

COVID-19

Not Bartow's First Social Distancing Epidemic

By Joe F. Head

Posted April 12, 2020

Never in a hundred years! How often have you heard or uttered that phrase meaning you will not see such an event in your lifetime? It is now the 100 years!

Twenty years into the 21st century an international pandemic has produced an historic crises for the nation and world with a virus known as COVID-19. As a result Bartow finds itself once again in the grip of a national and international epidemic that relies on physical distancing, clean hands, covered noses and mouths to mitigate a virus 100 years later.

Take a look back, just 102 years ago. In 1918, Bartow County suffered, along with the nation, its worst pandemic on record, the Spanish Influenza or La Grippe! World War I was raging and the world was sick.

According to the October 18, 1918 *Annual Report of the Georgia State Board of Health*, a sobering report was presented on the status of the epidemic in Georgia, specifically citing Cartersville. It included a mention of new cases within the previous 24 hours. Statewide there had been 2,749 new cases, with 48 deaths in one day. Hardest hit was Cartersville, with almost 1,000 new cases the previous day occurring on October 17, 1918, according to the data published. Cartersville's population at that time was approximately 4,200.

It is not precisely known how the pandemic originated, but in Georgia it appears to have begun at Camp Gordon (12 miles outside of Atlanta) among the WWI recruits, as it did in many other states. As soldiers were transferred from base to base readying for the Great War, infections broke out on most military bases. Eventually the base was quarantined, but not before the plague crept into the Georgia population. (Several Bartow boys died from the flu at Camp Gordon.)

Atlanta Mayor Asa Candler (former Bartow resident) took steps to close schools, churches, theaters and other venues that attracted large crowds. He banned soldiers from the city, but stopped short of closing businesses. La Grippe, an outdated term for a highly contagious flu, introduced the need for physical distancing between individuals as a mitigation step to manage the spread of the virus. The University of Georgia suspended classes.

On the home front, Dr. Howard Felton, (Cartersville's version of doctors Fauci and Birx) head of the Cartersville Board of Health advised of precautionary measures that should be taken by the city. He asks for the schools, theaters and churches to be closed. Among the first to respond were Sam Jones Methodist, First Presbyterian,

Felton's Chapel and First Baptist churches. He followed up with a letter to the Mayor indicating that the virus affects the weak, rundown and all ages. Speculation is that it leads to pneumonia and death.

Following the report that Cartersville experienced 1,000 cases in one day, Dr. Felton refuted the information in an October 20 article posted in the ***Atlanta Constitution***. According to Felton, the city has 150 cases and the county has about 800 cases. He adds the situation is serious in Cartersville and four of the five doctors are ill with the disease. (The original report may have combined the city and county numbers - 950- to estimate the 1,000 cases.)

By late October 1918 more than 250 cases of the flu had been reported in the city. On October 24, Dr. Felton, took more dramatic action to slow the virus. He recommended to the mayor an extension of the ban indefinitely. He insisted on a ban to stop the promiscuous spitting of tobacco products and phlegm on the sidewalks to be enforced with fines ranging from \$10.00 to \$200. He ordered signage to be posted warning of fines and good conduct to prevent infections.

Local physicians were working night and day to treat the ill. The first cases were reported in the county among large families. Dr. Felton mentions that large rural families were more likely to spread the virus quickly. As the situation worsens, Dr. Felton begins a series of newspaper articles to instruct on how to avoid the virus and home care for the sick.

His advice includes: avoid large groups, keep hands out of mouth, cover mouth/nose when coughing or sneezing, keep feet dry, stay out of drafts, wash hands frequently, de-clutter the sick room, use no rugs, eat a wholesome diet, stay in a well - ventilated room or even sleep in a screened-in room for fresh air and use individual wash basins and towels.

Also, he recommends feeding the sick from separate dishes if possible. If a fever or pinkish phlegm or sputum should appear, call a doctor. He clearly advises caretakers to wear a mask made from gauze as the virus is airborne. He even provides sewing instructions and follows with instructions to boil masks for reuse. He instructs how to use a thermometer and encourages the use of wearing an apron or gown when caring for the sick.

The situation in Cartersville continues to decline in the fall of 1918. As a result Dr. R. E. Wilson attends a Chicago Conference to learn more about the flu and how to combat it. He learns that from September 18 to December 1, some 350,000 US civilian deaths are expected. Among other precautions, the conference encourages the use of gauze masks.

An article from the ***Los Angeles Evening Herald*** is printed citing experts disagree about the use of masks and ask for such practices to be deferred. Their argument centers around the efficiency of face coverings.

Atlanta newspapers feature Dr. William Brady's "Health Talk" column and a call to centralize case reporting for tracking purposes. The flu was characterized as tricky and also known as la grippe. Another Health Talk by Dr. Brady featured information that any person resembling having a cold should keep a minimum of five feet away as coughing, sneezing or laughing sprays the surrounding area with droplets. The *Atlanta Journal* printed a call for women to sew 100,000 masks to meet the need.

Some preachers published articles that the epidemic is a curse of God. The tabloids carried ads for elixirs, tonics and certain whiskeys that were touted to remedy the illness. Likewise, recipes for poultices to be applied to the throat, chest and feet were lauded as treatments. Concoctions of boiled onions, apple vinegar thickened with rye meal and other brews often were tried to overcome the suffering.

In late November, Cartersville council asks several doctors to inspect the local schools to determine if they can be reopened. Local doctors agreed to conduct rotations. Students were asked to report and inspections were made over a week. The East Side School attendance was 50% and the West Side School was 90%. The doctors concurred it would be permissible to allow schools to resume, but any student showing symptoms would be sent home immediately. However, by January 16, 1919 the schools had to be closed again. Soon the virus began to break out in the convict labor camps first appearing at the Hall Station camp. Medical professionals were advocating for the public to be inoculated. A popular event was the county fair and many advocated for it to not be canceled.

The resurgence saw a presence of the Red Cross to begin teaching home health care and trying to mitigate sickness in large families. They, too, were advocating for entire families to get inoculated. Even as late as February of 1920, local schools were advised to not allow students to gather in groups or around the stoves, no dry sweeping of the floors, or spray floors before sweeping, try to keep room temperatures cool and to immediately report children with sniffles and colds.

In a local book entitled, **The Country Doctor's Wife** written by Ora Lewis Bradley a chapter is dedicated to the many Dreaded Diseases suffered in Bartow County. She mentions diphtheria, typhoid, tuberculosis (consumption), la grippe and pneumonia all of which took a human toll on early Bartow county. Additionally, the newspapers carried stories of small pox, sick farms and rumors of other illness that often were not true and were retracted.

A conference was held in Macon on February 2, 1919 to discuss the influenza. The presentation included data of estimated cases to date and that the epidemic will cost the state over 45 million dollars.

By late 1919 the Spanish Flu had run its course. On January 15, 1919, The *Atlanta Constitution* reported that 30,768 Georgians died of influenza to that date. The nation suffered 675,000 deaths and the world lost 50 million souls. It appears early

record keeping regarding cases and mortality in Bartow County were not available in sources found for this research.

Upon this quick reflection, it appears Bartow is not new to this scourge. Research clearly shows our history has grappled with isolation or social distancing well before it became again fashionable in 2020. Perhaps century old remedies still have lessons and value in today's modern world.

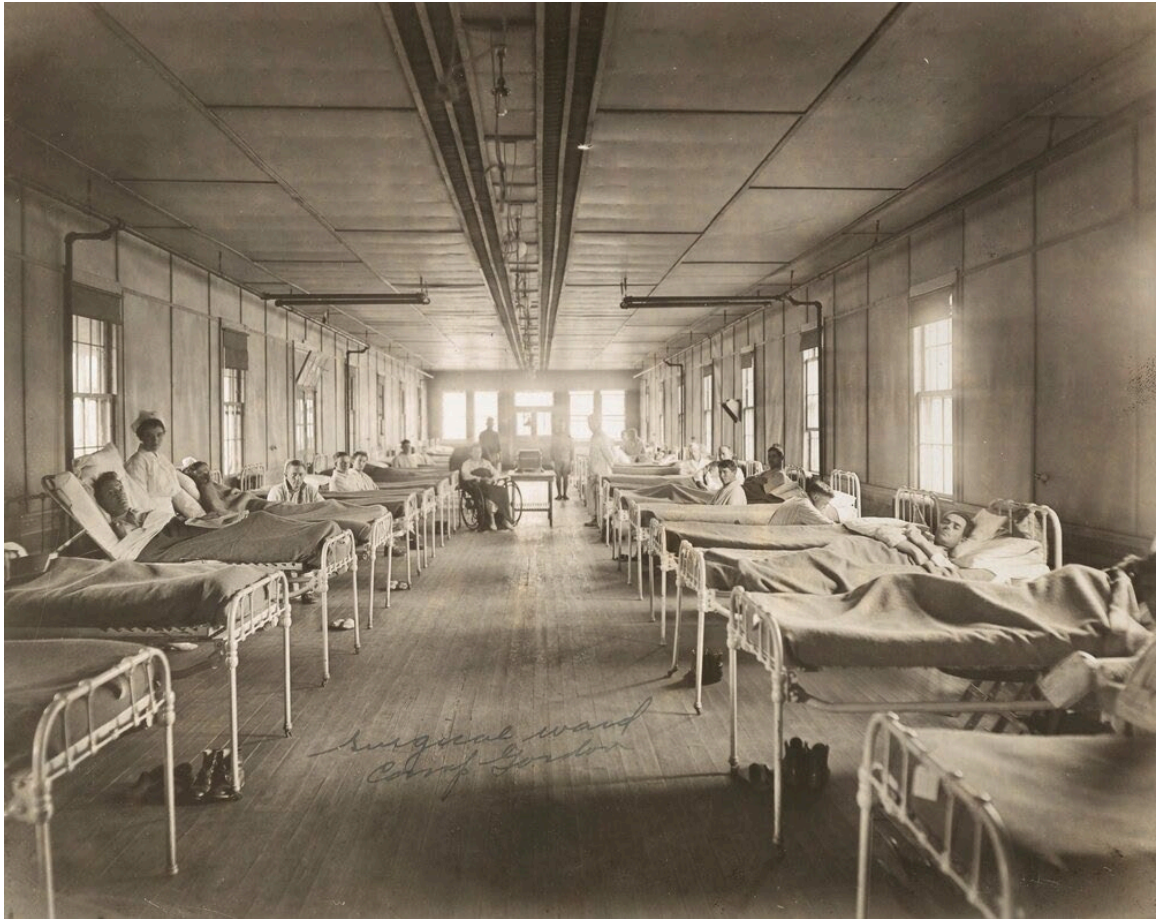
A summary of suggested mitigation actions 100 years ago vs today's COVID 19

Mitigation Suggestions	1918	2020
Cover nose and mouth when coughing/sneezing/laughing	Yes	Yes
Keep physical distance of 5 – 6 feet	Yes	Yes
Wear masks	Yes	Yes
Wash hands often	Yes	Yes (20 seconds recommended)
Sleep/Rest in well ventilated room	Yes	No
Post hygiene signs of directions to follow	Yes	Yes (digitally mostly)/Television/Newspapers
Close venues with crowds: theaters, churches, schools, etc.	Yes	Yes
Keep feet dry	Yes	No
Recommended home-made masks with directions provided	Yes (news articles)	Yes (digitally)
Refrain from promiscuous spitting of tobacco products and phlegm	Yes	No
De-clutter sick room	Yes	No
Face covering controversy	Yes	Yes

Optional Acknowledgements:

Debbie Head for her editorial contributions and Sam Graham for his research assistance

EVHS is Bartow County's advocate for historic and education preservation



Camp Gordon near Atlanta



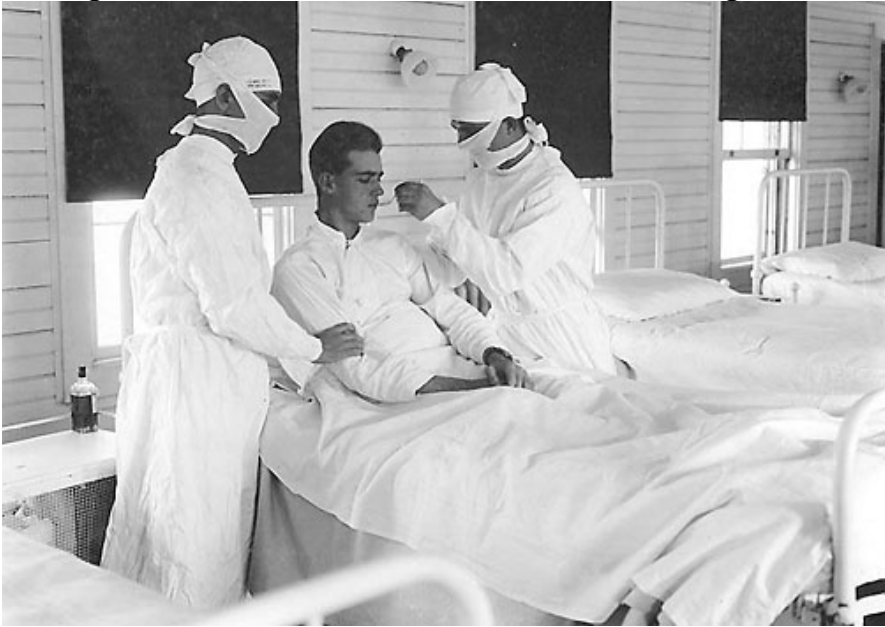
Generic images of Spanish flu, unknown locations

History of Spanish Flu in GA

- What would this have meant in 1918?
- What would this mean today?



Georgia Performance Standard SS8H7 Image



Spanish flu in Georgia