



NORTH RIVER PACKET

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The Local Impact of the Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919

Norwell has been through this before. How did our townsfolk react to the Spanish Flu Pandemic which occurred in the midst of World War I? Resiliency, Yankee ingenuity, and kindness prevailed then and now.

by Alan Prouty

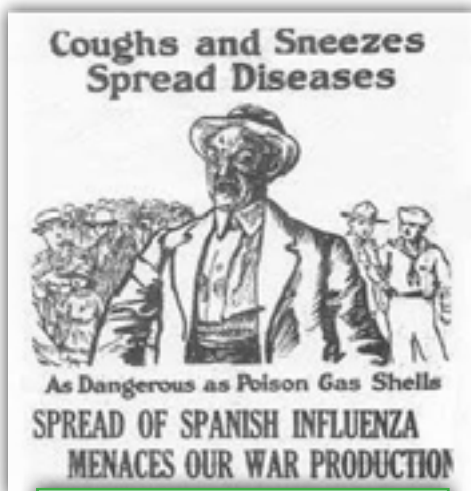
The epidemiologists of the Center for Communicable Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report that the Spanish Influenza of 1918-1919 was “the most severe pandemic in recent history.” That pandemic was also caused by an H1N1 virus, which spread to infect about one third of the world’s population, causing at least 50 million deaths globally, 675,000 deaths in the United States, and 28,000 deaths in Massachusetts.

Called the “Spanish Influenza,” it spread in three waves—starting in the spring of 1918 on a military base in Kansas. From there it spread to the battlefields of World War I in Europe where it became more virulent. The virus returned to America in the second wave in the fall of 1918 and spread to other countries around the world. The third and final wave proved to be less lethal in America and took place in the winter and spring of 1919.

The first cases of the Spanish Influenza in Massachusetts were two sailors who were diagnosed at the Receiving Ship on Commonwealth Pier in Boston on August 27, 1918. In early September of that year, as Babe Ruth and the Red Sox defeated the Cubs in the World Series, the virus spread rapidly to the civilian populations of Boston and other cities and towns of Massachusetts.

Government authorities responded to the explosion in the number of

cases and deaths with a campaign of newspaper articles, posters, and radio bulletins. They informed the public of the dangers of influenza and to promote practices to minimize the spread of the virus. ‘Coughs and Sneezes Spread Diseases’ (see below) was one of the posters.



The U.S. Public Health Service had a nation-wide campaign to help combat the epidemic.

The U.S. Surgeon General’s prescription for flu treatment in 1918 was the following: bed rest, good food, salts of quinine, and aspirin. Doctors also recommended “sun baths” of fresh air and sunshine. None of these treatments proved to be very effective. Families of flu patients were often quarantined in their communities.

Schools, theaters and public events in many of the cities and towns of Massachusetts were closed for several weeks in September and October. The public was encouraged to wear masks and not to gather in groups. Some businesses closed, but the nation was involved in the ‘Great War’ and most economic activities continued to operate as elements of the effort to support the war in Europe.

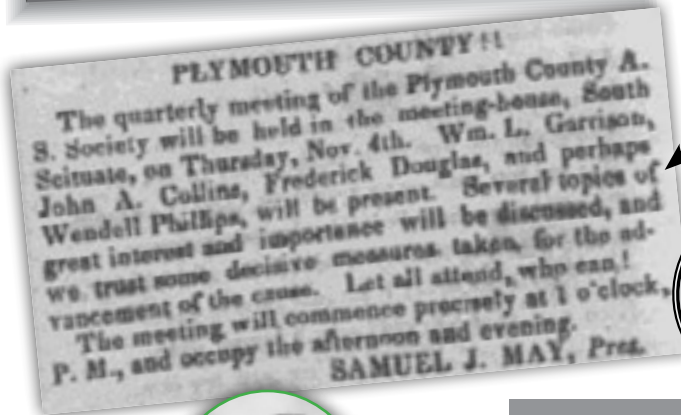
“ *The U.S. Surgeon General’s prescription for flu treatment in 1918 was... bed rest, good food, salts of quinine, and aspirin.* ”

Temporary tent hospitals were erected in Boston, Lawrence, Quincy, Brockton, and other large communities in eastern Massachusetts. The Governor recruited doctors and nurses from other states to respond to critical needs for health services in those communities most affected. Despite this response, the impact of the influenza in many

(continued on page 6)

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Treasures known and treasures found in the Norwell Historical Society Archives, in the Society Research Library, and in the Jacobs Farmhouse Museum are featured here in each issue.

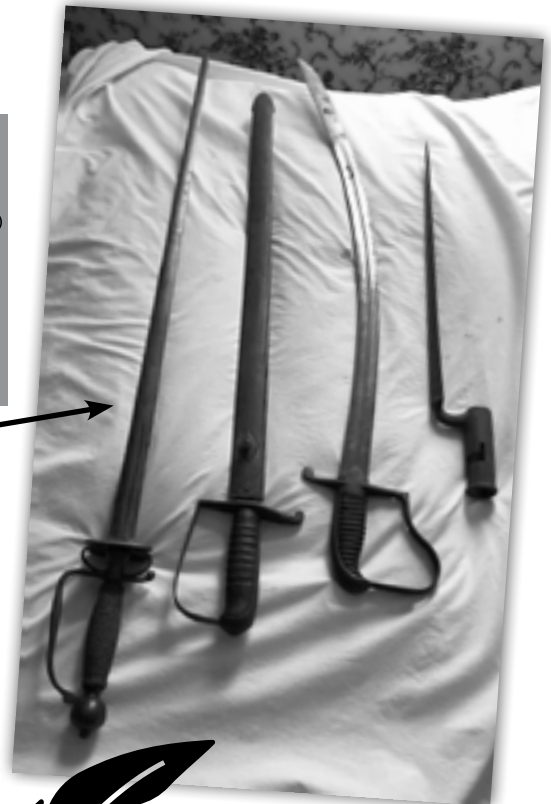


Former Society president Jon Bond is currently reading an autobiography of Rev. William Phillips Tilden, who grew up in South Scituate. In the book Tilden mentions "...Fred Douglass, a man just escaped from slavery, would hold an anti-slavery meeting ... in our church." Fascinated with this bit of information, Jon then did a newspaper search and found an announcement of the meeting!



Learn more about Rev. Samuel May and the abolitionist activities in South Scituate (Norwell) on our website. Go to the **Learn More** page and scroll down to the **Read Interesting Articles** section. Also, see a timely quote from Rev. May on page 8.

Nathan Pearce, a Society volunteer through the BC High School Community Service Program, researched these swords which are stored at the Jacobs Farmhouse Museum. Beginning on the far left is a rapier—used mainly for sword-on-sword fighting or to stab an enemy in close combat. The next sword is a broadsword, which is a more traditional sword that would have been used in a similar fashion to the rapier. Next is a cavalry sword, which would have been used for fighting while on horseback. The last one isn't a sword at all, but a bayonet. This would have been put at the front of a musket or rifle and used to keep nearing opponents at bay or to allow the gun to be used as a melee weapon. Thank you, Nathan, for researching these weapons and photographing and digitally cataloging many of the items at the Farmhouse Museum!



Just The Facts

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Museum & Research Library

The **Jacobs Farmhouse Museum** is open at scheduled events and by appointment only. Please contact the Society to schedule a tour.

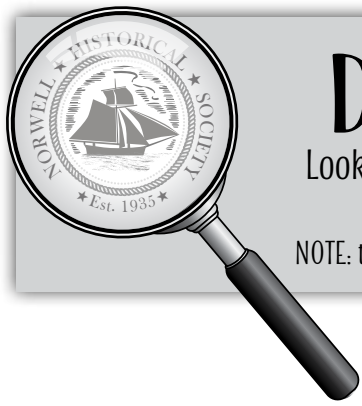
The Norwell Historical Society **Research Library & Archives Center** on the 3rd floor of the Sparrell School (322 Main Street) is open on Thursday mornings from 10:00 am until noon or by appointment.

Mission Statement

The mission of the Norwell Historical Society is to discover, preserve, and celebrate Norwell history through stewardship, education, and awareness—engaging our community, both present and future, to be vested in its history.

Mailing Address & Phone

The Norwell Historical Society
P.O. Box 693
Norwell, MA 02061
781-659-1888 (Research Library)



DISCOVER MORE AT OUR WEBSITE!

Look for the magnifying glasses in this issue—that means there is more to discover on-line at the Society's website NORWELLHISTORICALSOCIETY.ORG.

NOTE: the online version of the newsletter has other links (outlined in green) so you can discover even more!



Oral History Transcriptions

Volunteers are urgently needed to reformat the deteriorating oral history cassette tapes to a digital format before they are lost for good. It is an easy task that can be done at home. Please contact Janet Watson at watsonje@comcast.net.

Below is an [edited] interview with **Betty Merritt Keene** conducted by Kristen Collins on October 29, 1986. Having lived for over a century in the Ridge Hill area of Norwell, Betty passed away on February 5, 2020, just three months after her 100th birthday. In her own words, she tells about growing up in Norwell.

I've lived in Norwell sixty-seven years except for a few months. I was born right in this house here (51 High Street) and they didn't go to the hospital in those days.

I've lived on High Street and Washington Street [which] was a real pretty street when we lived there. When I was growing up it was all houses. There was no industry except way down at Queen Anne's Corner. There was a post office and little Chet Robinson's store. We lived in the house on Washington Street ...that belonged to my grandfather. It was where he grew up. [Ed note: This house was demolished to make way for commercial development.]

My grandfather had cows and he hayed. He used to deliver milk from here up into Rockland a little bit. He was the only real farmer around here. He used to saw wood with a big machine for people to burn in their houses. [He] used to deliver his milk with a horse and buggy.

I started at the Ridge Hill School right on the corner of Oak and Washington Streets [164 Washington Street today]. I went there for four years and then in the fifth grade we went down to the old high school that burned [on Main Street, burned in 1935]. You knew everyone in high school... I think our class was considered big because we had twenty-six kids—it was like a big family.

[Growing up] we didn't do too much, we didn't have too much. We just

played around the neighborhood with all the neighborhood kids. We had Ridge Hill Grove. We used to go over there and play ball. We used to have Tavern Hill and we used to spend all our time down there in the winter sliding. All the kids from everywhere gathered there. We had a little pond down back where we went skating. Other than that we just had our fun around the neighborhood.

The Library of course was down right in the back of the Ridge Hill School. It was just a tiny one room, and Mr. and Mrs. Leonard ran that. There was the James Library too, but I never got down to that because it was in Norwell Center. We just didn't get down there. Howie Hall was the fire chief and the Fire House was right in his yard.

Around here we had the Grand Army Hall and Ridge Hill Grove had a building there [where] the men used to play cards. They had a big baseball team too. The Grand Army Hall used to have a fair every year, a play, or a minstrel show. The Grand Army Hall is now a day-care center and the Ridge Hill Grove is now where the Cole School is. That's all gone completely.

We (shopped) on Main Street in Rockland. They had an A&P and First National.

I don't remember the Depression at all. I don't remember any hardships. I just remember we had food on the table. So I guess I was too young to realize if other people were suffering from it. [During World War II] we had our rations. We had these books, we could get so much sugar, so much

butter. I remember having to go around the house and pull the curtains down tight every night so no light would show out. Other than that it was just a quiet time.

[My husband, Ellsworth Keene] had many jobs. He worked at the [Quincy] shipyard, and then he went into the War Training Service [teaching flying]. Then after he got out we went to work for an oil company. He worked there until he went on the police force.

I guess the shipyard was the biggest [occupation] for most people around here [in the 1940's]. I don't remember any factories [in Norwell]. I think they were all before I remember. I think there were a lot of shoe factories, but there were none since I remember.

There are a lot of things we talk about when the whole gang of us get together. We lived a real quiet kind of life. We didn't go far and were just around the neighborhood. [Now, Norwell] is much more populated—more buildings—and I preferred it the way it was when I was growing up.



See photos of Ridge Hill on our website, some given to the Society by Mrs. Keene's family. On the Home Page, scroll down to the Historic Photo Gallery and find the Ridge Hill Photos.

Answer from page 4: This photograph is of the building that today houses Quik Pit store and Gallagher Construction in Norwell Center. Paul Robinson, who submitted the photo, is the son of the architect who designed the building!

Author John Cheever and the Norwell Connection

With the opening of Cheever Tavern in Norwell Center, many have asked the Society about John Cheever's connection to our town. Why is the famous author buried in First Parish Cemetery? The article below was originally printed in our December, 2014 newsletter.

by Samuel Olson

The front page of the June 23, 1982 edition of the *Boston Globe* featured an article on funeral services for John Cheever. It included a photo of his flag-draped casket being borne down the steps of Norwell's First Parish Church followed by family and friends. A hearse from Sparrell's Funeral Home, now McNamara-Sparrell, drove the few hundred feet to the burial site just behind the white-fenced eighteenth century burial ground adjacent to the parking lot where McGreal's Tavern [now Cheever Tavern] is now located.

The *Globe* described Norwell Center on that beautiful June day—the classic 1830 church, the sound of flowing water from the town spring, the glimpse of the North River through the leaves dappled by the early summer sunshine. No Chamber of Commerce “puff” could have put our small community in a better light.

Over the succeeding years, many citizens have pondered why our community became the final resting

place for Cheever, “the Chekof of the suburbs,” so closely connected to the upscale towns of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. After delving into several sources describing the circumstances of Cheever's often tortured life, I found that there were many good reasons.

John William Cheever was born in 1912 in Quincy, Massachusetts, to a family that traced its paternal branch to a passenger on John Winthrop's flagship the *Arbella*. An idyllic childhood in the upper middle class suburb of Wollaston came to a halt when his classically-educated father, Frederick Lincoln Cheever, lost most

“Cheever loved the sights, sounds, and smells of the picturesque river and the surrounding marshes.”

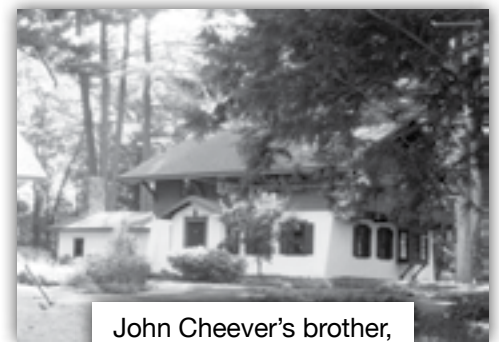
of his assets when the shoe industry collapsed in the mid-twenties. Further losses followed in the stock market crash of 1929. In 1933, the mortgage on the imposing eleven-room house was foreclosed.

A more fortunate childhood playmate of Cheever was Rollin Bailey whose father was a Quincy banker. Rollin, who died in 2007, and his wife Ruth Chipman Bailey were longtime

Parker Street [in Norwell] residents. Rollin is remembered for voluntarily videotaping Norwell Selectmen meetings. He and Ruth were for many years mainstays of the North River Players, both on and offstage. Rollin was interviewed several times by Cheever biographer Scott Donaldson.

Cheever was convinced he was never again invited to play on the Bailey tennis courts after what he perceived as his family's disgrace. Bailey recalled seeing his childhood friend for the last time on a troop train during World War II. He described Cheever's manner at their chance meeting as far from cordial.

Friends admired Mary Lily Cheever's maintaining the family by opening a gift shop on Hancock Street in Quincy. John, however, always believed she demeaned the family name by becoming a shopkeeper. Although not mentioned in sources used, I



John Cheever's brother, Fred, lived in this home at 163 River Street.

came across a notice in the *Rockland Standard* of July 2, 1933, about the Mary Cheever Shoppe opening on Washington Street, Norwell, in the John Simmons place.

Still another connection was Cheever's passing through the town to visit his grandmother's farm in Hanover where Mary Cheever and her mother operated a tearoom for a time. Cheever loved the sights, sounds, and smells of the picturesque river and the surrounding marshes.

(continued on the next page)

Photo credit: The Boston Globe via newspapers.com



Mary Cheever (left) and her daughter, Susan Tomkins, lead relatives and friends from First Parish Church in Norwell after yesterday's funeral service for writer John Cheever. Author John Updike, who delivered eulogy, is at left at top of steps. GLOBE PHOTO BY TED DAILY

(continued from the previous page)

An important Norwell experience later on was visiting his older brother Fred, his wife Iris, and their three children in their Alpine-style chalet built amidst a grove of pine trees on River Street.

Yet another South Shore link was his attendance at Thayer Academy in Braintree. Although the official reason for John's expulsion was his failure to meet academic requirements, he claimed it was for smoking. Regardless, his first notice as a promising writer came with the publication of the short story "Expelled" in the *New Republic* in 1930.

Cheever never attended college, or, for that matter, graduated high school. The thirties was a tough time for an aspiring writer to make a living. In addition, lapses into depression, a growing dependence on alcohol, doubts about his creativity, and a self-loathing about his bisexuality were among the demons he faced. He did gain employment for a time writing travel guides for the WPA's Writers Workshop [see inset]. He considered the whole program a giant "boondoggle."

WPA (Works Progress Administration) Federal Writers' Project:

a program established in the U.S. in 1935 as part of the New Deal struggle against the Great Depression. It provided jobs for unemployed writers, editors, and research workers.

In 1941, he married Mary Winterhitz who survived her husband for many years, dying herself in 2014. She was the daughter of Dr. Milton Winternitz, Chief of Surgery at Yale University Medical Center. She was also the granddaughter of Thomas Watson of Braintree, receiver of the first telephone message from Alexander Graham Bell. Three children were born to the couple, two of whom became writers. Although the union was often fraught with difficulties, Susan Cheever in her biography of her father, *Home Before Dark*, felt the marriage survived for three reasons:

the children, a genuine love for one another, or simply just out of habit.

After stateside army service in World War II, Cheever's writing fortunes picked up. He had a long time arrangement with *The New Yorker* for short story contributions. Among the best known of his stories was "The Swimmer," which was made into a movie starring Burt Lancaster. While the film was being made, Cheever began an affair with the producer's wife, actress Hope Lange.

His growing success enabled him to purchase a stone-gabled Dutch Colonial overlooking the Hudson River in Ossining, New York. Although he went on to achieve all the important American literary awards including the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *The Short Stories of John Cheever*, he was able to publish only four novels. The first of these was *The Wapshot Chronicle* which took him ten years to write. His most successful, *The Falconer*, was written toward the end of his life. He continued to be nagged with the feeling that writing short stories wasn't as prestigious as writing novels.

In 1975, Cheever was teaching a course on short story writing at Boston University. While living in an apartment on Bay State Road, it was becoming apparent to associates that he was drinking himself to death.

Ironically it was his brother Fred, himself a recovering alcoholic, who was in part responsible for John's salvation. Fred took him out of Boston, driving him back to Ossining where Mary had him committed to Smithers Institution, a facility treating chronic alcoholism. Cheever never took another drink. Unfortunately, in 1981, he was diagnosed with renal cancer which soon metastasized. Death came on June 18, 1982.

Cheever had never expressed any interest in where he might be interred but often spoke of the family's "burying hole" in Norwell's First Parish Cemetery. Both his mother and father had been buried there when they died in the mid-forties. Brother Fred had also attended First Parish Church for many years. Virtually broke, Fred had spent the last months of his life at

Wheeler Park, a public housing facility for seniors in Scituate.

Fred's daughter Jane Cheever Carr, now a resident of Hingham, checked with the Sparrell Funeral Home which confirmed that there was a burial plot next to his parents. The family thus decided that he would be buried in Norwell.

Cheever's widow and children asked John Updike to deliver the eulogy. Updike, then and now, is often considered the best American novelist of the mid- and late- twentieth century. Despite rumors to the contrary, there was no basis to believe the two writers were jealous rivals.

There were only forty mourners present as there was to be another service in Ossining the following day.

The church was packed with photographers. Loring "Spike" Wadsworth, described by one source as the quintessential canny New England undertaker, is credited with maintaining the dignity of the occasion by limiting the number of photographers admitted to the balcony.



Cheever's grave is located near the parking lot of Cheever Tavern and next to his parents' gravestones.

First Parish Cemetery's caretaker recently told me that visitors asked to see the Cheever grave more than any other. The graves of father, mother, and son are marked by three black stone cathedral window-shaped monuments.

A lighter touch to the day of the funeral has been supplied by John Hersey, author of *Hiroshima*. As Cheever's casket was being lowered into the ground, he noticed three frolicking boys on a pathway on a hillside above the grave. One of the boys suddenly tossed off three perfect cartwheels. Hersey said his good friend would have really liked that!

Spanish Flu, cont'd.

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areas of Massachusetts during the second and third waves of the virus was severe.

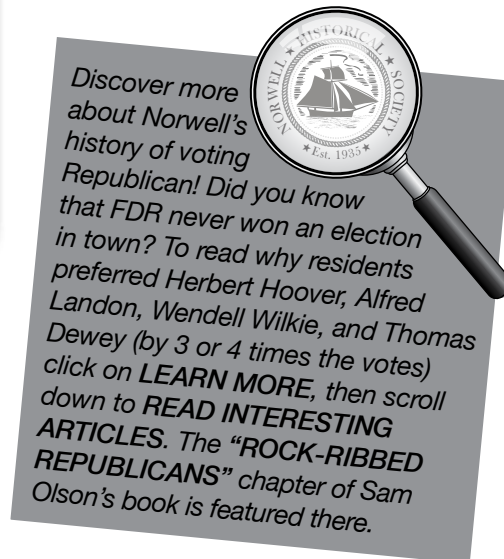
Norwell was a rural community in 1918 with a population of about 1,350 individuals. The low population density in the town resulted in natural social distancing which perhaps reduced the spread of the virus. Many people took the advice of the state authorities and the Red Cross to wear masks when in public places.



Red Cross workers in Boston make face masks for soldiers during the Spanish Influenza pandemic in 1918.
Credit: U.S. National Archives

The town took steps to mitigate the impact of the virus on the 198 children attending the three primary schools at Ridge Hill, Church Hill, and Norwell Center, and at the High School. A special resolution was issued by the school committee which provided that: "As a means of checking the spread of Spanish influenza, no pupil of a household where Spanish influenza exists, shall be allowed to attend any school of the Town of Norwell, until the attending physician shall issue him a certificate allowing him to return when the proper length of time shall have elapsed after his last exposure." The school physician oversaw implementation of this ruling. The principal of the high school later reported that: "...we are exceedingly fortunate in that no member of our high school has been taken away by the epidemic which has proved such a scourge to the community." Tragically, one young girl from a primary school did become one of the victims of the virus in Norwell.

Other activities of the Norwell town government continued to function with relative normalcy while the virus spread. On November 5, 1918 after the peak of the epidemic had passed, Norwell and all cities and towns in Massachusetts implemented the state election at the Town Hall. A total of 190 registered voters (all men) cast their ballots. Calvin Coolidge, the Republican candidate for Governor, received 136 of 190 votes and went on to be elected on a state-wide basis. All thirteen other Republican candidates for office received similar majorities from the Norwell voters.



Armistice Day was celebrated on November 11, 1918 to mark the end of the war in Europe. The town government prepared to celebrate the return of the 50 men from Norwell who had served in the armed forces during wartime.

The Annual Town Meeting was held as scheduled on March 4, 1919 and 109 voters attended. Town officers were elected, the town budget for the year was approved, totaling \$40,000. Alcohol was the important health issue, and the proposal to allow its sale was defeated. The meeting did approve funding for the ceremony to welcome home those citizens who had served in the war with Germany and to create appropriate monuments.

The Spanish Influenza left a painful legacy of nine deaths in Norwell in the six-month period from September 1918 to February 1919. The town's Board of Health did not record the total number of influenza cases during that time, but the average mortality rate for the virus was 2.5 percent, so calculating the 9 deaths as 2.5 percent of the total who had the disease, the total number of cases *may* have reached 300 in Norwell.

The town mourned those who did not survive the pandemic of 1918-1919 and recorded their loss in the Town Reports of those years. The victims were both young and old and represented a cross-section of the community of that time. Today, as we endure a second pandemic, we remember those victims:

- **Willard Robinson** aged 23 years, and **Aleida Wilder**, aged 27 years, were the first victims of the Spanish Influenza in September 1918. They both lived on High Street and rode the electric trolley cars of the Plymouth & Brockton Street Railway Company to work in shoe factories in Brockton and Rockland. A total of 98 men and women from Norwell worked in those shoe factories and they were a group that was especially hard hit by the virus.



The Norwell trolley ran from Queen Anne's Corner down High Street to Rockland, and provided transportation for many shoe factory workers.

- **Edward Parker**, aged 67 years, was originally from Reading, Massachusetts. He was a widower and worked as a piano maker.

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INTERESTED IN VOLUNTEERING?

_____ Researching at the Archives _____ Other:

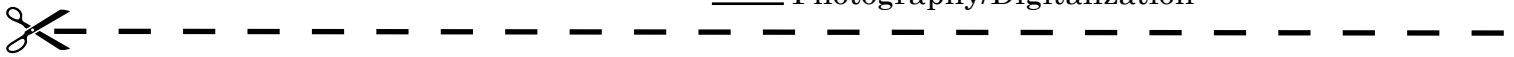
_____ Organizing at the Archives

_____ Farmhouse Tour Guide

_____ Farmhouse Maintenance

_____ Event Planning

_____ Photography/Digitalization



Spanish Flu, cont'd.

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• **Henry Abial Turner**, aged 91 years, was the oldest victim of the influenza from Norwell. Mr. Turner was a veteran of the 43rd Massachusetts Infantry Regiment in the Civil War. He lived on the family farm “Riverdale” on River Street, and had served the town as a Selectman and Assessor. For more than 50 years, he was the Director for Religious Education at the First Parish Church. He passed away on October 8, 1918, leaving his wife Mary and two sons.

• **Francis G. Woodman**, aged 33 years, was living with his parents, William and Carrie Woodman, on Grove Street when he died in October 1918. He was buried in the Mayflower Cemetery in Duxbury.

• **Henry Francis Spencer**, aged 27 years, was a clerk in a grocery store, having previously worked on the Bacon farm. He lived with his parents in their home on Central Street.

• **Lillian May Oakman**, aged 9 years, was a student at the Church Hill Primary School and the youngest victim of the influenza from Norwell. Lillian’s father, Stanley Oakman, worked in a shoe factory and lived with his wife Mary on Church Street.

• **George and Lucretia Griggs** were a married couple who had lived for many years on their farm on Cross Street. George was a former Norwell Selectman. They passed away there on the 16th and 25th of January 1919 at the ages of 70 and 71 years.



George and Lucretia Griggs tended a farm on their property at 174 Cross Street—the Deacon John Ruggles House, ca. 1720.

THROWBACK PHOTO OF THE MONTH



Paul Robison sent in this photo of Norwell Motor Sales. Do you recognize the building? Do you know what the building is today?

(answer at the bottom of page 3)



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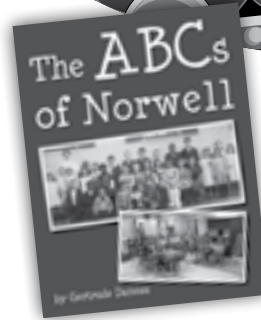
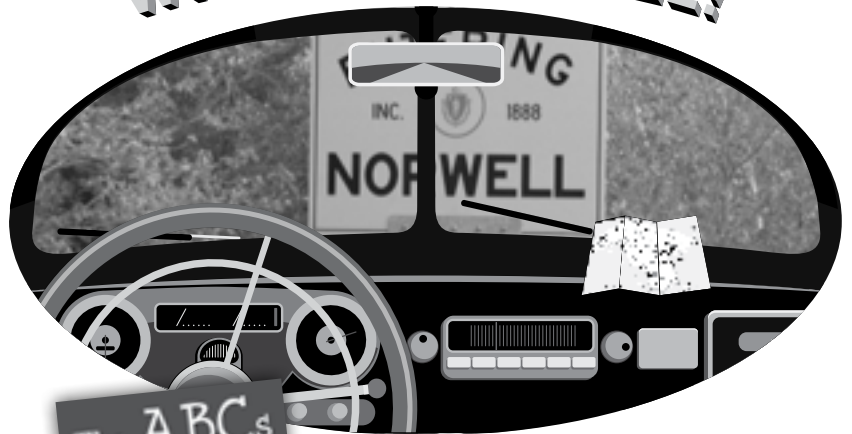
As so many of us are struggling to make sense of the recent sad events in our country, it seems like a perfect time to highlight Norwell's proud history of activism against racial injustices.

Rev. Samuel May lived at May Elms on Main Street and was minister of First Parish Church from 1836 to 1842. Here is an eerily prescient quote from a sermon of his opposing slavery:

"Tell me not that we are forbidden by the Constitution of our country to interfere in behalf of the enslaved. No compact our fathers may have made for us, no agreement we ourselves could make, would annul our obligation to suffering fellow-men. If need be the very foundations of our Republic must be broken up; and if this stone of stumbling, this rock of offence, cannot be removed from under it, the proud structure must fall. It cannot stand, it ought not to stand, on the necks of millions of men. For God is just, and His justice will not sleep forever."

See our website (► Learn More, ► Read Interesting Articles) for more info on Rev. May.

SUMMER ROAD TRIP WITHIN NORWELL!



Buy a copy of ***The ABCs of Norwell*** for \$10 and use the map within to find historic locations with your family!

While long road trips may not be possible this summer, you can still drive around Norwell and see the sites!

Books can be paid for online and delivered to your doorstep (within Norwell) or mailed to you for a \$5 fee.



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