

## Response to Pandemics in Southeast Texas: Past and Present

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Heather Howsmon

Novel Coronavirus has drastically altered life as we knew it. The global economy came to a halt; schools and businesses shut down causing millions to lose their jobs. Yet the world, more specifically Texas, has dealt with epidemics and pandemics before, and the method has always been the same: distance and time. Distance from one another to prevent the disease from finding new hosts, and time for the disease to run its course. The public health measures implemented today were routinely used in past health crises. By examining Huntsville's and Houston's response to the yellow fever outbreak of 1867 and the influenza outbreak of 1918, and the impact that response had on the severity and longevity of the outbreaks, we can learn how to best mitigate the damage to the lives and livelihoods of the current Coronavirus outbreak.

In early September of 1867, the yellow fever epidemic swept through Huntsville, brought by people traveling on stagecoaches from other parts of the state.<sup>1</sup> By the end of the month, "families hid in their homes or had fled to the country, schools had dissolved, businesses had closed, plantations had gone under quarantine, churches had fallen silent, and mail had become irregular...There was 'no business going on of any kind but coffin making and grave digging.'"<sup>2</sup> The epidemic came and went within the span of a month, taking ten percent of the population with it.<sup>3</sup> The city of Houston sent a few doctors, nurses, and supplies to aid Huntsville, but they had little to spare; they too were in the midst of their own yellow fever outbreak. The newly constructed railroad in Houston facilitated the disease's rapid advancement throughout the city. After the Civil War, the United States government stationed federal troops in Houston to establish order during the Reconstruction period; of those 2,500 troops, 700 perished from yellow fever.<sup>4</sup> The most effective measure implemented to combat this disease was to slow the transmission rate by closing schools and businesses. While some people

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<sup>1</sup> Texas Historical Marker, "Huntsville Branch Railway," *East Texas History*.

<sup>2</sup> Briana Weaver, "Yellow Fever in Huntsville, Texas," *East Texas History*.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Schmitt, "You Cannot See Anyone but Negroes: Huntsville's Yellow Summer of 1867," *The Measure* 2 (2018): 125.

<sup>4</sup> Benajah H. Carroll, *Standard History of Houston, Texas*, (North Charleston: Createspace), 87.

felt quarantine was an inconvenience, “the mercantile class, ... decried it as anti-business and denied the science on which it was based.”<sup>5</sup> Even with measures in place to control the spread, the fever took a devastating toll on the population. Most deaths occurred due to the lack of medical staff and supplies. According to Benajah H. Carroll, the author of *Standard History of Houston, Texas*, “The physicians were absolutely worked down and while they did all that they could, it was physically impossible for them to attend to hundreds who might have been saved could they have reached them.”<sup>6</sup> The outbreak subsided after a month of quarantine.

The next major epidemic to hit Huntsville was the Spanish Flu of 1918, which was one of the most virulent outbreaks in history. By this time, people recognized that quarantine would combat this disease. Although there were some dissenters among the population regarding masks, “masks of gauze and cheesecloth became the facial front lines in the battle against the virus. But as they have now, the masks also stoked political division.”<sup>7</sup> Masks were sometimes called “muzzles, germ shields and dirt traps.”<sup>8</sup> When the pandemic arrived in Huntsville, Sam Houston Normal Institute (now Sam Houston State University) closed its doors in order to mitigate the spread. This decision by then president, Harry Estill, was unpopular but necessary. Houston was similarly affected. “Despite warnings from Texas public health officials, Houston’s local health and city officials played down the threat for weeks.”<sup>9</sup> The breakout at Camp Logan, the Army’s training facility during World War I (present day Memorial Park), near city center, combined with crowded streetcars, contributed to the rapid transmission of the virus. At Camp Logan, nearly 700 men became infected and an estimated eighty to one-hundred men perished. At the behest of Houstonians, a total shutdown of the city was implemented and lasted seventeen days:

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<sup>5</sup> Jim Green, “Pandemic Reading: Quarantine and Isolation at the Lazaretto,” *The Library Company of Philadelphia*.

<sup>6</sup> Carroll, 86-87.

<sup>7</sup> Christine Hauser, “The Masks Slackers of 1918,” *The New York Times*, August 3, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Hauser, “The Masks Slackers of 1918.”

<sup>9</sup> Gwendolyn Knapp, “The Similarities Between the Coronavirus Pandemic and the 1918 Flu in Houston,” *Houstonia Magazine*, June 2020.

“Houston went dark. For 17 days the quarantine closed courts and stopped jury duty, athletic events, war drives, and other large public gatherings. Moving-picture shows, dance halls, and saloons temporarily shuttered. Churches and schools followed suit, and the Barnum & Bailey Circus packed up and left town.”<sup>10</sup>

Rice University halted classes to provide hospital overflow for the afflicted. This worldwide flu outbreak lasted until 1919. Influenza continues to plague the world today, but there has not been a flu epidemic as deadly as the 1918 flu, which killed fifty million people worldwide. Many people even believed that global pandemics were a thing of the past, until the emergence of COVID-19.

Nearing the end of 2019, reports of a mysterious illness presented itself in China. Even as the new COVID-19 virus continued to spread throughout China and cases were reported outside of China in early January 2020, the lives of citizens in most countries continued as usual. By the end of January, the World Health Organization had declared a global emergency, and President Donald Trump had issued a travel ban from China for non-United States citizens. By the end of February, cases began to increase rapidly in Italy, South Korea, and Iran.<sup>11</sup> On March 12, “County Judge Danny Pierce signed a disaster declaration for Walker County.”<sup>12</sup> Spring break was extended, as grade schools and universities began sporadic closures across the country. This extension allowed schools the time necessary to transition to online learning. Sam Houston University adapted fairly quickly to all of the changes and implemented a protocol to care for all students with emergency finances, loans, food, and services. Food banks became depleted, and SHSU transformed into a major donation site for food. The university counseling center began to operate online. Companies across the country furloughed employees and shuttered their doors. The financial strain caused many small universities to close permanently.<sup>13</sup> Near the start of April, Walker County had reported ten confirmed cases of COVID-

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<sup>10</sup> Knapp, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Secon, et al. “A Comprehensive Timeline of the Coronavirus Pandemic at 6 Months, from China’s First Case to the Present,” *Business Insider*, June 30, 2020, 4.

<sup>12</sup> “County Judge signs disaster declaration,” Huntsville, Texas.gov

<sup>13</sup> Dan Bauman, “Public Regional Colleges Were Already Struggling Covid-19 May Push Some to the Brink,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 11, 2020.

19.<sup>14</sup> By late July, Texas had almost 400,000 confirmed cases and over 6,000 deaths, and *The New York Times* reported on Tuesday, August 11, there had been at least “521,800 cases and 9,277 deaths in Texas since the beginning of the pandemic.”<sup>15</sup>

During epidemics past and present, Houston controlled outbreaks by social distancing and temporarily shutting down the economy. Families took care of each other, as there were not enough doctors to care for the rapidly increasing caseload. In 1918, some businesses closed permanently, but the economy regained its strength after quarantine was lifted.<sup>16</sup> Life returned to normal. Today, scientists have mapped the genome of SARS-CoV-2<sup>17</sup> (COVID-19) and understand how it enters the body, and our hospitals and medical knowledge are more advanced than those of 1867 or 1918. Even so, medical authorities argue that the best ways to combat the current pandemic is by using the tried and true methods of the past: social distancing and masks.

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph Brown, “Walker County up to 10 cases of COVID-19,” *The Huntsville Item*, April 3, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> “Texas Coronavirus Map and Case Count,” *The New York Times*, July 28, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Pedro Nicolaci da Costa, “Pandemic Economics: Lessons From the Spanish Flu in 1918,” *Forbes*, April 3, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> “CDC Launches National Viral Genomics Consortium to Better Map SARS-CoV-2 Transmission,” *Center for Disease Control*, May 6, 2020 <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/p0501-SARS-CoV-2-transmission-map.html>

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