

# The Sickly City: Responses to Two Different Outbreaks in Early Twentieth-Century Pensacola

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## INTRODUCTION

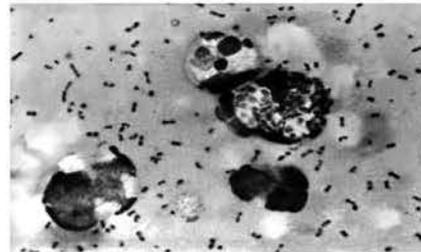
The history of pandemics is a popular topic among some historians in current times because of the Covid-19 pandemic that is still making its way through the populations of many countries. Two of the popular comparisons to the Covid-19 outbreak are the Spanish flu and bubonic plague of 1918-20 and 1346-1353 respectively. The issue with these comparisons is that the three pandemics are not entirely comparable with one another. The Spanish flu pandemic was far more prevalent than Covid-19 and the bubonic plague outbreaks of the early twentieth century were not nearly as rampant (not to mention, Covid-19 is not technically in the "plague" category). By analyzing multi-faceted responses to the Spanish flu outbreak of 1918 and the bubonic plague outbreak of 1920 in Pensacola, Florida, it shows that there is no standard response to pandemics only occasionally similar responses that can potentially aid in understanding the current pandemic.



Sacred Heart Hospital 1918

## Quick Facts About the Bubonic Plague Outbreak

- Scientific name: *Yersinia Pestis*, nicknamed bubonic plague after the Italian word *Bubo*, meaning pustules, describing one of the symptoms.
- The bubonic plague outbreak in Pensacola started with the arrival of a deceased African American teenager to the city on 21 June 1920.
- The outbreak infected ten individuals and claimed the lives of six.
- There is no exact date for the end of the bubonic plague in the city, though it is estimated that it ended shortly after 20 July 1920 though it was continually referred to for at least another year after that.



Microscopic image of *Yersinia Pestis*  
(bubonic plague)

## Notable People in the Outbreaks

- Surgeon General Rupert Blue (Spanish flu)
- Surgeon General Hugh S. Cumming (bubonic plague)
- Dr. Paul Mossman (Spanish flu)
- Major Ralph N. Greene (bubonic plague)
- Joe L. Earman (Bubonic Plague)



Joe L. Earman

## Quick Facts About the Spanish Flu Outbreak

- The virus received the name Spanish flu because it was thought to have originated in Spain.
- The Spanish flu outbreak started in Pensacola 28 September 1918.
- This outbreak infected an unknown number of people and claimed the lives of 263 lives.
- The outbreak subsided 23 October 1918.



Viral Image of the 1918 H1N1 Virus (Spanish influenza)

## Evidence of Responses

-Most of the evidence pertaining to the responses of businesses, government agencies and private citizens is found within *The Pensacola Journal*, annual State Board of Health of Florida reports, annual business reports, and communications between Major Ralph N. Green and Joe L. Earman.

## Examples of Titles in *The Pensacola Journal* Pertaining to the Outbreaks

- "Illness Curtails Service of Street Cars" (29 September 1918, Spanish flu)
- "Move to Stop Influenza in Epidemic Here" (29 September 1918, Spanish flu)
- "Closing Order Only Check for Influenza" (05 October 1918, Spanish flu)
- "Theater Men to Ask That Ban Be Lifted" (22 October 1918, Spanish flu)
- "Letter of Information to the People of Pensacola," (03 July 1920, bubonic plague)



The thirty-five motormen marked the beginning of the Spanish flu outbreak

## Other Examples Pertaining to the Outbreaks

- *Annual Report 1918* (Pensacola Electric Company, Spanish flu)
- *Thirty-Second Report: Biennial 1921-22* (State Board of Health of Florida, bubonic plague)
- "Day-Letter to Ralph N. Greene, 07 July 1920" (Joe L. Earman, bubonic plague).
- "Day-Letter to Joe L. Earman, 03 July 1920" (Dr. Ralph N. Greene, bubonic plague)
- "Letter to Walter Watson Jr. 19 July 1920" (Walter Watson Sr., bubonic plague)

## CONCLUSION

It is difficult to state why the differences in responses exist between the Spanish flu and bubonic plague outbreaks in Pensacola in the early twentieth century. The possibility exists that, since the Federal Government was already publishing warnings and prevention tips, thus the people of the city were prepared to accept recommendations and demands brought on by the Spanish flu. If that statement is true, then it means because of the sudden onset of bubonic plague, and perhaps because it was confined only to Pensacola, that the city refused to respond until they were threatened by both state and federal agencies. The language used during both outbreaks provides another possible insight, no demands were made during the Spanish flu in Pensacola by any level of government whereas the State Board of Health of Florida started out by making demands. Regardless of the reasoning, it confirms the idea that responses to Covid-19 in Pensacola, while different in certain ways than the previous outbreaks, are similar in many



People wearing masks during the Spanish flu pandemic



Plague doctors are commonly associated with bubonic plague outbreaks, but not in 1920.