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Sunday Sitdown: Donald W. Chamberlayne, Worcester historian



Donald Chamberlayne, a Worcester historian, uses the Worcester Public Library's microfilm resources as he researches the city's past [T&G Staff/Steve Lanava]

By Paula J. Owen
Correspondent

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Local historian Donald W. Chamberlayne's interest in Worcester started with his home in the Lenox neighborhood of Worcester, where he lived for 26 years.

After his retirement as a crime analyst with the Worcester Police Department, the 74-year-old began to pursue his passion for local history, spurred by his service as a docent and researcher for Preservation Worcester that he said was the source for many ideas for articles.

Mr. Chamberlayne put up his website - www.WorcesterThen.com - in December 2016, with the proviso that it was “an amateur historian’s efforts to contribute a little to what is known about the fascinating past of this great city.” He said it is intended to be “history lite,” leaving the “study of power relationships and the like to the professional, academic historians.”

Living in Paxton, he is married with two adult children – a daughter, married with two children, outside Philadelphia, and a married son in Colorado.

His hobbies include travel by minivan, woodworking, gardening, music, genealogy and operating a fantasy baseball league for 29 years, as well as his love of Worcester history.

His most recent work is 17 pages on Worcester’s experience of the influenza pandemic of 1918, released a century after the outbreak during a current flu epidemic that has claimed dozens of lives.

In it, Mr. Chamberlayne says that the “city’s medical profession responded heroically, working long hours in conditions quite dangerous to themselves, and seeming to do so without complaint.” However, he is critical of the “city’s hesitation to act quickly enough to deter the spread of the disease by closing public gathering places, from schools and churches, to theaters and saloons.”

He concludes: “As for the actual impact of the epidemic, based on the examination of the numbers of cases and deaths, it is necessary to start by saying that anything that kills in the neighborhood of 1,100 people has a very great impact. But some of the narratives about the pandemic, citing upwards of 50 million deaths or even more, could leave one to surmise that a large percentage of the local population perished. Actually, it was a little more than half a percent, and it directly affected something over 3 percent of families in the city. That was bad enough, but it was not 10 or 20 percent. As for the numbers of cases of the flu, that turns out to have been virtually indeterminate, partly because influenza was nonreportable prior to October and partly because (there was) an unknown and undoubtedly significant number of people who simply endured the illness without being seen by a doctor or a nurse. The story of Worcester’s experience of the influenza pandemic stands as a good example of the city as a community coping with a frightening, unpredictable and fast-moving threat. My impression is that the city acquitted itself pretty well on the whole. Now, as Al Southwick suggested, the question is how well might Worcester fare if another large-scale viral threat should arise?”

Why did you decide to write “Worcester’s Experience of the Influenza Pandemic of 1918” for your website?

“I started on the flu epidemic project in November, in part because 2018 marks the 100th year since it happened, and because I thought it was a subject worth knowing more about – others, if I could muster any readers, and myself. I focused on the role of the press because I wanted to try

to imagine what the epidemic looked and felt like through the perspective of the ordinary citizens of Worcester, and for them the newspapers were by far the most important source of information. My thought was that it had to be terrifying, especially for parents, to know that a potentially major attack of invisible, scarcely understandable viral killer-germs was on its way, then was here a little bit, then here a lot. The tracking of the viral threat and invasion of the city in the newspapers was by far the most important source for people wanting to know as much as possible about it.”

What other aspects of the epidemic did you research?

“My second ‘take’ on the subject was to assess the after-the-fact Public Health Department data on the flu and the lobar (pulmonary) pneumonia which many flu cases morphed into. I was able to form an estimate of the number of Worcester people who lost their lives to the epidemic, and to examine the counts by age, gender and location of residence within the city, and to provide an estimate of the percentage of families that lost one or more members to the disease.”

How long did it take to finish the piece and how did you go about it?

“It’s hard to say how long the task took because it was spread out over a month or so, with library time newspaper scanning, writing, editing and preparation of headline images – but maybe 20-25 hours would be a reasonable guess.”

Did you find anything unique to Worcester during that time?

“In a sense it was all unique to Worcester, since I focused directly on the viewpoint of the local newspaper reader, although I suspect that pretty much the same story could be told about many or most other cities that got caught in the path of the flu. If anything about Worcester’s experience was truly unique, it might have been the conversion within a week of a dance-hall building at the Fair Grounds into an isolation hospital for the flu. As an example of Worcester’s being typical rather than atypical, I suspect that the medical communities of most cities doubled down for a long, hard run on overtime, giving it their all, as clearly happened in Worcester.”

Did any other projects come out of it?

“As a follow-up, I then did a short piece on the whole array of causes of death at that time, one which provides some perspective on how much we have to be thankful for regarding medical advances over the past century, especially the virtual elimination of so many contagious diseases and the sharp decline in infant mortality that has been seen. If it sounds like I specialize in public health issues, not true. I don’t know if I have a specialty, but I do focus a lot of my efforts on photographs – both old and new, with the emphasis on the content, not the photographic quality.”

Do you have a favorite topic to research?

“If I have a favorite topic, one that I hope to find more time to complete within the year, it is the railroads of Worcester, of which I have two chapters of an intended four or five online now, with two others currently on the drawing board. I have lots of ideas stored up – including a couple

already in motion or 'on deck', and several that are in line waiting. Next is likely to be a profile of the town in 1771, on the eve of the revolution, based on the data from a printout of the results of a survey conducted for purposes of taxation by the Colonial government.”