

# The Fight Against Disease

Albany County and its response to past epidemics: how a disease can effect a community, and how the community can overcome.

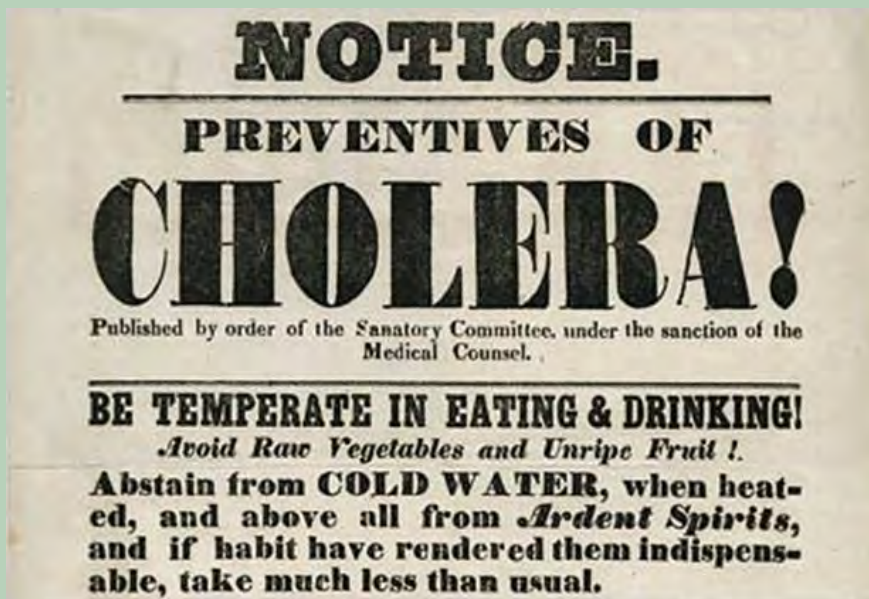


*The Altamont Enterprise, Dec. 13, 1918, p 3.*



*The Cohoes Republican, Jan. 8, 1919 p 1.*

The world has been in a deadly fight against an invisible enemy, the Coronavirus. Although the fight is far from over, take peace of mind knowing that this is not the first time the world, the nation, and the community has fought and won against disease. Throughout our history, there have been outbreaks and epidemics, but Albany County and its communities, have been resilient in fighting back. Two notable times in our past include a Cholera outbreak in 1854 and the 1918 Influenza epidemic. Both were challenging, deadly, and largely unfamiliar to us at the time. Yet with the help of emerging scientific research and the support within neighborhoods, we persevered.



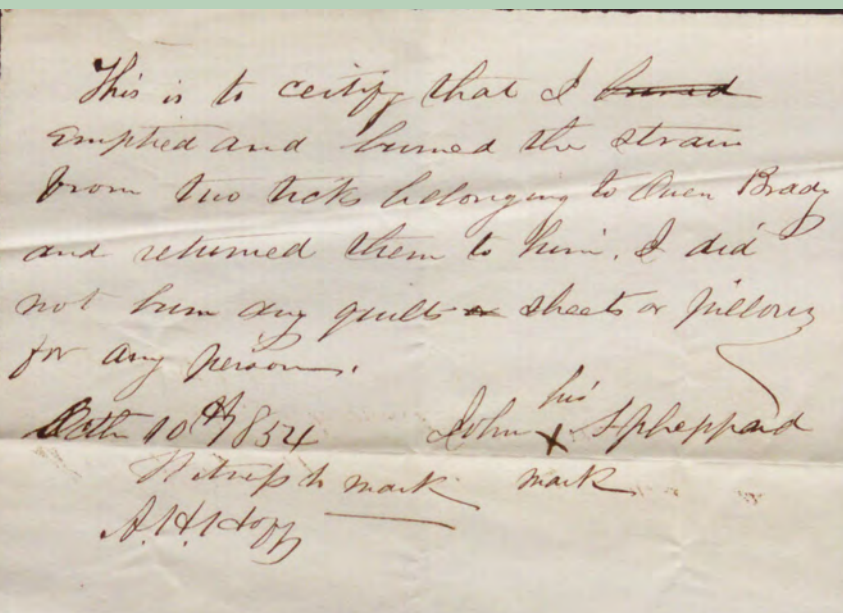
“Notice. Preventives of Cholera!” Published by order of the Sanatory Committee, under the sanction of the Medical Counsel (New York, 1849). New-York Historical Society Museum & Library, nyhistory.org.



Doctor Alex H. Hoff (b. 1822) who was hired as the Resident Physician for the Cholera Hospital. Became a Major in the Civil War. <https://www.geni.com/people/Colonel-Alexander-Hoff-USA/6000000021332419634>

Reports show that Albany spent over \$19,000 in public funds to help fight the epidemic back in 1832. Because of this critical response from the city, they were much more prepared when the disease hit again in the 1850s. Albany was quick to convert a standing hospital into a Cholera Hospital on August 8th 1854 when the first signs of disease remerged. The city then hired Doctor Alex H Hoff, a prominent physician and surgeon from Philadelphia, to become the Resident Physician at the newly opened hospital. (*The Military Surgeon*, “Memoir of Alexander Henry Hoff”, Vol 31, July, 1912. U.S. Army Medical Department, Office of Medical History website. <https://history.amedd.army.mil/biographies/hoff.html>)

Dr. Hoff immediately went to work hiring nurses and overseeing the treatment of countless patients. In addition, Doctor Hoff advised the city to hire individuals who were willing to burn and dispose of the straw beds of the infected. This practice helped keep the illness from spreading through the straw to other individuals who may have found it and attempted to repurpose it (See fig. left). After the epidemic died out, Doctor Hoff became the Surgeon General of New York State and held that title from 1854 to 1856. (*The Military Surgeon*)



92-00108. City Clerk, Cholera Epidemic, Certification of burning of bed belonging to Owen Brady. Signed by John Sheppard and received by Dr. A.H. Hoff Oct. 10, 1854. Courtesy of the Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

# Treatment

Below is an excerpt of a 12 page letter from Doctor A.H. Hoff to the Board of Health regarding his work at the Cholera Hospital in Albany. The letter goes on to describe four separate patients he had received, their

various forms of treatment, and the ultimate outcomes of each treatment.

Albany Sept 21st 1854

Board of Health

Gentlemen

By your direction a Cholera Hospital was opened on the 8th day of August. Since that time Forty Two cases of Cholera have been Received, and subjected to a treatment varying in its character to meet individual cases. Out of these Forty Two cases nineteen have died, one fifteen minutes after he was received, and several within three hours. Six of these averaged Sixty Three Years, the oldest being Seventy, the youngest Fifty Siven. Eleven averaged Thirty Seven, the oldest being Fifty Two, the youngest Twenty Six, one Eleven and one Seven.

Of this number there where thirteen males and Six females, most of them had been intemperate and suffered years of exposure and hardship.

(Continues on page 2) Of the received Twenty four their average age was Thirty One, oldest Seventy, youngest Three.

Out of the whole number of patients recovered, nineteen where in a Collapse, at least no pulse below the elbow, dark coloured and cold, Five of these recovered, Eight had secondary fever, three died, Fifteen recovered in primary stage, Two died.

92-00108. City Clerk, Cholera Epidemic, Letter from A.H. Hoff to Board of Heath regarding treatment of patients. Sept. 1854. Courtesy of the Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

It concludes with Dr. Hoff explaining that none of the popular potion remedies that were rising in popularity at the time were truly helpful in abating the disease. It is in the late 19th century, with the help of newspaper advertisements, that these patent medicines began to thrive. These medicines consisted of unlisted mystery ingredients and were widely advertised to consumers making up about half of newspaper advertising revenue at the time. Dr. Hoff explained that even if the layperson did have immediate access to these medicines, the patients would still not show much more probability in surviving the disease than would any other person who received simpler treatments such as surrounding themselves with hot water bottles to fight body chills and hydrating with rice water when possible.



# Social Stigmas

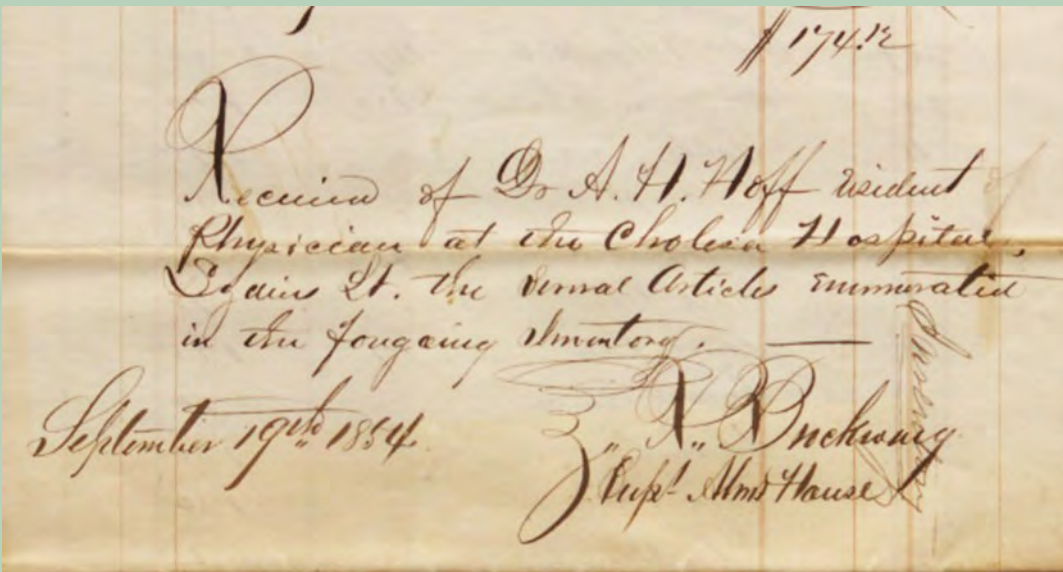
The understanding of disease and transmission among the general public was nonexistent during this Cholera outbreak, as many were uneducated and looked to religion and the supernatural for answers. The disease was able to spread like wildfire: not only because of possible overcrowding of homes and neighborhoods, but also because individuals continued their normal daily routines and continued to expose themselves to it.

It was thought to be a poor man's disease, and Doctor Hoff in a letter to the Board of Health observed that the majority of his patients had been self-indulgent and "suffered years of exposure and hardship." He did not elude to the idea that his patients brought Cholera on to themselves but he did notice a correlation between the lower class and the disease enough to make a notation of it.



Cholera Hospital- corner of Madison Ave (formerly Lydius St) and Dove St

"The disease raged so severely in Canal Street Dr. Hoff was employed there about twenty days... The Board of Health takes this occasion to express their approbation of the manner in which Dr. Hoff discharged his duties and for the courage, promptness, and fidelity, and professional skill displayed by him throughout"



89-01666. City Clerk, Albany Common Council Minutes, p 200. 1854-1855.

92-00108. City Clerk, Inventory of articles sent to Alms House received by Dr. A.H. Hoff at Cholera Hospital. Sept. 19, 1854. Courtesy of the Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

## Medical Breakthrough

John Snow was the man who discovered in 1854 that the current outbreak within New York City's dense neighborhoods was spread through contaminated drinking water. This scientific approach was welcomed among the medical communities and local governments to help reduce unsanitary conditions among cities and prevent future outbreaks.

## DEATH CLAIMS TWO IN ALTAMONT

CLARENCE S. OSTERHOUT AND  
MATHIAS RITTEE PASSED  
AWAY ON WEDNESDAY.

Both Young Men Were Victims of  
Pneumonia—Mr. Osterhout Was in  
His 34th Year and Mr. Ritter Was  
24 Years of Age.

*The Altamont Enterprise, Jan. 10, 1919, pp 1.*

**“Word has been received here that seven of the family of George Cooper now located in Schenectady, are suffering with Spanish influenza”**

*The Altamont Enterprise, Oct. 11, 1918, p 7.*

## Disease strikes again

The Influenza Epidemic emerged in Capital Region newspapers in fall of 1918, and the first mention of a local case was October 4th in the Altamont Enterprise. A soldier originally from Coeymans died from complications relating to influenza and pneumonia; he was less than 30 years old at the time.

From that point on, the term “influenza” would be used more and more often first in the local personals and then throughout the obituaries.

EPIDEMIC TOOK  
98 COHOESIERS  
Health Officer Estimates  
Numoer Of Influenza  
Cases At 1,500

*The Cohoes Republican, Jan. 9, 1919, p 8.*

According to the annual report of the Commissioner of Public Safety, during the month of October alone, the city of Albany reported 7,091 cases of influenza and 420 deaths. By October 1919 when the epidemic finally subsided, those numbers would increase to a total of 9,929 reported cases and 641 deaths in the city of Albany. More than any other reported communicable disease for both years.

Local hospitals, who were already understaffed due to medical professionals working overseas in the war effort, worked to their utmost capacities and survived with the help of countless volunteers. When hospitals were filled, the city converted and disinfected the Smallpox Hospital so that it could take on more patients. The City Government worked quickly and tirelessly with the Bureau of Heath, as well as taking in all advice available by the Health Officer. The City Fire Department and Police Department provided assistance in transporting patients to and from the hospitals and the Superintendent of Schools assigned school nurses to aide the Bureau of Health while the schools remained closed. Albany Medical College med students worked day and night to oversee patients and two lost their lives to the virus.

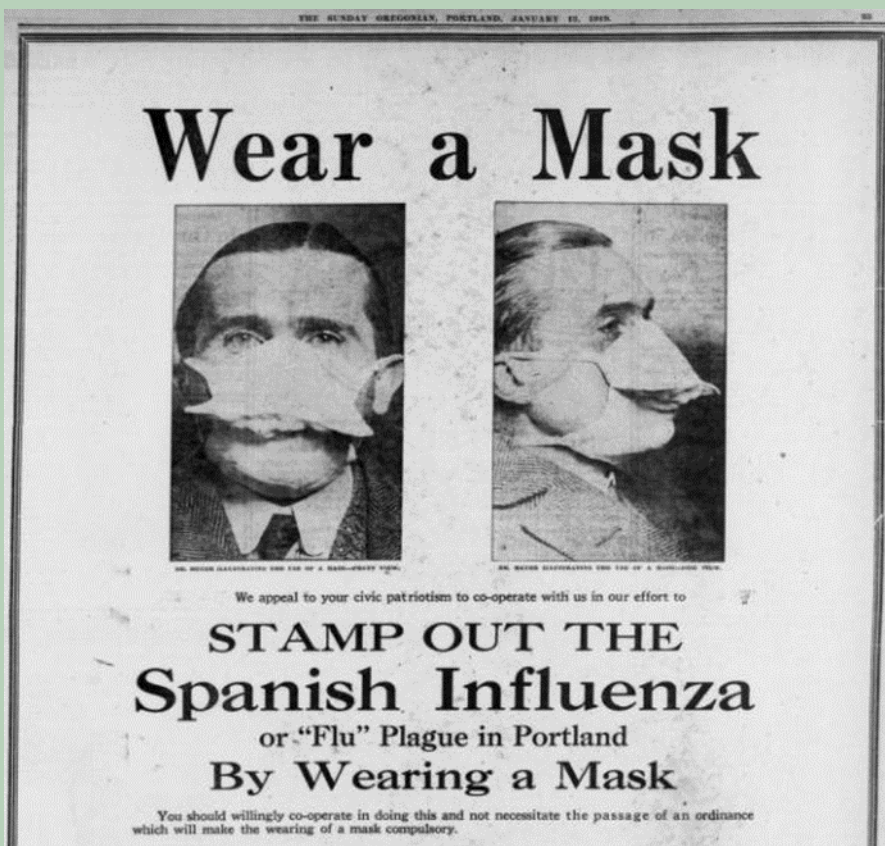
The City of Albany came together as a collective force against the influenza virus, and thoroughly succeeded. 85-02107. Common Council. Proceedings of the Albany Common Council Reports 1918—1919, pp 236-238. Courtesy of the Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

# UNCLE SAM GIVES ADVICE ON "FLU"

*The Altamont Enterprise*, Oct.  
18, 1918, p 1.

**“Cover up each cough and sneeze, If you don’t you’ll spread disease.”**

This phrase is from an official bulletin from the US Public Health Service regarding the influenza virus spreading across the country (*The Altamont Enterprise*, Oct 18, 1918, pp 1, 6). They advised people to be aware of and guard against “Droplet Infection”. The sickness was known to be caused by spreading person to person through the air in “very small droplets of mucus expelled by coughing or sneezing,” or even by “forceful talking.” The article then went on to explain the possible origin of the virus and the various symptoms to watch out for including body aches, weakness, and a high fever. It stresses that although a person could have a very mild case of the disease, he or she was still at risk of spreading a severe “attack” to others.



The Public Health Service advised that if someone became sick with influenza, it was imperative that they go home and stay home: one, to be in safe care in case they experience health complications, and two, so that they were not “scattering” the disease “far and wide”. Family members were urged not to sleep in the same room as an infected individual and they should keep as much distance from them as possible. Any rags or paper napkins used to clean up mucus or other bodily discharges were to be immediately gathered and burned.

*The Sunday Oregonian*, Jan. 12, 1919, p 23.

A kind of personal protection equipment (PPE) was also mentioned and advised by the Public Health Service. If a family member or individual must tend to the sick, it was advised that they cover themselves with a “wrapper, apron or gown” over their clothes while in the room. They were then to dispose of these garments when leaving before coming into contact with other healthy individuals. Even a simple fold of gauze to cover the mouth and nose was more protective than nothing at all so that the healthy attendant was not breathing in the “dry mucus” in the air.



# A timeline of the Influenza Epidemic as told by the City of Albany Bureau of Health

Report by Health Officer Arthur Sautter

## October 1918

October 6th

Physicians were communicated with and were asked the number of cases of influenza they had under their care and were requested to report their new cases daily to the Health officer.

October 7th

Number of cases reported show a material increase.

October 8th

The Board of Estimate and Apportionment met and on the recommendation of the Health Officer, a quarantine was placed on all indoor gatherings, including theaters, moving picture shows, churches and schools.

October 24th

Bans were partially removed, leaving quarantine on schools and moving picture shows.



<https://www.conncoll.edu/news/news-archive/2020/zimmer-on-1918-flu/#.X39xTGhKiM8>

## November 1918

November 7th

Moving picture houses were allowed to open for daily performances during the hours of seven and eleven p.m. only.

November 9th

Schools were allowed to open and the movies to give their regular shows.

# Not out of the woods yet...

**“US Health Service Issues Warning”** – increase in all respiratory diseases after influenza epidemic. Surgeon General Rupert Blue warned “Although the worst of the epidemic is over, there will continue to be a large number of scattered cases, many of them mild and unrecognized, which will be danger spots to be guarded against.” He then continued to explain the public health situation by comparing the fight against the epidemic to that of a great fire. He stated: “No fire chief who understands his business stops playing the hose on the charred debris as soon as the flames and visible fire have disappeared...he continues the water for hours and even days, for he knows that there is danger of the fire rekindling from smoldering embers.”

## **CHURCHES AND SCHOOLS CLOSED**

By request of the Board of Health, no public gathering will take place for several days in Altamont. Both of the churches will be closed all day Sunday. The movies, lodges, prayer meetings, Sunday schools and society meetings will be discontinued on account of the prevalence of Spanish influenza which has made its appearance here. Only a very few cases are reported in the village and by strict adherence to the rules formulated for prevention of the spread of the disease, it is thought no serious consequences will result.

*The Altamont Enterprise, Oct. 11, 1918, p 1.*

Although many lives were lost across the city and county during these hard times, countless more were saved due to the responsiveness of the City of Albany and surrounding towns. Communities came together against a common enemy, they volunteered their services where needed, and they abided by town orders, stifling the spread of the diseases. Our county is truly at its strongest when we all work together, and if we work together we will once again overcome.

## **SPAIN AND ENGLAND REPORT INCREASE IN TUBERCULOSIS AFTER INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC.**

**U. S. Public Health Service Warns  
Public Against Tuberculosis.  
One Million Cases Tuberculosis in United States—Each a  
Source of Danger.**

**Influenza Convalescents Should Have  
Lungs Examined—Colds Which Hang  
On Often Beginning of Tuberculosis.  
No Cause for Alarm If Tuberculosis  
Is Recognized Early—Patent Medi-  
cines Not to Be Trusted.**

*The Altamont Enterprise, Dec. 6, 1918, p 3.*

“Unless the people learn to realize the seriousness of the danger they will be compelled to pay a heavy death toll from pneumonia and other respiratory diseases” (Surgeon General Rupert Blue, *Altamont Enterprise*, Dec. 6, 1918, p 3).