



Beacon Historical Society

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Beer, Public Health, and the Pandemic of 1918

The 1918 influenza pandemic had a stronghold in Beacon as it did everywhere across the globe. Beacon's Commissioner of Public Safety John T. Cronin, issued Health Department Orders to insure the safety of our citizens. His brother, William J. Cronin of New York City, had died of influenza on October 8, 1918. Three days later, 95 cases of influenza were reported in Beacon, the highest record to date... with no end in sight. In response, Cronin's Health Order Number One, printed in the Beacon Daily Herald, ordered the closure of schools, moving picture houses, theaters, churches and Sunday schools and canceled all public meetings and other public assemblies until further notice. Order Number Two was announced the next day, closing all liquor saloons, hotel bar rooms, pool and billiard rooms, ice cream and soda water parlors. Goods were allowed to be sold if they were not consumed on the premises, but no loitering or congregating in or upon such premises were allowed.



Questioning Cronin's authority, eight saloon owners defied his orders and kept bars around town open. They were promptly arraigned before City Judge Dugan and paroled without bail. The proprietors immediately reopened their saloons and were again paroled and released for \$1,000 each (approximately \$18,000 in today's dollars). An attorney for the saloon keepers told them to "punch the nose" of any man who attempted to interfere with the conduct of their business and advised them to begin with Cronin.

Cronin then told Chief of Police Moith to send out his men and disperse any gatherings, but Moith refused to carry out the order. Moith took the matter up with Mayor Beskin, who agreed that the police should defy the Commissioner's orders. Cronin sent a two-hundred-word telegram to NY Governor Seymour Whitman describing the situation of violations in the interest of public health and a rebellious police force and Mayor (who was also a wine and liquor dealer).



On October 23, a hearing was held at the Mase Hook & Ladder Company firehouse. Cronin testified that he saw 50 men standing at the bar at the Conway Café, and that the bartenders were cleaning beer glasses by dipping them in a tank of cold water. Six local doctors at the hearing affirmed that there were several influenza related deaths every day and that they were treating hundreds of cases. The doctors all agreed that the disease was spread when people congregated and that drinking glasses cleaned in cold water did not remove germs.

The case then went to the Dutchess County Court presided by Judge C.W.H. Arnold. On November 4, he declared that Cronin, under the power vested in him by the Beacon City Charter, had the legal authority to close saloons during the epidemic. Each of the eight proprietors were under \$1,000 bail for their appearance before the grand jury. In addition, they had also been arrested on a disorderly conduct charge, tried and convicted. A reporter from the local paper described these proceedings "to rival in intensity the liveliest action on the western front."

It is unknown how many Beacon residents died or contracted influenza at the end of the pandemic. According to Will Tatum, Dutchess County Historian, the Poughkeepsie Journal did not publish statistics other than individual death announcements. Dutchess County Health Department records may hold that information, but are not accessible to the public at this time. The resolve and enforcement of Commissioner Cronin's health orders probably saved many Beacon residents' lives.