

## 2020 - Not our First Quarantine *by Joe Coleman*

Over the past few weeks as we follow orders to “stay at home” and quarantine, to most of us it feels like an unprecedented experience. No doubt, it is. Yet, there was a time in Bucks County when quarantines, on a smaller scale were much more common. I’ve come across some interesting details of quarantines in Hulmeville Borough as I’ve been researching the history of Hulmeville. This revised History of Hulmeville is scheduled to be published as we celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hulmeville’s incorporation in 2022. Hulmeville developed as a village in the 1790s and early 1800s however, until 1872 it was part of Middletown Township. In 1872 Hulmeville separated from Middletown and incorporated with the state of Pennsylvania as an independent borough.

As an independent borough, in 1885 Hulmeville was obligated by the state of Pennsylvania to organize a Board of Health. The Board of Health was created and began holding regular meetings to fulfill its obligations. Fortunately, the Board kept records and while the first volume is missing, the volume that covers the years 1900 to 1932 has survived and provides a glimpse into the public health efforts at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The Hulmeville Board of Health dealt with a wide array of issues including rabid dogs, outhouses, pigsties, dispensation of milk and stream pollution by the local mills. However by far the most common entries in the meeting notes deal with contagious disease. The diseases that caused concern included measles, mumps, diphtheria, scarlet fever, typhoid fever, whooping cough, infantile paralysis and chicken pox. The most common method used to deal with all of these was quarantine. The most prominent members of the Board in this era were Charles Haefner who served at first as Health Officer and then as President, Dr. E.S. Huntsman, a physician who served on the board from the start of these minutes until he resigned in 1923 and Mr. Joseph Williams who served as the health officer for over a decade.

What is maybe the most remarkable aspect of the role of the Hulmeville Board of Health, was its comprehensive nature. From the minutes it becomes clear that when word spread in this small town of about 450 residents that a contagious illness was present in a family, the Board of Health investigated. If the disease was confirmed, more often than not the family was quarantined, and signs were posted. Then as today there was much debate about the definition of the quarantine. Sometimes exceptions were made for the wage earner in the family to continue to work. In one instance a resident whose family was quarantined due to measles was “permitted to go about his daily labor under the promise not to mingle with anyone outside of his family unless absolutely necessary.” Other times, the quarantine was complete and enforced by law. Additionally the Board of Health would check in on the families that were quarantined. One member of the Board, the Health Officer, was appointed to this task and paid 50 cents per day for attending to any contagious case. His job was to inquire about the needs of the family and then try to deliver those things to the home. Finally, when the illness did pass the board of health authorized disinfecting of the property through “fumigation.” Again, a member of the Board would be paid for doing this and the Borough taxpayers paid the cost. While the initial cost of these services was paid out of the Hulmeville Borough budget but there are accounts of the borough seeking reimbursement from the family after the illness passed. For instance, in 1903, the Harrison family had been quarantined was sent a bill which was itemized as follows:

<i>Dr. Huntsman for Antitoxin</i>	<i>\$10.25</i>	<i>Henry Palmer for Coal</i>	<i>\$5.50</i>
<i>Edwin Henry Store Bill.</i>	<i>\$20.37</i>	<i>Chas Haefner for Services</i>	<i><u>\$7.65</u></i>
			<i>\$43.77</i>

The Board of Health also served as a point of contact to stop the spread of disease from other communities. The minutes reveal that on at least two separate occasions the Board of Health was notified by officials from other towns that a citizen under quarantine had left their town and was heading for Hulmeville. In both instances the Hulmeville Board of Health officials located the individuals involved and gave them an option. They would have to be quarantined in Hulmeville or return to their hometown. The threat of quarantine must have been very real because in both instances the individuals decided to return home.

When one discusses the quarantines of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it would seem that the Spanish Flu of 1919 must be part of the discussion. And in fact the flu does show up in the minutes. It seems that the school and churches in Hulmeville were closed by the Board of Health for a period of one week in 1919. Also there is a mention of one death by flu in 1919. However, for Hulmeville, it seems, that a 1926 diphtheria scare caused much more concern. Diphtheria was a nation-wide problem in the 1920s killing between 13,000 and 15,000 people per year. Three families in Hulmeville had diphtheria diagnosed in their homes in 1926. This disease was of particular concern in Hulmeville because it is most deadly in children and Hulmeville was the site of the Middletown Township public school that had been built in 1855. The Board of Health took more drastic action than ever before during this epidemic. In fact, the Board of Health instructed its Secretary of the Board of Health to swear out a warrant for the arrest of a father who allowed his daughter, who was under quarantine, to go to the general store in town on an errand. Additionally the Board asked the Borough Council to pay for the administration of the toxin-antitoxin diphtheria treatment to all of the Borough children and for Middletown Township school board to pay for the treatment for all non-resident children. Both organizations honored the request and paid for the immunizations.

The small borough of Hulmeville in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century has some lessons to teach us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Society has always been dealing with contagious disease. The basic principles haven’t change. Ending the scourge of the contagion takes the cooperation of the entire society.