



Remembering Nurses In The 1918 Flu Pandemic

By: **Phoebe Pollitt**

Abstract

From 1918 to 1921, an H1N1 influenza virus killed tens of millions of people around the globe. That pandemic first appeared in North Carolina in September 1918. Within weeks, thousands were sickened and many died. Governments shuttered schools, churches and other public places. Citizens were advised to wash their hands, use Vicks VapoRub, put Vaseline around their noses and to avoid kissing on the lips. Despite these efforts over 13,500 North Carolinians died during the pandemic.

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Remembering Nurses in the 1918 Flu Pandemic

By NCNA Member Dr. Phoebe Ann Pollitt, RN; Nursing History Council Vice Chair

From 1918 to 1921, an H1N1 influenza virus killed tens of millions of people around the globe. That pandemic first appeared in North Carolina in September 1918. Within weeks, thousands were sickened and many died. Governments shuttered schools, churches and other public places. Citizens were advised to wash their hands, use Vicks VapoRub, put Vaseline around their noses and to avoid kissing on the lips. Despite these efforts over 13,500 North Carolinians died during the pandemic.

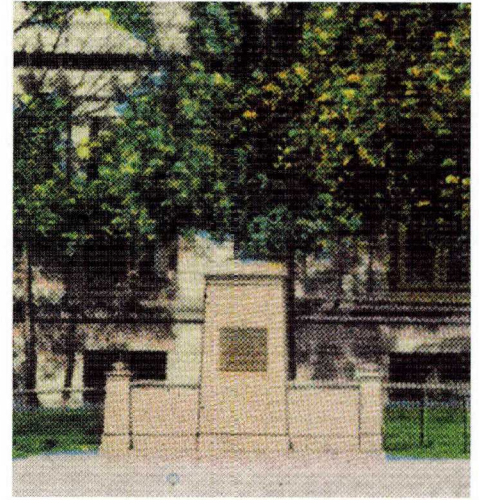
Meanwhile, hundreds of North Carolina nurses were serving in World War I. With a depleted workforce, many nurses at home volunteered extra hours to care for flu patients. At least seven of these nurses lost their lives; we are profiling two of them here.

The first nurse to die was Bessie Corinna Roper, originally from Morganton. She graduated from Rutherford Hospital School of Nursing around 1910. She accepted a case as a private duty nurse in Chapel Hill in 1918. By early October of that year, many UNC students and staff became ill and several died from the "Spanish Flu." Roper volunteered much of her free time at the University Infirmary. Several of the students she nursed recovered, but sadly she succumbed to the disease on October 22, 1918. Her obituary appeared in many papers in the state lauding her selfless and noble sacrifice and likened her death to those of soldiers fighting on the battlefields of WWI. She was buried with military honors. Roper's only memorial was a silver tea service the Chapel Hill Chapter of the American Red Cross presented to the UNC infirmary in her honor in 1923.

Nurse Lucy Bragg Page, originally from Raleigh, was a 1910 graduate of Petersburg General Hospital School of Nursing in Petersburg, Virginia. After graduation she returned home and practiced private duty nursing and served as treasurer of the Raleigh Nurses Association. In October 1918, half of the student body of NCSU became ill and 13 died of the flu. An additional 288 Raleigh residents succumbed to the flu in the same month. Page volunteered to nurse ailing students at the college, where she quickly caught the flu. After she recovered, she began volunteering at the Red Cross Emergency Hospital established at Raleigh High School. Page soon relapsed and died on October 31, 1918.

The deaths of Page and a volunteer who helped in the infirmary were commemorated with a Nurses Memorial fountain at the Wake County courthouse. Sadly, the fountain was removed during construction of the new courthouse. Its current whereabouts are unknown.

Today, as we confront a new pandemic and go beyond our normal work expectations to care for those in need, we will be inspired by the bravery of nurses a century ago who gave their lives working for the health and well-being of all people.



The Wake County Courthouse fountain memorial for Lucy Page and volunteer Eliza Riddick. Source: <https://docsouth.unc.edu/commland/monument/642/>

North Carolina's On-Duty Nurses Who Lost Their Lives to the H1N1 Pandemic

Bessie Roper, Morganton

Lucy Page, Raleigh

Etta May Perkins, Morganton
(died serving as a US Army Nurse at Camp Meade, MD)

Lillian Johnson, Loris, SC
(died in Waynesville, NC)

Laura Rouseasu, Salisbury

Alyce Baker, Ayden

Sybil Kelly, Union County, SC
(died in Wilmington, NC)

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The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the view of the North Carolina Nurses Association or its board of directors. ■