

Wartime on Beacon Street

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In the Peace Day Parade on November 11, 1918, Bostonians display an effigy of German Kaiser Wilhelm II. (Source: U.S. National Archives 23921419). (right)



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“The war is not over. The real war is just beginning - the war against ignorance, the war against poverty, the war against prejudice, the war against disease.”

Power in Suffrage

As the fight for women's right to vote grew in the 1910s, the residents of Beacon Street remained anti-suffrage, including the Gibson family. Suffragists called Beacon Street "enemy's country" because of the number of anti-suffrage supporters.

**GROUP OF ANTIS "REVIEWING" THE
PARADE FROM A BALCONY ON BEACON ST.**



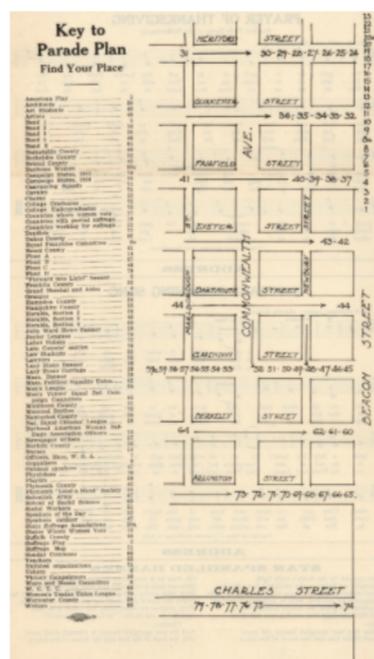
Anti-suffragists watched suffrage parades from their balconies on Beacon Street in 1915 with banners encouraging men to vote no.

The residents, at least the homeowners, were almost entirely white and wealthy, and held conservative views typical of Boston's upper class society. Mary Ethel, the oldest Gibson daughter, actively fought against suffrage. She sold red roses to Boston residents just before a suffrage rally in 1914, with the color red symbolizing anti-suffrage. Other residents on their street hung banners and released red balloons to counter suffragists, intending for Boston to remain conservative.

While the Gibsons may have disapproved of the movement, their five female domestic employees likely supported the cause and the change it would bring. Because the primary suffrage groups often excluded working class women, these women fought for their voting rights, including the many European immigrants who worked for wealthy homeowners on Beacon Street.

At a 1915 parade through Boston, domestic workers held signs encouraging men to vote yes on the suffrage ballot to support laundry workers. Would Beatrice Hardon, the Gibsons' laundress in 1910, have attended the march as well?

A pamphlet for the 1915 Massachusetts Women Suffrage Victory Parade maps the route of the parade through the Back Bay. (Source: Massachusetts Historical Society Archives, 1915)



Suffrage's passage in 1920 marked a huge change for the country, despite the white government officials and suffragists' frequent blocking of women of color from casting their own votes to try to maintain the status quo. The women of 137 Beacon Street both upstairs and downstairs were able to vote in 1920, with the Gibson women potentially abstaining from voting and their servants using their newfound right to do so.

Epidemic in the City

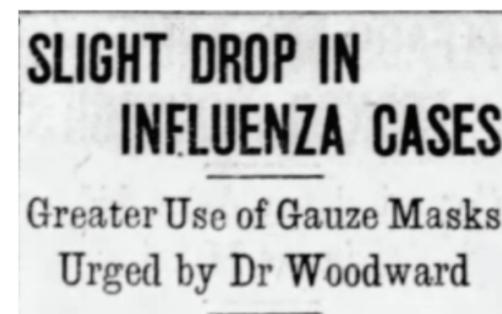
Spanish flu, made its way around the world in 1918, turning daily life upside down. In August the disease came to Boston, which was completely unprepared for a pandemic. The mingling of sailors, soldiers, and civilians, created a perfect storm for the influenza to spread quickly, engulfing Boston and spreading to Camp Devens to the west, where 45,000 to 50,000 soldiers trained.

Many prominent Bostonians vacationed in the resort town of Nahant including Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge. Pictured above: the Gibsons' summer home, overlooking 40 Steps beach, provided a respite from city life.



Where the Gibsons lived in Back Bay, houses were spacious, built with indoor plumbing which provided an extra measure of sanitation, and designed for single families. Other neighborhoods, like the North End, were hit worse by the influenza, partly because the structures there had less amenities, were improperly ventilated and had many families living in close quarters. An immigrant neighborhood for decades, the North End's overcrowding resulted in buildings "60 feet or more from the street...shut in on all sides by two or three story buildings almost lightless and airless".

Despite a rise in cases, doctors assured the public that the pandemic had not spiraled out of control. (Boston Globe, September 21, 1918)



Although Boston's cases were not as high as they had been in September and October, Boston Health Commissioner Woodward wanted to enforce the use of gauze masks among doctors, nurses, barber and dentists. Throughout the course of the pandemic, Boston officials never issued legislation on mask wearing. (Boston Globe, December 28, 1918)

Like many elite Bostonians able to take advantage of “shore and country homes” and bask in “fresh air, sunshine and nature”, Rosamond and her son Charlie spent the summer of 1918 at their home in Nahant, on the North Shore, with extended family. She remained in Nahant until early October, protected, while the influenza exploded in Boston.

Commonwealth Pier in South Boston was a hub of activity during WWI. Sailors waiting to go overseas lived in the Receiving Ship, an out of commission navy vessel where influenza cases first emerged. (Springfield College Archives and Special Collections, c. 1914-1918)



Although nurses and doctors were occupied with wartime efforts—with thousands deployed abroad—more Americans died from influenza than from war casualties. During the fall of 1918 alone, over 4,000 Bostonians died from influenza and/or pneumonia. In the end, more than 620,000 Americans died from the influenza epidemic than American soldiers in WWI.

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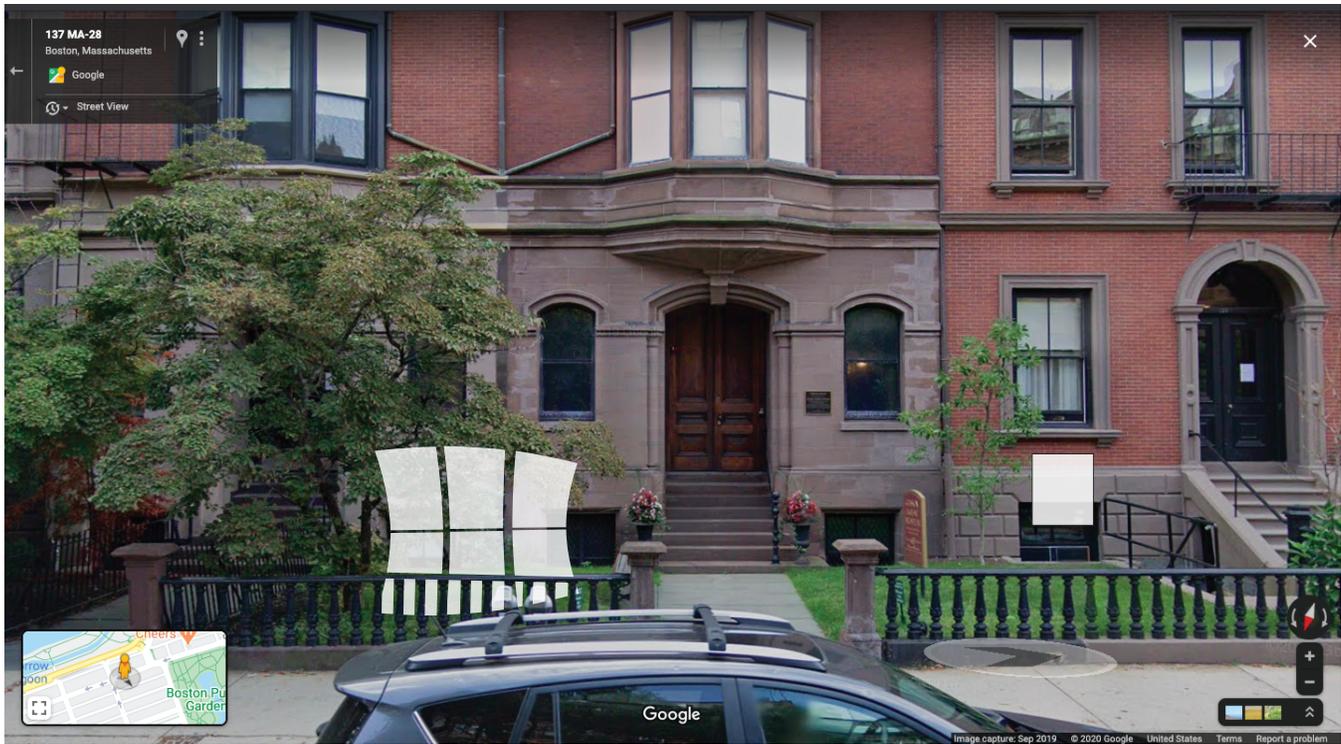
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A.



B.

