ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Playing Politics with Disease:

Newark’s Imperious Mayor during the 1918 Influenza Pandemic

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During the 1918 influenza pandemic nearly fifty million people perished worldwide from the flu virus, including 675,000 in the United States and 22,000 in the state of New Jersey alone. While the Department of Health of the State of New Jersey acted swiftly to the pandemic by issuing mandatory closings of all public gathering places, the municipality of Newark, under the leadership of Mayor Charles P. Gillen, chose not to adhere entirely to the quarantines. Of the 29,000 Newarkers who were stricken with the flu, 2,800 people died within three months. Gillen paid little attention to the numbers during the influenza crisis and took an anomalous approach in handling a contagious disease. Even as the figures continuously conveyed that more people were contracting influenza, Gillen still refused to follow national and state quarantines that would have shut down his city fully to prevent the spread of disease. Conscious of his own political standing in the time of Prohibition, Gillen defined his mayoral practices by his politics rather than by the people who were suffering from disease. While seemingly satisfying his constituents’ thirst for liquor by allowing saloons to stay open in order to distribute alcohol for “medicinal purposes,” ordinary citizens were dying in his city. Over ten percent of the deaths from influenza in the state of New Jersey occurred in Newark. While no one could have predicted where the greatest numbers of deaths would take place, Gillen’s political handling of the influenza crisis in Newark is reminiscent of how much one person could impact the health care of a city and calls into question whether some of the causalities from influenza in Newark could have been prevented.
Preface

This thesis is dedicated to all life-long learners and especially my own advisor, Professor Stephen Pemberton, who has taught me the importance of persistence in reaching a goal.
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On the night of October 6\textsuperscript{th}, 1918, in Newark, New Jersey, Mayor, Charles P. Gillen, led a group of revelers through the city’s streets after paper boys shouted that Germany had surrendered the Great War. Attending a benefit performance at Newark’s First Regiment Armory, Mayor Gillen gathered the audience and commenced a parade to City Hall complete with a band and flag bearers. The celebration lasted well into the early morning hours, startling many Newarkers from their sleep. Unfortunately, Mr. Gillen failed to confirm the veracity of the news and, consequently, deluded Newark residents about an early war victory. This type of impetuous, bold and often imperious decision-making would characterize Gillen’s leadership throughout his tenure as mayor and especially during one of Newark’s worst public health crises in its history: The great influenza pandemic of 1918.\textsuperscript{1}

\textbf{Why Newark}

As New Jersey’s largest city Newark has often been a topic of study throughout its rich history. From its development as an industrial center after the U.S. Civil War to the place where transients from the southern United States and immigrants from across Europe settled to find a new life, Newark’s diverse past has captured the attention of scholars and lay historians alike. Newark’s medical history is equally as intriguing because of events like the four dog-bitten children traveling to Paris in 1885 to receive Pasteur’s treatment for rabies, the Newark Female Charitable Society denying poor children trips to the mountains and seaside because of the 1916 polio outbreak and, especially, the outspoken mayor’s inauspicious handling of the 1918 influenza pandemic.

\textsuperscript{1} “Newspaper Headline Misleads; Gillen Heals a Joyous Parade,” \textit{Newark Evening News}, 7 October 1918, 12.
that may have caused the high death toll in Newark. In 1968 Stuart Galishoff, a long-time
Newark historian, commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the 1918 influenza pandemic
by reflecting on how Newark dealt with the influenza outbreak compared to the other
New Jersey municipalities and attributing the differences to the mayor himself: Charles
P. Gillen.2

During the 1918 influenza pandemic Mayor Charles P. Gillen skirted state and
national law when he refused to close down saloons in his city at the height of the 1918
influenza pandemic under the guise that liquor from the saloons provided medicinal relief
to those suffering from the flu. As mayor of the city of Newark Charles Gillen claimed
responsibility for all of his constituents - the sick as well as the healthy - and, according
to his way of thinking, many would need the alcohol to treat their illness. Thus, there was
no way that Charles Gillen was going to adhere to a state quarantine if it meant closing
down the drinking establishments that his constituents patroned regularly especially when
Prohibition was looming as a political issue. Nevertheless, Mayor Gillen’s actions may
have exacerbated the threat of disease in Newark as 29,000 inhabitants suffered from the
flu and nearly 2,800 died when influenza ravaged his city.3

Gillen did not appear insensitive to the disease afflicting his city and state, but he
also did not exercise political sagacity during a healthcare crisis. Gillen continued to

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Introduction; Clement A. Price, The Afro-American Community of Newark, 1917-1947: A Social History
(PhD diss., Rutgers University, 1975); Bert Hansen, “America’s First Medical Breakthrough: How Popular
Excitement about a French Rabies Cure in 1885 Raised New Expectations for Medical Progress,” The
American Historical Review 103 (1998): 389; Naomi Rogers, Dirt and Disease: Polio Before FDR (New
3 Galishoff, “Newark and the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918,” 258.
make decisions according to his political views, not really considering that he may have to act differently in the face of a public health emergency. Initially, he contributed to the War effort by sending nurses to care for flu-stricken servicemen at Camp Dix in South Jersey where news of the 1918 influenza outbreak first occurred; Gillen also educated the public about the dangers of influenza early on in his own city of Newark and, especially important to him, how to prevent it. In his mind Gillen was doing all of the right things, including allowing Newark saloons to stay open to distribute alcohol for the sick even though, in the end, he may have put more people at risk. The governor of New Jersey and the State Department of Health cooperated with the United States Public Health Service during the 1918 influenza pandemic by issuing quarantines on all public gathering places and also preparing the state’s infrastructure, but Gillen’s actions appeared antithetical to the State’s efforts to combat the disease, which caused political and public health care discrepancies in Newark that may have resulted in the inordinately high incidence of disease and accounted for ten percent of the deaths in New Jersey from influenza.4

This retelling of the story of Newark’s mayor during the 1918 influenza pandemic investigates and attempts to shed light on why Charles Gillen made leadership decisions that were contrary to the actions of the state and federal government, analyzes the impact of his actions on Newark as he put more people in danger of contracting disease, and seeks to discover what can be gleaned from this experience should another politician act independently when a major health care crisis occurs again.

Influenza Travels the World

In the world of 1918 there were few international collaborative efforts to combat the spread of contagious diseases. The germ theory of disease was generally accepted among medical practitioners since the late 1800s, but interpretations about how to handle people with illness still varied widely. Consequently, no health care standard was in effect if disease struck, and countries were pretty much on their own when it came to taking care of the sick. Influenza, or the “grippe” as it was commonly called, was (and still is) a yearly occurrence, but in 1918 a much more virulent form of influenza killed nearly fifty million people worldwide. In that year people referred to influenza as the “Spanish flu,” but it had not originated in Spain. Because of Spain’s neutrality during the Great War, its government felt no need to censor Spanish newspapers. Articles frequently talked about the outbreak of influenza especially when King Alphonse XIII contracted the disease, so the flu that year became associated with Spain, and the phrase “Spanish flu” stuck.5

Most experts now agree that the 1918 influenza pandemic began in the United States at Camp Funston in Haskell County, Kansas. From there American soldiers unknowingly spread the disease as troop movement for training and embarkation to Europe occurred frequently. Outbreaks of the flu began to appear in early autumn in Brest, France, where American troops disembarked for their war duty in Europe. In this port city five to six soldiers succumbed to influenza each day. From there influenza promulgated throughout France to Italy, as far north as Scandinavia and Iceland, and as

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far away as Latvia. Germany was hard hit with the flu, losing 300,000 of its own. Many suspect that influenza may have hastened the War’s end because Germany’s troops also came down with influenza and, as a result, were in less able to fight.\(^6\)

Influenza also spread throughout Africa and Asia and is estimated to have killed nearly thirty-five million people on these two continents alone. Moving quickly from Morocco to Sierra Leone and South Africa and then over to Asia, influenza struck particularly hard in India, which lost close to twenty million people. Ironically, those seemingly most vulnerable because of their lot in India’s caste system - the Untouchables - experienced less loss of life to the disease because no one was venturing near them. Influenza also reached China and Japan, but Japan lost less than one percent of its population, attributed most likely to the government’s proactive approach of distributing face masks and disseminating leaflets with warnings about the disease. China, some historians estimate, may have lost four to nine million people because it is believed that the government failed to act, which forced the Chinese to take matters into their own hands. Countries like Iran in Southwest Asia also suffered from the flu because of British troop movement throughout the region. Fearful of improper burial due to a lack of burial shrouds, Muslims from Shiraz, Iran, crawled to the mosques to die.\(^7\)

By contrast, Australia proved to be the exception to the rule. Its death rates from influenza were far fewer than in other Westernized nations due to the stringent quarantine


the Australian government placed on incoming ships at the time. However, the disease eventually penetrated the country when medical personnel, treating sick soldiers on a troop ship, came back ashore and infected the nation. Australia ended up losing 12,000 civilians to influenza, but this number was far less than in most countries.  

Influenza eventually found its way back to the Americas and proved devastating there as well. Many of the countries in South and Central America may never know influenza’s full impact because it was not a reportable disease at the time. Death from the flu may have ranged anywhere from 750,000 to one million, with the majority of the dead from Mexico, which may have lost close to half a million people. Canada, on the other hand, experienced one of the lowest death rates of 5.7 per one thousand people during the pandemic. Experts attribute Canada’s success with influenza to the government’s actions. Canadian officials shut down nearly all public gathering places by early October of 1918, which ended up being a timely response to the epidemic in that country.

Government reaction to influenza in the United States, on the other hand, was not as swift as it had been in Canada since the U.S. Public Health Service only sent out communications to the states after influenza had already become a public health threat. Established in 1798 as the Marine Hospital Service, this agency provided care for sick and disabled seamen. In the early twentieth century, under a new name of the Public Health Service, its primary function was to investigate all type of illness, including the “conditions influencing the propagation and spread of disease.” By the 1918 influenza

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pandemic, protecting the health of 106 million Americans proved to be a formidable task. By the time the Chief of the Public Health Service, Rupert Blue, issued a plea to health officials in forty-eight states to report on the incidence of influenza already rampant across the nation, there was little Blue could do except to suggest quarantines. In fact, a week later it was the Department of the Navy’s Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, not Rupert Blue’s office, that composed, printed and disseminated information about influenza on a one-page flyer. Influenza had become such a significant health threat in the armed services - especially at army bases like Camp Devens in Massachusetts - that the surgeon general of the United States Army, William Gorgas, sent physicians to Boston to investigate the situation. Only when medical officers counted more than 14,000 cases of influenza at Camp Devens alone, with the disease having already spread to Camp Dix in New Jersey, Camp Upton on Long Island, Camp Dodge in Iowa and Camp Kearney in California, did the Public Health Service begin to publish weekly updates on influenza. In the meantime, Dr. J.S. Koen, inspector of the Division of Hog Cholera Control of the Bureau of Animal Industry, had recently submitted an article to his office in Washington, D.C. which people were too busy to read. Dr. Koen had just attended the annual National Swine Show in Cedar Rapids, Iowa (not far from Kansas), and noticed that the symptoms from a disease afflicting the pigs at the show was strangely similar to the Spanish flu that he had heard about in Europe. In his forgotten article he gave the influenza of 1918 a new name - swine flu - and theorized that Spanish flu must have originated in pigs and transferred over to humans in the United States. From there it spread through troop movement. Although many researchers would question Koen’s swine flu theory over the next decade, that same influenza would eventually kill 675,000
Americans. Lack of organization and inadequate communication at the national level about the onset of influenza in the soldier populations meant that, when it came to civilians, the management of this disease was left to the individual states.\(^\text{10}\)

**New Jersey Rises to the Challenge**

Having to combat the influenza crisis very nearly on its own, the state of New Jersey rose to the challenge by issuing quarantines, conducting research, communicating regularly with medical personnel and opening emergency hospitals. Since New Jersey had two major military bases at the time - Camp Dix in Burlington County and Camp Merritt in Bergen County - news of influenza outbreaks spread relatively quickly, enabling the State Board of Health to act expediently. First, the State issued mandatory closings of all public gathering places; these were the quarantines strongly suggested by the Public Health Service. Second, the State sponsored research at a boarding facility for epileptic patients in Skillman, New Jersey, during the early weeks of the pandemic to determine the efficacy of a vaccine. Whereas the ethics of such research on unknowing patients would come into question today, the state determined that the tested vaccine could not produce immunity to influenza and reported its findings in the State Board of Health’s publication, *Public Health News*. In this publication the State also notified physicians about the symptoms of influenza, warned them not to

misdiagnose influenza as pneumonia and informed them about the best course of
treatment, including advice against using the vaccine. Next, the State utilized programs
and facilities already in place to help impending flu victims. Clinics used for the
treatment of venereal disease (ten percent of army recruits in New Jersey had already
tested positive for some form of the disease) were refitted to become temporary hospitals
for impending influenza victims. These collaborative measures at the state level were
unprecedented at the time and made New Jersey one of the most prepared states in the
Union for the onslaught of influenza.11

Individual locales in New Jersey also readied themselves for the 1918 influenza
pandemic by reacting quickly and setting up facilities for those who were in urgent need
of hospitalization. The public health officer of Princeton, T.W. Margerum, established an
emergency hospital at a former girls’ school to care especially for indigent immigrants
who had recently arrived in town to chisel stonework at the University. Prior to 1918, the
sick poor of Mercer County had to depend on hospitals in Trenton, the state’s capital.
(Princeton later acquired its own hospital due to the severity of the influenza outbreak
that occurred there, which afflicted at least three hundred inhabitants and killed over
twenty of them.) The city of Camden, because of its close proximity to Camp Dix,
became aware of a flu outbreak a month before influenza was a reportable disease in the
State and within two weeks had secured an armory as an emergency hospital. Then
doctors in the area would not have to make house calls but could treat many more

14, 13 November 1917-24 November 1918. New Jersey State Archives, Trenton, NJ; D.C. Bowen and
Epileptics (Belle Mead, NJ: Van Harlingen Historical Society, 1993), 16-18;William F. Snow and Wilbur
patients in one place. The capital itself, Trenton, organized a massive campaign to make and provide face masks to protect the soldiers at nearby Camp Dix. New Jerseyans across the state were fighting their own “war” at home - a sort of “subdivision” of the Great War being fought overseas - and derived a sense of patriotism as they followed state orders and prepared for the attack of influenza. Nearly all municipalities fully complied with national and state orders, but Newark with its intransigent mayor, Charles P. Gillen, was quite a different story and turned out to be the anomaly within New Jersey’s well-organized response to the Great Influenza.12

The Great War Changes Newark

In the fall of 1918 the United States was fully embroiled in war. President Wilson had declared war on Germany on April 2nd, 1917, and within a year two million American men had been trained as soldiers, and nearly one million were fighting alongside the English, French and Belgians on the Western Front against the Germans. Americans on the home front were supporting the war as best they could. They observed Meatless Mondays and Wheatless Tuesdays to reserve food, cultivated their own vegetable gardens to supplement their diet, bought liberty bonds to support the War and collected peach pits used in the manufacturing of gas masks. Americans at home and abroad did their utmost to meet President Wilson’s goal to make the world safe for democracy.13

Newarkers were no less patriotic about the War. By September of 1918, nearly 61,000 white Newark males, aged 18-45, had signed up for military service. As a result, a

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high number of black laborers recruited from the South worked round-the-clock at Newark Bay to fabricate freighters for the War. In addition, Newarkers had oversubscribed to liberty war bonds, eagerly awaiting the next government offering. They read the daily headlines whose news about the War consumed entire front pages of the local papers. Worried mothers, wives, sisters and grandparents carefully sifted through the pages to see the latest casualty list, and especially, to get word on any local doughboys who had made the ultimate sacrifice for their country.14

Home to most Newarkers consisted of plenty of factory sites where manufacturing was the lifeblood of the city. Starting out as a leading shoe fabricating city along Newark Bay, which supplied water for steam power to drive the machinery, Newark also became famous for its saddles, harnesses, carriages, jewelry and even beer. Known as the “City of Opportunity,” Newark attracted Irish, German, Italian, Slavic and Jewish immigrants. From 1890-1918 the city’s population increased by 128%. During the first year of the Great War nearly 100,000 new residents entered Newark, including black migrant workers from the South, eager to seek employment in industrial firms producing war-related materiel. By 1918, there were 450,000 city dwellers from so many diverse backgrounds that the head librarian at Newark’s Free Public Library, John Cotton Dana, sought books and magazines written not only in English, but also in Polish, Italian, Yiddish and Russian. The increase in population would also create a strain on Newark’s housing situation and reduce the city’s ability to care for its residents during a health

14 “Troops Embarked Total 1,750,000,” Newark Evening News, 21 September 1918, 1; Galishoff, “Newark and the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918,” 250.
crisis. The one left to shoulder the burden in 1918 was an immigrant himself: Newark’s mayor, Charles P. Gillen.\textsuperscript{15}

Born on August 6\textsuperscript{th}, 1876, in Roscommon County, Ireland, Charles Gillen accompanied his parents to the United States during the massive Irish migration of the mid-1880’s. Determined not to follow completely in his parents’ footsteps, Gillen chose to pursue real estate instead of factory work in Newark. Single with money to spare, this Irish immigrant had exceeded the expectations of his parents. As a result of his real estate dealings, he had created liaisons with banking institutions when home buyers sought mortgages. Gillen’s financial success enhanced his social circles and caught the attention of political bosses within the city and throughout northern New Jersey. In 1917 when Newark voters approved a commission form of government whereby a council of five would run the city, Gillen’s cronies encouraged him to seek one of the commissioner positions. Not only did he win a spot on the council, he received the most votes out of 81 candidates, making him the new mayor of Newark.\textsuperscript{16}

Although he was an immigrant in a relatively large city, Gillen was no pushover when it came to his politics. He was fiercely independent but held on to his Democratic ties because of links to party bosses like Leon Abbott of Hudson County and Frank “I am the Law” Hague of Essex County. Eager to impress his contemporaries, Gillen boasted about the opening of rail lines connecting Newark to Hoboken, Jersey City and New York. In addition, Gillen made sure that money was available during wartime to complete


\textsuperscript{16} Lawrence Kestenbaum, “The Political Graveyard,” Creative Commons, accessed April, 2010; Tuttle, How Newark Became Newark, 92-93.
the construction of skyscrapers such as the twelve-story Kinney Building and the
luxurious Robert Treat Hotel. Gillen constantly kept the city moving forward in the
direction his business associates expected.\footnote{\citesection{87} \citesection{90-91}}

At the same time, Gillen never lost sight of the “working man” who voted him
into office as Gillen often used unorthodox measures to prove that he could be a
benevolent actor of change to improve the daily lives of the poor in Newark. One day,
after the local trolley company raised its fare from six to seven cents, which would have
impacted Gillen’s constituents’ ability to pay for their transportation, Gillen boarded the
trolley and refused to pay the extra penny. The bad publicity forced the transportation
company to back down, and the original fare stayed intact. In order to deal with the city’s
housing shortage – one of Newark’s most pressing problems during the War – Gillen
ordered the National Guard to erect tents on vacant lots, but few of the homeless took
advantage of the measure. When Gillen shifted his tent project to the lovelier Vailsburg
Park where workers placed canvas homes on wooden floors linked to water, sewer and
gas lines, several hundred families found shelter until cold weather arrived. Critics called
Newark’s newest residential section “Tentville” and “Camp Gillen,” but it proved
sufficient as a temporary housing fix. Nonetheless, Gillen’s ostentatious solutions and
nonconformist approaches to problems would prove quite controversial as he dealt with
one of the worst epidemics ever to hit Newark: The Spanish flu of 1918.\footnote{\citesection{262, 93-94}}

\textbf{Gillen’s Initial Response to Influenza}

When news broke on September 24\textsuperscript{th}, 1918, that influenza had struck at least
twenty-five military camps across the country, including Camp Dix in South Jersey,
Gillen was one of the first responders to offer aid to the soldiers and show that he had the situation under control in the City of Newark. The next day Gillen called a meeting with Newark’s health officer, Charles Craster, the public schools superintendent, David Corson, and leading physicians of the city. Gillen ordered all physicians in Newark to report the number of patients who acquired this strange new flu. (At the time influenza was not a reportable disease.) Then Gillen officially announced that the municipality of Newark was prepared should influenza ever strike his city, so he offered to send sixteen local nurses to Camp Dix to care for the soldiers afflicted with the flu there. However, Gillen’s hasty decision meant that those same nurses would not be available in the future to care for the infected in his overcrowded city. Nonetheless, Gillen basked in the praise he received from physicians at Camp Dix who lauded Gillen for having the foresight and patriotism to provide for America’s soldiers. In the meantime, seventy-five Newark Ship Yard employees had come down with the flu, and local doctors reported eleven new cases of influenza, including four in one household, among Newark’s latest victims.  

After the meeting with Newark’s city officials and leading physicians, Gillen was anxious to start a communications campaign to show that his city was prepared for the impending disease. First, Gillen ordered city workers to display 200 large posters around the city about the dangers of influenza. Second, he made available to the public 2,500 copies of a “four-minute talk” about the prevention of influenza, modeled after Wilson’s Four Minute Men who spoke for four minutes about the War in movie theatres. Meanwhile, Gillen directed Charles Craster, Newark’s health officer, to issue a statement that the control of influenza was largely in the hands of the people themselves. At the

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same time, the Mayor urged any Newarker who was coughing or sneezing to keep out of all public places in which large numbers assemble. However, Gillen decided not to close the public schools in Newark despite reports that even institutions of higher learning, such as Mrs. Mabel S. Douglas’ New Jersey College for Women in New Brunswick, were closing their doors because the flu was spreading “much too rapidly” among its fifty-four young women. Gillen made no plans to close Newark’s public schools because the children going back and forth from school to home could convey warnings about influenza better than the newspapers since many parents could not read English. Thus, Gillen ordered the printing of 70,000 warning circulars about influenza for children to carry home to their families, thereby refusing to close the schools where the spread of disease was most likely to occur. Later, critics would call into question whether Gillen was truly protecting the most vulnerable of his city.\(^\text{20}\)

Gillen thought that he had completed the tasks to control influenza in Newark by making influenza a reportable disease, posting warning posters (in neighborhoods where most immigrants could not read English), distributing “four minute talks” and sending home warning circulars in the hands of the school children. He even made the city of Newark proud in the war effort by sending nurses to care for the sick soldiers at Camp Dix. Gillen’s initial response to the outbreak of influenza was superficial in an era when people were beginning to expect more action from their government when disease struck (See next section.). The reports showed that the outbreak of influenza at the army camps

was serious already, and it would only be a matter of time before the disease would reach civilian cities like Newark. Nonetheless, Gillen moved on to his next project when he heard that six million dollars’ worth of federal wartime aid was being made available to North Jersey and quickly claimed his city’s fair share. However, he virtually ignored the health news coming in daily – news which he had requested – that influenza cases in the city of Newark were drastically increasing. Within one week of meeting with the city’s officials, doctors reported over 1,500 influenza cases in Newark with 500 new cases in one twenty-four hour period. 21

Evolving Responses to Disease

Before the 1918 influenza outbreak, reaction to disease and responsibility for taking care of the sick evolved from a private ordeal in the home to philanthropic efforts of caring for the sick poor and, finally, to a public display of government interventions. During the late nineteenth century Louis Pasteur’s work with rabies and Robert Koch’s discoveries of the anthrax, cholera and tubercle bacilli influenced the current “germ theory of disease” whereby disease is caused by a distinctive organism. Illness spread because of contact with a specific germ, not because of atmospheric conditions (“miasmas”), as previously thought, whereby chemical fermentations in decaying filth caused disease. Prior to the widespread acceptance of the germ theory of disease, popular belief maintained that the breath, saliva and body seepages of the sick spread illnesses. Matter from these sources would adhere to linen, clothing, paper and other household items for long periods of time, decay and produce disease. As a result, healthy people shunned the sick for extended time periods until the perceived danger from the illness had

passed. Since people thought that a link existed between disease and the home, efforts to prevent illness began in the home. However, once the crisis had passed, further attempts to prevent disease would also dissipate. Because prevention of disease in the home was not enough, a campaign of cleanliness began in the public sector during the late nineteenth century, advocating long-term changes such as land drainage and sewer construction to reduce the threat of disease because in cities like Newark, for example, streets and gutters were cleaned only twice a year. The extraordinarily high incidence of disease in the cities led to the necessity of cleaning up the filthiness of these urban areas. Thus began the “sanitary science” of managing disease proposed by businessmen eager to attract more business to their cities and ladies’ auxiliary groups wanting to enact change through philanthropic efforts. Helping the poor to lead a more hygienic lifestyle in order to prevent disease became part of the social reforms that earmarked the Progressive Era of the early twentieth century.22

The responsibility to clean up cities like Newark, however, gradually shifted from a lay volunteer effort to a more official government-sponsored “New Public Health” movement. By the early 1900’s laboratory successes to diagnose, treat and prevent disease were much more widespread. Robert Koch’s seminal work with anthrax, for example, gave more credence to the germ theory of disease. Later, Koch showed repeatedly that anthrax bacillus did not exist in the blood of healthy animals until the bacillus was injected into them whereby it then produced the disease’s distinctive

symptoms. Researchers had also developed the Widal test for typhoid fever, the Wasserman test to detect syphilis and the Schick test to determine immunity to diphtheria. In addition, the development of a diphtheria antitoxin, the Salvarsan treatment for syphilis and a typhoid vaccine strengthened the germ theory of disease. Furthermore, the very publicized and successful treatment of four Newark children who were sent to France to receive Pasteur’s rabbits vaccine in 1885 brought to public consciousness that laboratory research could yield great advancements in dealing with fatal diseases. These advancements gave credibility to the New Public Health because its advocates could align themselves with laboratory-based knowledge of disease rather than with the sanguine charity of (mostly women’s) philanthropic groups.23

The New Public Health (coined by Hibbert Winslow Hill in 1913) gave rise to public health departments whose officials realized that they could gain political leverage with the public’s enthusiasm for the successes coming out of medical research laboratories. Consequently, public health officials prioritized their approaches to public health care in the cities by quarantining people during epidemics. The germ theory of disease confirmed that contagions caused illness, not the conditions of the environment. Since people and other vectors like mosquitoes carry germs (as Walter Reed pointed out in his study of yellow fever patients), then the sick, especially, ought to be isolated from the healthy. To public health officials the only sure way to isolate the sick was by ordering everyone to stay home. Therefore, enacting quarantines became one of the official duties of national, state and local public health departments. Closing down places

of public assembly was something tangible and enforceable that calmed public fears and kept the sick away from everyone else.\textsuperscript{24}

Despite this increase in medical authority on the government level, there remained skepticism during the transition from sanitary science to the New Public Health. After all, it was difficult to argue that disease was rampant in filthy urban areas among densely populated immigrant neighborhoods. Only two summers before the influenza pandemic an outbreak of infantile paralysis (polio) had ravaged major cities in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Connecticut. Public health officials responded to the disease by issuing quarantines, and by mid-September polio cases gradually declined. Therefore, it seemed prudent once again to enact quarantines to keep the influenza virus from spreading and to curb the disease as soon as possible. Quarantines to health officials like Rupert Blue of the Public Health Service, and later to members of the New Jersey State Board of Health, meant closing down public places until the threat of the disease passed. Therefore, enacting quarantines isolated the sick as well as the healthy and prevented further spread of the disease.\textsuperscript{25}

However, according to Mayor Gillen of Newark, the problem with quarantines was that they applied to individuals who were not currently ill, and Gillen saw no need to isolate the healthy from their normal activities. Dubious of quarantines, Gillen perceived them as a means of regulating behavior especially among poor and immigrant families, many of whom were his constituents. To Gillen, a quarantine meant lack of freedom of movement and loss of business. Why should the healthy have to pay the price of the sick?

\textsuperscript{24} Tomes, \textit{The Gospel of Germs}, 238; Hansen, “America’s First Medical Breakthrough,” 410; Rogers, \textit{Dirt and Disease}, 34.

\textsuperscript{25} Rogers, \textit{Dirt and Disease}, 30 and 34-35; “Blue Urges Quarantine; May Lift Sunday Auto Ban,” \textit{Newark Evening News}, 4 October 1918, 14.
The sick should just stay home. Meanwhile, in one twenty-four hour period ending on October 4th, the number of cases of influenza reported in Newark had climbed from 1,525 to 2,284.26

**Gillen Dismisses the Disease**

Unfazed by the latest numbers, Gillen was quick to react to other news instead. At 2:00 a.m. on October 5th Mayor Gillen was awakened by the shattering of plate glass windows close to his home. The Gillespie Shell-Loading Plant in nearby South Amboy, a major munitions factory for the War, had exploded, killing at least three hundred people and leaving over five hundred families homeless. Thousands spent the night in fields, and by daybreak, many were streaming their way toward Newark to seek medical help in the city’s hospitals and to find temporary housing in the city. Seizing his chance to show that he was always the first to respond when it came to the War, Gillen led the relief efforts for employees of this weapons factory, “taking a prominent part from early morning until late at night.” When Gillen saw that Newark’s Red Cross office was inadequate as a relief headquarters, he ordered city workers to convert a five-story building on the corner of Broad Street and Clinton Avenue into a housing complex for five hundred former South Amboy residents. The *Newark Evening News* reported in a somewhat caustic way, how quickly the transformation of the edifice occurred:

> It was as if a magician had waved his wand over the store building. Apparently from nowhere there appeared hundreds of cots, with sheets and blankets, which were set up on the upper floors; food of all kinds, including bread, coffee cake, vegetables and meat; coal for the furnace, gas and kerosene stoves, camp chairs and counters.

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26 Galishoff, *Newark and the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918*, 256; Rogers, *Dirt and Disease*, 33 and 104; “Gain of 759 Grip Cases City Record in 24 Hours,” *Newark Evening News*, 4 October 1918, 14.
Electricians arrived and put the lighting system in order; other men made gas connections. A telephone was installed and put to immediate use.

The next day an editorial in the paper commended the Mayor for reacting “splendidly” to the emergency. Unfortunately, while Gillen was responding to the people of South Amboy, 1,495 more Newarkers had come down with the flu, bringing the total to 6,258. They could have used that warehouse as a hospital for medical treatment because now there were also 102 deaths.²⁷

When Gillen arrived at his office on Monday morning, October 7th, he had much on his mind. Overnight he had led a massive parade through the city streets on the false pretense that the Great War was over after having spent the rest of the weekend dealing with refugees from the exploding munitions plant in South Amboy. And now, sitting on his desk, was this state order, issued by the governor, Walter E. Edge, and the New Jersey State Board of Health that said: “Due to the influenza outbreak, a statewide quarantine is in effect beginning today.” Quarantine, of course, meant that all places of public assembly, including movie houses, theatres, schools, churches, businesses and saloons, had to be closed down. Governor Edge issued the statement, believing that local towns and cities could “have the benefit of centralized assistance and direction of the state,” but Gillen was in no mood to hear it. By the afternoon, Gillen released his own statement that he was going to defer any compliance with the state order until a later date. In the meantime, Gillen ordered his health officer, Charles Craster, to issue this statement to the

²⁷ “Explosions Sweeping Munitions Plant At Morgan Cause Deaths Estimated as High as 137 and Loss of $10,000,000,” Newark Evening News, 5 October 1918, 1; “Newark Responds to Relief Appeal,” Newark Evening News, 7 October 1918, 1; “Morgan A Torch to Effort,” Newark Evening News, 7 October 1918, 8; “Liquor Men’s Appeal is Denied,” Newark Evening News, 9 October 1918, 4.
press instead: “This disease is nothing more than the grip in a somewhat more virulent form than it has worn in recent years.”

Unfortunately, Mayor Gillen was seemingly dismissive of the evidence reported in the local papers and in medical journals about the virulence of the season’s influenza. New York was reporting one thousand new cases a day; Philadelphia already had 20,000 ill; and the lawmaking galleries in Washington, D.C. closed down to curb any further spread of the disease. Unlike in years past, this flu seemed to be striking young people between the ages of 15 and 29 the most with the greatest number of deaths occurring in patients in their twenties. Dr. Arthur R. Casilli, Acting Director of the Pathological Department of Newark City Hospital, reported how abruptly and sometimes insidiously the symptoms of influenza occur: “After a period of incubation and an acute onset characterized by chills, fever, marked prostration, severe frontal headaches, muscular pains and sore throat, the patient takes to his bed.” Rapid heart rate and vomiting were also common, and often the fever was so high, that the patient became delirious. If the disease persisted, the patient often came down with pneumonia as well. Now trying to battle two diseases, a normally healthy young body would send nearly all of its white blood cells to that one area of the body – the lungs – to fight the bacterial infection. Dr. John W. Gray, another physician from Newark, noticed how the bodies of the fatal cases all seemed to present the same picture: A purplish skin color, which indicated an emphysema-like condition in the neck and chest. “The appearance of asphyxiation is understood when the chest cavity is opened and the water-logged condition of the lungs is

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revealed.” In other words, these young people had literally “drowned” to death in their own mucous.29

**Gillen’s Modified Quarantine Backfires**

Despite the graphic depictions of influenza victims and the increasing number of severe cases, Gillen was adamant about not placing his city under full quarantine. To national and state authorities, the only way to stop the rampant spread of influenza was to close down every public gathering place, but Gillen was tenacious and skirted around the state quarantine by issuing a modified quarantine for his city – one in which the restaurants and schools would stay open. After calling another conference with school officials, Gillen reported that the opinion expressed by health authorities was that “children would be safer in the schools than they would be if permitted to run at large among places where people congregated and where the danger of infection from personal contact is great.” Since Gillen offered no figures to support his claim that the epidemic did not exist in the schools, the superintendent of schools, David P. Corson, closed them down, much to the chagrin of the mayor. Not about to succumb to any other authority in his city, Gillen usurped control over other public places in Newark and decided that since “people have to eat,” restaurants would remain open.30

Unfortunately, Gillen taking control of matters placed the other commissioners of Newark in a difficult position because Gillen’s interpretation of the quarantine conflicted

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30 “Gillen Now Orders Quarantine Here,” *Newark Evening News*, 8 October 1918, 1.
with the commissioners’ duties to uphold the state mandate and precluded them from handling the epidemic in a timely manner. After that long day at the office Gillen decided he would get something to eat for himself at one of his favorite spots - the Owl Café - in the Roseville section of Newark. After dinner at around midnight Mayor Gillen noticed a couple of acquaintances and their dates a few tables nearby. Gillen promptly ordered a round of drinks for everybody. But before anyone received their drinks, Gillen was suddenly summoned outside. Waiting on the sidewalk were two city officials: Police Commissioner McEnroe and Director Brennan of Public Safety, enforcing the state quarantine requiring that all places of public assembly be closed. Clearly the Owl Café at midnight was a bastion for public gatherings where people were no longer eating, but rather, assembling only to drink, and therefore, it needed to be closed down immediately. At the risk of embarrassing himself Gillen argued that the Owl Café was, in fact, a restaurant that happened to be serving drinks. McEnroe and Brennan did not buy Gillen’s argument, and much to his dismay, closed down the entire establishment.  

**Gillen’s Side Door Policy Generates Reaction**

Gillen’s next move completely thwarted local officials’ attempts to follow state laws and attend to the influenza emergency overtaking Newark. After closing down the Owl Cafe where Mayor Gillen had been “dining” the previous evening, Director Brennan of Public Safety found a letter on his desk the next morning from Gillen ordering certain modifications to the State’s quarantine. First, the order did not include the closing of restaurants. If a restaurant were connected to a bar room, then only the bar ought to be closed; the restaurant portion of the premises could stay open. And if restaurant patrons

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31 “Gillen’s Saloon Order Put In Force Against Himself,” *Newark Evening News*, 21 October 1918, 1.
ordered alcohol with their meals, then those drinks were simply part of the meal. Second, based on the advice of certain prominent physicians in the City that whiskey and brandy are frequently prescribed “very liberally” in cases of pneumonia and influenza, Gillen ordered that saloons be permitted to keep their side doors open for the sale of bottled whiskey and brandy based on doctors’ prescriptions. Director Brennan reacted immediately, stating that such modifications would be impossible to enforce because a police officer would have to be posted at every side door of every saloon in the City. With over 1,200 saloons in Newark alone the job of regulating such a mandate seemed insurmountable. Nonetheless, even Newark’s legal advisor, Counselor Congleton, said that Mayor Gillen’s proclamation had to be enforced.32

The deadlock between government officials meant that Gillen was presiding over a city where there was little government action for the Newarkers suffering from disease but plenty of reaction to Gillen’s latest version of the state quarantine. Calling Gillen “our side-door mayor,” editorial writers from the Newark Evening News could not believe that during a prevailing influenza epidemic their mayor would come up with such a plan. “What a crack-a-jack scheme, and what a fine head was required to formulate it!” The paper also accused Gillen of failing to rise to an emergency but finding a way to be spectacular instead. When the State heard about Gillen’s “medicinal policy,” Dr. Jacob C. Price, director of the New Jersey State Department of Health, telegraphed Mayor Gillen with the following urgent message:

Information has reached this office that saloons in Newark are not closed in full accordance with the

32 “May Sell Bottled Goods to Aid in Influenza Cure,” Newark Evening News, 9 October 1918, 1; “Mayor’s Letter to Brennan,” Newark Evening News, 10 October 1918, 1; “Order Sent to Gillen to Close Saloons; Informed of Mayor’s Side Door Ruling, State Health Board of Director Sends Telegram; Deadlock Preceded Proclamation,” Newark Evening News, 11 October 1918, 1.
order of this department. For the protection of the state, this department insists on strict compliance with this order.

Despite this order, Gillen was not about to budge; he ordered Newark’s police to enforce his side-door and restaurant-drinking policies anyway.\(^{33}\)

It is likely that the Independent mayor of Newark saw the state quarantine issued by Republican Governor Edge as a political move rather than a public health measure. Gillen did not trust the motives behind the state order, sensing that there were more than health reasons for insisting on closing down saloons. Gillen had to consider not only Newark’s influenza situation, but also the Prohibition fervor sweeping the country and now his state. The move to ban the sale of alcohol had been a bitterly divisive issue for many years in New Jersey. As far back as the 1880’s the Prohibition Party in New Jersey had enough votes to hold the balance of power between Democrats and Republicans. In the meantime, the Republicans worked to gain the backing of temperance supporters and passed a “local option” act which allowed individual counties to prohibit the sale of alcohol within their borders. By the 1888 New Jersey legislative election, Prohibition became the central issue. The Democrats took back control of the legislature and promptly repealed the “local option” act. After the repeal constituents with “liquor interests” tended to side with the Democrats while Prohibition supporters were largely members of the Republican Party.\(^{34}\)

By the time the Independent mayoral candidate with Democratic ties – Charles P. Gillen – became mayor of Newark in 1917, conflict over this issue continued to rise.

\(^{33}\) “Our Side-Door Mayor,” Newark Evening News, 10 October 1918, 8; “Order Sent Gillen to Close Saloons,” Newark Evening News, 11 October 1918, 1. 
Prohibition Amendment had passed in the United States Congress, and now there was increasing pressure on the states to ratify it. Democrats (and Independents like Gillen) felt the constant need to stave off Prohibition to satisfy their thirsty constituents. Therefore, when the Republican governor of the State, Walter E. Edge, and his health officials decided to close down all saloons as part of their public health initiative, the order, to Gillen, sounded too much like an interdiction of alcohol. If the saloons closed down now, they might never reopen. As an immigrant himself and mayor of a city full of immigrants, who vehemently opposed Prohibition, Gillen thought he was keeping his constituency in mind with his modified quarantine. His “side door” policy allowed residents to get the alcohol they needed to remediate flu symptoms (under a doctor’s prescription, of course) and, at the same time, kept him from caving in to political pressure.35

However, not everyone saw the logic in Gillen’s side door policy. Protesting the idea of saloons staying open while churches were remaining closed, local clergy argued that the ministry of religion was “equally worthy of consideration as a necessary adjunct in the treatment of disease.” In a letter to Mayor Gillen, Reverend C.H. Wells philosophized: “Isn’t the church the last place of all that should be closed – the place where strong litanies as potent as most medicines go up that the good Lord may deliver us from plague, pestilence and famine?” Newark’s leading newspaper also questioned Gillen’s side door policy. In an editorial about the Mayor’s latest announcement, the Newark Evening News claimed that “Mayor Gillen has not assumed authority to open the churches, but at the outset he assumed authority to keep the saloons open. An election

35 Ibid.
impends in which the issue at the polls will be whether Essex County [where Newark is located] shall be represented at Trenton by Republicans pledged to prohibition, or by the Democrats pledged to keep the saloons open if they can. The Mayor is a Democrat. The church vote cannot be controlled, but the saloon vote can.” Despite these admonitions and criticisms, Mayor Gillen defiantly stayed his course.\(^{36}\)

Mayor Gillen found the newspapers to be more enemy than ally when justifying his policy. He went on the defensive by threatening to close down the *Newark Evening News*. In a scathing letter to the paper Gillen warned that if the “*Newark Evening News* attempts to interfere with any orders which I have issued or may issue for the preservation of the health of the people of Newark, I will close the paper immediately under the laws of the state, as a menace to the public health, just as I would close any place of assembly.” Gillen added that the paper had no right to question his authority as mayor, and that, if anything, praise was in order for enacting a medicinal policy recommended by physicians. In another move Gillen took over the City’s health department and ordered its director, Dr. Charles Craster, to report the latest number of influenza cases directly to the Mayor’s office rather than publicly to the newspapers. In effect, Mayor Gillen had seized control of all public information with regard to the influenza epidemic currently gripping his city.\(^{37}\)

Few residents within Newark paid attention to the “war of words” between Gillen and the local newspaper because Newarkers were too busy worrying about the sick and the dying. By October 21\(^{st}\) in the city of Newark alone, there were over 18,000 cases of

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influenza with over 750 deaths so far. With 121,000 reports of influenza statewide
Newark’s cases amounted to fifteen percent of the total incidences in New Jersey.
Newark’s health officer, Dr. Charles Craster, surmised that the number of sick could be
double that amount, but physicians were too busy treating the sick, that they did not have
time to report all of the cases (not to mention that Mayor Gillen had taken over the
reporting anyway). Since so many doctors were working round the clock, the Physicians’
Club of Newark established the Organization of the Emergency Medical Relief
Committee to schedule substitute medical personnel for those who had been on call
constantly since the epidemic began. Even the City Hospital of Newark could not receive
new patients because there were no more beds. People only gained admittance if someone
currently at the hospital had passed away. Furthermore, a shortage of nurses became
acute in the City because they either came down with the flu themselves, or Mayor Gillen
had sent them down to Camp Dix three weeks earlier to care for the soldiers.\(^\text{38}\)

Caring for the dead became a problem as well. Those who were able layered
caskets containing dead family members along Springfield Avenue in Newark, and
caskets lined the other streets for blocks. Holy Sepulcher Cemetery reported that it had to
dig trenches for mass burials to take care of all the bodies piled up in its vaults. In one 50
x 12 foot trench, forty-two bodies had been laid to rest, but because there were so many
dead in need of burial, the gravediggers began increasing the size of the trenches to 100 x

\(^{38}\) “Grip Quarantine Order is Revoked,” *Newark Evening News*, 21 October 1918, 1; “City’s Grip Total
Near 11,000 Cases,” *Newark Evening News*, 14 October 1918, 1; “Side Door Doctoring Is Done in Front
of Bars,” *Newark Evening News*, 19 October 1918, 3; Cunningham, *Newark [3rd ed]*, 261; “Physicians’
Club Minutes,” *Academy of Medicine of New Jersey Records, 1917-1918*, New Jersey Historical Society,
Newark, NJ: MG 826, Box 18, Folder 6.
Family members gazed through the wrought iron fence as their loved ones were buried en masse in mere open pits. Gillen either lacked understanding of the seriousness of the influenza situation or ignored it in favor of policy that would advance his political standing rather than address the public health. Gillen’s side door policy created a stir among those who were healthy, but the sick and those who had to care for the ill and the dead may have been too busy even to notice. Dubbed a policy, Gillen’s side door idea may have benefitted a few but caused the consternation of many - especially those who wanted to prevent the spread of influenza and save lives. Gillen’s side-door policy became the focus at the height of the influenza crisis in Newark, and, as a result, he failed the public health interest in its time of greatest need.

**Gillen Gains a Reputation**

Despite the heartache that Newarkers were facing, Gillen seemed to be behaving selectively rather than supporting the policy of quarantines that at the time was believed to be the best prevention against the spread of disease. On Monday, October 21\textsuperscript{st}, Mayor Gillen suddenly declared that the danger from the influenza epidemic in his city had passed, and that the state quarantine in Newark (which Gillen never endorsed or enforced) was now revoked. Citing a decrease since the previous Saturday in the number of influenza cases reported to the City’s health department (which Gillen took over), the Mayor claimed that the epidemic had subsided as far as his city was concerned. In fact, he reasoned, the number of influenza cases reported each day was decreasing. According to Gillen, there were on average only 550 new cases in each twenty-four hour period just

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prior to him lifting the ban on October 21st, compared to the 969 new cases reported on October 19th. To Gillen, this was a significant decrease in the number of influenza cases and enough justification for officially ending any state quarantine. However, Mayor Gillen failed to acknowledge that the number of people dying continued to rise: Newark’s death toll from influenza alone had now reached over 800.40

Gillen’s decision to revoke the state quarantine seemed to put the residents of Newark as well as its public officials in a state of confusion. Newark had been under the mayor’s modified quarantine for a little over a week whereas the rest of the state had been under full official quarantine for over two weeks. Now Gillen lifted the ban in his city entirely, but the state of New Jersey was nowhere close to lifting its quarantine. Newarkers did not know if they should follow the state’s quarantine, Gillen’s modified quarantine with its side-door policy or his lifting of the ban completely. Police chief, McEnroe, still ordered his men to enforce Gillen’s side-door policy even though the bar owners thought that they were allowed to open completely. Newark’s superintendents of schools, David Corson, feared reopening buildings so soon with the death toll now rising to 869. Ministers and priests were delighted that churches could open again, but with over 20,000 Newarkers sick in bed with the flu or pneumonia, not many showed up for Sunday services. In defense of his latest decision Gillen argued that he was merely following Jersey City’s Mayor Frank Hague’s lead. Hague had also lifted the quarantine in his city prematurely; however, Hague did not institute a side door policy like Gillen

had. In fact, Hague threatened arrest and loss of a liquor license if Jersey City saloon proprietors were caught with their side doors open.41

Was Gillen trying to impress party line bosses at the expense of protecting the public’s health? The city’s leading newspaper, *Newark Evening News*, noticed that Gillen may be putting the people’s health at risk. The daily paper began publishing sarcastic editorials to show how farcical Mayor Gillen’s actions had become - even going so far as to accuse Gillen of acting like a doctor. One reporter, disguised as a happy-go-lucky bar patron, wrote a full page story about his conversations with various people he had met along the way at several Newark drinking establishments. In one example he wrote:

At the bar, back by the green curtains, four men stood leaning on the rail. Their heads were together, and in front of them were glasses of beer. The man who had opened the door [to me] went behind the bar, and his head joined the others. It seemed that [their] story had been interrupted.

The story resumed. The taller man was an elderly man, bent with the weight of new trouble. Briefly, the story was that this man, who was drinking with the others at the bar, had buried, only the day before, his daughter, a young woman who had died of the epidemic disease. And when it had been told, it was discussed, and the stricken father was sympathized with, heads still together [at the bar]. The consensus of the bar gossip was that it was useless to try to avoid it if it had

41 “Grip Quarantine Order is Revoked; Mayor Gillen Declares Epidemic Danger Past, but Figures Do Not Show It; No Decrease in Death List,” *Newark Evening News*, 21 October 1918, 1; “McEnroe Answers Gillen; Denies Mayor’s Accuracy,” *Newark Evening News*, 22 October 1918, 2; “Waiting Order to Close City Again,” *Newark Evening News*, 23 October 1918, 5.
marked one for its own. What was the use?

Well, the doctors weren’t stopping it, anyway. Maybe whiskey would; someone had heard that it would. In fact, hadn’t the Mayor said that it would?

Naturally, Gillen’s response was less than complimentary. He claimed that:

The News, for some years past, has attacked and undermined in every way the progress and growth of the city and has attempted to give the city a bad name whenever anything occurred that would attract the attention of the outside world.

As Mayor of the city of Newark, I say that the time has come to wipe this contemptible newspaper out of existence….42

Gillen’s overt non-compliance and outspoken nature caught the attention of the New Jersey State Department of Health, which began to question the wisdom of Gillen’s actions. Late in the afternoon of October 21st, the New Jersey State Board of Health met to discuss, among other things on the agenda, the state’s influenza crisis and what to do about Newark’s imperious mayor. The mayor’s actions stymied the State Board of Health for Gillen failed to abide by the initial state closing of public places, he modified the quarantine twice to suit his interpretation on the use of alcohol to treat influenza, and now he lifted the ban in Newark independently of the State. After meeting about Gillen’s complete disregard for State authority, the Board of Health officially resolved that the epidemic still prevailed in the City of Newark, that all citizens of Newark had to obey the

42 “Influenza Seems Still on Decline,” Newark Evening News, 19 October 1918, 1 and 3; “McEnroe Answers Gillen; Denies Mayor’s Accuracy,” Newark Evening News, 22 October 1918, 2.
State order, and that the Board of Commissioners (which included Mayor Gillen) was obliged to enforce the state quarantine. Issuing an official statement, the Board of Health claimed that the “Mayor of Newark had no authority or power to override or nullify the action of the State in any matter relating to the general health of the State or in measures taken for the control of epidemics existing herein.” The State Board of Health even considered legal action against Gillen. Some members favored summoning Mayor Gillen before the Board to answer for his actions. The president of the State Board of Health, William H. Crew, said that the “Mayor was setting a bad example for the whole state,” and insisted that the “action of Mayor Gillen must not pass unchallenged.”

Gillen’s growing reputation as a counter-productive civic leader caused conflict at state and local levels and led many to start believing that he could actually be tampering with the health of Newark’s citizens. When Gillen’s own police chief closed down the bar at the Robert Treat Hotel, one of Newark’s newest and finest establishments, Gillen accused Chief McEnroe of deliberately violating his orders. Since the bar worked in conjunction with the hotel’s restaurant, then it operated “legally” under Gillen’s modified quarantine on public gathering places. However, McEnroe had a different interpretation: He thought that “only the health of the community was involved in any of the proclamations, and that the sale of drinks was prohibited principally because of the lack of facilities to properly sterilize glasses used in the dispensing of intoxicants.” Comments regarding the “health of the community” and the sterilization of glasses indicated that people were calling into question whether Gillen’s actions were, in fact, affecting the well-being of the citizens of Newark. The influenza situation in Newark was becoming

serious, and now the other civic leaders realized that they had a possible “renegade” on their hands who did not have the citizens’ best interests at heart, and who could possibly be putting more and more people in danger of disease and even death.44

The next day, members of Newark’s City Commission began distancing themselves from Gillen and his policies. In a meeting on October 22nd, three of the five directors – Brennan of Public Safety, Archibald of Revenue and Finance and Raymond of Streets and Public Improvements – all expressed a willingness to follow the State’s Board of Health requirements to shut down the city completely until influenza and pneumonia were no longer endemic in the community. A fourth director – Monahan of Parks and Public Property – was not present at the meeting due to “illness.”45

Playing Politics with Disease

Newark’s form of government was not always conducive to dealing with citywide issues, such as the 1918 influenza epidemic, in a unified way. In 1917 Newark’s voters approved a City Commission form of government whereby five commissioners would head five different departments within the city. Several people would run for the City Commission at the same time, and the person with the most votes would become mayor as well as director of one of the departments. While this system was efficient in dividing the responsibilities of the city into various departments, the heads of those departments often worked independently. As Director of Public Affairs, Gillen also controlled Newark’s health office. Therefore, Gillen was the first to receive any news about the influenza health crisis as well as the first to respond.46

44 “McEnroe Answers Gillen; Denies Mayor’s Accuracy,” Newark Evening News, 22 October 1918, 2.
45 “Put Influenza Ban Up to State Board,” Newark Evening News, 24 October 1918, 1.
46 Tuttle, How Newark Became Newark, 92.
However, the other directors on Newark’s city commission felt that Gillen had usurped power and made irrational decisions with regard to the public health of the city of Newark. In a second meeting in as many days, with Gillen present, the other directors publicly debated whether to remove Gillen as mayor or, at the very least, take away his duties as the head of the City’s board of health. Not one to remain silent about matters of politics, Gillen responded to both the State Board of Health and his fellow commissioners with the following denunciation:

I don’t know much about the members of that board. They live in rural communities and are actuated more by a desire to please the Newark Evening News than to protect the health of the people of New Jersey. They have never consulted with me or taken me into their confidence or attempted in any way to find out what the conditions are in Newark.

I did not, as head of [Newark’s] health department, attempt to lift the ban until I had completely satisfied myself on the best medical authority that there was no longer any epidemic in Newark….

These medical authorities of the state, I understand, ride in to their meetings on loads of hay. Our medical men know more in five minutes than they will know in a hundred years.

The ban is lifted as far as I am concerned. My colleagues are free to criticize me and act as they please….
The next day, the other members of Newark’s City Commission did indeed act. They wired the State to use its authority under state statute to remove Gillen from office.47

Meanwhile, the situation in Newark was becoming a true public health emergency, but Gillen was using the numbers to keep open political rivalries rather than care for the sick of Newark. Doctors reported 22,496 total cases with 1,000 deaths occurring in less than twenty days. In the twenty-four hour period since Gillen had criticized his colleagues and implied that members of the State Board of Health were a bunch of “hayseeds,” there were 725 new cases of influenza in Newark and 48 more deaths. But now because the number of deaths each day had been decreasing, Gillen claimed that the danger from the epidemic had already passed and, instead, asserted his political sentiments by demanding the resignation of the Republican-appointed director of the New Jersey State Board of Health, Dr. Jacob C. Price. In a letter to the governor, Walter E. Edge, Gillen urged a thorough investigation of Dr. Price, suggesting that Price issued the closing order on all public places on his own without proper authority. Then Gillen accused New Jersey’s Republican governor and the Essex County Republican Committee of being given “special dispensation” from the State Board of Health to hold a political meeting in Newark. Wasn’t Newark supposed to be under quarantine?48

By now, it was evident to state officials and local watchdogs that Gillen had always been more interested in politics than disease. The chairman of the State Republican Committee, Newton A. K. Bugbee, admonished Gillen’s criticism of the governor and explained that the Essex County Republican Committee met regularly in Newark, and by the time its members were to hold a meeting, the State would have lifted

47 “Put Influenza Ban Up to State Board,” Newark Evening News, 24 October 1918, 1 and 4.
the ban on public gatherings anyway. Bugbee went on to say, “It occurs to me that Mayor Gillen’s efforts to make political capital of a very cheap variety out of so serious a situation as the influenza epidemic…ill becomes the Chief Executive of a great city like Newark.” The Newark Evening News also editorialized that “A man who would use his power with lack of caution in such a case, whether simply because he had that power or for the purpose of making a display of it, is not a safe man in whom to repose authority over the citizens.” The next day, Republican members of the New Jersey state legislature introduced a bill to give the State Department of Health specific and full authority to establish necessary quarantines to curb future epidemics in the state of New Jersey and to prevent politicians like Gillen from taking matters into their own hands.49

Gillen’s rhetoric and actions may have predisposed state and local officials into thinking that he was indeed playing politics with disease by using a critical time in his city’s public health to further his political points. Gillen thwarted the state quarantine and kept the side doors of saloons open seemingly to demonstrate his position on Prohibition. He virtually ignored the increasing number of influenza victims, but later he used the numbers to justify his early lifting of the state quarantine by claiming that the number of cases and deaths each day was decreasing. In addition, he engaged members of the State Board of Health, his fellow commissioners and the local newspaper in a “war of words” that diverted his attention away from effective public policy that would care for the sick so that he could point out political differences. While he may have thought that he

answering to his constituents, Gillen took advantage of people’s miseries for his own political gain.\textsuperscript{50}

Aftermath of Influenza in Newark

Toward the end of October there were indications across the state and nation that the influenza epidemic was waning. Most states, including New Jersey, had lifted quarantines by the end of October, but not before the state lost more than 22,000 people. Newark lost 2,183 of its citizens out of nearly 29,000 cases - the largest concentration in New Jersey. On November 13\textsuperscript{th}, when the number of deaths in Newark in a twenty-four hour period went back to normal rates, the city’s health officer, Dr. Charles Craster, announced that the epidemic of influenza was officially over in Newark.\textsuperscript{51}

Dr. Craster’s proclamation received very little attention because Mayor Gillen had already announced three and a half weeks earlier that the danger from influenza had passed in Newark. Furthermore, most people were too busy celebrating the armistice, announced only two days earlier, ending the Great War in Europe. Nonetheless, it was time to follow-up and worry about patients still suffering from influenza, children becoming orphans as a result of the disease and Newarkers grieving the loss of family members. However, the Department of Public Affairs, directed by Gillen himself, would

\textsuperscript{50} “McEnroe Answers Gillen: Denies Mayor’s Accuracy, \textit{Newark Evening News}, 22 October 1918, 2.

have little, if anything, to do with the health care of the citizens of Newark in the aftermath of the influenza outbreak.\textsuperscript{52}

The local government’s ambivalent approach to the public health of Newark stemmed from long-held beliefs since before the Civil War. When industrialization helped to make Newark a leading manufacturing city, most of the city’s leaders came from the wealthy business class. As a result, they believed that the most important function of government was the promotion of business rather than the preservation of the health of its citizens. Once Newark formed its Board of Health, the department was known more for its charity efforts rather than its public health work. Consequently, Newark had not built a city hospital until 1882. Prior to that, hospitals such as Saint Barnabas, Saint Michael’s, the Newark German Hospital and the Newark Charitable Eye and Ear Infirmary opened because of the charitable work of church groups and immigrant societies or through the philanthropy of wealthy businessmen. Only when a committee from the Newark Board of Health converted a wing of an almshouse into a hospital, did the City Hospital of Newark finally open, but because of its association with an almshouse, most deemed the medical facility as an institution for society’s poor and forgotten castoffs.\textsuperscript{53}

City officials continued to take a \textit{laissez faire} approach to Newark’s public health when it came to overseeing sanitary conditions. In 1890 the U.S. Census Bureau had branded Newark as the nation’s “unhealthiest city.” Newark’s mortality rate was 27.4 per 1000 persons, which was the highest in the nation among cities with populations exceeding 100,000 people. It was at this point that Newark’s business leaders became


\textsuperscript{53} Galishoff, \textit{NEWARK: The Nation’s Unhealthiest City, 1832-1895}, 16, 28, 73, 74, 76, 80 and 82.
concerned about the local sanitary conditions since their success in business depended on the City’s ability to attract new residents and industries. Hence, major business leaders from the Newark Board of Trade insisted that the City build a sewage system to improve sanitary conditions. In the years directly following the federal government’s fateful labeling of Newark, the City finally constructed approximately two hundred miles of sewers, which was double the amount that had existed before, but it took non-government agencies to incite government officials into action - a practice which continued into the twentieth century.⁵⁴

Thus, it was not a surprise that Gillen would take a less than proactive approach in the aftermath of the influenza crisis. In a futile attempt to include Mayor Gillen and Health Officer Craster in their efforts to provide relief for those especially hard hit by influenza, charitable organizations throughout Newark met to formulate an action plan. The Council of Philanthropy, an emergency association of organized charities, such as the Red Cross, the Home for the Friendless, the Newark Female Charitable Society and the Crazy Jane Society, decided on its top priorities: Finding homes for children who became orphans during the influenza epidemic, caring for the destitute during their convalescence and reconstructing homes where entire families had been “ravaged by the disease.” While Mayor Gillen was present early at the first meeting, he did not remain until the end; furthermore, Dr. Craster made it clear that his department lacked funding as well as staff and would have to leave the influenza relief efforts to the good citizens of Newark such as the Council of Philanthropy.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Galishoff, NEWARK: The Nation’s Unhealthiest City, 1832-1895, 87, 85, 95, 99, 37, 100, 5 and 128.
Now that the influenza scare had subsided, Mayor Gillen was convinced that he had handled the situation well in Newark without compromising his political beliefs. He reveled in how clever he was at skirting around the state quarantine and, at the same time, answering to his constituents. After all, he had figured out during a health crisis how to adhere to the basic tenets of the state quarantine by keeping the side doors of the saloons open for business under the guise that people could purchase liquor for medicinal purposes. In his mind Gillen had answered to the calls of the State, the Democratic Party that opposed Prohibition, and his immigrant constituents all at the same time.\footnote{“Praise for Gillen,”  \textit{Newark Evening News}, 29 October 1918, 11; David J. Hanson, “The Eighteenth Amendment,” \textit{Alcohol Problems and Solutions}, accessed August 6, 2010, \url{http://www.potsdam.edu}.}

Unfortunately, Gillen did not answer the calls of the sick suffering from influenza in his city. The 29,000 people stuck in bed with the flu were likely not thinking about the New Jersey State Board of Health, Prohibition or the next mayoral election. They had to fend for themselves or depend only on the care of family members and overworked volunteers from charitable organizations. In this era when government was starting to take a much more active role in the care of the sick due to significant advances in laboratory science, Gillen made the choice to respond to his politics rather than his people.

\textbf{Interpreting Gillen’s Handling of the Influenza Pandemic}

There was an unforeseeable outcome associated with Gillen’s responses that no one – not even the Mayor himself – could deny: Nearly ten percent of the State’s influenza deaths occurred in Newark. That was enough evidence right there for the State Board of Health to accuse Gillen of not doing everything he could to protect the citizens of his city - especially when he could have closed down \textit{all} places of public assembly.
and, therefore, could have conceivably prevented more deaths. The State Board of Health implied that if Mayor Gillen had followed the state order exactly as it was intended, perhaps the death toll in Newark would have been less drastic. However, Gillen had much more to consider, such as his own political future and his constituents’ expressed desire for alcohol, so he remained resolute in his convictions even as the disease afflicted and killed those same voters.57

During Newark’s experience with influenza in 1918 Mayor Gillen displayed behaviors that some would characterize as a “dissenter” mentality because he alone sought solutions to local issues despite sweeping policies at the state and national levels. Both Rupert Blue of the United States Public Health Service and Governor Walter E. Edge of New Jersey ordered quarantines on all places of public assembly. Gillen lacked regard for these rules and hierarchies by implementing a modified version of the ban, his so-called “side-door” policy, and in doing so, he kept alive the politicized anti-Prohibition sentiment.58

Gillen played politics with the disease that was gripping his city so as not to diminish the real struggle over alcohol that was plaguing his supporters. To Gillen and his followers, the Prohibition agenda was just as important as the influenza situation itself. Gillen wanted nothing to do with quarantines to prevent the spread of influenza if they meant closing down drinking establishments and jeopardizing his political standing.

57 “State Warned of Perils In Wake of Influenza,” Newark Evening News, 28 October 1918, 2.
within his constituency. Gillen capitalized on the influenza crisis in Newark to make his sentiments about Prohibition known and to score political points among his supporters.

Gillen’s decision to imbed politics into his handling of the 1918 influenza outbreak disrupted a well-organized infrastructure that the state of New Jersey had implemented in order to handle the influenza pandemic. Once the State Board of Health issued quarantines, nearly 95% of all the municipalities adhered to the State order, but Gillen modified the mandatory closing of all public gathering places in the State’s largest city to suit a certain constituency and bolster his own political standing. Gillen’s “side-door” policy, political beliefs and personal goals gave him much notoriety, but he also reacted antithetically to the State’s measures to protect its people and, in turn, affected many more people’s live in Newark.59

Gillen mismanaged his own city’s efforts to handle influenza, secured very little infrastructure to prepare for a public health emergency like the influenza crisis, opposed the wishes of the State Board of Health, and, in doing so, interfered with work at the state level to combat the influenza pandemic. Gillen’s actions precipitated the need for the State Board of Health to have a special meeting to discuss what to do about the mayor of Newark who was imperiously defying the state quarantine. Furthermore, members were calling for Gillen’s appearance before the Board to explain his public health policies in Newark. The director of the State Board of Health, Dr. Jacob C. Price, had sent Mayor Gillen numerous telegrams demanding that Gillen abide by the State mandates during the current health crisis. Mayor Gillen’s “side door” policy and unwillingness to cooperate

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with State officials set a precedent that questioned who would truly be in charge during a public health crisis.\(^{60}\)

Gillen also alienated his fellow city commissioners at the local level because they wanted to be in full compliance with the State quarantine while Gillen did not. However, because the local health board operated under the Department of Public Affairs, which Gillen headed, the other commissioners felt powerless to exercise any control over the Newark Board of Health. One commissioner, Director Raymond of Newark’s Department of Streets and Public Improvements, noted at a commission preparedness meeting that Gillen did not discuss the current health crisis in Newark, but rather, disclosed the contents of a letter he had written to Governor Edge, demanding the resignation of the director of the Department of Health of the State of New Jersey, Dr. Jacob C. Price. Gillen insisted that the “terribly drastic step” to close down all places of public assembly should have been taken only after “mature deliberation and discussion” by all members of the State Board of Health and “not by any one man.” Meanwhile, Director Raymond adduced in his comments to the press that Gillen failed to recognize that his nonadherence to the state quarantine and his “side-door” policy had been instituted by just “one man.”\(^{61}\)

Mayor Gillen’s actions in Newark during the 1918 influenza pandemic and his strained relationships with state and local officials exemplify how people’s political agendas can influence their decision-making as they deal with the panic and stress of a public health crisis. At the time, no one could have imagined a mayor of a major city

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behaving this way. After all, the influenza pandemic was the “war” that the people were fighting at home. Certainly everyone, including local officials like Gillen, would rally behind the state to fight this disease, just like patriotic Americans rallied behind the national war effort. However, Gillen was not about to fit into this mold; he had his own political agenda, and there was no real recourse in place on how to handle someone like Gillen.62

It was not that Gillen was fiercely anti-Republican, and therefore, would do anything to contradict the Republican governor of the state. After all, Gillen’s parents had been Republicans when he was growing up and only switched to the Democratic Party when they moved to New Jersey. Gillen was not necessarily a staunch Democrat either. He was not at all reticent about disagreeing with Democratic cronies when it came to municipal policies in Newark; in fact, one mourner at his funeral remembered how much Gillen “loved a fight.” Consequently, Gillen ran as an Independent in 1917 when he sought a place on Newark’s newly-formed commission government and garnered the most votes in a field of 81 candidates. He was, for a time, “one of the most powerful and popular political figures in the city.” Simply put, Gillen possessed his own form of politics, and his way worked as far as he was concerned because he was always looking out for the “average man on the street.” Gillen never forgot his immigrant roots, and he was not about to compromise his political beliefs just because of a temporary panic with influenza.63

63 “Newark Photographs,” Charles F. Cummings New Jersey Information Center, Newark, NJ; “Newark Mayors: Gillen” Charles F. Cummings New Jersey Information Center, Newark, NJ
Gillen never did testify before the State Board of Health for his lack of cooperation during the influenza crisis. The scare from the disease had waned by the end of the Great War. Governor Edge resigned his office to take a United States Senate seat that he won in that year’s election. Most everyone else was excited about the victorious men coming home from Europe. One of Gillen’s last public appearances as mayor was when the members of the 312th Infantry marched past Newark’s City Hall. Gillen continued to get re-elected to Newark’s City Commission until 1933 but never again served as mayor. In 1935 he became an administrative assistant in Trenton, New Jersey, at the then Democratic state headquarters of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Employed back in Newark by the end of the decade, Gillen was fittingly sworn in as a member of the Newark Housing Authority in 1938 after serving as an appraiser for the city tax board the year before. Ever aware and proud of his Irish heritage, Gillen founded and became president of the Erin Society of Newark in 1927. Gillen gradually distanced himself from public and political life until he died of heart failure in 1956 at the age of 79.  

Conclusion

In 2006 researchers from the University of Michigan in collaboration with public health officials from the United States Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta embarked on a project to understand what lessons could be gleaned from the 1918 influenza pandemic. Realizing that it would take at least six months to develop an effective vaccine to prevent the spread of influenza today should another serious outbreak occur, these scientists and historians wanted to know the most successful actions cities

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undertook upfront to combat the spread of the flu in 1918. After a year long study they concluded that cities which used “social distancing measures and other non-pharmaceutical interventions fared better than those that did not.” At that time the use of quarantines was the best way federal, state and local government officials knew to curb the proliferation of influenza, and the research sides with their thinking that full quarantines probably resulted in fewer deaths.65

The finding by the researchers at the University of Michigan and members of the CDC calls into question whether a full quarantine, rather than Gillen’s modified, side-door policy could have prevented some of the deaths among the residents of Newark in 1918. Newark lost eight percent, or 2200 victims, out of 29,000 cases of influenza while New York lost seven percent, or 6300 people, out of the 93,000 cases. Many may not be concerned about a one percent difference in mortality between the two cities, but Newark was (and is) a considerably smaller city than New York. Could Gillen’s mismanagement of the 1918 influenza pandemic in Newark and his lack of interest in combating the disease have played a part in the number of deaths in that city?66

The story of Charles P. Gillen and the city of Newark during the 1918 influenza pandemic speaks to the centrality of governments during natural as well as man-made disasters. It was because of the actions of Mayor Gillen that Newark stands out as an anomaly among the other municipalities in New Jersey that quietly followed the mandates of the state. The 1918 influenza outbreak in Newark began as a natural phenomenon but quickly turned into a constructive episode of political bantering among

66 “New York Had 100,000 Ill In Epidemic, with 12,000 Dead,” Newark Evening News, 26 October 1918, 1.
local and state officials. Gillen spent his energy espousing his political ideals by cleverly skirting around the state quarantine with his side-door policy and, as a result, attracting much attention to himself, which may have been his intent considering that Prohibition was a political issue at the time. However, imagine if Gillen had spent his time securing more medical personnel for the people of Newark, turning more warehouses into hospitals or, for that matter, enforcing the State’s quarantine on all places of public assembly? Would he have received as much attention? Perhaps not, but he may have saved more lives.  

It is difficult to fathom in this day of modern medicine the massive loss of life that the people of 1918 experienced because of the influenza pandemic. Over 22,000 New Jerseyans, 675,000 Americans and nearly fifty million people worldwide perished because of influenza. Given today’s global population, a 1918 influenza-like virus could result in tremendous loss of life again. Today, as scientists develop more potent vaccines, public health professionals prepare emergency response programs, educational and business leaders analyze disaster recovery models and government officials create policy on how to manage people in times of a healthcare epidemic, no one can truly predict the everyday human reaction to disease. As the story of Mayor Gillen illustrates, people’s reactions during times of crisis can become unpredictable, and if people like Gillen are in positions of power, they could affect the political and social cohesion of a community, and ultimately, how well that community would handle a healthcare emergency. The actions of Mayor Gillen remind us that we must prepare not only for the scientific and managerial aspects of disease, but also for the socio-political factors involved in dealing

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with a public health crisis. Mayor Charles P. Gillen, who initially appeared rather
innocuous in New Jersey politics, boldly created his own policies to handle the influenza
that struck his city of Newark in 1918 and impacted many lives as a result. Mayor
Gillen’s story sheds new light on what it means to be truly prepared for the next
pandemic. 68

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