

Biotechnology, Medical Education & the 1918 Pandemic

Alfred E. Golz Fellow: Joseph Rubsamen, Class of 2023

Summer research advisor: Sarah McMahon, Associate Professor of History

During the Alfred E. Golz summer research history fellowship, I began investigating the changing role of medical knowledge, biotechnology innovation and education, community reaction, and public policy legislation response to the 1918 pandemic in Maine. In addition, I began looking at the pandemic historiography, medical innovation, and public response from the New England seventeenth century virgin soil epidemics to the current COVID-19 pandemic. I began this by investigating the relationship between medical innovation in knowing disease, biotechnology advancements in treating disease, and patient care shaped by disease outcomes. I am looking at community survival and infection data, primary source medical literature from the Medical School of Maine curriculum and archival records, medical peer-reviewed literature, documentaries, personal journals, and newspapers.

The project began with an overview of pandemics that impacted Maine from the original settlement with the transmission of virgin soil diseases to the current COVID-19 pandemic. I focused on the 1918 H1N1 and COVID-19 pandemics and the connections between the medical, community, educational, and policy responses. I began to evaluate the diseases, biomedical technologies, patient care, and treatment outcomes through case studies from journals, correspondence, and opinion pieces from the Medical School of Maine.

This project works to grapple with the differences between the 1918 and COVID-19 pandemic response in terms of medicine, policy, education, and public sentiment. Furthermore, comparison to past pandemics underscores the disease outcome, medical development and knowledge, and policy shifts from a normal societal order to a pandemic-life new order. I am continuing this research in Professor McMahon's 3000-level seminar: "Community in America, Maine, and at Bowdoin." I look forward to finishing the research and writing my findings during her course this fall and beyond.