

## Bronxville and the Polio Epidemic of 1916

*By Raymond Geselbracht*

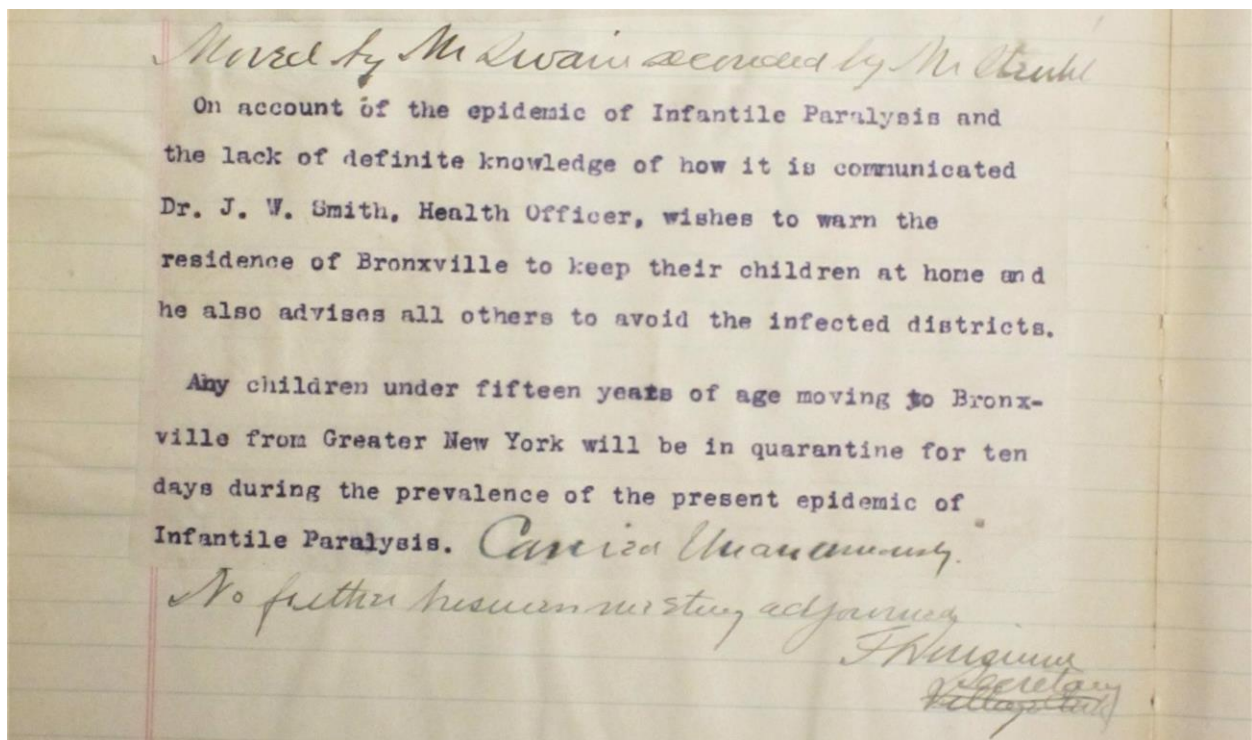
In the summer of 1894, a frightening disease spread through central Vermont. It was polio, typically called infantile paralysis at the time. This was the first serious outbreak of polio in the United States. There were about 120 cases. It was a dread disease which appeared during summer and struck very young children, primarily, and badly crippled or killed some of its victims. Little was known about the disease, public health officials had no good understanding of how to inhibit its spread, and doctors had no effective therapy to treat it. Mention of a polio outbreak evoked the grievous image of small children struggling to move their arms and legs, or even to breathe.



*The poster just outside the window of this house in Brooklyn warns that "Infantile Paralysis is very prevalent in this part of the city. On some streets many children are ill. This is one of the streets. KEEP OFF THIS STREET."*

On June 19, 1916, health officials in New York City announced that a polio epidemic had broken out, centered in Brooklyn. People in Bronxville must have felt uncertain how to react to this undoubtedly troubling news. Other than the outbreak in Vermont over twenty years earlier, the disease had been so rare that it had little presence in American life. There had never been a major, wide-spread outbreak in the United States, and people outside New York City may not have taken the June 19<sup>th</sup> announcement too seriously.

Bronxville's health officer, Dr. John Smith, said he doubted polio would spread to Bronxville from New York, but he offered parents some prudent advice anyway. This was about ten days after the New York outbreak was announced. Keep your children away from Brooklyn and Manhattan, he advised parents, don't go there yourselves, if you can avoid it, and make sure that nurses and others who have frequent contact with your children have not been to New York City recently. Dr. Smith's alarm at the developing epidemic had grown considerably by the time the Board of Health held its monthly meeting on July 11. Citing a lack of understanding of how the polio virus spread, he warned parents to keep their children at home. The board at this meeting approved a resolution providing that children under fifteen years of age who moved to Bronxville from New York City would be put in quarantine for ten days, and it instructed the village dog catcher to kill all stray cats, since it worried that cats might be spreading polio.

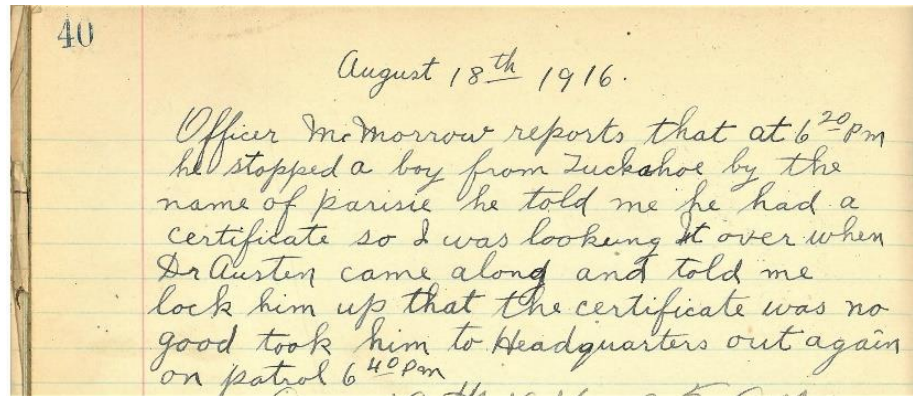


*The Board of Health, in its first meeting following the polio outbreak in New York City, approved a ten-day quarantine for children who moved to Bronxville from the city.  
Village of Bronxville, Board of Health records.*

Through the month of July the situation worsened. A polio case appeared in Yonkers, just across the Bronx River from Bronxville, early in the month. Then four

cases were discovered in New Rochelle. In New York City, cases of polio surged to a high level that looked like it would last all summer.

On July 25, the Bronxville Board of Health responded to the growing health hazard by approving two ordinances. One prohibited children who did not live in Bronxville from entering the village without a health certificate indicating they did not have polio; the other required that village children who traveled to infected areas go into a two-week quarantine when they returned to Bronxville.



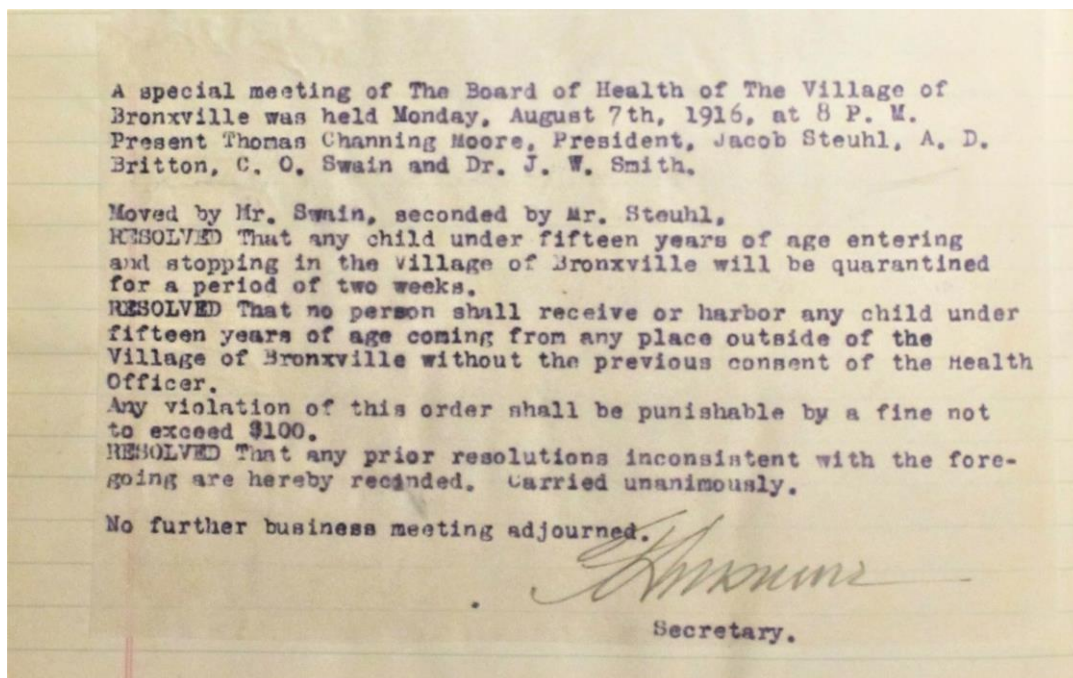
*Dr. Oliver Austin, the acting Bronxville health officer, determined that a Tuckahoe boy had presented a fake health certificate, and he instructed a police officer to "lock him up." Village of Bronxville, Bronxville Police Blotter.*

The Board of Health met again on July 31 to consider what else should be done. Dr. Smith asked the board to empower the Bronxville police to make house to house inspections to find and correct unsanitary conditions that could cause polio to spread into Bronxville. The board approved the request, and the head of police was instructed to send his officers throughout the village, looking for conditions dangerous to public health. Homeowners were to correct any unhealthy conditions found; if they didn't, they would be summoned before the Bronxville court. The board also took further action to keep the village clean, directing that garbage be collected every day, and residents were asked to keep their trash cans clean and to sprinkle them with lime juice.

By early August, the epidemic was spreading quickly through Westchester County, and worried officials from cities, towns, and villages came together and asked the County Board of Supervisors to establish an isolation hospital for polio victims. The board approved the request, and ten days later the hospital, in Elmsford, was completed, and about two weeks later an addition had been completed, bringing the hospital's capacity to 120 beds. It was described as "nothing but a series of long, low, wooden shacks, connected by plazas," but it was quickly recognized as the best hospital

in the county, and maybe in the state, for the treatment of polio victims. A Red Cross official who later toured the hospital said, "If any child that I loved had the disease...I should do everything in my power to get him to [the Westchester County Isolation Hospital]."

Bronxville in early August was still free of the disease and many residents probably hoped their village would be spared completely. The Board of Health, at their meeting on August 7, approved a resolution directing that a fine of up to \$100 (\$2,400 in 2022 dollars) be levied on every person receiving or harboring a child under fifteen years of age from outside the village without the approval of the Bronxville health officer. The Bronxville police went to work to enforce the ordinance. On August 17, for example, they spotted a man and three children riding in a wagon north down Midland Avenue. As they approached the wagon, the man stopped and got the children down and tried to hide them in the shrubs and trees along the side of the road. The police got the children back into the wagon and told the man to continue on his way out of the village. He did as he was told, for a few minutes. Then he stopped the wagon again—he was at the intersection of Midland and Tanglewylde—got the children down, and pushed them toward the woods again. The man, Nathan Tucker of Tuckahoe, was brought before the Bronxville court and fined \$25 (\$600 in 2022 dollars).

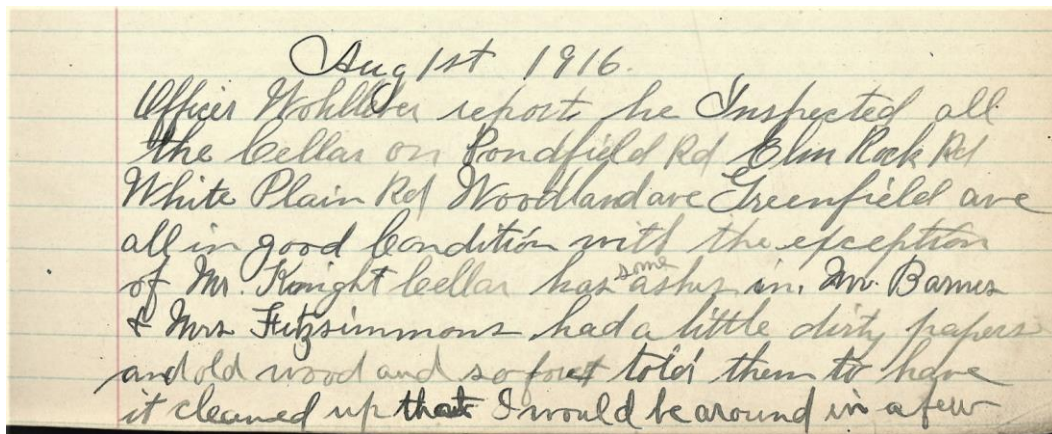


*At its August 7 meeting, the Board of Health strengthened its orders regarding children entering Bronxville and for the first time provided for a fine for violators. Village of Bronxville, Board of Health records.*

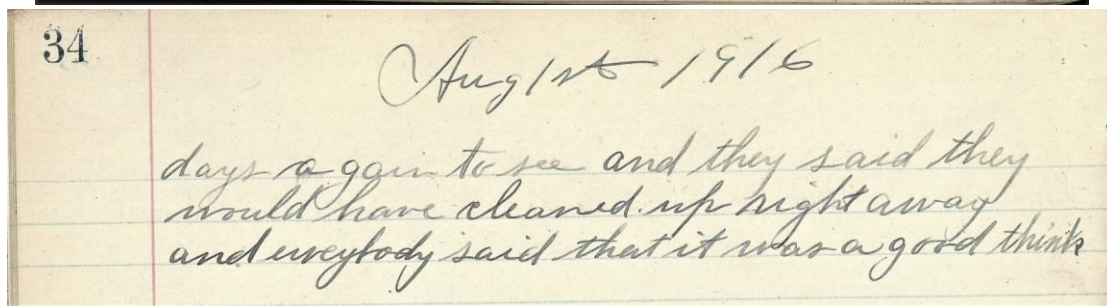


Another violator was Mrs. William L. Colt, a prominent person in Bronxville, known especially as a militant suffragist. She was arraigned on August 19 for having three boys—visitors from Canada—in her home on Maple Street. The judge gave her a \$2 fine, which she refused to pay, and she threatened to appeal the fine. She backed down, though, and presumably paid it.

The Bronxville police, meanwhile, were going house to house, inspecting cellars, looking for unsanitary conditions that might breed disease—by, for example, allowing flies to multiply. Flies were suspected carriers of the polio virus. By the end of the first week in August, all the cellars in the village had apparently been inspected, and police had followed up their inspections when necessary to assure that unclean and unsanitary conditions had been cleaned up.



Aug 1st 1916.  
Officer Wohlleber report he inspected all the cellars on Pondfield Rd Elm Park Rd White Plain Rd Woodland and Greenfield are all in good condition with the exception of Mr. Knight cellar has <sup>some</sup> ashes in. Mr. Barnes & Mrs. Fitzsimmons had a little dirty papers and old wood and so forth told them to have it cleaned up that I would be around in a few



34 Aug 1st 1916  
days ago to see and they said they would have cleaned up right away and everybody said that it was a good thing

Officer Wohlleber reported that all the cellars he inspected were in good condition except for three houses, which had "some ashes...dirty papers and old wood and so forth...." The owners said they would have the messes "cleaned up right away...."

Village of Bronxville, Bronxville Police Blotter.

As August wore on, Bronxville residents could perhaps feel that their good fortune would continue, that the public health measures their village was taking would continue to be effective, and that they and their families would remain free of the polio

virus. In a few more weeks, cooler weather would come and the epidemic would wane. Maybe they could make it safely through the rest of the dangerous summer of 1916.

On August 19, four new cases were discovered in Yonkers, just across the river from Bronxville. The four children of Mr. and Mrs. George McCluskey all came down with the disease. One boy, two years old, died very quickly; the other three children recovered. This outbreak was puzzling. The McCluskey children had been kept at home since the early days of the epidemic, and they had not been visited by other children. How had the virus gotten to them? Mr. McCluskey worked in Bronxville, but there had been no cases in the village and it seemed impossible that he could have somehow picked up the virus there. However the children caught the disease, the village had to protect itself. Police officers were placed on a day-and-night watch at the two bridges at DeWitt and Midland Avenues that connected Bronxville to the area of Yonkers where the McCluskeys lived.



*Bronxville's health officer directed that banners be hung over all the main Streets that came into the village, warning that children could not enter Bronxville without a health certificate. Courtesy of James Maxeiner.*

Bronxville's health officer—Dr. Oliver Austin, the health officer for both Eastchester and Tuckahoe, was filling in for Dr. Smith—decided to hang large banners over all the highways that came into the village, warning that children could not enter

Bronxville without a health certificate. There were twelve banners in all. He also sent a letter to every place in the village that served food and drink. "The possibility of poliomyelitis being spread through common drinking glasses," Dr. Austin wrote, "compels me to forbid your serving soda to any child under sixteen years of age whom you do not know to be a resident of Bronxville." Actions such as these could help keep polio out of the village, Dr. Austin believed, but he knew more was necessary. Bronxville's residents had to be involved in the fight, he said in an interview with the *Bronxville Review*. Every one of them, including children, had to become "lynx-eyed Health Officers" spying out violators of the public health ordinances.

As August changed into September, Bronxville residents had reason to hope their village might completely escape the scourge of polio. It seemed there were outbreaks of disease on every side, particularly in Tuckahoe and in the area of Yonkers just over the Bronx River, but Bronxville had still not suffered a single case of the disease. Maybe the village's public health measures were working, or maybe—some people were probably ready to believe this—their beautiful village was simply charmed.

Such day-dreaming ended on September 4<sup>th</sup>. On that day, Dorothy Cusick, the three year old daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Leo Cusick of Front Avenue (now Parkway Road) was diagnosed with polio and taken to the county isolation hospital in Elmsford. Her case was severe. It was thought Dorothy's mother brought the virus into the Cusick home. Two weeks before Dorothy got sick, Mrs. Cusick was present at the funeral of young George McCluskey of Yonkers. At the time, it wasn't known that the boy had died of polio. When the cause of death was discovered not long after the funeral, the Cusick family was placed in quarantine. All seemed well as more than a week went by; the family probably hoped that the virus's incubation period had passed. But Dorothy became ill.

Not until a month later, on October 5<sup>th</sup>, did another polio case appear in Bronxville. Demorah Matthews of Hobart Street was the victim. The fortunate girl had a very mild case and quickly recovered. She was Bronxville's second, and last, case of polio.

#### OBITUARY Dorothy Cusick

Dorothy, the three year old daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Leo Cusick, of Front avenue, died at 5:45 P. M., Wednesday evening, of pneumonia. She was taken ill Friday of last week. The interment was in Holy Mount Cemetery at 2:30 P. M. today.

Dorothy Cusick was the first victim of the infantile paralysis scourge in Bronxville, this summer. She was stricken, Monday, September 4th, and was sent to the Isolation Hospital at Elmsford where she was for some time. Since her return she had been strapped in a frame and physicians gave it as their opinion that she would be a cripple for life. Dorothy Cusick attracted much attention in the fall of 1915 when she won the prize in the baby parade conducted by the Mount Vernon Argus. She was on a suffrage float.



The regular monthly meeting of The Board of Health of the village of Bronxville was held Tuesday, November 14th, 1916 at 8 P. M. Present Thomas Channing Moore, President, Jacob Steuhl, A.D. Britton, C. O. Swain and Dr. J. W. Smith.

Minutes of last meeting read and approved.

Health officers report read and ordered placed on file.

Moved by Mr. Swain, seconded by Mr. Steuhl,  
That all <sup>existing</sup> regulations relating to Infantile Paralysis quarantine be and they hereby are repealed. Carried unanimously.

No further business meeting adjourned.

*Thomas Channing Moore*  
Secretary.

*The Board of Health repealed its last remaining quarantine regulations on November 14, 1916.*

It would take a long time, though—maybe a lifetime—for enough forgetting to occur to heal the deep scar of sadness the 1916 polio epidemic left behind in Bronxville and in other cities, towns and villages throughout the country. The shock of the irrecoverable loss of the polio victims, almost all children, who died was the epidemic's legacy, as were the many children who suffered from the terrible effects of the disease, and the many parents and siblings and friends who suffered for the children's sufferings. A Red Cross official, after the epidemic had ended, spoke to an audience in Village Hall about the "300 crippled little ones" who would have to be cared for their entire lives. These were the children of Westchester County who had contracted the disease and been left paralyzed. "Three hundred little ones," she said, "who daily for years must attempt to do what they cannot do; who must for days and weeks try to raise an arm or a leg which will not move. Their despair to ever accomplish it and the hopelessness of their parents is what must be overcome."

Bronxville was extremely fortunate to have only two cases of polio. Little Dorothy Cusick's case was severe. She was badly paralyzed and had to live strapped in a frame after she came home from the hospital. She died on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1917. It's difficult for anyone who has not lost a child in this way to have any idea what her mother and father felt and endured for the rest of their lives.

Polio returned summer after summer to communities across America, not in epidemic proportion every year, but every year people had to worry what was coming. 1931 was probably the next bad summer for worrying about polio in Bronxville, though it was nothing like 1916. Nationally, polio outbreaks became worse and worse as the years went by, with 1952 being the peak year for infections. The discovery and administration of vaccines in the 1950s and 1960s gradually eradicated polio. The last naturally occurring case in the United States was in 1979.