# Guide to the **COVID-19 Pandemic Collection**

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See also:

THC Digital Archives V-65-3-7

V-65-3-7 Oversize materials

COLLECTION DESCRIPTION

This collection documents COVID-19's impact on Tompkins County. On March 1, 2020, New York State informed the public of its first case of the novel coronavirus, and by March 7, Governor Andrew Cuomo declared a state of emergency, which soon resulted in shifts to daily living, such as bans of large gatherings and calls for social distancing – keeping six feet apart and social circles small. By March 14, the Tompkins County Health Department reported its first COVID case, an Ithaca College community member, and on March 21, the Ithaca City School District notified the public that one of its members tested positive. These initial cases mark the beginning of this collection's story. The History Center and Cornell University's Division of Rare Manuscript Collections began a dialogue about how to best document the pandemic starting in early March. While Cornell would focus on New York State and national impacts, The History Center's emphasis would be on the local story. In an effort to archive the breadth and depth of COVID-19's effect on Tompkins County, The History Center put out a call to the public for COVID-related submissions on March 20. Donors began offering materials almost immediately, and archival staff began keeping notices from local governments and health department officials, as well as those from local business and cultural institutions.

In March 2020 the most severe impact was, of course, on the people being sickened by the virus. But in addition to the terrible physical toll of the virus, precautionary restrictions put in place completely disrupted people's lives: Schools and colleges shut down; businesses and cultural institutions closed. Only those considered "essential," such as supermarkets, stayed open. Students began attending class remotely and business meetings were held over Zoom. It wasn't until the summer of 2020 that places began opening up on a very limited basis. Later in 2020 and throughout 2021 more businesses and institutions opened, but many were on reduced hours, and restaurants adapted to the unprecedented situation by offering take-out only. In 2022 more openings took place, and restaurants began offering

sit-down dining, even though late 2021 saw a drastic increase in cases with the new Delta variant of the virus. In early 2022 yet another variant, the Omicron, took hold and caused another increase in cases. In April 2022 the White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator, Dr. Ashish Jha wrote, "Every four to six months since the beginning of the pandemic, we have seen the emergence of a significant variant, including Delta in the spring of 2021 and Omicron in late fall of 2021. There is little reason to think we are done with viral evolution or that we won't see more transmissible or immune-evasive variants in the future."

This collection contains materials that illuminate the impacts of the pandemic and Tompkins County's responses to them. Daily Summaries – curated by Anna Kelles, then a member of the Tompkins County Legislature – provide thorough documentation of how the virus's impact on the many pockets of Tompkins County developed over time. With hyperlinks and summaries of articles, community resources, business notices, town hall meetings, Tompkins County Health Department's data, and announcements made by the colleges and the Ithaca City School District – these newsletters showcase the landscape of the pandemic's effects. The reportage from local news sources — *Tompkins Weekly*, *Ithaca Voice, Ithacan, The Cornell Daily Sun*, *Ithaca Times*, and *Ithaca Journal* — narrate the development of testing, the rise and fall of cases, the shifts to online life, the economic impacts, and the county's response to various community needs, including safe voting during a presidential election in November 2020. Artifacts like surgical masks and instructions how to make them allude to the significant role masks have played throughout the course of the pandemic; from their initial limited to supply to their common usage in managing spread of the virus.

This collection also features a number of community notices from local businesses, nonprofits, churches, and other institutions, updating the public on their amended protocol in response to the pandemic. A Cornell University survey – done by undergraduate and graduate students, alumni, staff and family, faculty, unaffiliated individuals – offers a glimpse of how the virus affected college institutions. As a complement to the data and factual reportage, this collection also includes photographs taken by students, professors, and community members, and first-person reflections–such as journal entries and videos – that detail some of the ways people coped during the pandemic. Official information on the COVID vaccine is included as well.

The exceptionally fast development, approval and distribution of mRNA vaccines was a scientific and historic first. Messenger RNA was first discovered in the 1960s, and its potential use in medicine was considered in the 1970s and 1980s. Several pharmaceutical companies grappled with complex technical issues around this, and between 2008 and 2010 both BioNTech and Moderna began working on mRNA technology. Beginning around 2012 federal R&D money supported this research, and when the Covid pandemic hit both companies were well positioned to make the most of the need. According to the journal *Nature*, "… when COVID-19 struck, Moderna was quick off the mark, creating a prototype vaccine within days of the virus's genome sequence becoming available online. The company then collaborated with the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) to conduct mouse studies and launch human trials, all within less than ten weeks. BioNTech, too, took an all-hands-on-deck approach. In March 2020, it partnered with New York-based drug company Pfizer, and clinical trials then moved at a record pace, going from first-in-human testing to emergency approval in less than

eight months." (14 September 2021) Johnson & Johnson developed a more traditional single dose vaccine, while the two mRNA vaccines required two doses.

The first vaccines administered in Tompkins County went to health care workers in December 2020. Vaccine clinics were set up for eligible residents in January 2021. Eligibility in New York was determined based on potential exposure and vulnerability, and all emergency workers, long-term care residents, health care workers, were among the first to be vaccinated. Gradually, as more vaccines were made available, the process opened up to older residents, and eventually to all residents. Vaccines were administered by County Health Department staff at the Shops at Ithaca Mall, as well as at local pharmacies. As of this writing (April 2022) more than 77,000 county residents are fully vaccinated. Booster shots began to be offered late in 2021 and in 2022 second booster shots have been offered to residents over the age of 50.

As the virus evolved and later variants spread, the pandemic toll devastated communities and hospitals throughout the world, especially in the US. In Tompkins County, as of April 2022 more than 19,000 individuals have been infected with the virus, and there have been 60 resident deaths. The story is an ongoing one and this two-year collecting process captures the first stages of a story that is not yet complete.

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