

APPENDIX

DID THE EPIDEMIC REALLY HAPPEN?

Absolutely. The yellow fever outbreak that struck Philadelphia in 1793 was one of the worst epidemics in United States history. In three months it killed nearly five thousand people, 10 percent of the city's population.

Thousands of people fled to escape the disease. Congress adjourned on schedule and its members left town, along with George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Mayor Matthew Clarkson was one of the few high-ranking government officials courageous enough to stay. He and the members of the Mayor's Committee tried to hold the city together as the death toll mounted.

BATTLE OF THE DOCTORS

Medicine in the late 1700s was crude. The stethoscope had not yet been invented, nor had the thermometer. People did not understand how disease was spread.

At the beginning of the epidemic there were about eighty people practicing medicine in Philadelphia. Not all of them were trained doctors. Some fled to the countryside, others died of yellow fever.

The doctors of Philadelphia battled one another as well as the epidemic. They were loosely divided into two camps: the followers of Dr. Benjamin Rush, and the followers of French physicians like Dr. Jean Deveze.

Dr. Rush was one of the most famous doctors in the country. He gave patients mercury, calomel, and jalap to make them throw up and have diarrhea. He drained blood from them (a common practice) to get rid of the "pestilence" in their bodies. Medical experts speculate that Rush's treatments killed many of his patients.

The French doctors prescribed rest, fresh air, and lots of fluids. That was the best way to treat the disease. It still is.

TAKE TWO SPONGES AND CALL ME IN THE MORNING

Philadelphians were desperate for anything to prevent or cure yellow fever. They soaked sponges in vinegar, then stuck them up their noses. They washed their hair and clothes in vinegar. They even drank it.

Guns and cannons were fired in the street in the hopes that the gunpowder would clean the air. People wore nasty-smelling bags of camphor around their necks, chewed garlic, and drank vile potions of herbs. Beds were buried underground, then dug up in an effort to kill whatever was causing the disease.

Nothing worked. People kept getting sick until the frost killed off the mosquitoes that spread yellow fever.

WHERE ARE THEY BURIED?

Some fever victims were buried in churchyards and cemeteries throughout the city, but many lie anonymously in what is known today as Washington Square, the old potter's field. It is bounded by Sixth, Seventh, Walnut, and Locust Streets in Philadelphia. At one end is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, commemorating the Revolutionary War dead buried there. Across Walnut is the former location of the old Walnut Street Jail, where Jean Pierre Blanchard's balloon ascended in January 1793.

THE BALLOON

The first hot-air balloon flown in the United States was launched from the Walnut Street Jail on January 9, 1793, by the French aeronaut Jean Pierre Blanchard. Nearly every person in Philadelphia stopped what they were doing and watched as the yellow silk balloon carried him 5,800 feet in the air.

Blanchard performed several scientific experiments aloft, filling six bottles of air, taking his pulse, and making observations about the air pressure, temperature, and weather. If Benjamin Franklin had lived long enough (he died in 1790), he would have been thrilled with the event.

The wind blew Blanchard fifteen miles, across the Delaware River to New Jersey. Blanchard shared a bottle of wine with the farmer in whose field he landed, and showed the man his "passport," a letter of safe passage written by President George Washington.

A crowd soon gathered, and a wagon was found to transport Blanchard and his deflated balloon back across the river. He was greeted in Philadelphia by a cheering crowd. Blanchard's plans for a second flight in the city were ruined by the yellow fever epidemic.

THE AMAZING PEALE FAMILY

There really was a Peale family, though they did not have an apprentice named Nathaniel Benson. The Peales are sometimes referred to as "the First Family of American Art."

Charles Willson Peale was one of the finest portrait painters in the United States. He was also an intensely curious man. Peale opened America's first natural history museum in his house in the 1780s. His collection included mastodon bones, fossils, minerals, and preserved animals such as jackals, mongooses, and bison, along with dozens of species of amphibians, birds, fish, and insects. After their famous expedition of the newly purchased West (1804-1806), explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark donated many of the specimens they had found on their journey to Peale's collection.

Peale fathered seventeen children and named many of them after famous artists. Those who survived childhood became active in the arts or helped their father with the museum. Peale's second son, Rembrandt Peale, was a noted artist who painted his first portrait of George Washington when he was only seventeen. One of his later portraits of Washington hangs in the Smithsonian in the Hall of Presidents. He also painted a well-known portrait of Thomas Jefferson.

FREE AFRICAN SOCIETY

The Free African Society was founded in 1787 by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. Richard Allen was born a slave in Philadelphia in 1760. He bought his freedom and went on to help found the African Methodist Episcopal Church and become its first bishop. Absalom Jones, born a slave in 1746 and freed in 1784, was the first African-American to be ordained an Episcopal priest. The most widely recognized image of Jones was painted by Raphaelle Peale, the oldest son of Charles Willson Peale.

Allen and Jones founded the society as a mutual aid organization devoted to helping widowed, ill, or out-of-work African-Americans. It was also dedicated to abolishing the evil institution of slavery. Under the leadership of Jones and Allen society members worked day and night to relieve the suffering of yellow fever victims. They nursed the sick, fed them, washed them, buried them, and made sure their orphaned children were cared for.

After the epidemic, society members were attacked in a pamphlet written by publisher Mathew Carey. He accused them of overcharging for burials and stealing from the sick. The charges were lies, and Mayor Matthew Clarkson took out ads in the city's newspapers to defend

the heroic work of society members. Allen and Jones wrote their own pamphlet, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in 1793*, which described what the African Americans of Philadelphia had done to help their fellow citizens during the epidemic.

COFFEEHOUSES

Coffeehouses were all the rage in the 1790s. People gathered in them to conduct business, talk politics, and catch up on the news of the day. Owning and running a coffeehouse was considered a respectable business for a widow.

The most famous coffeehouse in Philadelphia was called the London Coffee House (named after—you guessed it—a coffeehouse in London, England). It was opened in 1754 by a printer named William Bradford.

Bradford hung a painting of King George on the wall of his coffeehouse. But when Great Britain started to tax the colonies heavily, the king's picture came down. John Adams, Dr. Benjamin Rush, and other important men met at the London Coffee House to discuss revolutionary strategies. The Declaration of Independence was signed a few blocks away.

THE FRENCH INFLUENCE

France sided with the United States during the American Revolution, sending money and soldiers to aid the young nation. By 1793 the French were having troubles of their own. They beheaded their monarchs —King Louis XVI and his wife, Marie Antoinette—and declared war on England, Spain, and Holland. Although America was officially neutral, many Americans supported the French. As refugees from the French Revolution and from the slave revolts in the French West Indies poured into Philadelphia, French fashion and language became very popular. Young boys would cheerfully shout, "*Vive la République!*" when they met French sailors in the street. The refugees opened dancing academies, fencing salons, and hairdressing parlors. French cooks introduced ice cream to Philadelphia. Thomas Jefferson's favorite flavor was said to be vanilla. And during the epidemic it was French doctors who had the most effective treatments.

FAMOUS PEOPLE TOUCHED BY THE FEVER

Dolley Payne Todd Madison

Dolley's first husband, John, died during the epidemic of 1793, along with the couple's young son and John's parents. Dolley was later introduced to Congressman James Madison by their mutual friend, Aaron Burr. She married Madison in 1794.

When James Madison was elected the fourth president of the United States in 1809, Dolley became one of the nation's most beloved First Ladies. Among other things, she is famous for organizing the first Easter Egg Roll on the Capitol grounds, and for saving the famous life-size portrait of George Washington when British soldiers burned the White House in 1814.

George Washington

President Washington was in his second term of office when the epidemic hit Philadelphia, then the nation's capital. He left the city on September 10. Why? He said, "Mrs. Washington was unwilling to leave me surrounded by the malignant fever which prevailed, I could not think of hazarding her and the Children any longer by my continuance in the city, the house in which we lived being, in a manner, blockaded, by the disorder."

It was a smart thing to do. Polly Lear, a good friend of Martha Washington's, had contracted yellow fever in the early days of the epidemic. It was said she caught it while shopping in the

marketplace with Martha. When Polly died, Thomas Jefferson helped carry her casket at her funeral.

Dr. Benjamin Rush had a young assistant from Virginia named Warner Washington, thought to be a cousin to George Washington. Despite (or because of) Rush's treatment, Warner died of the fever too.

George Washington died on December 14, 1799, of a throat infection.

Dr. Benjamin Rush

Although we know today his methods were useless and dangerous, Dr. Rush's services were in much demand during the fever outbreak. At the height of the epidemic he was seeing 120 patients a day. Dr. Rush contracted the disease himself but survived.

Rush's insistence on perilous remedies for yellow fever patients was a rare misstep for the energetic doctor. He was far ahead of his time on many issues. He fought against slavery and capital punishment, and argued for public schools, the education of girls, and the compassionate treatment of the mentally ill. He treated his insane patients with gentle understanding. Among his mentally ill patients were Mary Girard, wife of Stephen Girard, and a daughter of artist Charles Willson Peale.

Stephen Girard

Born in France, Girard fought on the side of the Americans during the Revolutionary War. He made several fortunes in shipping and banking and was one of the richest men in the country.

Though he could have fled with the other wealthy and influential people during the epidemic, he chose to stay and help. Girard supervised the transformation of Bush Hill into a safe, functioning fever hospital. He came down with the fever himself but survived. Although he trusted his insane wife to Dr. Rush's psychiatric care, he no doubt turned to the French doctors of Bush Hill while he was sick.

TO MARKET, TO MARKET

There were no refrigerators in 1793, no freezers, no twenty-four-hour grocery stores, and no canned hams. Most city dwellers bought their food at the marketplace. Farmers from the countryside would pack their wagons with produce, meat, eggs, cheese, milk, and bread, and drive before sunup into Philadelphia. The people in the city counted on them.

With the government shut down and farmers afraid to come into the city, getting enough food to eat during the epidemic was a problem. It was made worse by the lack of money in the city. In the early days of the epidemic many wealthy people and business owners fled. The people they employed were out of work. It didn't take long until they were out of cash.

All over the East Coast other communities imposed quarantines on people from Philadelphia. That meant that Philadelphians were not allowed to come into their towns, not even to buy food.

We do not have any records that tell us whether or not people starved during the epidemic. We do know that people, especially the poor, were hungry. Some neighboring towns donated food, firewood, and cash to help out. The Mayor's Committee was in charge of collecting and distributing the donations, and the records show that the citizens of Philadelphia were very grateful for them.

THE MIRACULOUS MOVING CAPITAL

Washington, D.C., was not the first capital of the United States. In fact, the capital moved all over the place before settling down on the banks of the Potomac River in 1800.

The Continental Congress met for the first time in Philadelphia in 1774. It was the largest city in the colonies and centrally located. Philadelphia remained the base of the government for years, but the Revolutionary leaders were occasionally chased out by British soldiers. The Congress moved to Baltimore and Annapolis, Maryland; Lancaster and York, Pennsylvania; and Princeton and Trenton, New Jersey. While on the run the Congress met in courthouses, taverns, and private homes.

After the peace treaty was signed with the British, the new American government set up shop in New York City. George Washington's first inauguration took place there on April 30, 1789.

While the government was based in New York, there were fierce debates about where the permanent home of the nation's capital should be. Southerners wanted the capital to be located farther south.

Alternatives were named: Wilmington, Delaware; Lancaster, Pennsylvania; Annapolis or Baltimore, Maryland. None passed.

Finally, discussion centered around building the capitol on the Potomac River. It was a geographic compromise between North and South, and it was easily reachable by boat, an important consideration in the days when roads were often impassable. After much debate the Congress decided to carve a piece out of Maryland and Virginia and create a federal district. They did not want the seat of national government to be located in any one state, afraid that the other states would think it unfair. Philadelphia was the temporary home of the government from 1790 to 1800. In 1800 the government moved to the District of Columbia.

After leaving Philadelphia in the middle of the yellow fever epidemic, George Washington headed south. He laid the cornerstone for the United States Capitol on September 18, 1793.

FEAR AND PANIC

At the beginning of the epidemic most people in Philadelphia were calm. There had been "fevers" in the city before, and few thought it was anything to worry about. But as the death toll quickly rose panic took over.

The fever closed businesses and the government. All anyone could talk about was "Who's dead? Who's sick?" The men pushing handcarts carrying corpses to the burial grounds called out, "Bring out your dead!" just as they had during the bubonic plague in England.

Although it can be hard for us to imagine, there are many reports of sick people being abandoned by their families, some thrown into the street to die. Friends and neighbors stopped talking and avoided one another on the street. Kindness seemed to evaporate. In a few short weeks the city was transformed into a living nightmare, with the sick dying, the healthy paralyzed with fear, and the doctors helpless.

The brave people who stayed in the city and helped the sick were extraordinary. The volunteers of the Free African Society, those who worked at Bush Hill, and the members of the Mayor's Committee devoted themselves with incredible courage to care for strangers. They are the real heroes of this story.

YELLOW FEVER TODAY

Yellow fever still exists, but not in the United States. In 1902 Dr. Walter Reed discovered that the female *Aedes aegypti* mosquito spreads the disease. In the 1930s a vaccine was developed, but yellow fever still kills thousands of people a year in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South America.