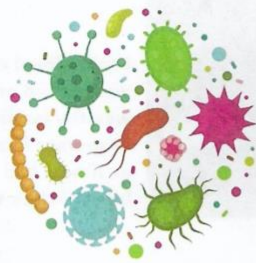


Colonial Diseases

by Audrey DeAngelis and Gina DeAngelis



In 1736, four-year-old Franky developed a fever and aches. Then spots appeared all over his body—even in his mouth. Within a few days, the boy was dead. Franky was the son of famous inventor and patriot Benjamin Franklin. Like so many others in the 1700s, he died of smallpox.

Around the same time that Franky became ill in Philadelphia, hundreds of people in New England died of “throat distemper.” The victims were mostly children. They experienced fevers and sore throats. Their tonsils became inflamed. Historians think the epidemic was caused by one of two diseases: scarlet fever,

which brings a red rash, or diphtheria, which causes a suffocating film to grow in victims’ throats.

In 1760, George Washington’s wife,

Martha, contracted measles in Virginia. Measles is marked by a high fever and a runny nose or a cough. In addition, a splotchy red rash spreads from the face across the body. Mrs. Washington recovered.

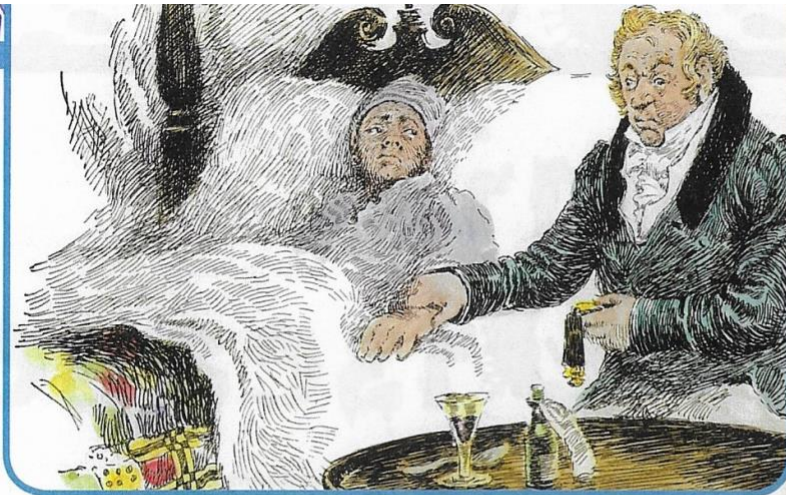
In Colonial America, epidemics of various diseases struck often. No one knew what caused them or how they spread. Once infected, sick people had to let a disease run its course. Few treatments were effective. No one understood why some people died while others survived. Some people simply accepted illness as the will of God.

In 1721, Boston residents experimented



DID YOU KNOW?

Today, most people in the United States are vaccinated against diseases. In many cases, the vaccination process begins with babies. Babies and young children are the most vulnerable to diseases.



Professional doctors were relied on mostly by wealthy families or by desperate families when an illness had moved beyond their care.

with *inoculation* during a smallpox epidemic. It was successful, and 50 years later, General George Washington ordered soldiers in the Continental Army to be inoculated against smallpox. But the idea of purposely exposing people to a dangerous and painful disease terrified many Americans. The first smallpox *vaccination* wasn't developed until 1796 in England.

Catching Fever

“Camp fever.” “Ship fever.” “Jail fever.” “Hospital fever.” Those terms all were used to generally describe illnesses that spread quickly among

people living in crowded conditions. Before people understood about diseases or the existence of germs, it was hard to identify specific illnesses, let alone know how to treat them.

In many places in the 1700s, not many trained doctors existed. And doctors did not always know best how to help sick people. People relied on their own experiences to care for sick or injured family members. Women did nearly all of the nursing, and they did it at home

In 1727, the first edition of a popular pamphlet called “Every Man His Own Doctor” was published. It

An epidemic is an outbreak of a contagious disease that spreads rapidly and widely.

Inoculation is the process of exposing someone to a mild form of a disease by introducing the disease-causing agent into the person.

Vaccination is the process of introducing a weakened or killed virus into a person in order to stimulate antibody protection against the disease. It does not cause the disease itself.





Colonial people drank teas brewed from herbs and plants to combat illness.

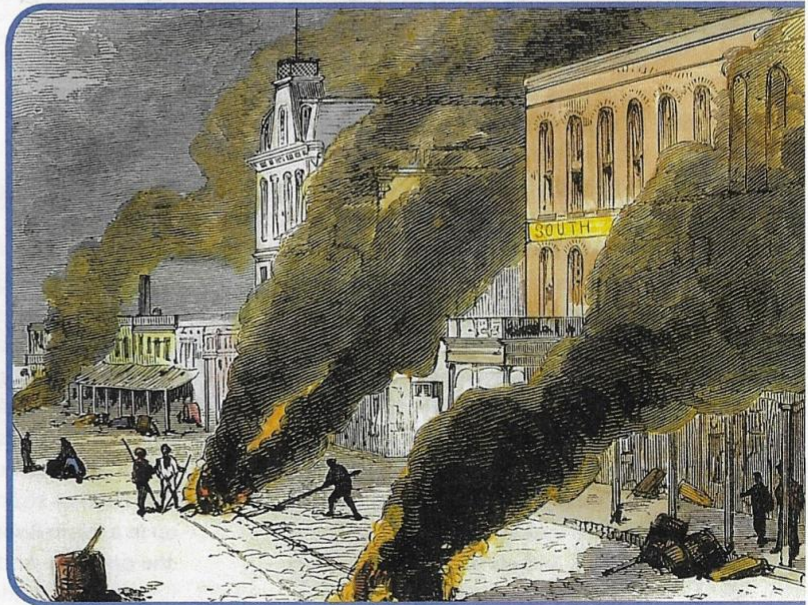
was written for people who didn't have the money to pay for professional medical care. The pamphlet helped with troubles ranging from rattlesnake bites to diabetes. Many of the treatments involved home remedies, such as boiling bark or roots from various plants to make a tea. In some cases—such as willow bark—drinking the tea really

was helpful! Willow bark contains aspirin.

Colonists also tried to prevent illness. They thought bad air, known as miasma, caused disease. To ward off bad air, some people chewed garlic or wore it around their necks. Other people carried handkerchiefs soaked with vinegar or perfume. Colonists also smoked tobacco, set large fires, and fired guns. Those methods were thought to push away bad particles. Sometimes, they helped. Today, we know that smoke temporarily repels disease-carrying mosquitoes.

Yellow Fever! ★

Yellow fever had come and gone in the American Colonies since the 1690s. But in 1793, the worst-ever strain of yellow fever arrived in Philadelphia. People living and working near the docks died first.



Colonists used controlled fires to fight against disease. It occasionally worked because the smoke drove away disease-carrying mosquitoes.

The disease then spread further into the city.

Some people believed that yellow fever was contracted by being in an unhealthy area. Other people thought the disease began in a pile of rotting coffee beans on the city’s docks. No one understood that the disease was carried by mosquitoes and that it did not move from person to person.

Victims of the fever experienced chills and sharp pain behind their eyes. Some people became nauseated and vomited. After several terrible days, most people recovered. Others seemed to recover but then fell ill again within hours. Those people suffered high fever and *delirium*. They vomited blood that had seeped into their stomachs. In those cases, the victims’ skin turned yellow. It was a sign that the disease was damaging the liver. Many victims had a difficult time surviving that final severe stage. It gave the disease its name.

Rush to the Rescue

In July 1793, 50,000 people lived in Philadelphia. Within three months, one in 10 people—5,000 people—had died of yellow fever. Residents who could leave the city fled, including most federal government officials. Other cities such as Baltimore and New York refused to let people from Philadelphia enter. They feared the disease’s spread.

Dr. Benjamin Rush refused to leave the city. He said, “I have resolved to stick to my principles, my practice, and my patients to the last extremity.” With a few other doctors,

Rush led the effort to care for the sick. Most of the city’s 2,000 free African American residents stayed, too. Rush believed, incorrectly, that they were immune to the disease. He enlisted the African American community to help nurse the city’s sick residents. In time, however, the African American volunteers became ill and died, too.

Rush also fell ill. He followed the same treatment he gave his patients. He was lucky. He recovered and was back to seeing patients within a few days. Although he was viewed as a hero for his medical care during the epidemic, the treatments he relied on—bloodletting and purging—were shown to make people weaker rather than healthier. Rush’s refusal to stop using those methods tarnished his legacy as a doctor. +

Audrey DeAngelis works as an archaeologist, and loves both the history and wildlife she encounters in her job.
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FAST FACT

The word *malaria* literally means “bad air.” Malaria is a disease that is spread by infected mosquitoes. People once thought the disease was spread by swampy or damp air.

Delirium is a temporary state of mental confusion often due to illness from a high fever.

CURE FOR A COUGH

[Cough] may be cured in the Beginning with riding moderately on Horseback every Day, and only taking a little Ground Ivy Tea sweeten’d with Syrup of Horehound at Night when you go to Bed. But in case it be violent, it will be proper to bleed Eight Ounces and be constant in the Use of the other Remedies. In the meanwhile, you must use a spare and cooling Diet, without either Flesh or strong Drink. Nor should you stove yourself up in a warm Room, but breathe as much as possible in the open Air. And to prevent this Mischief, don’t make yourself tender [“soft”], but wash every Day in cold Water, and very often your Feet.

—Excerpt From
“Every Man His Own Doctor”