

trated by the general nervousness of everyone around him, Washington took it upon himself to make an inspection.

Down the five miles Washington traveled, through forests and past scattered farmhouses and fields, over the small bridge covering Pegg Run, until he entered the city. He spent the next while riding up one street and down another, nodding politely to the few people he happened to encounter at that early hour. The air smelled fine; the streets were clean and orderly. Aside from the tiny red flags stuck on houses, there was no outward sign of the fever anywhere.

He rode back to Germantown later that day to tell his shocked staff where he'd been. Best of all, he informed them, the nation's capital was healthy enough for Congress to meet there in December, as planned.

The city filled up again and took on its normal, preplague pace. The markets bustled with activity; the taverns and coffeehouses buzzed with conversation; the federal, state, and local governments took up the business they had left off in September.

Benjamin Rush emerged from the epidemic emaciated, feeble, and haunted. In a letter to Julia, he expressed what was probably on the minds of many of those who had stayed and survived. "Sometimes seated in your easy chair by the fire," he wrote, "I lose myself in looking back upon the ocean which I have passed, and now and then find myself surprised by a tear in reflecting upon the friends I have lost, and the scenes of distress that I have witnessed, and which I was unable to relieve."

No one would ever know precisely how many Philadelphians died of yellow fever in 1793. Many of those who traditionally kept such count—ministers, sextons, and city officials—had either fled the city or been ill themselves. The best estimates put the number of victims at between four and five thousand men, women, and children. What was clear to all was that life would never be the same. The fear had gone too deep, the losses were all too real and personal.

Dolley was no wallflower, content to spend the rest of her days living in the past. She was too intelligent, lively, and attractive for such a passive existence. Eleven months after John Todd's death, Dolley married a congressman from Virginia named James Madison. The yellow fever certainly had a tragic impact on her life, one she would recall often in the years to come; yet it was out of this that Dolley Madison's role in our nation's history—as hostess for the widower president Thomas Jefferson and then first lady for her husband—was born.

Government also found itself changed. The Pennsylvania legislature realized that the state government had ceased to exist when its members scampered from the city in panic. They never admitted personal failure or cowardice; to do so might be used against them in coming elections. Instead, they factored flight into the structure of the state government; in the event that yellow fever or any other natural disaster might rout them again, they gave the governor special authority to make laws and spend money until the crisis ended.

The national government learned something because of the yellow fever epidemic as well. The states had worried so much about a future autocratic president that the federal government had inadvertently created a constitutional crisis for the one currently in office. To avoid repeating such an awkward and embarrassing situation, Congress passed a law giving the president power to call it into session outside of the nation's capital whenever a grave hazard to life and health existed.

Changes also came to the city because of the fever. While no one knew what caused yellow fever, the doctors agreed that foul smells were not healthy and might promote disease. Therefore, efforts were made to keep the markets and streets free of offensive-smelling matter, and the laws holding homeowners responsible for cleaning up their property were strengthened. At first, these laws were rather weak and generally ignored by all. But as the nineteenth century went along and the link

people couldn't flee to comfortable country homes like their wealthier neighbors, but at least they could escape the most squalid and plague-ridden sections of town.

The biggest improvement was made in the way water was supplied to Philadelphia. In 1793 water for drinking, cooking, cleaning, and putting out fires all came from private and public wells or from the Delaware River. Most wells were dug in the cellars or backyards of homes, usually only a few feet away from the privy pit. In addition to human waste, the byproducts from manufacturers, such as tanneries, and refuse from the markets seeped into the drinking water. As for the Delaware, it was a handy dumping ground for anything and everything—household and human waste, manufacturing rubbish, and debris from the hundreds of ships that visited the city every year. The result was evil-smelling and evil-tasting water.

While the College of Physicians assured everyone that yellow fever did not originate in the water, the majority of citizens felt otherwise. If the foul smell of rotting coffee could cause health problems, they reasoned, why couldn't foul-smelling water? Complaints about the water and its link to yellow fever increased with each new visitation, until action was finally taken in 1799. That was when the city hired Benjamin Latrobe to design and construct Philadelphia's first waterworks.

Water was lifted by a steam-engine pump from the Schuylkill River (which was then purer than the Delaware) and forced along a tunnel to the central pump house, located in the large central square at Broad and High Streets, just two blocks from Ricketts' Circus. There another steam-engine pump lifted the water into huge wood reservoirs, from where it was fed by gravity to households and businesses around the city.

Water from the system—the first water system in the United States—was sweeter tasting and had no offensive odor. Plus the water