

labor even while “her husband and two children lay dead in the same room with her.” No midwife attended her, and no relative or neighbor gave her comfort. She managed to crawl to a window and get a passerby’s attention. “With his assistance, she was delivered of the child, which died in a few minutes, as did the mother.”

By the end of the first week of September, the yellow fever epidemic had driven the state government from Philadelphia and crippled the city’s administration. It then struck at the federal government with a vengeance. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton and his wife fell ill with the fever on September 5, and left the city. Six clerks of the Treasury Department also contracted the disease, leaving just one, Joshua Dawson, at his post.

Attorney General Edmund Randolph was away negotiating an Indian treaty, and his department fell into disarray almost immediately. The post office ceased doing business when three of its clerks grew ill. Thomas Jefferson, meanwhile, had submitted his resignation (which was to take effect on December 31) because of Washington’s neutrality policy and went home to his estate in Virginia. Nearly everyone, Washington observed with consternation and annoyance, had “matters of private concernment which required them to be absent.”

The president recognized the mortal danger federal employees faced and urged department heads to move their offices from Philadelphia to Germantown, some five miles away. A few days later Washington himself began preparing to leave for Virginia.

“It was my wish to have continued [in Philadelphia] longer,” he wrote to his personal secretary, Tobias Lear, “but as Mrs. Washington was unwilling to leave me surrounded by the malignant fever wch. Prevailed, I could not think of hazarding her . . . any longer by *my* continuing in the City the house in which we lived being, in a manner, blockaded, by the disorder and was becoming every day more and more fatal.”

On the morning of September 10, George and Martha Washington



*No contemporary illustrations of Philadelphia's yellow fever epidemic exist, but scenes similar to this one from a cholera epidemic in France must have been very common in Philadelphia in 1793.*

(THE PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART/THE WILLIAM H. HELFAND COLLECTION)

headed south toward Mount Vernon. He planned to be away from the seat of the federal government for fifteen days or so and did not take any official papers with him. In the weeks ahead, he would postpone his return several times, as reports reached him that the epidemic was growing worse.

Without realizing it, the president set a constitutional crisis in motion when he exited the city. Many people, Thomas Jefferson and future president James Madison included, felt that Washington could not legally convene Congress anywhere but within the city limits of Philadelphia. Without Congress to pass laws and appropriate money, the workings of the federal government would eventually come to a grinding halt.

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*Robert Morris lent George Washington his smaller home (on the left) while the federal government was situated in Philadelphia.* (THE LIBRARY COMPANY OF PHILADELPHIA)

