



WAYNE STATE
UNIVERSITY

Pandemic Perspectives

Department of History, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences



Pandemic Perspectives

Historical Accounts of
Pandemics and Epidemics

With support from:

Cohn-Haddow

Center for Judaic Studies

African Americans and Philadelphia's 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic

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Overview

- Yellow Fever as a Disease
- Yellow Fever in the U.S.
- The 1793 Philadelphia Epidemic
- African Americans in Philadelphia and their Role in the Epidemic
- Similarities between 1793 and Covid-19
- Bibliography



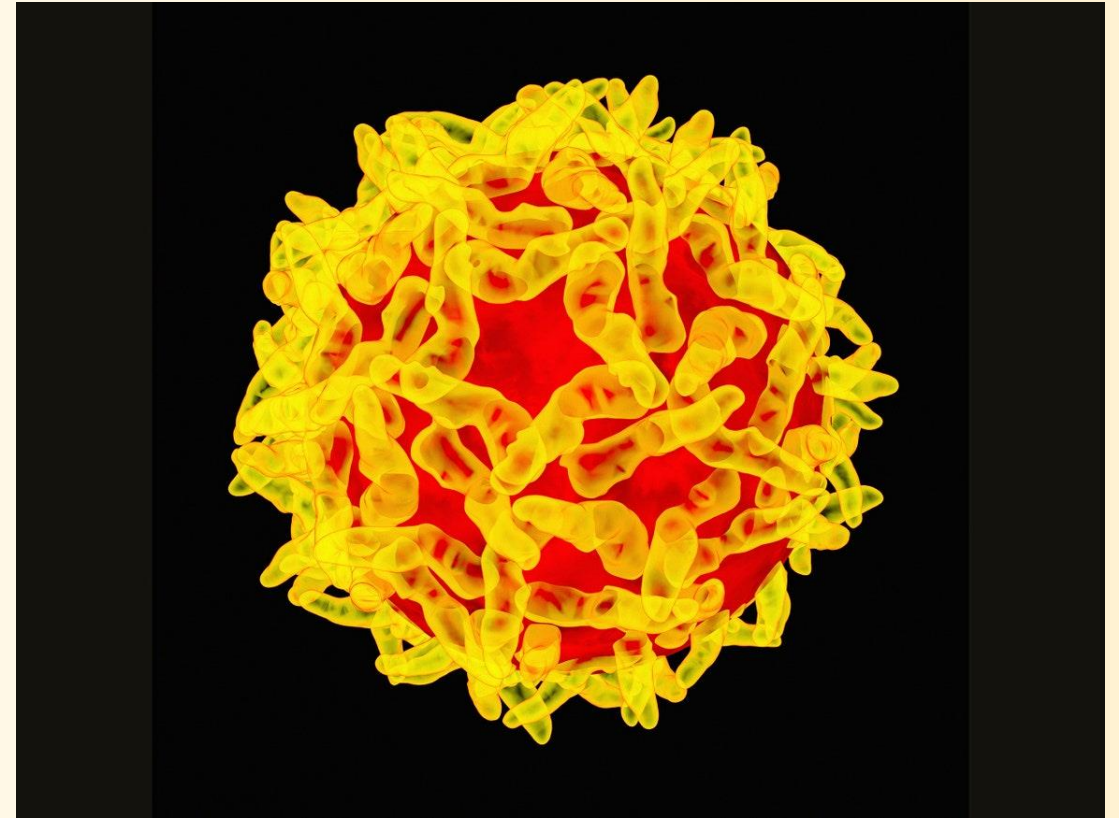
Aedes aegypti - Yellow Fever

- Viral hemorrhagic disease carried by mosquitos.
- Symptoms:
 - Start with fever and muscle pain;
 - Can advance to compromising liver and kidney function, leading to victims' eyes and skin becoming jaundiced (yellow);
 - Internal bleeding leads to vomiting blood.



Yellow Fever

- Death rates vary.
- Overall, 3-7.5%;
- 20-50% among those who developed jaundice;
- Greater than 50% for those with more severe symptoms.

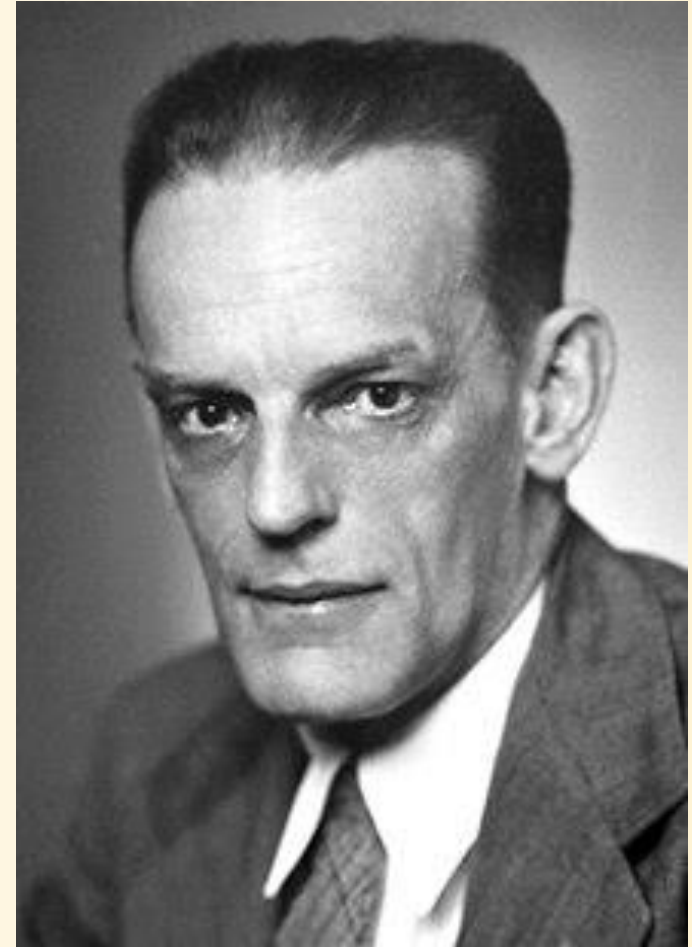


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Towards a Vaccine

- Discovery that mosquitos were yellow fever carriers in 1901;
- Global campaign to eradicate it intensifies in 1915;
- Many setbacks in efforts to treat symptoms and develop a vaccine;
- Vaccine developed during the Second World War era and refined;
- Today, yellow fever is not fully eradicated worldwide.

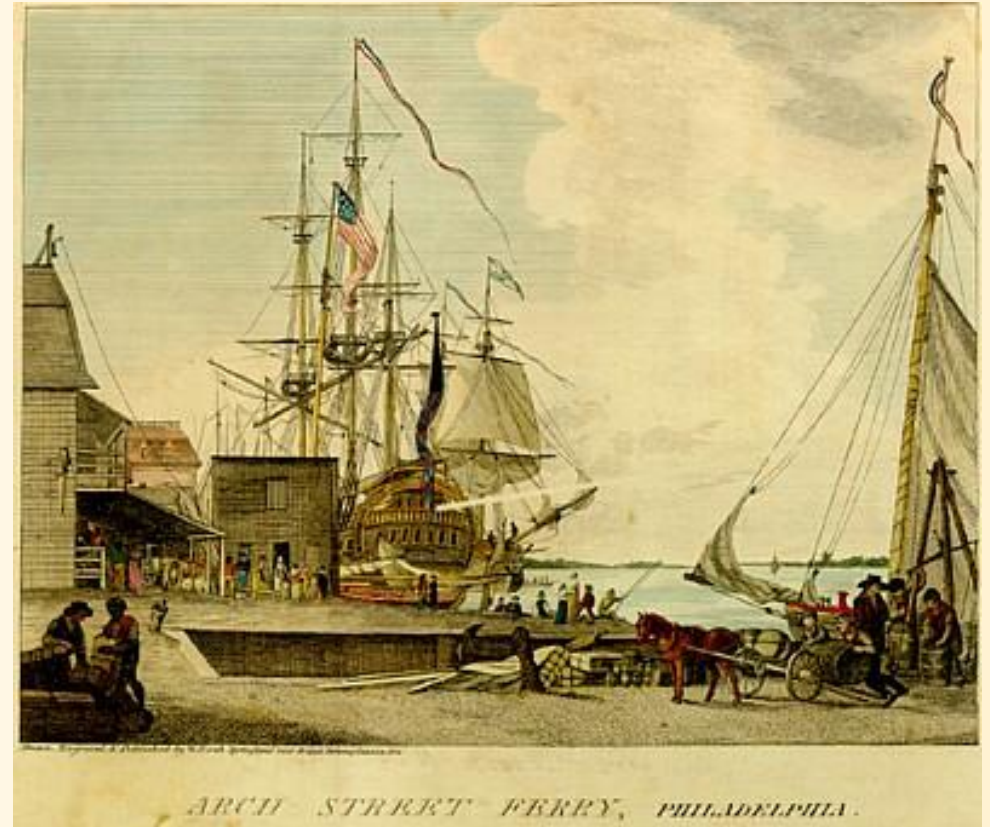


Max Theiler won the 1951 Nobel Prize for his work.



Yellow Fever in the U.S. & 1793 Philadelphia

- First outbreaks in the U.S. documented in 1690s.
- Subsequent outbreaks occurred throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.
- From the summer through fall of 1793, Philadelphia sees the largest yellow fever epidemic in U.S. history.



Arch Street Ferry, Philadelphia | Image in the Public Domain



Philadelphia, Late Summer 1793

- Philadelphians started falling to the disease as mosquitos infected residents;
- Doctors blamed recent immigrants from France and Haiti and struggled to understand the disease;
- By October 1793, upwards of 100 people were dying each day.



Four illustrations from 1819 showing the progress of yellow fever. | Image courtesy of the U.S. National Library of Medicine



Yellow Fever in the City of Brotherly Love

- 20,000 mostly wealthy residents fled the city of Brotherly Love, then the seat of the federal government, taking refuge in New York City and other locales.
- The Bush Hill estate served as an emergency hospital and quarantine station.



James Peller Malcolm Drawing of the Bush Hill Estate |
Image in Public Domain



Black Philadelphia

- Africans and African Americans had lived and toiled largely in bondage in Pennsylvania since the colony's settlement.
- In the earliest days, most were held in bondage on the colony's farms and in individual homes and businesses.

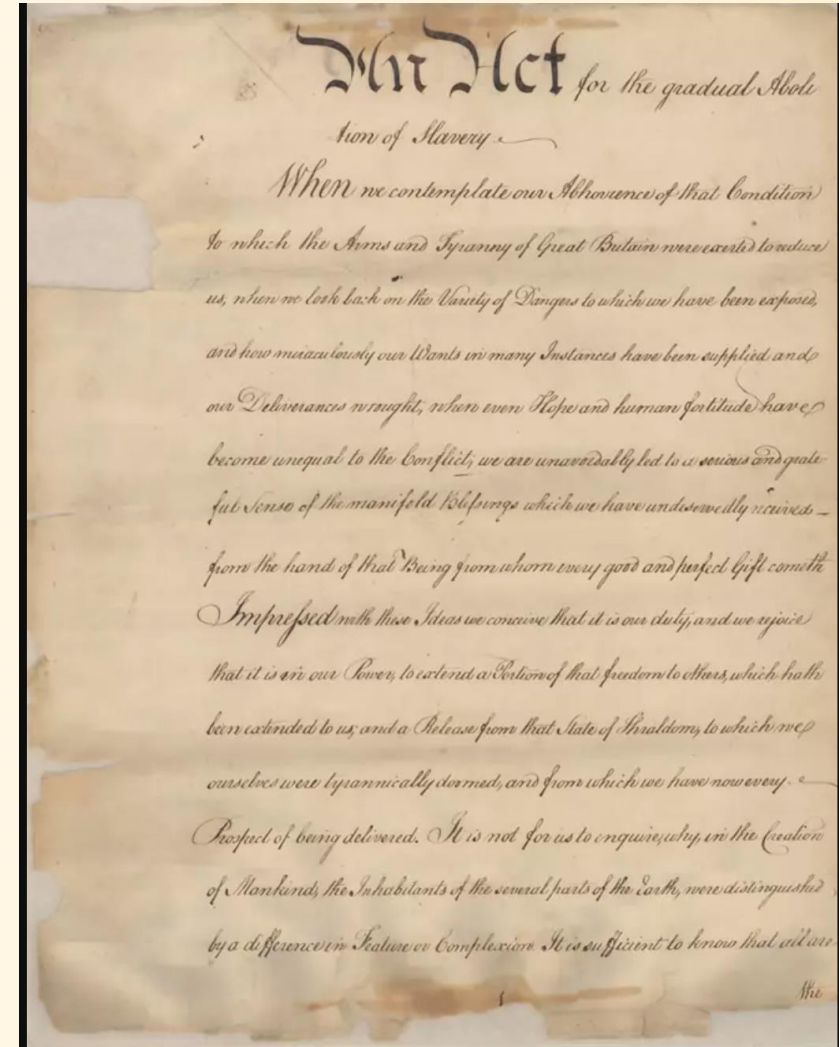


Map of Philadelphia, circa 1796.



Black Philadelphia

- Some Africans and African Americans were free, having bought their way out of bondage, or they were held in bondage by enslavers moved by the Age of Revolutions to free them.
- Pennsylvania's 1780 Gradual Abolition Act facilitated slavery's end there and the growth of a free Black population.



Text of Pennsylvania's Gradual Abolition Act

Black Philadelphia

- Free and freedom-seeking Blacks made their way to Philadelphia's free community.
- Many of these men and women were at the forefront of the nation's abolition movement.
- Most free Black Philadelphians worked as domestic servants, day laborers, and mariners.

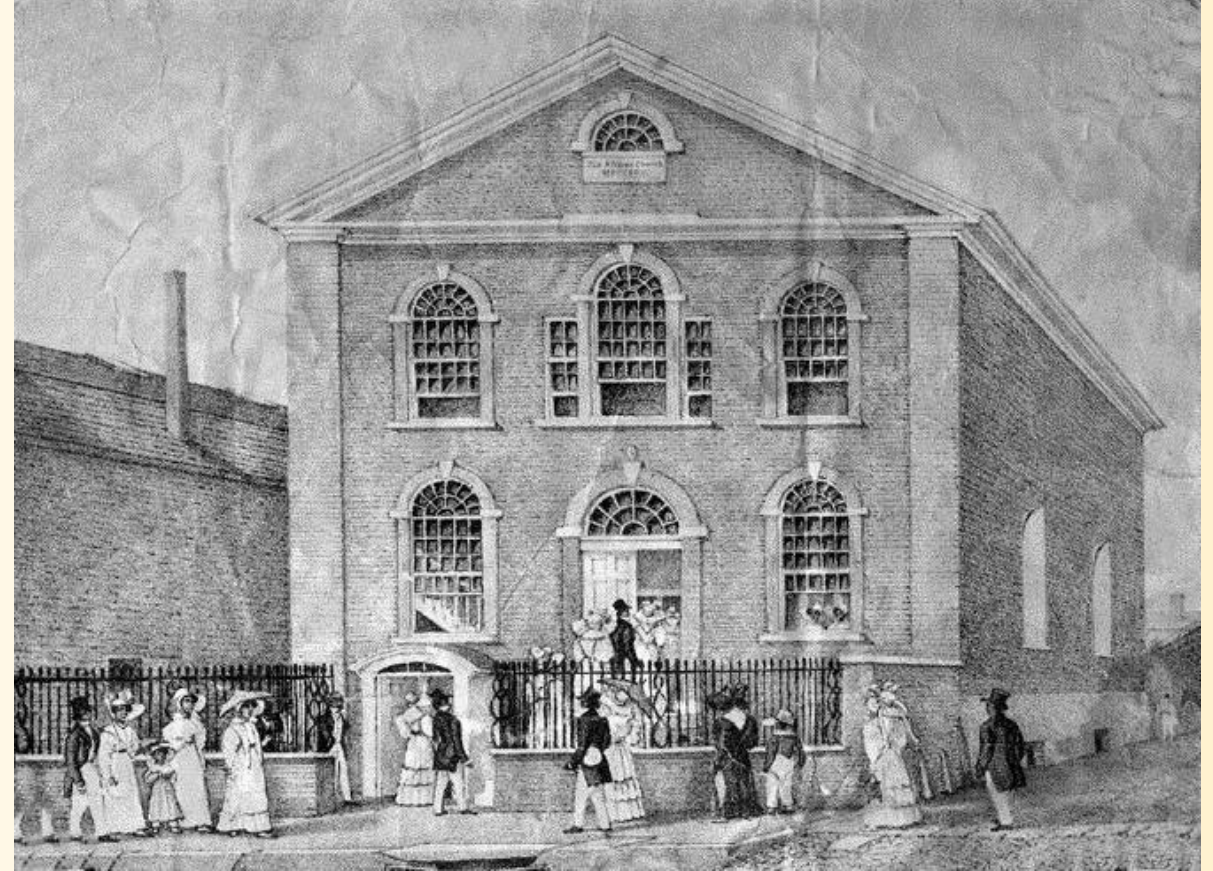


John Lewis Krimmel's *Pepper-Pot: A Scene in the Philadelphia Market* , reflecting the hardship experienced by free Blacks as well as immigrants from England, Ireland, and Germany.



Black Philadelphia

- By 1790, some 2,000 Free African Americans lived in Philadelphia.
- In time, enterprising ones acquired property and established their own businesses that served a mostly Black clientele.
- Wealthier ones established Black cultural institutions.

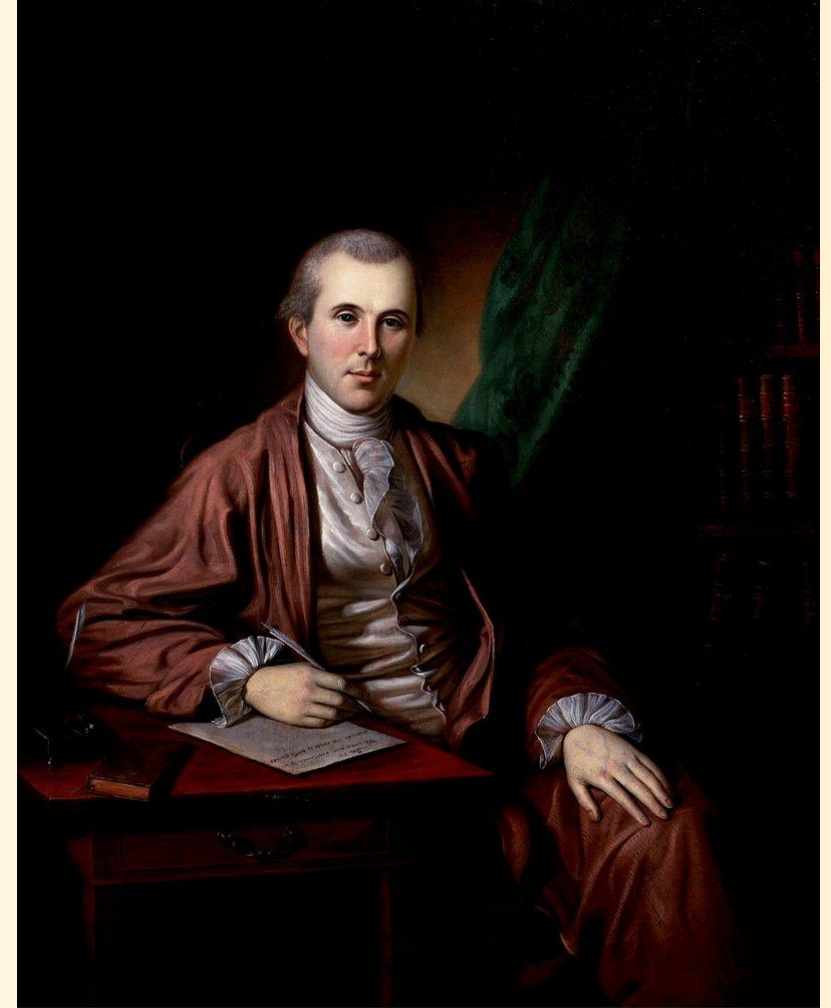


Philadelphia's African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, founded in 1792.



Epidemic Strikes

- Founding Father and physician Benjamin Rush mistakenly believed Africans and African Americans were immune.
- He enlisted the Reverends Absalom Jones and Richard Allen to recruit African Americans to help with the sick and dying.

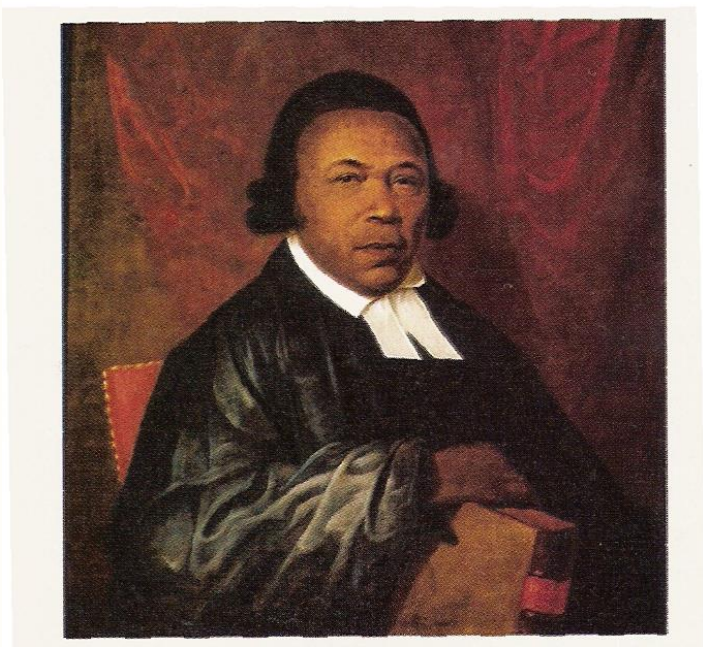


Benjamin Rush, Founding Father, physician, civic leader
| Image Charles Willson Peale/Courtesy of Crown



Abolitionists & Religious and Civic Leaders

Reverend Absalom Jones



Reverend Richard Allen



African Americans Respond

- Having faced extensive racist discrimination and white racial grievance for any achievements they made, Black Philadelphians rushed to help, thinking that might lessen white people's hostility towards them.
- Whites welcomed Blacks into their homes to provide medical care and carry away and dispose of the dead.

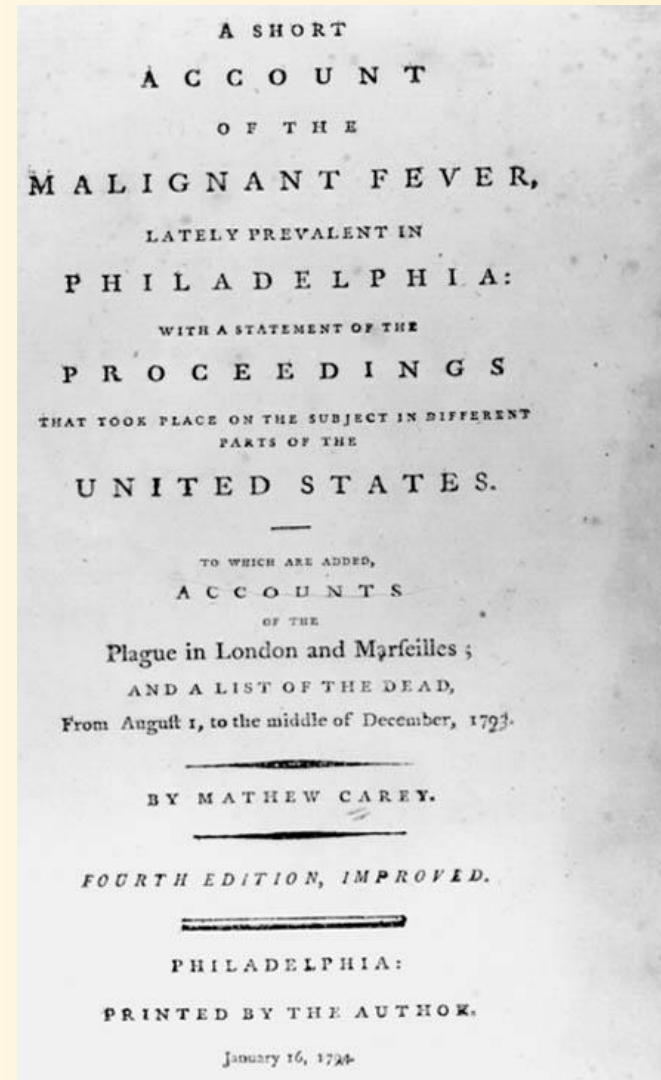


A Case of Infectious Fever | Image courtesy of The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia



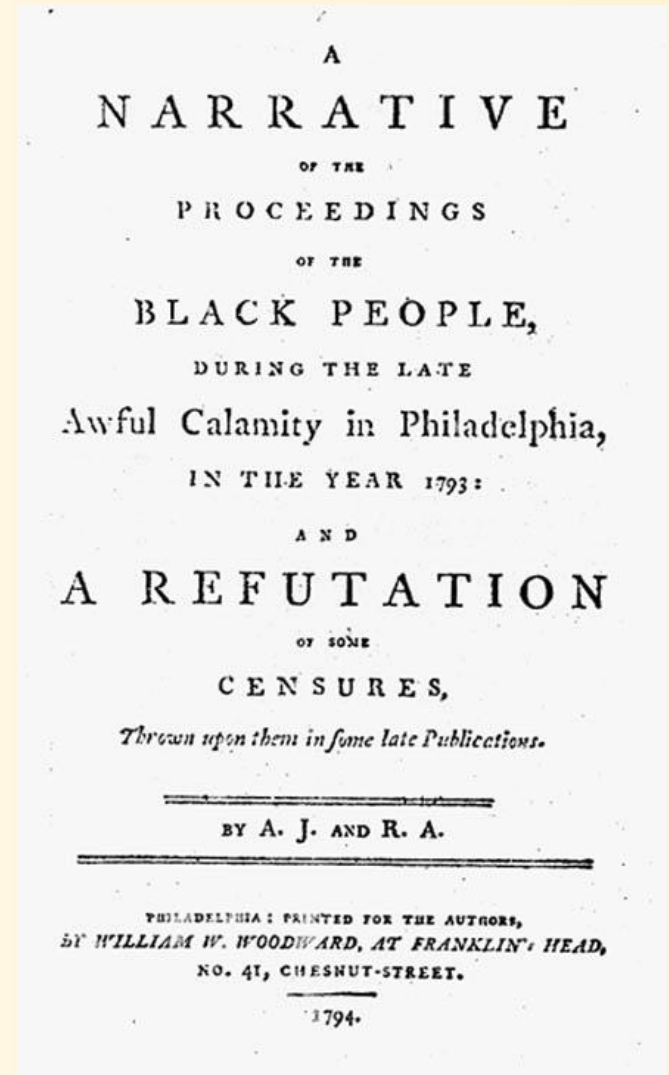
Racial Grievance

- In November, Matthew Carey, a white man, published "A Short Account of the Malignant Fever," accusing Black nurses, porters, and inspectors of profiting from the disaster.
- This account was so popular it quickly went through four printings and shaped how white Philadelphians understood and remembered the epidemic.



African Americans Respond

- The Reverends Absalom Jones and Richard Allen countered with "Black People During the Late Awful Calamity," refuting Carey's slanderous account.
- They documented the risks African Americans took nursing white people and tending to the dead.
- Their rebuttal forced Carey to amend future editions.



African Americans Respond

MORTALITY.

—EACH welcome has its fall, number
Of year's autumn light, while ample sleep,
Unconscious from the rest, each morning peeps

Which escapes the common fate
Of short existence, content, and rest
The South House of Assembly 1795.

An Account of the BAPTISMS AND BURIALS in the United Churches of Christ Church and St. Peter's,
by Matthew Whitehead and John Ormrod, Clerks; and Joseph Dolby, Sexton.
Also—An abstract of the Baptisms and Burials of the various Congregations of the City and Suburbs of
Philadelphia. From December 25, 1792, to December 25, 1795.

BAPTISMS		BURIALS	
Males	Females	Males	Females
74	62	218	179
219	198		

Difference of Baptisms and Burials in Christ Church and St. Peter's between this year and last.

Baptisms decreased	41	Burials increased	273
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Buried under one year, from forty to fifty . . . 27
From one to three . . . 11
From five to ten . . . 19
From ten to twenty . . . 25
From twenty to thirty . . . 42
From thirty to forty . . . 81
From forty to fifty . . . 62

The Diseases and Calamities in Christ Church and St. Peter's, this year.

Apoplexy	1	Gravel	2
Biliousness	1	Hopping Cough	2
Cholic	1	Hypertrophy	2
Consumption	1	Murderation	3
Cutaneous	1	Nervous Fever	3
Diarrhoea	1	Old Age	3
Dysentery	1	Pneumonia	3
Emphysema	1	Rheumatism	3
Exanthema	1	Scurvy	3
Fever	1	Tuberculous	3
Flux	1	Typhoid	3
Gout	1	Yellow Fever	14
Hemorrhage	1		
Jaundice	1		
Measles	1		
Mumps	1		
Scarlatina	1		
Scurvy	1		
Typhoid	1		
Whooping Cough	1		
Small Pox	1		
Scarlet Fever	1		
Measles	1		
Mumps	1		
Scarlatina	1		
Small Pox	1		
Scarlet Fever	1		

ST. PAUL'S CHURCH.

Baptisms	141	Decreased	2	Burials	94	Increased	54
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ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCHES.

St. Mary's: Baptisms 215 Decreased 12
Burials 270 Increased 123

St. Ann's: Baptisms 23 Decreased 6
Burials 63 Increased 46

BAPTISMS INCREASED OR DECREASED.

Sweden	44	Decreased	10
German Lutheran	208	Increased	66
Dutch Reformed	200	Decreased	9
First Presbyterian	45	Done	9
Second Do.	50	Done	9
Third Do.	60	Done	3
Church Do.	6	Done	3
The African Church	1	Done	3
Missionary	1	Done	3
Methodist	39	Done	29
Jews, or Hebrew Church	4		

BURIALS INCREASED OR DECREASED.

Sweden	98	Increased	6
German Lutheran	821	Done	60
Dutch Reformed	244	Done	11
The Friends	401	Done	11
First Presbyterian	90	Done	10
Second Do.	147	Done	10
Third Do.	132	Done	10
Church Do.	21	Done	10
The African Church	15	Done	10
Missionary	18	Done	10
Society of Free Quakers	41	Done	10
Methodist	60	Done	10
Epiphany	30	Done	10
Jews, or Hebrew Church	4	Done	10

BURIALS IN THE STRANGERS' GROUND.

Whites	1679	Increased	57
Blacks	353	Done	23

BAPTISMS this Year, . . . 1614 Increased . . . 111
BURIALS this Year, . . . 1994 Increased . . . 279

BURIALS IN THE GRAVE-YARDS, FOR THE FIRST OF AUGUST.

Christ Church and St. Peter's	229	Friends Cemetery—St. Mary's	210
St. Paul's	72	Dutch	10
Sweden	72	First Trinity	10
German Lutheran	79	The African Church	10
Dutch Reformed	79	Missionary	10
First Presbyterian	284	Society of Free Quakers	10
Second Do.	345	Methodist	10
Third Do.	28	Epiphany	10
Church Do.	122	Methodist	10
Methodist	112	Jews or Hebrew Church	10
Epiphany	18	Stranger's Ground	142
Swedish Do.	18		
TOTAL first August	2019		

**How many precious souls are fled
To the cold regions of the dead,
None but death's chill hand,
To lead them on that happy shore,
Through the long period run,
Where years and eons have no name,
Where time and pain are never known.**

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- Jones and Allen also detailed the prominence of African Americans among the dead, showing that Black people were not immune.
- Upwards of 400 died, and they may have contracted yellow fever traveling to and from caring for their white neighbors and tending to the dead.



The Epidemic Ends

- Public health services and the city government collapsed under the strain.
- A November cold spell, which forced mosquitos into hibernation, stopped the disease's spread.
- By then, almost 5000, about 10-15% of the city's population, had died.



A woodcut from 1793 shows Stephen Girard taking a man infected with yellow fever to Bush Hill in his personal carriage. | Image: Public Domain



Similarities between 1793 and 2020

- Misunderstandings of the disease—how it is spread and how to treat it;
- Overwhelmed public health systems and strained state and local governments;
- Othering and scapegoating marginalized peoples;
- The ability of class to shield most wealthy and middle-class people from the disease and the hardship of avoiding infection while leaving others particularly vulnerable;
- High infection and death rates among struggling people and those without access to adequate medical care.



Additional Reading

- *African American Lives: The Struggle for Freedom V1*, edited by Emma J. Lapansky-Werner, Clayborne Carson, and Gary B. Nash, Longman, 2004.
- *An American Plague: The True and Terrifying Story of The Yellow Fever Epidemic*, by Jim Murphy, Clarion Books, 2003.
- “Black Founders: The Free Black Community in the Early Republic Exhibit,” The Library Company <http://librarycompany.org/blackfounders/#.XuFJDxNKi50> .
- “Crisis in the Capital: The Cultural Significance of Philadelphia’s Great Yellow Fever Epidemic,” by Eve Kornfeld, *Pennsylvania History*, 1984.
- “Furor Therapeuticus: Benjamin Rush and the Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793,” by Leon Eisenberg, *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 2007.
- *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860*, James O. Horton and Lois Horton, Oxford University Press, 1998.
- “The Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793,” by Kevin Foster, Mary Jenkins, and Anna Coxe Toogood, *Scientific American*, August 1998.
- “Rhetoric and Identity in Absalom Jones and Richard Allen’s “Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia,” by Jacqueline Bacon, *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 2001.
- “The Wages of Blackness: African American Workers and the Meanings of Race during Philadelphia’s 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic,” by Jacqueline Miller, *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, April 2005.

