

# Crisis In The Nation's Capital: Philadelphia's Yellow Fever Epidemics



Courtesy of The Library Company of Philadelphia

*“It is too distressing and affecting a scene, for a person young in life to bear.”*

So wrote Isaac Heston, a 23 year old law clerk in the office of John Todd at Fourth and Walnut Streets. The letter Heston wrote to his brother on September 19, 1793 describes the epidemic of yellow fever which ravaged the city and it survives as a testament to the events of that fateful summer. Heston's words convey the horror of the epidemic.

The illness broke out in late July 1793 in the alleys and dim, crowded houses along Water Street, near the docks. Panic ensued and those who could afford to leave the city sought refuge in

outlying communities. Many lawyers remained, busily drafting wills and settling legal affairs. Heston worked in the small first floor office of Todd's residence, with a view of the deserted street outside.

Heston died ten days after writing his letter. He lies in an unmarked grave on the grounds of the Arch Street Friends Meetinghouse. His employer John Todd soon followed him into death. Todd left behind a young widow and son. Like almost everyone in Philadelphia that year, their lives were forever altered by the epidemic.

*“Indeed I don't know what the people would do if it was not for the Negroes, as they are the Principle nurses.”*

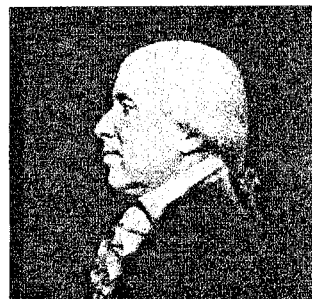
Richard Allen and Absalom Jones approached Mayor Matthew Clarkson to volunteer and led many others in Philadelphia's African American community in an effort to keep Philadelphia functioning during the epidemic. In 1793 about 5% of the city's population was African American. Many were free blacks, including Allen and Jones, who had formerly been enslaved. Although it was believed that the disease was contagious, volunteers bravely nursed the sick. Others worked late into the night to bury the dead. Issac Heston noted their contributions when he wondered "what the people would do" without the African Americans.

The official historian of the epidemic, Matthew Carey, later challenged the motivations and service of the African American volunteers. In 1794, Allen and Jones responded with their pamphlet *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in the Year 1793...* This restrained and dignified account graphically describes a city paralyzed by horrific illness and describes the deeds and reactions of the volunteers as they bravely persevered. Death was not the only effect of the epidemic. As a result of their service, Philadelphia's African American community emerged with additional strength and respect.

*“The Doctors are now differing about the Disorder, and the methods of Cureing.”*

Dr. Benjamin Rush also remained in the city during the epidemic. As a physician, he recognized the symptoms of yellow fever: black vomit, hemorrhages and yellow skin. Rush advocated aggressive treatment by bleeding and purging patients. There was lively debate in the newspapers over the source of the epidemic. Rush believed the cause was a load of rotting coffee on a wharf. Recipes for treatments and preventions appeared in the newspapers. Sniffing vinegar, camphor-soaked squares of cloth or lengths of tarred rope were recommended precautions. The choice

of cures was often affected by the political loyalties of the infected. The "French" treatment promoted by Dr. Devèze consisted of rest and liquids to strengthen the body so that it could heal itself. The debate continued as the disease returned periodically to the city - the last major epidemic occurred in 1805. It was not until 1902 that Dr. Walter Reed's commission solved the puzzle of yellow fever by identifying the female *aedes aegypti*, a tropical mosquito, as the vector of the virus. Today, there is a vaccine to prevent yellow fever, but still no cure for the disease once it is contracted.



Dr. Benjamin Rush

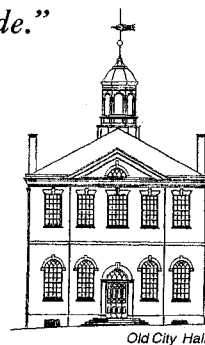
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*“Politics that run so high lately are now all laid aside.”*

In 1793 Philadelphia was the Pennsylvania state capital and the capital of the new United States. When the epidemic struck, the affairs of state became secondary to survival. Officials from all levels of government quickly joined the flow of people streaming from the city. Mayor Matthew Clarkson refused to surrender to the fear. He called for volunteers to provide basic, necessary services. Using Old City Hall as a headquarters, Clarkson and his committee of fewer than two dozen volunteers buried the dead, reformed

the abysmal conditions at the hospital at Bush Hill mansion, nursed the sick, and gathered wandering orphans.

Months later, as the disease finally abated, many citizens returned to begin the daunting task of restoring life in Philadelphia to what it had been. No one could restore the lives lost in the epidemic, however. The people were left with the sadness of knowing that almost 5,000 people, an estimated 10% of the city's population, had not lived to see the trees turn color that fall.



Old City Hall