

DEATH IN YELLOW PART 2: EPIDEMIC

OPENING

In our last episode, we met three notable Philadelphians of the Early American period. Most famous among them was Dr. Benjamin Rush, signer of the Declaration of Independence, physician to America's founding fathers, and one of, if not the most prominent physician at the time. He was a professor at the America's first medical school, on staff at America's first hospital, and a practicing physician in a large clinical practice. The two other men, the Reverends Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, were formerly enslaved African-Americans born in Delaware. They were free men, prominent preachers, and founders of the Free African Society, a mutual aid organization for free-born and emancipated Blacks. The lives of the three men intersected around the cause of abolition, but they would intertwine further at one of the most critical points in the history of the newly independent United States. In 1793, the capital city of Philadelphia was struck by a terrible yellow fever epidemic.

This episode will cover the outbreak of the epidemic and how each of the three men responded to the crisis. Pennsylvanians are about to begin.

SCRIPT

The U.S. Congress had been meeting in Philadelphia since December of 1790, and Dr. Benjamin Rush was very much at the center of activity, even though he was not a Member of Congress. He was socially connected, politically outspoken, and a published pamphleteer and essayist. Rush was a close friend and family physician of then-Vice President John Adams. Rush was also a friend of Thomas Mifflin, the first Governor of Pennsylvania elected under the new state constitution of 1790. And he was a neighbor of Alexander Hamilton, with whom he disagreed politically.

The Reverends Absalom Jones and Richard Allen were Black preachers at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. They had been successful in attracting Black parishioners to their mostly white church. When St. George's restricted the participation of Black congregants, in part by banishing them to the balcony, Jones and Allen led the Black congregants in a walk-out. The date of this incident is disputed, but a good guess is February of 1793. A movement to create a new Black church, the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, was led by Absalom Jones. Richard Allen put his efforts into the establishment of a Methodist church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which would open in 1795.

By the end of August 1793, there was a roof-raising celebration for the new Black episcopal church, sponsored by the Free African Society, and attended by Dr. Rush. It was an unusual dinner event, held outdoors in an area shaded by large trees. A hundred white persons associated with the construction of the church, mostly carpenters or donors, were served dinner by free Black parishioners. At the end of the meal, there was a brief toast by Rush that ended "may African churches everywhere soon succeed African bondage". After that, the white guests rose from their chairs and a hundred Black men and women sat down, at which point the white attendees served them dinner. It was a wonderful and moving choreography that left many in tears of joy.

But something dark and troubling was already stalking the City of Philadelphia. Rush noticed it. He commented in a letter to his wife the night before the dinner that "a malignant fever has broken out

in Water Street.” It had “already carried off twelve persons”, including one who died only twelve hours after experiencing the first symptoms. The illness was confined in one area near the Delaware River. Rush himself treated 11 patients; 3 had already died and the others were seriously ill. The theory at the time, which Rush endorsed, was that this outbreak of fever was caused by bad air from rotting coffee sitting on a wharf.

As luck would have it, Rush’s wife Julia and several of their children were visiting Julia’s relatives in Trenton, but two of Rush’s young sons Richard and Ben were still in Philadelphia with him and their eldest son John was on his way back home. Living in Rush’s home was also his mother, his sister Rebecca, and a 28-year-old servant (Marcus Marsh) who was born a slave but freed upon the death of Rush’s father-in-law, Richard Stockton.

Soon the illness spread beyond that area near the river. Rush recognized the symptoms – he recalled the yellow fever outbreak in 1762, when he assisted Dr. Redman in caring for the sick, and a handful of small outbreaks in the intervening years. A review of his clinical notes suggested that he had been seeing yellow fever since the beginning of August. On August 5th, for example, the sick child of a fellow physician died of a fever two days after Rush made a house call. By mid-August of that year, he determined conclusively that he was witnessing an outbreak of yellow fever.

There were more patient deaths that month and, by August 21st, Rush told Mayor Matthew Clarkson that yellow fever has broken out in the City and encouraged him to announce public health measures. At the Mayor’s behest, there was a meeting of doctors at the College of Physicians on August 25th to discuss the outbreak. Several doctors had already fled the city. Those that did attend concurred on recommendations, which Rush summarized for the group. These included:

- Stop the tolling of the bells for funerals, as so many people were dying
- People should avoid contact with infected persons
- Homes with infected persons should place a small red flag on the front door or window
- The sick should be cared for in the center of large rooms with ventilation, with their linens frequently changed and washed
- There should be private funerals to bury the dead
- The city should perhaps create a new “large and airy hospital” to care for the poor who are stricken

The recommendations also included some that may seem a little weird, but were consistent with the lack of modern germ theory and with the prevailing view that yellow fever was caused by bad air.

They included:

- Avoid all fatigue of the mind and body
- Avoid standing or sitting in the sun
- Dress warmly (recall, this was August in Philadelphia)
- Burn gunpowder to slow the fever’s spread
- Use handkerchiefs with disinfectants to smell, including garlic or tar -- else smoke or chew tobacco

These recommendations were published under the name of the college’s vice president, Dr. Shippen, despite the fact that he had already fled town for his safety and wasn’t at the meeting. So, Dr. Shippen was no profile in courage, though one can empathize with doctors in this situation

during an epidemic. Even most recently, during the early months of the COVID pandemic, when hospitals were full, mortality was high, and everyone else was told to stay home and minimize contact with others, health care workers had to do their jobs.

In a letter from Rush to his wife Julia at this time, he wrote, “I hope I shall do well... I do not neglect to use every precaution... I even strive to subdue the sympathy for my patients; otherwise I should sink under the accumulated loads of misery I am obliged to contemplate. You can recollect how much the loss of a single patient once a month used to affect me. Judge then how I must feel in hearing every morning of the death of three or four!”

Rush was making house calls to the sick all day and evening. When he got home, his three sons avoided him so as not to get sick. Rush ultimately sent them out of town, but his mother and sister chose to stay to help Rush.

On August 29th, about a week after the church roof-raising celebration, Rush saw that the fever was present throughout the city. The public was also aware, as gruesome stories circulated of young and otherwise healthy people falling ill and dying. Often, Rush would show up to a house call to find that his only task was to verify a death. He was stopped in the street by people begging him to visit their house next. Rush didn’t work alone, of course, He was assisted in his work by Caspar Wistar, a young teacher at the medical school, Johnny Stall, one of Rush’s apprentices, and Marcus Marsh.

Recall from our previous episode that yellow fever is caused by a virus. Humans contract the virus from a bite by an infected mosquito. It is not spread by human-to-human contact. No known cure exists to this day but, as with many viruses, those who recover from it are immune. Most infected persons experience mild cases of headache, muscle pain, and loss of appetite. More serious cases suffer from a high fever and severe back pain, and torturous thirst. In the most severe cases, the eyes and skin turn yellow, there is frequent vomiting of hemorrhaged blood, liver and kidney failure, extreme fluid loss, deliriousness and coma. Patients often die within four to six days of onset. For those who show signs of jaundice, the mortality rate is over 50%. The symptoms of severe cases are terrifying

The source of the outbreak is another question. A 1998 article in *Scientific American* states: “***The trouble began soon after French refugees from a bloody slave rebellion in Saint Domingue (now Haiti) landed on the banks of the Delaware River, which bounds the east side of the city. In addition to news of the fighting, the refugees relayed tales of a mysterious pestilential fever decimating several islands in the West Indies. In July the same disease broke out in Philadelphia.***”

I’ve covered the preventive measures advocated by Rush and his colleagues. Treatments for those already infected included the standard approaches of the day to disease:

- Peruvian bark – from the chinchona tree, which contained quinine
- Cool baths
- Wine
- The application of extreme heat to cause blisters on the body, then rubbing them open using a cloth soaked in turpentine. This was thought to allow toxins to leave the body.

Not surprisingly, Rush found that these measures weren’t effective. So in early September he turned to purgatives as an approach – specifically the use of laxatives. He administered a powerful

combination that included mercury and jalap, which is the dried root of a Mexican vine. By this point, his colleague Caspar Wistar was ill.

As in other epidemics of the past, many considered flight from the afflicted urban center to be the best prevention. In Rush's August 29th letter to his wife, he wrote, "***I have advised all the families that I attend, that can move, to quit the city. There is but one preventative that is certain, and that is 'to fly from it'.***"

Besides calling on the College of Physicians to issue public health recommendations, Mayor Clarkson undertook other efforts to combat the epidemic. This was a time when the sewage system was terrible even where one existed. Dead animals were left to rot in the streets and waterways. The water near industries could be polluted, and the air could genuinely unhealthy, even aside from the "bad air" theory of disease. So, Mayor Clarkson ordered a cleanup of the city's streets and started actually enforcing laws that mandated trash collection twice a week. This was possibly at Rush's urging. In hindsight, cleaning up the City would have positive health effects in general if not against yellow fever, but if these measures reduced standing water where mosquitoes could breed, then it would have a positive impact.

Doctors other than Rush (who believed yellow fever to be transmitted person-to-person and not by bad air) argued for isolating the sick. The Mayor responded by quarantining new arrivals of people and goods for two weeks.

By Rush's account, at least 325 had died from yellow fever by the end of August, and many others had fled the City, including many doctors. Pennsylvania Hospital stopped admitting patients with yellow fever, and so did the City's prominent poorhouses. A makeshift hospital for yellow fever victims was created at Bush Hill, a residence about a mile from the City proper where, the year before, Vice President Adams and his wife had resided. If you're thinking that this hospital was likely to be overwhelmed, under-resourced, and improperly staffed, you are right. Conditions were horrendous.

On September 6th, the Governor of Pennsylvania himself, Thomas Mifflin, left Philadelphia -- which, again, was also the state capital at the time. To Mayor Clarkson, he said, in effect, "good luck, you're on your own." Mifflin was not a profile in courage. Between the panic and the departure of the chief executive, public order fell apart within the week.

Other key figures soon joined the exodus. George Washington fled the city on September 10th for Mount Vernon.

Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson initially thought to remain in the city and represent the Administration, but left in mid-September.

Vice President Adams only stayed in Philadelphia when Congress was in session anyway, so he was gone.

Alexander Hamilton fled to Albany but got sick nevertheless.

Henry Knox, Secretary of War, fled.

20,000 people in all took flight from the city and the surrounding suburbs.

Every newspaper but one – the *Federal Gazette* – shut down publication. And the *Gazette* focused its reporting on the epidemic.

Who was left?

Dr. Rush, Mayor Matthew Clarkson, and some heroic doctors.
The poor.
African Americans.

The population of Philadelphia and the immediate area was about 50,000, and the Black population was 2,159. Of these, 310 (or about 14%) were enslaved, so there was a significant free Black minority in the City.

The Philadelphia area was also home to perhaps 3,000 French-speaking immigrants at the time, most concentrated near the port. The French Revolution upset society not just in France, but elsewhere in the French empire, notably the island of Sante-Domingue in the Caribbean, now called Haiti. As recent immigrants, many having arrived within the past year, they likely also stayed in Philadelphia during the epidemic.

On September 10th, the day that Washington fled the city, Mayor Clarkson appealed for volunteers to help care for the sick. About a dozen men formed a core of volunteers that worked 46 days straight to check on the sick, create an orphanage, purchase supplies for the hospital and sick patients, manage donations, and bury the dead. It was a very brave and selfless endeavor – ultimately three of the volunteers would die of the disease

Among the volunteers, merchant Stephen Girard and barrel-maker Peter Helm sought to manage Bush Hill Hospital. Girard was born in France and emigrated to America when he was a boy. He was a wealthy shipping merchant by the time of the epidemic. Jean Deveze, a French doctor from the West Indies, was hired as head physician at the hospital. There is some speculation in scholarship on the history of the epidemic that many of the staff at the hospital were French immigrants, owing to Girard's and Deveze's background and the preponderance of French in Philadelphia at the time.

By early September, Rush had really leaned into his “mercury laxative” cure for yellow fever. This was a bad call because these laxatives were, as you might imagine, highly toxic and could cause mercury poisoning as well as diarrhea, which could lead to dehydration. This error was compounded when Rush found an old manuscript by a Virginia doctor, John Mitchell, given to Rush by none other than Ben Franklin. Mitchell wrote about his experiences with yellow fever in 1737 and 1741. Dr. Mitchell argued that purgation combined with aggressive bleeding had worked well in some cases. Dr. Rush adopted this approach – aggressive bloodletting and administration of laxatives – and this became his method of care for the duration of the epidemic.

Given the assumption that yellow fever was spread between people or by miasma, Dr. Rush was very selfless and brave, and the man on the spot. But he was not only wrong about an appropriate treatment for yellow fever, he was obstinate about it. He feuded with doctors who advocated a less extreme intervention. These fellow physicians included:

Dr. James Hutchinson – the official doctor of the port area where the illness first broke out
Dr. David Nassy – a Jew who had immigrated from Dutch Suriname. He advocated a regimen of wine and twice-daily baths. He ultimately treated 117 people stricken with the disease; 98 survived.

The previously mentioned Dr. Jean Deveze also advocated cool baths.

Dr. Edward Stevens – another West Indian, had treated his close friend of Alexander Hamilton with bark, wine, and cold baths. On September 14th, the *Federal Gazette* published a letter from Alexander Hamilton extolling Dr. Stevens' methods and how they helped him recover. Rush referred to the method of care taken by Doctors Deveze and Stevens as “the French remedies”.

Finally, Doctor William Currie published a pamphlet recommending mild purgatives, something to encourage perspiration, and fresh air.

Rush felt besieged at this point because so many fellow physicians disagreed with him and even ascribed their disagreement to personal politics. When Alexander Hamilton published his letter, for example, Rush believed Hamilton was siding against him on medical treatments because Rush was politically more sympathetic to the Republican beliefs of Jefferson and Madison, and less to those of Federalists Hamilton and his friend John Adams. In any case, Rush did not change his methods.

If you thought that today's politics are uniquely polarized, even extending to how best to respond to a major epidemic, think again. Late 18th-century politics in America were viciously contentious and given to intense partisan rancor.

Regardless of their viewpoints, these doctors were heroes who stayed to care for sick citizens when other physicians fled. They wrote of seeing over 100 patients a day. Rush was so busy caring for the sick, that he didn't even bother to charge patients for care. He was getting two hours a night sleep at one point. Some physicians, of course, suffered from yellow fever themselves. Estimates are that ten physicians died in the epidemic, including Dr. Hutchinson, the port physician, and that all physicians who remained fell ill at some point during the epidemic. Rush himself came down with yellow fever in mid-September and starts taking his own cure – bloodletting and purgatives.

The day after President Washington fled the city, the front page of several local newspapers featured an announcement from the other two figures I want to talk about: the Reverends Absalom Jones and Richard Allen. They wrote, “***As it is a time of great distress in this city, many people of the Black colour, under a grateful remembrance of the favour received from the white inhabitants, have agreed to assist them as far as is in their power for the nursing of the sick and burial of the dead.***” What would follow this call to action were acts of courage and grace by Jones, Allen, and many Black Philadelphians. Their assistance was especially vital, given how many physicians and others who might have helped had left the City.

Where did this idea of benevolent and even grateful action come from? Possibly from Dr. Rush himself, who had written to them both, claiming that God had granted Black persons immunity from yellow fever, and that while they were not obligated to help, it would be would impress both God and their fellow citizens. The basis of this claim would prove to be sadly wrong – Blacks as a group were not immune to yellow fever, and could and would die from it.

Black volunteers roamed the streets of Philadelphia offering help to those in need, sitting with the sick for hours and administering to them. Rush taught them basic nursing techniques. They

transported corpses to cemeteries – sometimes shouting the familiar plague-era call to “bring out your dead”. .

The bodies were taken to many cemeteries, including Potter’s Field in Washington Square in what is now Center City Philadelphia. One of the original five square parks planned by William Penn, Washington Square was where over 2,000 unidentified Revolutionary War soldiers were buried. They were joined by many victims of the yellow fever epidemic.

Jones and Allen recounted what it was like for them and their colleagues to provide care for the sick and removal of the dead during this time. They write,

“We feel a great satisfaction in believing, that we have been useful to the sick, and thus publicly thank Doctor Rush, for enabling us to be so. We have bled upwards of eight hundred people”

“When the mortality came to its greatest stage, it was impossible to procure sufficient assistance, therefore many whose friends, and relations had left them, died unseen, and unassisted. We have found them in various situations, some laying on the floor, as bloody as if they had been dipt in it, without any appearance of their having had, even a drink of water for their relief; others laying on a bed with their clothes on, as if they had come in fatigued, and lain down to rest; some appeared, as if they had fallen dead on the floor, from the position we found them in.”

“An affecting instance.—A woman died, we were sent for to bury her, on our going into the house and taking the coffin in, a dear little innocent accosted us, with, mamma is asleep, don't wake her; but when she saw us put her in the coffin, the distress of the child was so great, that it almost overcame us; when she demanded why we put her mamma in the box? We did not know how to answer her, but committed her to the care of a neighbour, and left her with heavy hearts. In other places where we have been to take the corpse of a parent, and have found a group of little ones alone, some of them in a measure capable of knowing their situation, their cries and the innocent confusion of the little ones, seemed almost too much for human nature to bear. We have picked up little children that were wandering they knew not where, whose (parents were cut off) and taken them to the orphan house, for at this time the dread that prevailed over people's minds was so general, that it was a rare instance to see one neighbour visit another, and even friends when they met in the streets were afraid of each other, much less would they admit into their houses the distressed orphan that had been where the sickness was; this extreme seemed in some instances to have the appearance of barbarity; with reluctance we call to mind the many opportunities there were in the power of individuals to be useful to their fellow-men, yet through the terror of the times was omitted.”

In their published accounts of the yellow fever epidemic, Jones and Allen commented that the number of Black nurses caring for the sick was perhaps 20 times the number of whites, which is very telling, given that Blacks represented only about 5% of the population of the city and suburbs at the time.

By late September, Rush admitted privately in a letter to his wife he had been all wrong about Blacks being immune to yellow fever. “The Negroes are everywhere submitting to the disorder,” he wrote, adding, “Richard Allen is very ill. If the disorder should continue to be spread among them, then will the measure of our sufferings be full.” In all, about 240 Blacks died in the epidemic, in other words, at about the same rate as whites.

September proved to be the deadliest month of the epidemic, with well over 2,000 dead. By at the end of the month, about 100 Philadelphians died every day

On October 10th, Rush himself was sick again with a fever and bad pain. He treated himself with his standard regimen of bloodletting and mercury laxatives, and remained bedridden for days. He was cared for throughout his illness by Marcus Marsh.

Rush was lionized around the country for his bravery and his valiant efforts. But he was also criticized heavily in Philadelphia for his methods and sometimes blamed by relatives of the dead. In response, he grew so despondent that he thought about leaving the City when the epidemic was finally over and moving to New York City to teach at Columbia University.

Matthew Carey – an Irish-American publisher of literary magazines who had fled the city – wrote a pamphlet titled “**A Short Account of the Malignant Fever Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia**” and first published on November 15th, just two weeks after what appeared to be the end of the epidemic. It was instant history and several subsequent editions were printed.

Carey spent a good part of his pamphlet speculating on the possible causes of the outbreak, describing the disagreement among doctors about whether it was due to local causes, rotting coffee, miasma, or importation from abroad and, if so, how. He noted that the “most probable and general opinion” was that the fever was introduced by ship, specifically the privateer ship Sans Culotte.

He recounted the panic of the population – the flight of people from the city -- and how, after the proclamation by the College of Physicians, “**the bells were immediately stopped from tolling, which was a measure very expedient; as they had before been kept pretty constantly going the whole day, so as to terrify those in health, and drive the sick, as far as the influence of imagination could produce that effect, to their graves. An idea had gone abroad, that the burning of fires in the streets, would have a tendency to purify the air, and arrest the progress of the disorder. The people had, therefore, almost every night large fires lighted at the corners of the streets. ...the mayor published a proclamation, forbidding this practice. As a substitute, many had recourse to the firing of guns, which they imagined was a certain preventative of the disorder. This was carried so far, and attended with such danger, that it was forbidden by the mayor's order....**”

He also wrote about how the people who could not flee the city coped: “**Of those who remained, many shut themselves up in their houses, and were afraid to walk the streets. The consumption of gunpowder and nitre in houses as a preventative, was inconceivable. Many were almost incessantly purifying, scowring, and whitewashing their rooms. Those who ventured abroad, had handkerchiefs or sponges impregnated with vinegar or camphor, at their noses, or else smelling bottles with the thieves' vinegar. Others carried pieces of tar in their hands, or pockets, or camphor bags tied round their necks. The corpses of the most respectable citizens, even of those who did not die of the epidemic, were carried to the grave, on the shafts of a chair, the horse driven by a negro, unattended by a friend or relation, and without any sort of ceremony. People shifted their course at the sight of a hearse coming towards them. Many never walked on the foot path, but went into the middle of the streets, to avoid being infected in passing by houses wherein people had died. Acquaintances and**

friends avoided each other in the streets, and only signified their regard by a cold nod. The old custom of shaking hands fell into such general disuse, that many were affronted at even the offer of the hand. A person with a crape, or any appearance of mourning, was shunned like a viper. And many valued themselves highly on the skill and address with which they got to windward of every person they met."

Even worse, he detailed how people just abandoned sick family members. The wife who fled her husband's death bed. The parents who abandoned their sick children. The children deserting their ill parents. As Carey put it ***"Many men of affluent fortunes, who have given employment and sustenance to hundreds every day in the year, have been abandoned to the care of a negro, after their wives, children, friends, clerks, and servants had fled away, and left them to their fate."***

Carey writes about the task of disposing thousands of bodies, and repeats a wag who said the only business going on was digging graves and pits. Officials in other cities and towns responded by seeking to divert incoming flows of people and goods from Philadelphia.

Given that Carey was a prominent publisher and knew how to write for an audience of readers, it perhaps isn't surprising that his pamphlet was the first definitive history of the epidemic and was widely read. But Carey's account, again written by someone who wasn't even there, in part reflected his social network. In an account where many people are thanked at length by name for their bravery and good deeds in a time of crisis, the significant and notable efforts by Black citizens receives little and even demeaning attention. Furthermore, as an example that no good deed goes unpunished, Carey leveled allegations against the Black good Samaritans:

"At an early stage of the disorder, the elders of the African church met, and offered their services to the mayor, to procure nurses for the sick, and to assist in burying the dead. Their offers were accepted; and Absalom Jones and Richard Allen undertook the former department, that of furnishing nurses, and William Gray, the latter—the interment of the dead. The great demand for nurses afforded an opportunity for imposition, which was eagerly seized by some of the vilest of the blacks. They extorted two, three, four, and even five dollars a night for attendance, which would have been well paid by a single dollar. Some of them were even detected in plundering the houses of the sick. But it is wrong to cast a censure on the whole for this sort of conduct, as many people have done. The services of Jones, Allen, and Gray, and others of their colour, have been very great, and demand public gratitude."

These charges against Blacks were repeated by other news sources, such that the bravery and selflessness of the Black population, who were motivated in part by the hope that a grateful white populace would be less hostile to them, was ignored. Blacks, who were the heroes, were instead charged as villains.

Carey noted the belief some people had that Blacks were immune to the disease, and that this was not true, although he also says the number seized by the illness was not great and that they responded to medicine better than whites.

In response, Jones and Allen felt compelled to defend their community and to set the record straight. They produced their own pamphlet, published on January 24th, 1794, titled “***A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the year 1793: And a Refutation of Some Censures Thrown upon them in some late Publications.***”

In it, they write, “We have buried several hundreds of poor persons and strangers, for which service we have never received, nor never asked any compensation.”

They provide a detailed account of the expenses and receipts of their organized work, which showed they lost money overall.

That certain nurses had to be paid a lot of money to work was true, but that was true of all nurses in the city at the time, Black or white. It was dangerous work that people didn’t want to do, and other entities were bidding for them to perform the same services, temporarily driving up wages. Jones and Allen said they didn’t begrudge working class-people in dangerous conditions for wanting to earn what their labor was worth.

They pointed out that Carey fled the city, and made more money from his writings and publications on the epidemic than the people who stayed and tried to help their fellow citizens get through it.

They also admitted that in a handful of cases, Black nurses stole from the sick and distressed, but that was also true among white nurses, who didn’t get any criticism from Carey.

Here Allen and Jones even recount a few tales of profiteering and pilfering by white nurses:

“We know six pounds was demanded by, and paid, to a white woman, for putting a corpse into a coffin; and forty dollars was demanded, and paid, to four white men, for bringing it down the stairs.”and...

“Mr. and Mrs. Taylor both died in one night; a white woman had the care of them; after they were dead, she called on Jacob Servoss, esq. for her pay, demanding six pounds for laying them out; upon seeing a bundle with her, he suspected she had pilfered; on searching her, Mr. Taylor’s buckles were found in her pocket, with other things.” ...and...

“An elderly lady, Mrs. Malony, was given into the care of a white woman, she died, we were called to remove the corpse, when we came the woman was **laying** so drunk that she did not know what we were **doing**, but we know she had one of Mrs. Malony’s rings on her finger, and another in her pocket.”

By repeating without verification what others told him, Matthew Carey had in effect slandered the Blacks. Had he asked the Mayor or Doctor Rush, he would have been set straight. He didn’t, even though he was a friend and editor of Rush. Carey’s false allegations were inflammatory and racist. They played into the cynical populist trope that “everything is a racket” and “somebody is always making money off of something.” Well, it turns out the guy making money off the situation was Carey – his pamphlet sold at least three editions by the time of the Jones and Allen’s pamphlet in response.

But even beyond the motive of mounting a defense, what is important about Jones and Allen's account is that in pointing out misdeeds by white citizens, they offered a glimpse into the situations that people faced.

The epidemic was raging. People were dying everywhere and families were left on their own to cope with dead bodies and the aftermath. Perhaps 40% of the people fled the city. There weren't enough nurses and other workers to meet the overwhelming needs of the citizens, and people had to cope. When a loved one, spouse, child, or parent is dead, and the number one problem, for which there is no easy solution, is removal of their corpse, one becomes desperate. To quote Jones and Allen: "We have been pained to see the widows come to us, crying and wringing their hands, and in very great distress, on account of their husbands' death; having nobody to help them, they were obliged to come get their husbands buried, their neighbours were afraid to go to their help or to condole to the frailty of human nature, and not to wilful unkindness, or hardness of heart."

Jones and Allen then recounted stories of some of the Blacks who actively cared for the sick in their homes:

"A poor black man, named Sampson, went constantly from house to house where distress was, and no assistance without fee or reward; he was smote with the disorder, and died, after his death his family were neglected by those he had served." ...and...

"Sarah Bass, a poor black widow, gave all the assistance she could, in several families, for which she did not receive any thing; and when any thing was offered her, she left it to the option of those she served." ...and...

"A young black woman, was requested to attend one night upon a white man and his wife, who were very ill, no other person could be had;—great wages were offered her—she replied, I will not go for money, if I go for money God will see it, and may be make me take the disorder and die, but if I go, and take no money, he may spare my life. She went about nine o'clock, and found them both on the floor; she could procure no candle or other light, but staid with them about two hours, and then left them. They both died that night. She was afterward very ill with the fever—her life was spared."

Jones and Allen pointed out that despite their community's obvious good works, they could still be subject to racism by white citizens: "A white man threatened to shoot us, if we passed by his house with a corpse: we buried him three days after."

Jones and Allen also recalled that their community was asked to help because of a belief they were immune to yellow fever, a belief belied by the death toll among them:

"In 1792, there were 67 of our colour buried, and in 1793 it amounted to 305; thus the burials among us have increased more than fourfold, was not this in a great degree the effects of the services of the unjustly vilified black people?"

Jones and Allen ended their pamphlet with a letter to the Mayor and the following statement:

We shall now conclude with the following old proverb, which we think applicable to those of our colour who exposed their lives in the late afflicting dispensation:

***—God and a soldier, all men do adore,
In time of war, and not before;
When the war is over, and all things righted,
God is forgotten, and the soldier slighted.***

One notable impact of Jones' and Allen's pamphlet was that, after reading and considering it, Matthew Carey revised his own pamphlet for a fourth edition.

And, as Rush's biographer Stephen Fried points out, "within six months of the pamphlet's publication, Jones and Allen had opened not only the first Black church in the nation's capital but the first two."

As cold weather approached, the epidemic started to wane because – as we know now -- that is when mosquitos bite less, breed less, or die. The first hard frost of the year could bring a mosquito-borne epidemic abruptly to an end.

Sure enough, in late October, the first frost occurred. On October 31st, a white flag flew over the city hospital, signifying that no yellow fever patients remained. On November 9th, the epidemic was officially declared over. On the following day, President Washington returned to the Philadelphia from Mount Vernon.

The Potter's Field caretaker, Joseph Ogden, reported that between the City and a cemetery near Bush Hill, he had buried 1,008 bodies. almost a quarter of the 4,044 who died through early November. That number is based on grave counts, but the actual death toll is thought to be about 5,000.

In the aftermath of the yellow fever outbreak, both Doctors Deveze and Nassy published pamphlets about their experiences with yellow fever in Philadelphia in 1793. Dr. David Nassy returned to Suriname in 1795, seemingly because his pro-slavery viewpoint was out-of-touch with his fellow Jews in Philadelphia.

In the summer of 1794, Benjamin Rush published his own account of the epidemic: "***An Account of the Billious Remitting Yellow Fever, as It Appeared in the City of Philadelphia in the Year 1793***".

In 1794, Pennsylvania Hospital began the project that Rush had requested for seven years – a new hospital wing to care for patients with mental illnesses. No longer chained to the floors of cells in the basement, the mentally ill would live in well-lit rooms with heating.

But Benjamin Rush's medical reputation never wholly recovered from the epidemic, when his form of treatment, aggressive bloodletting and purgation was seen by most physicians as excessive and counter-productive, if not deadly. By 1797 his private practice was over.

In 1803, Benjamin's Rush's old friend, Thomas Jefferson, now President of the United States, made Dr. Rush the *de facto* medical advisor to the Lewis & Clark expedition that was to travel throughout

the new Louisiana Purchase heading west along the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean. Captain Meriwether Lewis was Jefferson's secretary and someone whom Jefferson could trust in this vital endeavor. Jefferson sent Lewis to Philadelphia to meet with Rush in preparation for what would no-doubt be a perilous journey. Rush was particularly hopeful that Lewis could inquire into the mental health of the native American tribes he encountered along the way, including incidents of madness and suicide. Lewis & Clark would take along in their expedition boxes of "Rushes Pills" – the mercury laxative that were so effective as to be explosive. Dispensation of the pills – and their effects – would be mentioned in personal accounts of the trip.

For years afterward, people investigated and argued about Dr. Benjamin Rush's actions in the yellow fever epidemic. Yes, he was very brave and selfless. But were his extreme measures wise or justified? And what about his theory that the cause of the disease was a local miasma (that is, bad air from rotting food) instead of its being imported from elsewhere. In 1881, a Cuban doctor, Carlos Finlay, presented to the International Sanitary Conference his findings that the fever was transmitted by mosquito, for which he was mocked and ridiculed. But in 1900, Dr. Walter Reed, of the U.S. Army's Yellow Fever Commission, designed and undertook experiments with healthy human volunteers. He conclusively proved that the virus was indeed spread by mosquitos and not the clothing, bedding, or vomit of the sick. Without the knowledge that the way to defeat yellow fever was to control the mosquito population, it is doubtful that the U.S. could have completed the Panama Canal. In the previous, abandoned French effort to build the canal, over 20,000 workers died, mostly from yellow fever.

To this day there is no cure for yellow fever, but there is a safe vaccine that confers potential lifetime immunity with one dose.

Benjamin Rush's medicine chest can now be seen as part of the collection in Philadelphia's Mutter Museum – a repository of medical history artifacts operated by the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, an institution founded in 1787 by Benjamin Rush and other prominent doctors.

The Reverend Absalom Jones continued as a preacher in the newly formed African Episcopal Church of Saint Thomas in Philadelphia, becoming the first African American episcopal priest in 1802. In 1979, he was canonized as a saint of the Episcopal Church.

The Reverend Richard Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in 1794 and the larger denomination in 1816. He was an activist in the AME Church for decades, eventually rising to the position of bishop. With his wife Sarah, he hosted a stop on the Underground Railroad until his death in 1831.

While several books and over a dozen articles were reviewed in the crafting of these episodes, three deserve particular mention:

- *Rush: Revolution, Madness and the Visionary Doctor Who Became a Founding Father* by Stephen Fried, Crown Publishing, 2018
- The pamphlet *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia* by Matthew Carey, 1793.
- The pamphlet *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the year 1793: And a Refutation of Some Censures Thrown upon then in some late Publications* by Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, 1794.

Both pamphlets are available online for free.

While we are done with our tale of Benjamin Rush and Absalom Jones and the yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia in 1793, we are not yet done with Richard Allen.

In 2022, Philadelphia City Council renamed Allens Lane, in the Mount Airy section of the City. The street was originally named for William Allen, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Colony of Pennsylvania, founder of the city now known as Allentown, and owner of the estate Mount Airy, as that northwest section of the city is known. As of February 2022, however, the Allens Lane named for William Allen was redesignated as honoring Richard Allen, one of our heroes of the Yellow Fever Epidemic.

We learned about the prominent Allen family in our episode on Occupied Philadelphia. So. it feels like we are in a good position in our next episode to investigate who advocated for this name change that isn't a name change, why it occurred and why, specifically, at the time it did.

Tune in two weeks from now for our next Pennsylvania episode – “Renaming Allens Lane”.

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