

Reports on the yellow fever epidemic, 1793

Introduction

Between August 1 and November 9, 1793, approximately 11,000 people contracted yellow fever in the US capital of Philadelphia. Of that number, 5,000 people, 10 percent of the city's population, died. The disease gets its name from the jaundiced eyes and skin of the victims. Other symptoms include fever, headache, and "black vomit" caused by bleeding into the stomach. At the time, it was thought that yellow fever was caused by rotting vegetable matter, and it was believed to be contagious; the disease is actually spread by mosquitos.

The epidemic created panic in the capital, causing 17,000 people, including President Washington and other members of the federal government, to flee to the countryside. This document, from the papers of Secretary of War Henry Knox, contains two reports written during the peak of the epidemic in the first few weeks of October. Knox had moved his office to Montgomery County before taking his family back to Boston. The document is possibly a compilation of accounts Knox's staff were receiving from elsewhere. One report notes: "The day before yesterday we were witness to what appears to me Shocking – a Coffin was brought to the entrance of Welsh's alley, where it stayed sometime for the man to die before he was put into the Coffin, Such hurry must burry many alive."

The war department was keeping Knox informed about the situation since Washington and the Cabinet were trying to determine if it was safe for the government to return to Philadelphia in November.

Excerpt

The fever from all that I can learn is more fatal than ever, yesterday a vast number of burials – I do not expect any abatement of the fever before we have rain and high winds – The day before yesterday we were witness to what appears to me Shocking – a Coffin was brought to the entrance of Welsh's alley, where it stayed sometime for the man to die before he was put into the Coffin, Such hurry must burry many alive.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction, examine the image of the letter, and study the excerpt and the transcript. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. How did the lack of medical and scientific knowledge about yellow fever contribute to the spread of the disease?
2. Using information from the letters, assess the seriousness of the yellow fever epidemic of 1793.
3. Compare the reaction of the citizens of Philadelphia in 1793 to reactions of people to one of the recent epidemics and pandemics involving a disease such as: severe acute respiratory

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syndrome virus (SARS), the Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS), or the Ebola virus.

Additional Research:

Explain the process by which physicians and scientists ultimately discovered the cause of and effective treatment for Yellow Fever.

Transcript

Account of the yellow fever outbreak in Philadelphia, October 11–14, 1793. (GLC02437.05942)

Philadelphia 11th october 1793
11^oClock A.M.

“The fever from all that I can learn is more fatal than ever, yesterday a vast number of burials – I do not expect any abatement of the fever before we have rain and high winds – The day before yesterday we were witness to what appears to me Shocking – a Coffin was brought to the entrance of Welsh’s alley, where it stayed sometime for the man to die before he was put into the Coffin, Such hurry must burry many alive.”

New York 14th October 1793
½ past 10^oClock A.M.

“The mail is arrived, I have no letters but I have seen Several, The malady in Philad^a continues dreadful, one hundred and thirty Seven were buried on friday last by the Committee independent of many who were buried by theirfriends, Fifty eight were Carried from Bush hill to Pottersfield Thursday last.—”

Deaths on the 11th oct.

T. D. Sergent Esq^{re}. M^{rs}. Keppellee, Major Franks, Jacob R. Howell, Rev^d. M^r. Winkhouse, Reverend Mess^{rs} Fleming & Griswold, Baldwin the druggist, Speakman the druggist, Gallagher China Merch^t, O.C. Hull apotecary, Evans of the firm of Evans & Hunts, M^{rs}. Metsker, M^r. Kay surviving partner of A Clare M^{rs}. Krafe, Major Barker and his wife, Owen Jones &c.

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Image

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New York 14th October 1793
 1/2 past 10^o Clock A.M.

The mail is arrived, I have no letters but I have seen several, The malady in Philadelphia continued dreadful, one hundred and thirty seven were buried on Friday last by the Committee, independent of many who were buried by their friends, Fifty eight were carried from Bush hill to Pottersfield Thursday last.

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 (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC02437.05942)