

Hong Kong Baptist University

## HKBU Institutional Repository

---

Library Award for Excellence in Undergraduate  
Research

Library

---

2017

### The Role of African Americans when Yellow Fever Epidemic Spread to New York City in 1795

Hiu Tung Sun

*Hong Kong Baptist University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.hkbu.edu.hk/lib\\_ugaward](https://repository.hkbu.edu.hk/lib_ugaward)



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

#### APA Citation

Sun, H. (2017). The Role of African Americans when Yellow Fever Epidemic Spread to New York City in 1795. Retrieved from [https://repository.hkbu.edu.hk/lib\\_ugaward/13](https://repository.hkbu.edu.hk/lib_ugaward/13)

This Student Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Library at HKBU Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Research by an authorized administrator of HKBU Institutional Repository. For more information, please contact [repository@hkbu.edu.hk](mailto:repository@hkbu.edu.hk).

# **Hong Kong Baptist University**

**HIST 4335 Topic Studies in Global History –  
New York**

**The Role of African-Americans when Yellow  
Fever Epidemic spread to New York City in  
1795**

[4 May 2017]

**Lecturer: Dr David Schley**

**Sun Hiu Tung, Janet (13208748)**

*Getting yellow tinge to eyes and skin, and vomiting in black were the symptoms of a deadly disease back in 1793 in Philadelphia. No one – not even professional scientists and doctors – knew about the cause of the disease. Philadelphians thought that they might have eaten rotten vegetables or decayed food to get sick.*

*“They are those won’t get sick!” experts like Dr Benjamin Rush pointed the finger at the men in black colour. The blacks were then given an important role in combating the disease – to take care of the patients of this fatal sickness. However the fact is, the “immunity” has never appeared.*

*The epidemic then widely spread to other cities, including the emerging metropolitan – New York.*

*After the epidemic, those blacks who risked to save others did not get award. Still they are living poorly as they were before, or even believed to be immune to other epidemics. Not until today when scientists prove that the disease hit in 1793 is spread by infected mosquitoes.*

## **Introduction**

It was not the first time when New York was being hit by Yellow Fever in 1795. As early as 1668, the deadly disease was thought to be a punishment from God that the Governor at that time had to order a fast day.<sup>1</sup> In 1793, the largest scale Yellow Fever epidemic struck the young United States’ capital, Philadelphia. The fever came in summer and faded when winter arrived. It was estimated that one-tenth of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Heaton, C. E.. *Yellow Fever in New York City*. Bulletin of the Medical Library Association, 34(2). (1946). 67.

population in Philadelphia had died and more than 17,000 had fled by November that year.<sup>2</sup> Dr Benjamin Rush was a physician and a medical researcher in Philadelphia. He had persuaded the Free African Society, a religious black community, to voluntarily send helpers and nurses to help with taking care of patients who were mainly whites. He believed that the blacks had special immunity that can escape from Yellow Fever. Although he later said that he was being “mistaken” at the beginning, he still claimed that “the disease was lighter in them, than in white people.”<sup>3</sup>

This belief continued when the epidemic spread to New York after two years. Despite the living proof shown in the combat of Yellow Fever two years ago, the whites, who were still dominating the city’s decision and opinions, claimed that the blacks can gain self-protection with their body’s speciality. However, the question is, were the blacks really having immunity to the fatal epidemic?

Rush also said in his self-written account that he did receive black Yellow Fever patients in his clinic in Philadelphia.<sup>4</sup> While this scientifically unproven belief might have put the blacks in to risk, they were still encouraged to “help” with the nursing. The reasons behind the “construction” of this belief were that hospitals were facing shortage in human resources as many whites had fled, and the opinion leaders of the black community also wanted to make use of the chance to serve to achieve their religious and social goals.<sup>5</sup> However, it is undeniable that the cause of Yellow Fever

---

<sup>2</sup> Powell, J. H.. *Bring Out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793*. University of Pennsylvania Press. (2014). X.

<sup>3</sup> Rush, Benjamin. *An account of the Bilious remitting Yellow Fever, as it appeared in the city of Philadelphia, in the year 1793*. Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson. (1794). 97

<sup>4</sup> Rush, Benjamin. *An account of the Bilious remitting Yellow Fever, as it appeared in the city of Philadelphia, in the year 1793*. Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson. (1794). 97

<sup>5</sup> Public Broadcasting Service. “Julie Winch on Jones' and Allen's response to Carey.” Accessed April 20, 2017. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3i3111.html>.

was still uncertain, which had made them clueless about the correct way of fighting the epidemic.

The “fantasy” of racial immunity did not bring anything good to the black community. They were even accused of not taking good care of their white patients and getting too high wages during the epidemic. Matthew Carey, a magazine publisher accused the African-Americans of working with “extorting high wages, or even stealing from those they nursed.”<sup>6</sup> Also, the blacks were seen with unique immune abilities in other epidemic later on, for instance, malaria, which indeed had nowhere to gain immunity and again exposed the whole race into serious disease.

### **How did Yellow Fever spread to New York in 1795?**

Killing around 5,000 people in Philadelphia in 1793, in summer 1795 the Yellow Fever had spread to Manhattan of New York, a nearby city.<sup>7</sup> The fever had occurred for three times - in 1795, 1799 and 1803 - as major hit to the city.

Before Yellow Fever reaching New York, mayors of New York and Philadelphia had been contacting each other with letters. Philadelphia was considered as the governmental and political centre of America. When Yellow Fever widely spread in Philadelphia, outsiders had been observing the situation of it – to ensure that the operation of the city can be maintained.<sup>8</sup> In August 1793, Mayor of Philadelphia Matthew Clarkson sent a letter to Richard Varick, the Mayor of New York. In the letter, Clarkson asked the Common Council of New York City to make a donation of

---

<sup>6</sup> Carey, Mathew. *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever*. The New York Public Library. (1794)

<sup>7</sup> Baruch College. “Yellow Fever Epidemic - 1795 to 1804.” Accessed April 2, 2017. [http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/nycdata/disasters/yellow\\_fever.html](http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/nycdata/disasters/yellow_fever.html)

<sup>8</sup> Kornfeld, Eve. *Crisis In The Capital: The Cultural Significance of Philadelphia’s Great Yellow Fever Epidemic*. *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 51, no. 3 (1984): 194.

five thousand dollars to the city in combating the fever.

“It is with peculiar satisfaction that I [Clarkson] execute their [Philadelphians’] request, by making in their name, on behalf of our suffering fellow-citizens, the most grateful acknowledgements, for the seasonable benevolence of the Common Council of the city of New York. Their sympathy is balm to our wounds.”<sup>9</sup>

However after the request of donation from New York, the confidence on Philadelphia was still not regained. As a political state, even President Washington and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson chose to leave the city as the disease emerged in September 1793. Citizens who did not choose to flee had to face chaos brought by the lack of confidence to the city,<sup>10</sup> for instance, banks’ operations were slowed down due to inactiveness of the citizens.

Seeing the chaos caused in Philadelphia, as well as the fatalness of the disease, although Yellow Fever had not widely swept New York until 1795, the city government decided to react on the fever with precautions. In 1794, the Common Council of New York planned to convert a residential estate to a hospital.<sup>11</sup> The location of the hospital-to-be was on the bank of the East River where was called Bellevue.

Finally in 29 May 1795, Yellow Fever broke out after two sailors of *Antoinette* were

---

<sup>9</sup> Rush, Benjamin. *An account of the Bilious remitting Yellow Fever, as it appeared in the city of Philadelphia, in the year 1793*. Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson. (1794). 132.

<sup>10</sup> Kornfeld, Eve. *Crisis In The Capital: The Cultural Significance of Philadelphia’s Great Yellow Fever Epidemic*. *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 51, no. 3 (1984). 195.

<sup>11</sup> Minutes of the Common Council of the City of N.Y., 1784-1831, II. New York (1917). 100-101

found infected with the fever and immediately sent to the Bellevue.<sup>12</sup> Later, some more Yellow Fever cases were found on the ships travelling along West Indies which were for sugar and coffee. New Yorkers were then afraid of all the ships coming from West Indies, believing that it was the source of importing the fever. For instance, even members of another ship named *William* which travelled from Liverpool suffering from Yellow Fever was also believed to have contacts with people on board of the West Indies ships – although it was proved to be just a rumour.<sup>13</sup> Still, citizens' fear continued to grow but unsupported.<sup>14</sup>

As the Yellow Fever was still something new and unknown to New Yorkers, media then picked up the responsibility to explain to the public what Yellow Fever was. In an opinion piece in August 1795, there were 19 points listed out about the facts of Yellow Fever. The information was mostly gathered from the experience from Philadelphia. At the same time, it has responded to the curation method suggested by doctors like Dr Benjamin Rush.<sup>15</sup> The writer did rebuttal on the theories and the so-called “bleeding therapy” preferred by Rush, claiming his hypotheses might be problematic.

At the same time, to make the situation under control, the New York government had made use of the media to comfort panicking people. The Committee of Health of New York told the public on an August day that the number of infected was decreasing.<sup>16</sup> The truth is, people living in the heavily infected zones were still having their lives at

---

<sup>12</sup> Kotar, S.L. and Gessler, J. E.. *Yellow Fever: A Worldwide History*. Mcfarland (2017). 83

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Bayley, Richard. *Account of the Epidemic Fever which Prevailed in the city of New-York, during part of the summer and fall of 1795*. Faculty of Physic of Columbia College. (1796). 17

<sup>15</sup> *New-York Gazette*. August 28, 1795

<sup>16</sup> *Commercial Adviser*. August 29, 1795

risk. Water Street was one of the concerned area, as members from *William* - one of the infected ship from Liverpool – was found to be active on Water Street. A family living there was turning to be helpless when seeing burying every day.<sup>17</sup>

The fever became controllable when winter came. As the main media of transmission is mosquitoes, the insects would turn to be not very active in cold weather. But the Yellow Fever came back again in 1798. It was recorded that many had left the city and settled in the rural area.<sup>18</sup> Only in 1870, when the source of infection was clear, no more annual outbreak of this fatal disease.

### **The “immunity” of African-Americans in Yellow Fever**

When Yellow Fever first started in Philadelphia, doctors and experts tried hard to find out the origin of the disease, so as to save the city. Dr Benjamin Rush, a leading figure in combating Yellow Fever, mentioned in his own account that “the black people have in no one instance been infected with the malignant fever which now prevails in our city.”<sup>19</sup> He contacted two black religion leaders – Absalom Jones and Richard Allen – of the Free African Society for manpower for medical assistance.

Rush assured the black community that they had immunity against the deadly disease that swept the city, and claimed that they were the right group of people to save lives.<sup>20</sup> Rush believed that the best way to halt this fatal disease was to have African-American medical workers to help with the treatment of other citizens who fell sick.

---

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* September 9, 1795

<sup>18</sup> *Ecclesiastical records, state of New York.* New York Public Library (1901). 489.

<sup>19</sup> Rush, Benjamin. *An account of the Bilious remitting Yellow Fever, as it appeared in the city of Philadelphia, in the year 1793.* Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson. (1794). 95.

<sup>20</sup> Toogood, Anna Coxe. *The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793.* Neither Separate Nor Equal: Congress in the 1790s. United States Capitol Historical Society. Ohio University Press. (2000). 52

The two leaders agreed with the proposal and thought that this could bring good to themselves, the black community. To the whites, although the northern side of America was friendlier and relatively freer to black community, white community, including medical workers, inevitably would flee to escape from the fever. Leaving the blacks in the city, the black nurses were seen as important to fill in the nursing vacancies.<sup>21</sup>

By the time the fever spread to New York, Rush had recognised his mistake that the black community was immune to the Yellow Fever as he saw in Philadelphia, but he continued to claim that the chance of blacks getting the disease was much lower than the whites.<sup>22</sup> New saying on the influences when blacks expose to Yellow Fever appeared in New York.

Valentine Seaman was a researcher in New York, who was also working on Yellow Fever-related studies. Seaman assured that the chance of the blacks and whites getting the Yellow Fever were the same, just the mortality rates differed. His argument was actually supported by evidence – Africans might be coming from fever-originated zone that genetic immunity had already built in.<sup>23</sup> Since there was not a clear and grounded explanation towards the ethnical difference to the fever, this saying was trusted by the general public. Hence, black nurses were also employed in New York.

### **Sending out black nurses**

---

<sup>21</sup> Boone, Kyle. "A Theodicy of Redemptive Suffering in African American Involvement Led by Absalom Jones and Richard Allen in the Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793." Senior Seminar. Olivet Nazarene University. 2013

<sup>22</sup> Apel, Thomas. *Feverish Bodies, Enlightened Minds: Science and the Yellow Fever Controversy in the Early American Republic*. Stanford University Press. (2016). 23

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*

With support by Dr Benjamin Rush, the Free African Society agreed to send out black nurses first to help with solving the fever in Philadelphia. They mainly worked as nurses or workers with burial duties, since healthy white men and women did not want to take up these duties.<sup>24</sup>

The black community chose to believe in Rush, as they wanted to build up a positive image of the black community as “morally superior.”<sup>25</sup> Although they received high salaries, as this was still considered a fatal job, most of them did not flee and recovered cases were seen as well. Yet, the rapid increase in infected African-Americans proved that Rush was wrong.

### **How common were black nurses?**

From an account of Dr Alexander Anderson, a doctor who worked in the Bellevue hospital in 1795, black nurses appeared in households. One of the patients he had contacted with introduced him his family, which consisted of his relatives, a black servant, two white nurses and one black nurse.<sup>26</sup> Thus, black nurses could be commonly seen.

### **The African-Americans had got sick**

Localists and doctors tended to believe that people from the West Indies could escape from the disease, as they can regulate themselves when facing the fever. Especially in New York, members of the public chose to believe this saying as the first ever

---

<sup>24</sup> Jordan, Winthrop D.. *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812*. UNC Press Books. (2013). 528

<sup>25</sup> Public Broadcasting Service. “The Yellow Fever epidemic.” Accessed April 20, 2017. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3p1590.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Lossing, Benson John. *A memorial of Alexander Anderson, M.D., the First Engraver on Wood in America*. The University of Michigan. (1872). 43

imported case was of a sailor who did travel to the West Indies.<sup>27</sup> Isaac Cathrall, a physician, believed that “blacks of every description, were less liable to it than the white inhabitants; and the negroes originally from the coast of Africa were scarcely ever affected.”<sup>28</sup>

In fact, the rate of African-Americans getting sick is the same as the whites. In Philadelphia, 1,334 poor and African-Americans died from the disease when it first broke out.<sup>29</sup> Also, around thirty years after the outbreak of the epidemic, in 1821, John Eberle, the editor of the *American Medical Recorder* suggested that a real immunity only appeared when one was exposed to the disease “from infancy”, whilst ethnicity and race is not a big deal to whether or not one held immunity.<sup>30</sup>

Modern scholars have explained the cause of the formation of this perception as exaggeration of the immunity effects on some African new-comers to the whole black community. Mariola Espinosa of *Social Science History*, says that only new-arriving black people from West Africa might have acquired immunity to the Yellow Fever back in their home country. Comparing to the whites who had never exposed to the fever, the blacks seemed to be genetically immune to the disease. Thus, the effect had been enlarged to the whole race.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Bayley, Richard. *Account of the Epidemic Fever which Prevailed in the city of New-York, during part of the summer and fall of 1795*. Faculty of Physic of Columbia College. (1796). 17

<sup>28</sup> Apel, Thomas. *Feverish Bodies, Enlightened Minds: Science and the Yellow Fever Controversy in the Early American Republic*. Stanford University Press. (2016). 23

<sup>29</sup> Toogood, Anna Coxe. *The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793*. Neither Separate Nor Equal: Congress in the 1790s. United States Capitol Historical Society. Ohio University Press. (2000). 52

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, James. *The Influence of Tropical Climates on European Constitutions; To Which is Added, Tropical Hygiene, or the Preservation of Health in All Hot Climates*. *American Medical Recorder* 4 (3). (1821) 542-43

<sup>31</sup> Espinosa, Mariola. *The Question of Racial Immunity to Yellow Fever in History and Historiography*. *Social Science History*. (2014).441.

### **Any improvements in treating African-Americans?**

Black leaders like Jones and Allen were so eager to send their people to work in hospitals and clinics. They wanted to show the rest of the citizens that they had “commitment to the greater good of all people.”<sup>32</sup> They had built up an image of giving and serving during the epidemic. However, a numbers of white opinion leaders did attack the black community for their work.

Mathew Carey was a famous critique writer. He made use of the chance to discredit the African-Americans to make money from publications.<sup>33</sup> He accused the blacks of having “extorting high wages, or even stealing from those they nursed.”<sup>34</sup> Carey said did not choose to write about the bright side of the black nurses, for instance, how they stayed at their position fearlessly to cure the patients, but to accuse and attack them from being greedy. The two leaders had to fight back with a remark from Mayor Clarkson, saying that all black nurses were paid fairly and honestly when they served.<sup>35</sup>

At the same time, even actual numbers in mortality showed that African-Americans actually held no special immunity to yellow fever, scientists still thought that they have immunity to fatal diseases, including malaria, due to racial prejudice.<sup>36</sup> Thus, social and health-related perception on African-Americans continues over years.

---

<sup>32</sup> Manion, Jen. *Liberty's Prisoners: Carceral Culture in Early America*. University of Pennsylvania Press. (2015). 124

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>34</sup> Carey, Mathew. *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever*. The New York Public Library. (1794)

<sup>35</sup> Murphy, Jim. *An American Plague: The True and Terrifying Story of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. (2014). 117-118

<sup>36</sup> Tuthill, Maureen. *Health and Sickness in the Early American Novel: Social Affection and Eighteenth-Century Medicine*. Springer. (2016). 352

## **Conclusion**

Lacking sufficient scientific and medical knowledge, African-Americans were seen as a group that had immunity towards a deadly fever. They joined the medical operation which might have exposed themselves into danger, still they were working to show that they were caring and willing to do good for the society. In an era of fatal disease, African-Americans as the minority did have a role in combating the Yellow Fever. Regardless of the intention of their participation, they did help save lives during the fever. Unfortunately the comments given to them might still be bind by social perception and racial prejudice.

## References

### *Books and Journals*

1. Heaton, C. E.. Yellow Fever in New York City. *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association*, 34(2). (1946).
2. Powell, J. H.. *Bring Out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793*. University of Pennsylvania Press. (2014).
3. Rush, Benjamin. *An account of the Bilious remitting Yellow Fever, as it appeared in the city of Philadelphia, in the year 1793*. Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson. (1794).
4. Carey, Mathew. *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever*. The New York Public Library. (1794)
5. Kornfeld, Eve. Crisis In The Capital: The Cultural Significance of Philadelphia's Great Yellow Fever Epidemic. *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 51, no. 3 (1984)
6. Kotar, S.L. and Gessler, J. E.. *Yellow Fever: A Worldwide History*. Mcfarland (2017)
7. Bayley, Richard. *Account of the Epidemic Fever which Prevailed in the city of New-York, during part of the summer and fall of 1795*. Faculty of Physic of Columbia College. (1796)
8. Toogood, Anna Coxe. *The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793. Neither Separate Nor Equal: Congress in the 1790s*. United States Capitol Historical Society. Ohio University Press. (2000)
9. Boone, Kyle. "A Theodicy of Redemptive Suffering in African American Involvement Led by Absalom Jones and Richard Allen in the Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793." Senior Seminar. Olivet Nazarene University. 2013
10. Apel, Thomas. *Feverish Bodies, Enlightened Minds: Science and the Yellow Fever Controversy in the Early American Republic*. Stanford University Press. (2016)
11. Jordan, Winthrop D.. *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812*. UNC Press Books. (2013)
12. Lossing, Benson John. *A memorial of Alexander Anderson, M.D., the First Engraver on Wood in America*. The University of Michigan. (1872). 43
13. Johnson, James. *The Influence of Tropical Climates on European Constitutions; To Which is Added, Tropical Hygiene, or the Preservation of Health in All Hot Climates*. *American Medical Recorder* 4 (3). (1821)
14. Espinosa, Mariola. *The Question of Racial Immunity to Yellow Fever in History and Historiography*. *Social Science History*. (2014)

15. Manion, Jen. *Liberty's Prisoners: Carceral Culture in Early America*. University of Pennsylvania Press. (2015)
16. Murphy, Jim. *An American Plague: The True and Terrifying Story of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. (2014)
17. Tuthill, Maureen. *Health and Sickness in the Early American Novel: Social Affection and Eighteenth-Century Medicine*. Springer. (2016)

***Government papers***

1. Minutes of the Common Council of the City of N.Y., 1784-1831, II. New York (1917)
2. Ecclesiastical records, state of New York. New York Public Library (1901). 489.

***Newspapers***

1. New-York Gazette. August 28, 1795
2. Commercial Adviser. August 29, 1795, September 9, 1795

***Websites***

1. Public Broadcasting Service. "Julie Winch on Jones' and Allen's response to Carey." Accessed April 20, 2017. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3i3111.html>.
2. Public Broadcasting Service. "The Yellow Fever epidemic." Accessed April 20, 2017. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3p1590.html>
3. Baruch College. "Yellow Fever Epidemic - 1795 to 1804." Accessed April 2, 2017. [http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/nycdata/disasters/yellow\\_fever.html](http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/nycdata/disasters/yellow_fever.html)