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"At the peril of our lives": race, citizenship, and Philadelphia's 1793 yellow fever epidemic.

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“AT THE PERIL OF OUR LIVES”: RACE, CITIZENSHIP, AND PHILADELPHIA’S 1793 YELLOW FEVER EPIDEMIC

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Abstract

The late-eighteenth century was a crucial time for determining the social role of black people in Philadelphia, and Pennsylvania at large. In 1780, the state legislature began a gradual abolition process that contributed to a growing free Black population in the city, while many other Black Philadelphians remained in bondage. Their livelihoods remained restricted by anti-Black laws that contributed to the overall poor health of Black Philadelphians. As the yellow fever epidemic began in 1793, Philadelphia's medical community supported racist scientific myths that Black people possessed a natural immunity to yellow fever. In an agreement with the city and Dr. Benjamin Rush, Black community leaders Richard Allen and Absalom Jones recruited Black volunteers to attend to the sick. Theories of Black immunity to yellow fever were proven wrong as volunteers contracted the disease and died. Despite their lifesaving work, Black Philadelphians were accused of theft and extortion in the press, exacerbating white fears about the growing Black population in their city. Examples of Black rebellion in the Haitian Revolution added to these fears, complicating the conversation surrounding Black people's fitness for political participation. The yellow fever epidemic of 1793 became an opportunity for Black people in Philadelphia to publicly defend their capability for citizenship in the early American republic.

Keywords: Philadelphia, yellow fever, scientific racism, abolition, Atlantic World

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-AP-

Introduction

In an August 1793 diary entry, Philadelphia resident Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker wrote of a disease moving quickly through the city: "...a fever prevails in the city, particularly [sic] in Water Street, between Race and Arch Streets of the malignant kind," Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker wrote, "... numbers have died of it, some say it was occasioned [sic] by damaged [sic] coffee, and fish, which was stored [sic] at Wm. Smith, others say it was imported in a Vessel from Cape-Francois [sic] which lay at our warfe, or at the warfe back of our store."[1] Drinker's diary entries through November recount almost daily burials, constant news of friends and neighbors contracting and passing away from yellow fever, and the comings and goings of the rest of Philadelphia's white elite as they attempted to avoid the illness by traveling to more rural areas of Pennsylvania. The Drinker family chose to remain in Philadelphia and observed the chaos unfolding near the ports from the safety of their Front Street mansion.[2] Despite this, their own household was eventually touched by the disease. Only five days after the August entry Drinker wrote that one of her household servants, "poor Black Joseph," had taken ill. She was unsure of his exact condition as he had yet to be seen by a doctor but suspected that he had yellow fever as many of their neighbors had received such a diagnosis that week. Drinker mentions that Joseph was taken to a "negro house," where she hoped that he would be seen by a Dr. Foulk and nursed back to health.[3]

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[1] Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, *Diary of Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, August 1793,* ed. Elaine Forman Crane, in *The Diary of Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, vol. 1* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 898.
[2] Elaine F. Crane, "The World of Elizabeth Drinker," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 107 no. 1 (1983): 21.
[3] Drinker, 900.

This is the last time that Drinker writes about Joseph; it is unclear if he recovered, or if he ever received an official diagnosis of yellow fever. Exhibiting racial inconsideration, Drinker was more concerned with the wellbeing of her neighbors. She included news of their health alongside weather reports, her own daily schedule, and her increasing fears of crime in the city. After a neighbor's house had caught on fire, Drinker was convinced that it was set by a group of Black arsonists.[4] Her preoccupation with unsolved arson cases and eagerness to assume Black guilt mirrored a growing fear among white Philadelphians of the revolutionary ideas in practice in Saint Domingue and their influence on the city's growing Black population.

Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker's diaries are not centered around the experiences of Black Philadelphians, but her mentions of her Black servants and the false science projected upon their bodies offers a glimpse into the impact of scientific and cultural racism on Philadelphia's free Black population. The presence of enslaved Black people in the western hemisphere was born in part by a need for disease-seasoned laborers, intertwining assumed biological protections with the demands of the transatlantic slave trade.[5] Medical observations from earlier yellow fever outbreaks across the western hemisphere, most notably an outbreak in Charleston, South Carolina, asserted that Black people did not contract the disease or die from it as often as white people, implying the existence of a biological difference that protected Black bodies from certain diseases. There was some truth to these medical observations, as some Black people in Charleston had likely caught yellow fever before and acquired immunity, but this could not be

[4] It is possible that the fire was actually caused by a public bonfire. Drinker also writes about tar being burned in the streets to purify the air. Many Philadelphians believed that the disease was being carried through the air in keeping with the miasma theory that was popular during that period, but this was false. Burning tar did not impact the spread of yellow fever. See *Diary of Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker*, August 1793, 900; see also J.H. Powell. *Bring Out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793*. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), xviii.

[5] Manuel Barcia, *The Yellow Demon of Fever: Fighting Disease in the Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Slave Trade.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 9.

attributed to a heritable immunity to the disease among black people. Even still, this theory made a clear distinction between white and Black bodies, and this idea encompassed more than just disease. Eighteenth century physicians connected biology to behavior as well, corroborating racist ideas about Black propensity toward servitude.

The 1793 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia is an example of how scientific myths in colonial America forced Black people to mobilize against a biological threat in exchange for access to the body politic, costing them their lives. This became the rationale behind months of white exploitation of Black labor. Using racist ideas of Black immunity to yellow fever as justification, Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush pleaded with Richard Allen and Absalom Jones to recruit Philadelphia's free Black population as essential workers. As white Philadelphians fell to yellow fever, Black Philadelphians stepped in as nurses, grave diggers, and other roles. Their efforts were coordinated by the Free African Society, a Black abolitionist group founded by Allen and Jones. Yet, for many of these volunteers the decision to help with yellow fever care efforts was not a personal choice but a moral obligation. Their actions were under great scrutiny from their fellow Philadelphians as well as white citizens across the United States who understood the actions of a few hundred black people in Philadelphia to represent the biological and political capacity of all black people across the nation.

Rush's ideas about Black immunity to yellow fever were proven false as Black volunteers caught yellow fever and died in rates comparable to those of white Philadelphians. In proliferating a false idea about Black immunity, the medical community of Philadelphia and other doctors across the Atlantic World reinforced the idea that Black people were biologically different from white people. They pointed to supposed black immunity to disease such as yellow

fever, Mathew Carey, an Irish-born printer and publisher,[6] sparked further debate about the criminal behavior of Black Philadelphians with his pamphlet "A Short Account of the Malignant Fever." In his work, he claims that Black nurses and attendants were gouging prices and stealing from their employers. These allegations came at a time when state legislation and revolutions abroad influenced the growing debate around abolition. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones responded in defense of Black volunteers, seeing an opportunity to make a case for Black humanity to abolitionists and enslavers alike.

Fear of disease in the 1793 yellow fever epidemic paralleled a greater fear of allowing Black people to enter the body politic of the United States. The disease came on ships from Saint Domingue alongside white and Black refugees escaping the Haitian Revolution. These escapees also brought eyewitness accounts of the rebellion. For Black Philadelphians, the Haitian Revolution symbolized the potential for self-determination, but for white Philadelphians, the tales from Saint Domingue sparked a deeper concern about the potential for rebellion among the free and enslaved. Their fears are reflected in colonial legislation designed to limit employment and socialization opportunities for free and enslaved Black people. This population was vulnerable to diseases of all kinds, especially in high traffic areas of the city such as the docks or markets where people from different regions of the western hemisphere swapped pathogens, but their frequent exposure to yellow fever in the service of white households would prove to be fatal. White fear of the disease and willingness to place supposedly immune Black volunteers on the front lines demonstrates the assumed disposability of Black bodies in an environment that posited them as biologically different, and therefore inferior and intended for servitude. Exclusion from the body politic, bolstered by the power of commonly accepted scientific racism,

[6] Regina Dolan, "Mathew Carey, Citizen and Publisher," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 65 no.2 (1954): 120.

fostered poor health and high death rates among Philadelphia's Black community as they navigated the world of gradual abolition and the remnants of scientific racism.

Epidemiological Context

Yellow fever is a disease spread by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito.[7] It cannot be passed from person to person; if a mosquito bites an infected person, and then bites a noninfected person, that person can contract yellow fever.[8] The disease passes through infected individuals in two phases. The first phase is mild, and patients who are infected experience a fever, chills, fatigue, and headache. Most yellow fever victims recover after the first phase, and those that do so are immune from the disease from that point on.[9] However, some patients go on to endure significantly worse symptoms in the second phase of the disease. Their fevers increase, their fatigue gives way to delirium, and they begin vomiting a Black combination of stomach bile and blood. The latter was generally considered a sign of impending death, and few patients recovered after displaying that symptom.[10]

The final weeks of July 1793 marked the beginning of yellow fever cases in the United States. Cases began to rise in the following weeks, and over the course of the next three months, nearly ten percent of Philadelphia's residents had died of yellow fever.[11] This statistic was proportional across races. Historian Mariola Espinosa estimated that of the 2,489 Black people living in Philadelphia in 1793, about 240 died of the disease. This is proportionate to the number

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[7] Powell, xix.

[8] This key piece of information about the transmission of yellow fever was discovered in the mid-nineteenth century by physician Walter Reed, whose medical experiments revealed that the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito was the carrier. Prior to that, physicians believed that yellow fever could spread from person to person. See Powell, vii.

[9] Thomas A. Apel. *Feverish Bodies, Enlightened Minds: Science and the Yellow Fever Controversy in the Early American Republic.* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 1.

[10] Apel, 2.

[11] Eric Herschthal. "Antislavery Science in the Early Republic: The Case of Dr. Benjamin Rush." Early American Studies 15, no. 2 (2017): 301.

of white Philadelphians that died, though it is possible that this is an undercounting of yellow fever deaths.[12] Meanwhile, Philadelphia's medical community formed two distinct theories to explain how a disease endemic to West Africa found its way to the shores of the United States' East Coast. All explanations circle back to Philadelphia's burgeoning economy and an increase in trade between the United States and other slaveholding nations. The presence of yellow fever in the western hemisphere is inextricably linked to the transatlantic slave trade in the United States and the Caribbean. Yellow fever had plagued the Caribbean for decades, and enslaved Africans and European slaveholders alike died from its complications. Frequent trade between the United States and the Caribbean increased the chances of carrying yellow fever between the two locations. This, coupled with an increase in French immigrants to the United States after the beginning of the Haitian Revolution, contributed to a theory known as contagionism. Contagionists, such as Dr. William Currie, believed that the disease arrived with ships from Saint-Domingue.[13] This theory was not entirely accurate as Dr. Currie believed it; for example, contagionists still falsely believed that the disease could be transferred from person to person. Even still, it was a more accurate portrayal of its spread than Dr. Benjamin Rush's theory and linked the disease with the events in Saint Domingue in the Philadelphian imagination.

Rush disagreed with the contagionist theory and considered himself to be a climatist. He suggested that a barrel of spoiled coffee that had been thrown off the side of a trade ship was the cause of the yellow fever. He believed that the rotting coffee created a miasma that traveled through the air and infected people throughout the city.[14] If the miasma theory was correct, it

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[12] Mariola Espinosa, "The Question of Racial Immunity in History and Historiography," *Social Science History* 38 no. 3-4 (2015): 441-442.
[13] Philip Gould, "Race, Commerce, and the Literature of Yellow Fever in Early National Philadelphia," *Early American Literature* 35 (2000): 164.
[14] Gould, 165.

would explain why Philadelphians living near the ports were some of the first to be infected with yellow fever. Germ theory later disproved the idea that the disease spread through the smell of rotting organic matter. Despite the idea that miasma carried disease through the air, Philadelphians of all ages began smoking cigars and chewing tobacco as a preventative measure against the yellow fever.[15]

The city's geographical position and urban layout exacerbated the spread of the disease. At the time, Philadelphia was the nation's capital, enjoying all the economic benefits of a thriving port city. The most obvious signs of its prosperity would also become breeding grounds for disease: an increasing population, cramped living quarters across the city, and waste piling in the streets.[16] In addition, increasing immigration to the United States' urban centers in the colonial period introduced new diseases and their carriers to people with no previous exposure. Philadelphia hosted a growing number of white people of all classes, free and enslaved Black people, and refugees from Saint-Domingue. Diseases spread as these groups crossed paths. As a result, metropolitan areas including New Orleans and Philadelphia saw several outbreaks of yellow fever during the late-eighteenth century.[17] Philadelphia, located on the Delaware River, welcomed ships into its ports daily. These ships carried food, clothing, and other tradable goods, but they also carried human beings and mosquitoes who brought yellow fever with them. The city's sanitation and water management created circumstances in which yellow fever could thrive. Philadelphia had only one sewer, so residents had to dig various holes across the city for

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[15] Mathew Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia: With a Statement of the Proceedings That Took Place on the Subject in Different Parts of the United States.* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1793), 32. Digital Collections, United States National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health.
[16] Gould, 159.
[17] J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 265.

waste removal and water collection.[18] Once mosquitoes arrived at port, they lived around and bred within these watering holes and other water containers. This was especially crucial during the summer months, as *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes prefer to reproduce in warm water. [19]

The spread of the disease in the city impacted its most vulnerable populations. Philadelphia publisher Mathew Carey estimated that some seven-eighths of yellow fever deaths were those of the city's poor.[20] This can be attributed to geographical location and socioeconomic status: the city's elite could afford housing further out from the city, but the working class lived close to the Delaware River. Some were employed at its ports, where the first cases of the disease were located. They were the first to interact with infected travelers leaving foreign ships, and the last to be able to afford health care. However, Carey did not acknowledge this difference in workplace hazards or financial means. Instead, he implied that the high death rates among the city's poor can be attributed to their lack of cleanliness and morals. He identifies "drunkards" and prostitutes as being among those who suffered the most from the disease.[21] It is undeniable that excessive alcohol consumption, venereal diseases, and general lack of access to healthcare would have made it more difficult for these individuals to survive yellow fever.

High-ranking city officials and even clerical employees escaped the city and left little notice behind to the city government. Some groups remained in the city throughout the epidemic, but it is unlikely that they had a choice in the matter. Those that stayed behind were poor, Black, or refugees.[22] These individuals typically lacked the means to leave quickly. Doing so would put them in a worse financial predicament than staying and risking their lives. The departure of local

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[18] Powell, vi.
[19] McNeill, 43.
[20] Carey, 77.
[21] Carey, 74.
[22] Jacquelyn C. Miller, "The Wages of Blackness: African American Workers and the Meanings of Race during Philadelphia's 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic." *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 129 (2005): 177.

officials left a massive void in the city's day to day operations, further slowing an already challenging response to the epidemic.[23]

The remaining members of the city government responded quickly to the departure of other officials. On September 14, 1793, Mayor Matthew Clarkson called the first meeting of the Committee to Attend to and Alleviate the Sufferings of the Afflicted with Malignant Fever. The committee was composed of volunteers who would assume the responsibilities of the city officials that had departed the city. From an economic standpoint, Philadelphia was woefully unprepared to manage the epidemic. Over half of their yearly budget was dedicated to maintaining the streets, docks, and other public spaces.[24] There was virtually no money left over to aid hospitals and conduct burial services, of which there would be many in the following months. This later fed accusations of theft and extortion among Black nurses and volunteers.

The false idea of Black immunity to yellow fever took hold in the context of a city desperate for help. In his research on the disease, Dr. Benjamin Rush came to the conclusion that Black Philadelphians did not catch the disease as frequently as their white counterparts. If they did, they were more likely to recover from the disease.[25] His argument drew heavily from letters exchanged between physicians in warmer climates; medical professionals in these areas of the early American republic already believed that Black people possessed a natural immunity to yellow fever that offered them an advantage over whites in confronting the disease. Dr. John Lining, a physician in Charleston, South Carolina, penned a detailed report of the city's 1748 yellow fever outbreak in which he claimed:

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[23] Gould, 160.
[24] Powell, 56.
[25] Rana Asali Hogarth, "The Myth of Innate Racial Differences Between White and Black People's Bodies: Lessons from the 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania." *American Journal of Public Health* 109, vol. 10 (2019): 1340.

> When the yellow fever prevailed in South Carolina, the negroes, according to that accurate observer, Dr. Lining, were wholly free from it. "There is something very singular in the constitution of the negroes," says he, "which renders them not liable to this fever; for though many of them were as much exposed to the fever as the nurses to this infection, yet I never knew one instance of this fever among them, though they are equally subject with the white people to the bilious fever." The same idea prevailed in Philadelphia, but it was erroneous.[26]

The College of Physicians of Philadelphia endorsed Dr. Lining's work, cementing the myth of Black immunity in medical conversations of the day.[27] Benjamin Rush and Mathew Carey subscribed to this idea, though both later recognized that it was false. As local doctors and the press carried the narrative of Black immunity to the public, Black people were not only marked by supposed biological difference, but also became disposable once they had served their purpose in the fight against yellow fever. Even as theories of Black immunity were proven false, Black people continued to care for white yellow fever patients.

Philadelphia's medical community was largely incorrect in their assumptions about yellow fever and Black immunity: one in every ten Black Philadelphians died from yellow fever during the epidemic, a rate almost identical to that of white Philadelphians.[28] The letters Dr. Rush had found about enslaved Africans' resistance to yellow fever outbreaks in the Caribbean and the American South were not entirely false, but they were not applicable to the epidemic in Philadelphia. In general, yellow fever had a more consistent presence in places with hot, humid climates than in Pennsylvania.[29] Enslaved Black people in the Caribbean, particularly those that had been born in West Africa, had likely already been exposed to yellow fever and were unlikely

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[26] Carey, 62-63.
[27] Powell, 41.
[28] Richard Allen and Absalom Jones published burial records that confirmed these numbers in their *Narrative.* Espinosa's article provides a thorough breakdown of these documents, and others, that indicate the mortality rate between white and Black people in 1793 was similar.
[29] Espinosa, 441.

to be reinfected.[30] This was not the case for Black people living in Philadelphia, many of whom lacked previous exposure to the disease. Their health was further compromised by consistent poverty and other barriers set in place by colonial legislation, which proved fatal for many as scientific misinformation was used to mobilize Black people in the fight against yellow fever.

Benjamin Rush and Black Immunity to Yellow Fever

Prior to the 1793 yellow fever epidemic, Rush had been circulating his own racist ideas about race and medicine. Trying to make sense of perceived biological differences between Black and white people, Rush came to believe that Black skin was a symptom of leprosy. He later retracted this statement, acknowledging that Black skin was likely an evolutionary protection against the African sun.[31] In 1792, Dr. Rush expanded on this idea with an address delivered to the American Philosophical Society in which he explained that Black people's perceived submissiveness was not an inherent characteristic but instead a behavior they had learned through years of enslavement.[32] In his eyes, Blackness was a reversible disease. Black people were not inherently inferior, Rush argued, but living in bondage had made them that way.[33] In order to raise Black people up to the same status as white people, Rush claimed, they needed to be emancipated. Emancipation would be followed with civic education and an introduction to Christianity. Black people, having been exposed to these ideas, would finally be able to become white and enjoy the fullness of American citizenship.[34]

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[30] Espinosa, 442.
[31] Herschthal, 274.
[32] Herschthal, 275.
[33] Herschthal, 275.
[34] Herschthal, 278.

His analysis of the matter reveals key themes in the debate surrounding citizenship for Black people in the early American republic. First, race could be manipulated to fit a narrative. In Rush's estimation, Blackness became something that could be "fixed" with enough education and moral fortitude. Meanwhile, the biological nature of the Black body remained stagnant. Despite changes in spirituality or education, Black bodies would always remain marked by biological difference in the eyes of white folks. Blackness was portrayed simultaneously as a changeable state and a fixed characteristic, scientifically and culturally. Rush was not alone in his thoughts; Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker also included theories of natural immunity among Black people in her diaries, and the concept had been endorsed by the College of Physicians of Philadelphia for decades. The organization hailed Lining's work as the best description of yellow fever at that time.[35]

This cemented the misconception of Black immunity in the public imagination, categorizing Black bodies as fundamentally different from white bodies. That difference was incorporated into conversations about the Black capacity for political participation as well. Dr. Benjamin Rush's commitment to "curing" Blackness becomes even more curious when his antislavery views are considered. In addition to his renowned medical career, Dr. Rush was also an abolitionist. He served as the president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, one of the nation's most prominent antislavery organizations, from 1803 to 1813. Rush's membership in this organization reveals key contradictions between his abolitionist beliefs and his medical career: he agreed that Black people should enjoy freedom but was hesitant to raise them to his own level by acknowledging that they were biologically the same being. His medical background and his thoughts about enslavement were often intertwined, and his abolitionist work only further

[35] Powell, 41.

complicated medical understandings of Black bodies as it related to citizenship. His ideas often contradicted themselves and his own antislavery rhetoric. Rush's complex relationship with these topics show that racist biological ideas seemed plausible even to those who considered themselves to be allies in the abolitionist cause, further complicating their role in gradual abolition. Rush and others like him clearly supported abolition, but they were hesitant to associate the sickliness or low livelihood among Black people with the impact of colonial legislation. More subtly, they feared expanding their perception of citizenship to include the traits they associated with blackness. Instead, high death rates or poor health among Black people was attributed to either their Blackness and enslavement, confirming false ideas about the biological nature of Blackness and bypassing any acknowledgement of the toll enslavement and low standards of living took on the Black body.

Colonial Law, Black Bodies, and the Body Politic

Yellow fever came to Philadelphia at a time when Philadelphia struggled to negotiate the terms of recently passed legislation ending enslavement in Pennsylvania. The legislation, known as the Pennsylvania Gradual Abolition Act of 1780, was one of the first pieces of notable antislavery legislation to be passed in the United States.[36] The act was designed to appeal to both abolitionists and slave owners, and this was reflected in its conditions of freedom. The most notable stipulation was that people of African descent that were registered as enslaved before March 1, 1780 were to remain enslaved for life. Any children born to enslaved women, however, could be emancipated after 28 years to allow slave owners to profit from their labor even if only

[36] Richard S. Newman. "Freedom's Grand Lab: Abolition, Race, and Black Freedom Struggles in Recent Pennsylvania Historiography." *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 82, no.3 (2015): 360-361.

for a finite amount of time.[37] The law also allowed slave owners the opportunity to preemptively offer manumission. Some did exactly that, citing spiritual and moral reasons for their choice. Others chose to draw out the process by having their slaves agree to indentured servitude after emancipation.[38] Eight years later, the Pennsylvania legislature bolstered their previous gradual emancipation law with a new piece of legislation preventing slave owners from separating enslaved families or selling enslaved people across state lines.[39]

Prior to 1780, Philadelphia had a fluctuating enslaved population. The year 1767 saw the highest number of Black people living in bondage, but this number dropped in the following decades.[40] The free Black population in the city grew after 1775 after the Society of Friends disavowed slavery and encouraged its members to preemptively manumit their slaves.[41] Fugitive slaves from neighboring states also added to the overall Black population as well; the Pennsylvania Abolition Society provided them with financial support and legal defense, ensuring that they would not go back to a life of slavery in their home state.[42] From 1775 to 1790, the number of free Black people living in Philadelphia went from 114 to 1,849,[43] and by 1793, the city of Philadelphia had roughly 55,000 residents. Of that amount, around 2,500 were Black.[44] The future for the newly emancipated was unclear. The legislation had freed them, but it offered no conditions of citizenship by which they could define their role in society. Though some Black

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[37] Erica Armstrong Dunbar and Randall M. Miller. "Introduction." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 137, no. 1 (2013): 10.
[38] Y'Hoshua R. Murray. "Upon God Knows What Ground: African American Slavery in Western Pennsylvania." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 136, no. 4 (2012): 510.
[39] Paul J. Polgar. ""To Raise Them to an Equal Participation": Early National Abolitionism, Gradual Emancipation, and the Promise of African American Citizenship." *Journal of the Early Republic* 31 (2): 241.
[40] Gary B. Nash, "Slaves and Slaveowners in Colonial Philadelphia." *William and Mary Quarterly* 30 (2): 245.
[41] Nash, 236.
[42] Newman, 8.
[43] Herschthal, 292.
[44] Powell, xviii.

people were no longer considered enslaved in the state, their status remained questionable, giving rise to conversations about what it meant to be a citizen at a time when such a term was only recently being extended to include Black people. In addition, the growing Black population was troubling to white Philadelphians who found Black bodies and movement difficult to regulate.

Free Black people in Philadelphia were not considered enslaved, but they remained totally excluded from the body politic of the United States with no representation in government. Colonial legislation required that they be treated like white indentured servants.[45] It was difficult to enforce such a large-scale piece of legislation in a way that met the needs of enslaved people in rural Pennsylvania as well as major urban centers, like Philadelphia. As such, the actual enforcement of this legislation was left up to the municipal court system, and white communities enforced the parts that were relevant to them and their economy. Punishments could be doled out by public authorities but were more likely handled by the slave owners themselves. Therefore, some pieces of anti-Black legislation in the colony were ignored for convenience's sake, and others were strictly enforced. For example, in Philadelphia, most slaveholding households kept one or two enslaved people at once. They did not need a large enslaved population for agriculture like rural Pennsylvanians; instead, their one or two bondspeople were more likely to be performing domestic tasks.[46] This difference between slaveholding in rural and urban Pennsylvania is important because it reveals the isolating nature of enslavement in the city. Even the growing free Black population was limited in their ability to move freely and generate unmonitored income. This was an intentional design by the Colonial Council of Philadelphia,

[45] Oscar R. Williams, "The Regimentation of Blacks on the Urban Frontier in Colonial Albany, New York City, and Philadelphia," *Journal of Negro History* 63, no. 4 (1973): 329.
[46] Williams, 332.

who wanted to restrict Black people's ability to socialize and work. Without the money or coordination necessary to organize crime, the Council could reduce the potential for rebellion. Enforcement of this policy exemplifies an increasing fear of Black rebellion among white Philadelphians, especially those in power.

Before the Gradual Abolition Act of 1780 finally put the terms of abolition to paper, many Black people in Philadelphia lived in the legislation's margins. Philadelphia's 1790 census counted 2,150 Black people in the city; the number would nearly triple over the course of the next decade.[47] Even with a significant population increase, the general death rate among Black Philadelphians was significantly higher than that of white Philadelphians.[48] This is indicative of the state of Black health in the city. Black people in colonial Philadelphia were overwhelmingly poor as the result of laws that restricted the places where free Black people in Philadelphia could work. If Black people could find work, it was often poorly paid, which made it difficult to afford food with any nutritional value.[49] Food insecurity was also prevalent among enslaved Black people. Similar laws prevented enslaved Black people from hiring themselves out; some even fined slave owners who permitted it. Those who lived in rural areas of Pennsylvania curbed the effects of food insecurity by growing their own food on small patches of land given to them by their enslavers under strict time and profit conditions. Enslaved people in the city lacked the space or permission to grow for themselves, so they had to rely on slave owners to distribute food that was often inedible.[50] Regardless of their freedom status, Black people in Philadelphia struggled to access foodstuffs that met their nutritional needs. This, coupled with the physical

[47] Susan E. Klepp, "Seasoning and Society: Racial Differences in Mortality in Eighteenth Century Philadelphia," *William and Mary Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (1994): 476.
[48] Klepp, 477.
[49] Klepp, 482.
[50] Klepp, 483.

strain of their daily lives, meant that free and enslaved Black bodies were more vulnerable to disease.

As Pennsylvania continued the process of gradual abolition, the United States and European countries were closely observing concurrent revolutions in France and Haiti. The United States' response to the French Revolution was markedly more positive than their view of the Haitian Revolution, as revealed by numerous updates in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on both fronts. American publications such as the *National Gazette* understood the Revolution as further evidence that a new era of self-determination was beginning across the world: "We, of the present day, live at a period when the strongholds of despotism are breaking up; when nations just begin to discover that all human government should be administered by the servants, and not by the "masters" of the people."[51] The United States perceived the French Revolution as another victory for republican government. The author of the *Gazette* article urged the country not to remain neutral about the future of the French Republic, as success for the fledgling French government would determine the outcome for America's own republic.

In contrast, the United States viewed the Haitian Revolution with apprehension. They feared that their message of abolition and Black self-determination would reach American shores and inspire enslaved Black people to stage a similar government overthrow. Newspapers shared almost daily reports of violence on the island, providing graphic details of anarchy in which newly liberated Black Haitians murdered white families out of revenge. It is clear that such news troubled white Americans, even those living in areas that had enacted gradual abolition. If it could happen in Haiti, a stronghold of enslavement and French colonialism, it had the potential to take place in the United States as well. The changing conditions in Philadelphia created a

[51] National Gazette. (Philadelphia, PA), Sep. 11 1793. https://www.loc.gov/item/sn83025887/1793-09-11/ed-1/.

paranoia of both disease and Black rogues. Having just welcomed hundreds of white refugees and their slaves from Saint-Domingue, Philadelphians feared that the Haitian Revolution would inspire similar action among their newly freed Black population.

The question of abolition became further complicated as free and enslaved Black people in the United States began to see their own struggles reflected in the Haitian Revolution. The American understanding of the Haitian Revolution bisected along racial lines: though many white Americans feared that their own cities would soon resemble Cape-Francois, Black Americans found encouragement in the idea of a Black republic. Richard Allen was among them; years after the Haitian Revolution ended, he remarked that Haiti would one day become a great nation.[52] For white Americans, Saint-Domingue became synonymous with disease and death. Refugees escaping the violence Saint-Domingue also spoke of how disease proliferated on the island. They told Philadelphians of how they had lived under the constant threat of disease and death on the island.[53] Their fear of infected ships from Saint-Domingue persisted throughout the epidemic. Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker included in a November 1793 diary entry a rumor that a French ship carrying 400 passengers, many of them infected, had arrived in Philadelphia's port.[54] This alarmed city residents, as the municipal government had closed the port and militias were positioned on the docks to prevent travelers from bringing more cases of yellow fever to the state.[55] Philadelphians feared further spread of the fever so much that an official from the city was sent to investigate the claim, though it was determined to be exaggerated.[56] The fear was not

[52] Maurice Jackson. ""Friends of the Negro! Fly With Me, the Path is Open to the Sea": Remembering the Haitian Revolution in the History, Music, and Culture of the African American People," *Early American Studies* 6, no. 1 (2008): 66-67.
[53] Powell, 4-5.
[54] Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, *Diary of Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, November 1793,* ed. Elaine Forman Crane, in *The Diary of Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, vol.1* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1991) 934.
[55] National Gazette. (Philadelphia, PA), Oct. 2 1793. https://www.loc.gov/item/sn83025887/1793-10-02/ed-1/.
[56] Drinker, 934.

limited to disease; the bloodshed in Saint-Domingue troubled them as well. White Philadelphians watched as Saint-Domingue had been upended by the question of slavery. As the debate surrounding abolition continued and the yellow fever worsened throughout the city, it is no surprise that white residents feared that increasing crime and death spelled a fate similar to that of Saint-Domingue.

Meanwhile, the United States' reception of the two revolutions was not lost on Black people in Philadelphia. The final pages of Absalom Jones and Richard Allen's *Narrative*, entitled "An address to those who keep slaves, and those who approve the practice," spoke directly to slave owners across the United States with a clear message that enslavement would not be a permanent feature in the framework of the United States. Absalom Jones and Richard Allen briefly mention the bloodshed of the Haitian Revolution in their response to Mathew Carey. The authors mourned "the late bloodshed of the oppressors, as well as the oppressed." Though they do not mention the Haitian Revolution by name, the intense fear of a similar revolution taking place in their own country provides context that points to the events in Haiti. Further, the authors plead with the slave owners of the United States to free their slaves, if for nothing else than to avoid the possibility of revolutionary violence happening to themselves or their future children.[57] Jones and Allen punctuate their response with an emotional appeal: "If you love your children, if you love your country, if you love the God of love, clear your hands from slaves, burden not your country with them."[58] The authors understood that their words needed to appeal to mixed company, as both white abolitionists and white enslavers read the pamphlet. For this reason,

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[57] Richard Allen, Matthew Clarkson, and Absalom Jones. "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." (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1794), 25. Digital Collections, United States National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health.

[58] Allen, Clarkson, and Jones, 25.

Jones and Allen's response centers the moral and spiritual cost of enslavement to forge a sense of common humanity between Black and white people but ends with a reminder of the political cost of enslavement.

As the yellow fever began to spread throughout the city, Benjamin Rush turned to Richard Allen and Absalom Jones for help. As a member of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, he was familiar with the Free African Society and their work within the Black community.[59] Rush and his colleagues went so far as to say that they had never come across a Black person who had contracted yellow fever, even if they had been in close proximity to someone who had been infected.[60] Because their natural immunity would protect them, Rush argued, Black Philadelphians had a moral obligation to care for those suffering from yellow fever. Using the organizational structure of the Free African Society, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones mobilized Black Philadelphians to act as nurses, gravediggers, cart drivers, and other essential roles throughout the epidemic.

The beginnings of the Black volunteer force of 1793 are connected to the founding of the Free African Society. The Free African Society, found by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones in 1787, was designed to uplift free Black people out of a state of forced poverty. It provided social welfare services to the Black community where Philadelphia's municipal government failed to, or intentionally created barriers. The Free African Society offered financial aid to the most vulnerable members of the Black community, including orphans, widows, and those living in extreme poverty.[61] The organization's experience in the coordination and care that came with

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[59] Newman, 7; Allen, Clarkson, and Jones, 5.
[60] Hogarth, 1340.
[61] Thomas E. Will, "Liberalism, Republicanism, and Philadelphia's Black Elite in the Early Republic: The Social Thought of Absalom Jones and Richard Allen. *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 69, no. 4 (2002): 562.

their work proved vital during the yellow fever epidemic. Descriptions of Black attendants during the epidemic indicate that the FAS had formed a network of support among those that they had served. Many of the attendants that Allen and Jones speak of in their *Narrative* were the young women, widows, and older children. It is possible that some of these individuals benefited from the Free African Society's aid, familiarizing themselves with its leaders and creating early connections. The poor Black men that Allen and Jones had contacted through the FAS assisted with burials and loaded coffins onto wagons.[62] William Woodward, a local publisher and member of the city's committee on yellow fever, connected Allen and Jones with the remaining members of Philadelphia's city government. The city government offered limited funds to offset the costs associated with such an undertaking, but with their finances in such disarray, Allen and Jones paid for coffins and burial services out of their own personal funds.[63] When they ran low on money and help, the two men buried deceased yellow fever patients themselves.[64] After Benjamin Rush taught the two how to treat yellow fever patients through bleeding, they performed the treatment on over 800 people.[65]

Connecting Abolition to the Epidemic

Abolitionist rhetoric in the late eighteenth century relied heavily on moral and spiritual condemnations of enslavement. The same ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity that had inspired the American Revolution bled into the anti-slavery arguments of the 1790s. Gradual emancipation relied on the idea that newly freed Black people could be shaped into dutiful citizens. Emancipation without moral and civic instruction would lead to an unruly Black

[62] Allen, Clarkson, and Jones, 10-12.
[63] Allen, Clarkson, and Jones, 5-7.
[64] Allen, Clarkson, and Jones, 18.
[65] Allen, Clarkson, and Jones, 17-18.

population and only confirm the fears of pro-slavery advocates across the country. Therefore, it was crucial that abolitionists incorporated environmentalism into the slow release of Black people into society. Environmentalism is the idea that a group of people can be influenced by the moral and social expectations surrounding them.[66]

What exactly did white abolitionists envision when they discussed citizenship for Black people? Perhaps the most obvious stipulation was that citizenship and enslavement were not compatible, figuratively or literally. In a literal sense, enslavement prevented Black people from being able to own property, and therefore they were not able to vote. Enslaved status also called their temperament for citizenship into question. Even Benjamin Rush believed that Black people's supposed inclination to servitude was too much to overcome without significant white influence, bringing the conversation back to environmentalist abolition tactics of educating and Christianizing newly freed Black people.[67]

While their work with white abolitionist groups was integral to their eventual citizenship and the survival of the city of Philadelphia, it is important to recognize that white abolitionist groups, especially those whose members were among the city's elite, supported gradual emancipation and its conditions for their own benefit and not expressly for the benefit of formerly enslaved Black people. These white elites approached the abolition dilemma with a paternalist mindset, believing that they had a moral and spiritual obligation to recognize the humanity of enslaved Black people and raise them to some kind of status akin to citizenship. That status, however, was conditional upon good behavior.

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[66] Polgar, 233.
[67] Herschthal, 292.

The Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS), founded in 1775, was the first abolition group in the western hemisphere.[68] Their work addressed chattel slavery in the United States at a time in which legislators preferred to ignore substantive discussion or action on the topic. After the passage of the Gradual Abolition Act in 1780, Pennsylvania became a destination for enslaved Black people looking to escape plantations in neighboring states. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society provided financial and legal aid for fugitive slaves that refused to return to their home states.[69] Its commitment to abolition should not be mistaken for a full integration of Black people, as the group remained segregated until the 1830s.[70] Like its most prominent members, the organization advocated for abolition while hesitating to address the culture of racism within their own organization.

Black-led abolitionist groups existed in Philadelphia as well, including the Free African Society. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones worked closely alongside the PAS for years prior to the yellow fever epidemic on abolitionist issues and community support. A section of Jones and Allen's *Narrative* is dedicated to "the friends of him who hath no helper" in direct reference to the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and other abolitionist groups.[71] In addition, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society was an early supporter of education for free Black people in Pennsylvania. Some Quaker-run schools for Black children existed in Philadelphia, but they were limited.[72] The Free African Society also confronted educational issues. Richard Allen, having been born into slavery and never formally educated, believed that education, work, and moral aptitude were

[68] Richard S. Newman, "The Pennsylvania Abolition Society: Restoring a Group to Glory." *Pennsylvania Legacies* 5, no. 2 (2005): 6.
[69] Newman, 8.
[70] Newman, 8.
[71] Allen, Clarkson, and Jones, 27-28.
[72] Nash, 240.

necessary for abolition.[73] At first glance, this seems like a paternalistic approach to abolition. It is possible, however, that Allen was trying to be pragmatic about the situation. He and Jones were well aware that the conduct of the few would reflect on the many: "...the bad consequences many of our colour apprehend, from a partial relation of our conduct, are that it will prejudice the minds of the people against us."[74] Participation in the body politic required Black people to conform to a moral standard defined by white people, even if it meant sacrificing their bodies or their lives in the process.

Money became a source of contention for white Philadelphians throughout the epidemic. Black essential workers demanded higher wages for their work during the epidemic to compensate them for the increased risk of their work, especially as Black caretakers began to die more frequently from yellow fever.[75] They had always been paid less than poor white workers, though their salaries were not much better by comparison. A poorly paid Black labor force, however, allowed employers to justify paying all laborers a low wage so long as the lowest paid white employee was compensated more than their Black counterparts.[76] Some white Philadelphians denounced the Black volunteers that stepped in to care for the city's sick and dying. Those who hired on Black attendants were disgruntled by the rate of pay that they asked for. White nurses were also hired on, but rarely received the same criticism from their employers.[77] In his *Short Account,* Mathew Carey disparaged Black nurses for what he considered extortion: "they extorted two, three, four, and even five dollars a night for attendance,

[73] Elise Kammerer, "Uplift in Schools and the Church: Abolitionist Approaches to Free Black Education in Early National Philadelphia." *Historical Social Research* 42, no. 1 (2017): 301.
[74] Allen, Clarkson, and Jones, 10.
[75] Miller, 184-186.
[76] Miller, 185.
[77] Miller, 186.

which would have been well paid by a single dollar."[78] His accusation spurred rumors of Black nurses stealing from their patients.[79]

Allen and Jones used their own record books as evidence that they had not been extorting Philadelphia's sick and dying, taking great care to assert that they did not even anticipate payment for the debts they were owed.[80] It became even more important for Absalom Jones and Richard Allen to address Carey's accusations, and to do so with care. When Mathew Carey released his pamphlet describing the state of affairs in Philadelphia, he accused Black Philadelphians of theft and other crimes of opportunity and posed a threat to the future of Black citizenship. Though Allen and Jones did hear of a few Black nurses having stolen from a family or overcharged money, they had heard similar stories about white servants doing the same. They noted in their response to Carey publishing his *Short Account* was itself a way to make money during a tragedy, speaking implicitly about Carey's brush with bankruptcy prior to publication: "is it a greater crime for a Black to pilfer, than for a white to profiteer?"[81]

Carey also alleges that the Black nurses must have known that they possessed a certain level of immunity to yellow fever, otherwise they would not have offered their services so willingly: "...had the negroes been equally terrified, the sufferings of the sick, great as they actually were, would have been exceedingly aggravated."[82] Here, he acknowledges their service, but not their sacrifice. Though Black attendants died as the result of their labor, Carey does not equate their lives with those of white yellow fever patients. This also incensed Allen and Jones, who knew of many attendants that had contracted yellow fever and died. The authors briefly

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[78] Carey, 77.
[79] Gould, 157.
[80] Allen, Clarkson, and Jones, 6-7.
[81] Allen, Clarkson, and Jones, 8.
[82] Carey, 63.

mentioned the names of ten attendants they knew who had not even asked for payment; over half of them were young women or widows.[83] They are also quick to remind Carey that Black and white people died of yellow fever in comparable numbers, and that many Black volunteers had been denied the care that they had willingly provided to others.

Carey dedicates an entire chapter of his "Short Account" to describing Stephen Girard's mansion at Bush Hill and how the estate was repurposed as a hospital. Many of the patients at the newly formed hospital at Bush Hill were working class Philadelphians who could not afford to leave the city or hire nurses to tend to them at home. Carey fails to disclose, however, that the attendants had been sourced from the city jail. In Jones and Allen's response to Carey, the authors recall "that two thirds of the persons, who rendered their essential services, were people of colour, who, on the application of the elders of the African church, were liberated on condition of their doing the duty of nurses at the hospital at Bush-hill."[84] Releasing prisoners, particularly Black prisoners, from the local jail calls racialized understandings of citizenship into question once more. It is unclear if these freed Black prisoners, having performed the same dangerous labor of free Black people during the epidemic, were able to enjoy the same commendation as everyone else after their service was over. Like other Black people working dangerous jobs during the epidemic, these Black prisoners existed in a state of limbo: valued enough to work, but not enough to be elevated to the same status as everyone else.

The hospital was also staffed by non-prisoners, many of them ordinary people who had not received medical training and had simply responded to Jones and Allen's need for help. They worked diligently to care for the patients at Bush Hill. Though Carey later acquiesced that the

[83] Allen, Clarkson, and Jones, 11-12.
[84] Allen, Clarkson, and Jones, 4-5.

entire Black population of Philadelphia could not be blamed for this, his initial accusation voiced what Philadelphia's white elite quietly believed: allowing Black Philadelphians to assist in the fight against yellow fever had been a mistake, and no amount of civic duty would be able to transform Black people into republican citizens.

As America's leading publisher at the time, Carey understood that his work was likely to be circulated outside of Philadelphia. In fact, this may have been the very reason he published his *Short Account* in the first place; he was on the verge of bankruptcy prior to the epidemic.[85] His words had the potential to harm not only Philadelphia's own Black population, but those living in other cities across America. This would pose a significant threat to future abolitionist action as Pennsylvania's gradual abolition process continued. The basis of his accusations of theft and immoral conduct took place in Philadelphia, but the impact of his words reached far beyond the city's borders. He published at least four different editions of the *Short Account.*[86] Richard Allen and Absalom Jones understood that the emancipation of their people would require them to meet white expectations of good character and conduct. The structure of Allen and Jones' pamphlet shows that the authors understood the implications that their work would have for free Black people, even those outside of Philadelphia. Jones and Allen attempt to find an emotional middle ground with white Philadelphians in response to Carey's remark that some of the Black nurses were not intelligent enough to do the job correctly. The authors wrote that the act of nursing "is, itself, a considerable art, derived from experience, as well as the exercise of the finer feelings of humanity,"[87] acknowledging that while some of the volunteer nurses likely did not have any medical training, their caretaking abilities were rooted in the common humanity that they shared

[85] Powell, ix.
[86] Powell, 311.
[87] Allen, Clarkson, and Jones, 12.

with white people. With this statement, Jones and Allen directly contradict the idea that Black people were fundamentally different from white people.

In the final pages of their response, Jones and Allen broadly address the people of color of the United States:

> There is much gratitude due from our colour towards the white people; very many of them are instruments in the hand of God for our good, even such as have held us in captivity and are now pleading our cause with earnestness and zeal...much depends on us for the help of our colour than many are aware; if we are lazy and idle, the enemies of freedom plead it as a cause why we ought not to be free, and say we are better in a state of servitude and that giving us our liberty would be an injury to us, and by such conduct we strengthen the bonds of oppression and keep many in bondage more worthy than ourselves.[88]

Clearly, Allen and Jones understood the potential repercussions their actions would have on the lives of Black people living in freedom and in bondage across the United States. If their efforts to aid in the epidemic fell short, or if their plans were disrupted by the immoral conduct of a few, it would reflect poorly on the entire race and be used as further evidence that Black people were not deserving of their freedom or eventual citizenship.

Conclusion

By the end of November 1793, Philadelphia's newspapers reported that the yellow fever epidemic had finally come to an end. The neighboring state of New York followed the city's lead and began to relax policies designed to prevent infected travelers from bringing the disease with them. New York had also formed its own committee to address the yellow fever epidemic, which reported that "health has been restored" to the city of Philadelphia. Despite this, the committee

[88] Allen, Clarkson, and Jones 27.

urged citizens to still take precautions when handling bedding or clothing used by yellow fever patients:

> ...real danger is still to be apprehended from the bedding and clothing of those who have been ill of the malignant those who have been ill of the malignant fever. The committee have received satisfactory information, that numbers of valuable, but infected, beds have been given to the nurses and attendants of the sick, many of which will probably be offered for sale--they are also assured, that attempts have been made to ship on freight considerable quantities of beds and bedding, from Philadelphia, for this city; which were prudently refused by the person applied to. Therefore resolved, that in the opinion of this committee, it would be unsafe, and inexpedient, to admit the introduction into this city, of beds and bedding of any kind, or feathers in bags, or otherwise; also second hand wearing apparel of every species, coming from places infected with the yellow fever ---and that whoever shall attempt so high handed an offence, against the lives and health of the inhabitants of this city, will justly merit their resentment and indignation.[89]

New York's warning about the mattresses shows that fears of both yellow fever and Black crime persisted after the epidemic itself ended. This excerpt makes it seem as though nurses and aides, most of whom were Black, were well aware that the mattresses were infected and yet continued to sell them or at the very least traffic them out of state. In actuality, these individuals were likely struggling financially like many others in Philadelphia's working class. Having previously established that Black nurses were paid very little, and sometimes not at all, it is no surprise that they would try to sell their secondhand goods to make a profit as the city began to recover economically. The warning about contaminated mattresses, and the Black people that were supposedly trying to sell them to unsuspecting customers, demonstrates how fear of yellow fever and the Black body continued to haunt post-epidemic Philadelphia.

In the spring of 1794, nearly five months after the yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia had come to an end, Mathew Carey addressed his earlier publications about the city's Black volunteers. In a pamphlet titled "Address of M. Carey to the Public," he reaffirms his earlier

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[89] *Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 21, 1793,

accusations of theft and other malicious behaviors among Black nurses. Though he commends Richard Allen and Absalom Jones for their work, he refuses to retract the allegations that posited Philadelphia's Black volunteer force as opportunistic criminals. Yet, Carey does not believe that his publications were racist. In fact, he argued that he was on the side of Jones, Allen, and other Black Philadelphians: "...is this the language of an enemy? Is it not rather that of an advocate, endeavouring to palliate facts, which are not attempted to be denied?"[90]

Biological lies about the Black body are upheld in the legacies of Mathew Carey and Benjamin Rush, both having advertised the myth that Black people were immune to yellow fever.[91] Despite this, Benjamin Rush was known for his membership in the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in addition to his renowned medical career. Some of Carey's publications indicate a certain level of support, however surface level, for the abolitionist cause. In other documents published decades after the end of the epidemic, he supported the removal and resettlement of Black Americans to Africa.[92] His publishing history implies once again that individuals in late-eighteenth century America saw no conflict between their outwardly abolitionist views and their less-publicized beliefs in the inferiority of Black people.

Black people were not naturally immune to yellow fever, but in endorsing this false concept, Benjamin Rush and other medical professionals integrated principles of racist biology into medical practice. This line of thinking bolstered the argument that Black people's biological differences from white people would always prevent them from ever fully living up to the promise of citizenship. Using supposed biological differences between races as evidence,

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[90] Jacqueline Bacon. "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." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 125, no.1-2 (2001): 74.

[91] Carey acquiesced in a later edition of the pamphlet that Black people were not in fact immune to yellow fever. See Carey, 77-78.

[92] Bacon, 68.

scientists and medical professionals created a scientific basis for citizenship in the early American republic in which race could be manipulated to meet a certain standard of morality. Black people were not similar enough to white people to be granted citizenship, but they were different enough to justify undertaking dangerous labor for the wellbeing of white Philadelphians. At the same time, Black community leaders in Philadelphia knew that the labor that they provided them with an opportunity to leverage their work and ultimately their lives for eventual citizenship.

The debate surrounding abolition was underscored by the worsening physical and political health among Philadelphia's Black community. Colonial legislation blocked Black political participation while dictating the lives of free and enslaved Black people across Pennsylvania. Philadelphia, with its small but growing free Black population, selectively enforced colonial laws to restrict Black people's ability to work and socialize. This was an intentional act designed to prevent organized rebellion on the heels of such action in Haiti. In practice, however, it made Black people more vulnerable to disease through poor nutrition and housing in a growing city with little sanitation. It is difficult to determine if colonial legislation intended to create such a negative impact on the health of Black people in Philadelphia, but its power remains evident in the comparable death rates of Black and white people living in the city during the 1793 yellow fever epidemic. Just as Black bodies remained biologically separate in the white medical imagination, Black people remained excluded from the body politic in a state between enslavement and full political participation.

Scientific racism persists in academic writing and medical practice today. Over two centuries later, Americans still point to racist ideas of biological difference to explain Black people's supposed immunity to or proclivity for catching certain diseases. Yellow fever itself

remained a point of contention among historians until recent decades. Publications from as recent as 2010 still imply that Black people originating from West and Central Africa have a genetic, heritable immunity to yellow fever.[93] Despite this, there is no proof of evolutionary biological protection against yellow fever. Studies have shown that one bout of yellow fever is generally enough to prevent a person from contracting the disease again, meaning that immunity to the disease is not heritable.[94]

Moreover, the juxtaposition of disease outbreak against Black liberation in the yellow fever epidemic parallels the present coronavirus pandemic. Much like 1793, the summer of 2020 was marked by revolution as protests across the country demanded justice for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others who were murdered by the police. Much like rumors of Black immunity circulating in the press, the first few months of the pandemic saw disinformation spread among Americans, with Black people across the United States jokingly asserting that Blackness offered an immunity to the coronavirus. It was not biological differences between the races that made Black people more susceptible to the coronavirus, just as the Black population of Philadelphia was not protected by natural evolutionary immunity. Rather, Black people living through the yellow fever epidemic of 1793 and the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 died from similar social and economic conditions that left them vulnerable to disease. A lack of access to proper healthcare and frequent exposure to disease through essential work exemplify the burden that Black people have carried and continue to bear in the face of biological disaster.

[93] Espinosa, 438.
[94] Espinosa, 447.

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