

out and made mention of, we esteem partial and injurious; we know as many whites who were guilty of it; but this is looked over, while the blacks are held up to censure.—Is it a greater crime for a black to pilfer, than for a white to privateer? . . . [W]e have suffered equally with the whites, our distress hath been

very great, but much unknown to the white people. . . . We can assure the public we have taken four and five black people in a day to be buried. . . . It is even to this day a generally received opinion in this city, that our color was not so liable to the sickness as the whites. We hope our friends will pardon us for

setting this matter in its true state. The public were informed that in the West Indies and other places where this terrible malady had been, it was observed the blacks were not affected with it. Happy would it have been for you, and much more so for us, if this observation had been verified by our experience.

When the people of color had the sickness and died, we were imposed upon and told it was not with the prevailing sickness, until it became too notorious to be denied, then we were told some few died but not many. Thus were our services extorted at the peril of our lives.

## A Contemporary Black Perspective on the 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic in Philadelphia

Rana Hogarth, PhD

**R**ichard Allen, one of the authors of *Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia*, was born into slavery in 1760. Owned first by Benjamin Chew and then Stokely Sturgis, Allen experienced fair treatment by his own accounts but still yearned for his freedom. Allen would eventually purchase his freedom in the 1780s. After converting to Methodism, he traveled to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he made ends meet by working as a shoemaker and preaching to African Americans at the St. George's Methodist Church (African Americans received their services separately from Whites).<sup>1</sup> Absalom Jones, Allen's *Narrative* coauthor, was born a slave in 1746 and was eventually separated from his family through sale, ending up in Philadelphia at the age of 16 years. There he worked in a store, attended school, and eventually got married. He was manumitted in 1784.<sup>2</sup>

These two men met when Jones attended one of Allen's services. By 1787, they had founded the Free African Society in Philadelphia, a mutual aid society consisting of free and formerly enslaved Black people. Both men enjoyed leadership positions within Philadelphia's free Black community; Richard Allen would go on to found the Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, while Absalom Jones would head the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas.<sup>3</sup>

Jones and Allen are well known for their commitment to uplifting and supporting free African Americans in Philadelphia and for their contributions to African American religious life more broadly. These two figures showed courage, poise, and dignity in the face of the catastrophic loss of life during Philadelphia's 1793 yellow fever epidemic and in the face of unfair attacks that they and members of their community received in the aftermath.<sup>4</sup> It was, after all, their organizational skill, leadership, and compassion that held the city together in the fateful summer and autumn of 1793.

The extraordinary role that Black people played in this epidemic is brought into sharp relief when one looks at the letter that Isaac Heston wrote to his brother 10 days before Isaac died of the fever: "indeed, I don't know what the people would do, if it was not for the Negroes, as they are the principal nurses."<sup>5</sup> When yellow fever struck Philadelphia that year, the city, which was the nation's temporary capital, was turned into a "melancholy scene of devastation."<sup>6</sup> Philadelphia was home to upwards of 51 200 inhabitants, 94% of them White and 6% Black. According to Susan Klepp, during the epidemic roughly 5000 people perished; estimates of death from yellow fever were approximately "3,095 for whites and 198 for blacks."<sup>7</sup> As Klepp has made clear,

the true proportion of African American deaths will remain unknown because the under-recording of black deaths occurs in all surviving documents from 1793, and because there is no separate listing of black deaths during the epidemic months.<sup>8</sup>

As physicians and laypersons attempted to make sense of yellow fever's impact on the city, race continually emerged as a characteristic that was believed to influence susceptibility to and severity of the disease (at the time of this epidemic, the concept of a mosquito vector was unknown). Black people were erroneously believed to be to be resistant to yellow fever, or, if susceptible, they were likely to experience only mild symptoms relative to Whites. This belief, it should be noted, appeared in published medical treatises penned by highly respected and well-trained physicians and was subsequently passed on to the next generation of practitioners.

This transfer of erroneous information about Black people and innate immunity is precisely what happened in the case of the 1793 epidemic. Benjamin Rush, the renowned antislavery physician, had read about the supposed resilience Black people showed to yellow fever in older medical treatises, and only then did he try to convince

Richard Allen and Absalom Jones to stay behind and help tend the sick in Philadelphia. In a letter written to Allen in September 1793, Rush explained his reason for asking Allen and the free Black community to stay behind during the deadly epidemic: “It has pleased God to visit this city with a malignant and contagious fever, which infects white people of all ranks, but passes by persons of your color.”<sup>9</sup>

Rush’s plea to Allen to marshal a cadre of Black people to help with the epidemic did not go unheard. Allen and Jones mobilized Philadelphia’s Black community to assist with nursing the sick and burying the dead. At a time when nearly one third of the city fled yellow fever, free African Americans chose to stay behind; little did they know that they were putting themselves in harm’s way both literally and figuratively.

Rush’s uncritical acceptance of the belief that Black people were naturally immune to the disease because of their race would prove to have disastrous consequences: Richard Allen contracted yellow fever during the epidemic and nearly died from it. Moreover, as the fever started to subside, a popular pamphlet (*A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia*) penned by respected Irish American publisher Mathew Carey circulated throughout the city, accusing Philadelphia’s African American community of extorting money, pilfering from the sick, and generally taking advantage of the situation.<sup>10</sup>

To Jones and Allen, who were acutely aware of the daily injustices thrown in the way of African Americans and who convinced their community members to stay behind and help in spite of the ways in which Whites contributed to their status as second-class citizens, Carey’s actions were unacceptable. Jones and Allen pushed back on Carey’s damaging and ill-informed claims and highlighted how the suffering of Philadelphia’s Black community had been trivialized or ignored in most White accounts of the disease.

It was under these circumstances that Philadelphia’s leading free Black ministers, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, jointly penned *Narrative*. Jones and Allen put forth their version of events in a pointed and concise pamphlet, one that would live on as the first copyrighted pamphlet by African Americans and a critical firsthand account of the impact of the yellow fever epidemic from the perspectives of African Americans. Much was at stake in penning this pamphlet; indeed, the reputation of the city’s Black inhabitants depended on it. Mathew Carey did not just give the heroic works of the city’s Black people short shrift but implied that those Black people who did offer true assistance were exceptions rather than the rule. Scholars have noted that Carey’s “portrayal of African American service is at best neglectful, at worst malevolent.”<sup>11</sup>

To date, Jones and Allen’s *Narrative* remains one of the only primary sources of Black perspectives on one of the earliest public health crises in the early republic. Thus, *Narrative* represents just one example of how African Americans

have refused to be silent on matters relating to their health and perceptions of their community. Jones and Allen’s pamphlet has garnered attention from historians as an instructive source for understanding the African American experience in early America. Its value, however, transcends disciplinary and professional boundaries. Their pamphlet—and the historical context under which it emerged—reveals the ways in which medical thinking directed conceptions of what it meant to be Black or White. More importantly, it helps bring into focus the ways in which our current expectations about health often rely on age-old ideologies of race. **AJPH**

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The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

### ENDNOTES

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