Philadelphia 1793: Yellow Fever, Race, Medicine and Politics

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Abstract:

This curriculum unit will examine Philadelphia in the year of 1793. Philadelphia was the capital city of the United States, the center of politics of the day. Immigrants were pouring into the city of “brotherly love.” George and Martha were living in Robert Morris’ mansion, a short distance from the more crowded, filthy streets of the bustling port city. The French Revolution and its politics were felt in the city with its large French population. Dr. Benjamin Rush, signer of the Declaration of Independence, was teaching his students at the University of Pennsylvania. Then there was the deadly illness that spread through the city like wild fire. The year of 1793 and its yellow fever epidemic would forever change Philadelphia.

In Philadelphia, 1793, the debate over the cause and cure of yellow fever dominated all else. In the middle of the summer people started dying in unusual numbers. At first only the poor living closest to the Delaware River were affected. It was not until the wealthier Philadelphians started to die that those in power took note. Dr. Rush treated the disease with his only method of healing, bleeding and purging. While his treatment was useless, his presence in the city was heartening. As the disease spread many fled the city of Philadelphia. President Washington and most of the new government officials administered the affairs of the nation from outside Philadelphia.

The black community in Philadelphia provided the manpower to do what others did not want to do: collect and bury the dead. Reverends Absalom Jones and Richard Allen were important leaders who volunteered and helped the white community during the crisis. In the early stages of the epidemic it appeared that the black population was immune from yellow fever. Thus, they did not leave the city.

By December 1793, five thousand people died in what has been called the worst health disaster ever to befall an American city. This yellow fever epidemic was filled with horror, intrigue, powerful players and politics. Philadelphia would never be the same.