A Colonial “Coronavirus”: Leadership Lessons on Resilience and Race

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• Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s last sermon, “Awakening to a Revolution,” suggests the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793-1799 as a social justice metaphor for this pandemic moment.

• The Yellow Fever Epidemic, a colonial coronavirus, was one of the most terrifying crises in early American history. Yellow Fever afflicted America’s capital, Philadelphia, with death, suffering and a leadership deficit.

• In 1793 alone, one-half of the population fled the city, including founding fathers Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington. Those left in the city were often the poor, including Africans.

• Many of the city’s prominent physicians fled—80 doctors left in August alone, and the remaining 10 paid with their lives.

• Over 5,000 people (about one-tenth of the population) died of the fever in Philadelphia. The first Yellow Fever epidemic in 30 years beset, what was described by the doctors of the day, “the healthiest city in the healthiest nation in the world.”
Colonial Epidemiology and Xenophobia

- The first victims were working-class people living along the Delaware river. Victims suffered hemorrhages and high fevers; their eyes and skin turned yellow; and they expelled black vomit. Many died from internal bleeding only days after becoming sick.
- The College of Physicians in April 26, 1793, based on prevailing theory that the disease was contagious and spread by putrid vapors recommended:
  o avoid people with the disease,
  o breathe through cloths soaked with camphor or vinegar,
  o burn gunpowder to clear the air, and
  o establish a hospital to treat indigent victims, who were too poor to pay for the preferred home care.
- Dr. Benjamin Rush and his followers believed Yellow Fever to be of domestic origin and called on Philadelphia to face the awful truth and begin a program of sanitary reform. The city lacked an efficient sewage system, and outhouses and industrial waste polluted the water supply. Noxious fumes from tanneries, distilleries, soap manufacturers and other industries polluted city air. Rush attributed the Yellow Fever to vapors from a shipload of coffee from the West Indies, left rotting on a wharf.
Dr. William Currie and other physicians believed Yellow Fever was of foreign origin: West Indies by way of refugees, fleeing illness and slave rebellions in the Caribbean. Currie and some Federalist politicians and Philadelphians urged greater enforcement of quarantines, especially against the arrivals from Haiti—who arrived just before epidemic.

Neither camp of physicians understood that Yellow Fever illness was bourne by female mosquitoes of the species, *Aedes aegypti*, stowaways on ships from Santo Domingo.

Treatment for the Illness

Rush used purging and bleedings, based upon the belief that the abdominal viscera must be emptied of blood—as much as four-fifths of the body's total supply. Treatment was called both a “salvation” and "a murderous dose."
Bishop Richard Allen

- Founder of the Free African Society
- Organizer of a critical public health response – nurse and grave digging corps
- Founder of the AME Church, first Black denomination in America.
- Author of the first historical account of Black community life, first political publication
- Former enslaved person, who purchased freedom for himself and his wife

Dr. Benjamin Rush

- Professor at the University of Pennsylvania
- Founder of the prestigious College of Physicians of Philadelphia.
- Signatory of the Declaration of Independence, philanthropist, and teacher
- Founder of American medicine
- Abolitionist, who once owned a slave
Rush mistakenly believed that African Americans were immune to the epidemic. Assuming this racial difference, Rush asked African civic and religious leaders Richard Allen and Absalom Jones to organize nurse and burying corps—colonial first responders without masks mistakenly assumed to be immune.

“Parents desert their children as soon as they are infected, and in every room you enter you see no person but a solitary black man or woman near the sick. Many people thrust their parents into the streets as soon as they complain of a headache.” - Dr. Benjamin Rush

Epidemic historian Mathew Carey accused some African Americans of exploiting the pandemic, price-gouging for their services, and pillaging the homes of white patients.
In what is likely America’s earliest African American political publication, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen published a restrained rebuttal, depicting the horrible conditions under which the Black nurses worked, unassisted and sometimes refusing payment for their services.

In the wake of the epidemic, Philadelphia organized one of the first municipal health departments, sewer systems and sanitation campaigns.

In 1794 gratitude led city leaders and initially resistant white clergy to cooperate with the African-American community to found the first black-owned and -operated churches in the nation: African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas and Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church—following litigation and legislation.
Leadership Lessons on Race and Resilience

- The Coronavirus crisis exposes and exacerbates racial, class and generational inequities.
- Quarantining, isolating, de-densifying and fleeing are matters of class and race, not merely public health responses.
- The wealthy fled colonial Philadelphia and contemporary New York City leaving behind the poor. Almost 5% of New York’s total population fled and 40% left from the wealthiest neighborhoods.
Use Trust, Truth, and Context as well as Facts, Data and Science


  - Racial description without context makes bad worse
  - Territorial Stigmatization
  - Biologic Explanation
  - Behavioral Explanation
The Pandemic Crisis is a Democratic Opportunity

- Focus on agency not merely disparity
- Reimagine democratic infrastructure:
  - Pandemic curve and electoral calendar
  - Mail-in voting
  - Felony re-enfranchisement
  - Eliminate voter suppression
  - Create an affirmative right to vote
- Reimagine criminal justice
  - Compassionate release
  - Youth, immigrants and communities of color
  - Strategic de-incarceration and abolition
Suggested Readings