



Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

Variola: A Notable Foe

By Cindy Major

Smallpox is not a subject most people yearn to read about, but it is in the news in more depth and with increasing frequency every week. It is interesting to note that smallpox was a subject on the minds of the American Revolutionary soldiers, as well as our present day homeland defenders. Elizabeth A. Fenn, in her new book **Pox Americana, The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82**, does a wonderful job in describing this foe and how it affected the Revolutionary War.

Smallpox was a critical element in George Washington's preparation for being the commander of the American forces. While accompanying his half-brother Lawrence on a trip to Barbados, George was infected with Variola, the virus which causes smallpox. In relating Washington's ordeal, as described in his diary, Fenn walks us through the characteristics of the disease, how it is spread, the incubation period, and its symptoms -- without elaborating on the sensational and gory details. She also gives a history of the disease up to the 18th century. This discussion is very enlightening because it illustrates that smallpox was just as devastating to the population of Europe in the 15th century as it was on this continent in the 18th century. In both cases, people were living in stable, somewhat isolated groups that shared a common immune system. When one member of the group was infected, the virus learned that immune system and was even more ferocious in its attack on the rest of the group. Those who, like Washington, were lucky enough to survive the smallpox attack were immune for life.

Each chapter of **Pox Americana** begins with a personal story illustrating a point that the author is making. For example, Fenn discusses how movement during the war affected the spread of the disease. When the war began, people left homes and small communities that had been their whole world and traveled to places they never would have considered visiting. The story of John Patten from Bedford, New Hampshire, illustrates this point. Patten volunteered to fight for his country, traveling back and forth from military encampments to home. Finally, while he was in Canada, it was smallpox, not the British, which defeated him. Like most Continental soldiers, Patten never had the disease prior to the war.

Unlike the American forces, a large percentage of soldiers in the British Army were already immune to smallpox. The large number of immune soldiers gave the British the luxury of allowing, and in some cases ordering, soldiers who were not immune to undergo inoculation. The process of inoculation, unlike vaccination, actually infects the subject with a milder form of the virus. Since the incubation period is generally fourteen days, and the symptoms last at least that long, a soldier would be indisposed for a month or more. Because the need for inoculations was small, this process did not disable British fighting forces as it

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would the American army. Also, there were immune comrades available to care for the patients. Many deaths in the American camps were not from the virus alone but due to the lack of caretakers for the sick who were often unable to feed themselves.

Smallpox also had an affect on the civilian population. The sensible Abigail Adams took advantage of a twelve-day lifting of the ban on inoculations granted by the Massachusetts legislature. She went to Boston and had herself and her four children protected from the growing threat of infection. She was aware that smallpox was a very contagious disease as evidenced by her using smoke to disinfect letters she received from John Adams while he underwent inoculation in 1764. Despite this, she went to church regularly during the period she was undergoing inoculation herself.

After losses on the Canadian front, Washington and his officers could not deny that these deadly microbes were as dangerous a foe as the British artillery. Infected men were ordered into isolation. Inoculation was banned for fear that it would cause further spread of the disease. General Thomas declared that soldiers who disobeyed the ban would be punished by death. Having seen

the ordeal their comrades had endured, men still dared to seek inoculation. Some desperate souls attempted self-inoculation; others who were already infected flagrantly violated quarantines. The same passion for independence that drove these men to fight made discipline difficult at best.

As the war continued, it became apparent to Washington that inoculation of the American troops would have to be attempted. Not only were the existing forces being depleted by the disease but replacement soldiers were discouraged by its growing threat. In January 1777, Washington admitted, "*that the apprehensions of the Small pox and its calamitous consequences*" had "*greatly retarded the Inlistments*" from Virginia. In February of the same year, he informed John Hancock that he was ordering all members of the army who had not had the disease to be inoculated. In addition, inoculation was to be mandatory for all recruits joining the ranks. Inoculation centers were secretly set up across the country. According to Fenn, "...all of this required the utmost secrecy, for if the British got wind of it, they might capitalize on the temporary indisposition of thousands of American soldiers." Here in Virginia, they were located in Alexandria, Fairfax and Dumfries. Sadly, it was the Alexandria location where scandal broke out. Dr. William Rickman, the head of the

Alexandria inoculation center, was investigated for the abuse and neglect of his patients. The story of three men left freezing without food or water while they suffered the effects of the virus is horrendous. But the author relates testimony in defense of the doctor as well. One mitigating factor is the volume of people that needed attention. On one day, for example, seventeen hundred North Carolinians checked into an inoculation hospital in Alexandria.

It is understandable that our attention to the Revolutionary period is focused on the causes of the war and on the people who did the fighting. However, the smallpox epidemic of that same period took tens of thousands of lives across the continent and easily surpassed the number of deaths in battle. Elizabeth A. Fenn does credit to the subject, giving us a clear understanding of how it affected the people and events of the time.

Special thanks to Cindy Major for donating **Pox Americana** by Elizabeth A. Fenn to our docent library! If you would like to know more about the affects smallpox had on our young nation make sure and check it out!