

An

American **PLAGUE**

The TRUE and TERRIFYING STORY of the
YELLOW FEVER EPIDEMIC
of 1793

BOSTON GLOBE-HORN BOOK AWARD • ROBERT F. SIBERT INFORMATIONAL BOOK AWARD
JAMES MADISON BOOK AWARD • A NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST
ORBIS PICTUS AWARD • A NEWBERY HONOR BOOK



Jim Murphy

inguish the yellow fever infection
board of ships.—The following re-
sults to preserve from infection are
in the first authority—cleanliness,
carefulness, courage, regular and tem-
perate living, with the very moderate
of brand
to act as a
rits. So
dissolution
g the free
om, is also
om all infe
Died, on t
right's Fe
Hon. W
efident of
West-Che
uphin Co

Y TH
NEW-
tract of a
Grives, la
Neptune,
port to N
man in th
Septembe
“I take t
oming you
at. 42, d
e French
ing chafed
I ten o’cl
afe the pri
18 pound
lost fight o
light on a
ward, fired
ourfe four
or the light
er were pr
oding the c
y the affist
ad been tal
which the
hased, tak
ere.”

We are informed, there will be a
meeting of the Citizens this evening,
at the Tontine Coffee-House, to consi-
der of the best means of preventing the
introduction of the alarming disease,
that now ravages Philadelphia.

Extract of two letters from a gentleman
in Philadelphia, to his friend in this
city.

September 10.

“Our neighbourhood is as yet very
healthy, several have been cured of the
fever, which proves that its violence is
abating. new cases are not so frequent
as at first. Secretary Hamilton and his
life are on the recovery.”

proposed meeting.

Arrived.—Ship Providence, Jenkins,
West-Indies; Sloop Betsey, Chappell,
New-London; Apollo, Anderson,
New-port; Friendship, Johnston, Bal-

tion of the City.

WHEREAS, the City Commissioners,
have observed, a great number of dwell-
ing houses and stores in this City, which
for the present, are shut up, and having
apprehend, that some
sons, may avail them-
portunity, to commit
er outrages.—The said
aking the same under
deration, have agreed
able bodied men, well
their Sobriety, Honestly
ll be employed in ad-
ent Watch, to act as a
other manner, as the
rs shall think most ex-
more effectual protec-
and properties of the
time being.

Public notice is hereby
on, or persons, willing
ast, being recommend-
that they may make ap-
r of the Commissioners,
r at their stated meet-
and Friday evenings,
se—They being deter-
ed therein, with all
dispatch.

By Order of the Board,
IN MEASE, Clerk.

inters in the City, are re-
the above, in their News-
dnt.

e Citizens.

f old shirts, thifrs and
d, is much wanted at
the sick.

ave any to spare, are
d them to the State-
person is appointed to

CLARKSON, Mayor.

re requested, to publish
nt, for a few days.

e Citizens.

AN AMERICAN PLAGUE

THE TRUE AND TERRIFYING STORY
OF THE YELLOW FEVER EPIDEMIC OF 1793

by Jim Murphy

CLARION BOOKS / NEW YORK

late, practicable, and successful, (in
ninety-nine cases of an hundred) in the
present epidemic.
Sept. 13th.

DOCTOR RUSH'S
Celebrated Mercurial Purging & Sweating
POWDERS,
For preventing and curing the Prevailing
Putrid Fever, may be had, carefully prepa-
red, with proper directions, at
BETTON & HARRISON'S,
No. 10, South Second-street.
Sept. 14. dtf.

Those who have been intrusted with
the care of the houses belonging to citi-
zens who have removed into the coun-
try, are requested to send the Fire
Buckets belonging to such families, to
the Court-House, where they will be
placed under the care of the Constable
of the watch, and be ready for use in
case of fire.

This precaution at this time, is ex-
tremely necessary, and it is hoped, that
it will be particularly attended to.

MATTHEW CLARKSON, Mayor.
Sept. 12, 1793.

The Printers of newspapers in the
city, are requested to insert the above.

Clarion Books

a Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company imprint
3 Park Avenue, 19th Floor, New York, New York 10016
Copyright © 2003 by Jim Murphy

The text was set in 12-point Times Roman.

Book design by Trish Parcell Watts.

Map by Kayley LeFaiver.

All rights reserved.

For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book, write to
trade.permissions@hnhco.com or to Permissions, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Pub-
lishing Company, 3 Park Avenue, 19th Floor, New York, New York 10016.

www.hnhco.com

Printed in China

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Murphy, Jim

An American plague : the true and terrifying story of the yellow fever
epidemic of 1793 / by Jim Murphy.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-395-77608-2 (alk. paper)

1. Yellow fever—Pennsylvania—Philadelphia—History—18th century—
Juvenile literature. [1. Yellow fever—Pennsylvania—Philadelphia—History—
18th century. 2. Pennsylvania—History—1775–1865.] I. Title.

RA644.Y4 M875 2003

614.5'41'097481109033—dc21

2002151355

SCP 30 29

4500724531

AN AMERICAN PLAGUE

City of Philadelphia.

AT a Meeting of the Corporation, August 23, 1793, called expressly to take into consideration the present alarming state of the city, the Mayor laid before the Board, the following letters and orders, which he had from time to time, issued upon the occasion; and which, at the request of the Corporation, are now laid before the public.

GENTLEMEN,

AS there is great reason to apprehend that a dangerous, infectious disorder now prevails in this city, it is the duty of every department of authority to take the most effectual precautions to prevent its spreading: And as the keeping the streets at this time as clean as possible may conduce to that desirable object, I require that you will immediately upon the receipt of this letter, employ the scavengers in making the streets and gutters in every part of the town as clean as possible, and that as fast as the filth be laid together, that it be immediately hauled away.

I recommend that they begin to clean first in Water street, and all the alleys and passages from thence into Front-street, and then proceed to clean the other more airy streets.

I expect that the inhabitants will have the satisfaction of seeing this business going on, this afternoon or to-morrow morning; any delay on your part will reasonably be considered as an improper attention to a very essential duty.

MATTHEW CLARKSON, Mayor.

Phila. Aug. 22, 1793.

City Commissioners.

GENTLEMEN,

WHILST the present contagious fever shall continue in this city, it will be proper that every precaution be taken, that can in any degree prevent its spreading; and as it may conduce to that desirable end, I desire that you will be particularly attentive, to cause all the streets, lanes and alleys, in every part of the City, to be kept in a constant state of cleanliness, and to cause the filth and dirt to be hauled away, as speedily as it is heaped together. In executing this duty, you must not confine yourselves to the times prescribed by the ordinance, but cause it to be done as much oftener as may be necessary, to keep them effectually clean. The extra expence attending this business, will be allowed in account.

MATTHEW CLARKSON, Mayor.

Phila. Aug. 27 1793.

MR. BROWN,

I WISH, through the channel of your paper, for the good of the public, to introduce a hint to the Grave-Diggers of this city, to lay every corpse a proper depth under ground; as infectious disorders, are liable to be spread, when they are not above two feet under the earth, which I have reason to believe, has been some times the case.

MONITOR.

Aug. 30.

European Intelligence,

Received by the Ship *Adriana*, Captain Robertson.

[CONTINUED.]

LONDON, June 24.

Admiralty-Office, June 22, 1793.

Copy of a letter from Captain Edward Pellew, of his Majesty's ship *La Nympe*, to Mr. Stephens, dated off Portland, June 19, 1793.

I have the honor to inform you, that, at day-light yesterday morning, I was so fortunate as to fall in with the National French Frigate, *La Cleopatra*, mounting forty guns, and manned with 320 men, commanded by Monsieur Jean Mallon, three days from St. Maloes, and had taken nothing.

We brought her to close action at half past six, and in fifty-five minutes took possession of her; the two ships having fallen on board each other, we boarded her from the quarter-deck, and struck her colours; and finding it impossible to clear the ships, then hanging head and stern, we came to anchor, which divided us, after we had received on board 150 prisoners. The enemy fought us like brave men, neither ship firing a shot until we had hailed.—Her captain was killed, three lieutenants wounded; the number of men not yet ascertained, but; from the best accounts, about sixty; her mizen-mast overboard, and her tiller shot off.

I am extremely concerned she was not purchased at a less expence of valuable officers and men on our part, whose gallantry I cannot sufficiently regret, and to whose loss I cannot possibly do justice. We had twenty-three men killed, and twenty-seven men wounded, of which a list is enclosed.

I am very particularly indebted to my first lieutenant, Mr. Amherst Morris, and no less so to lieutenants George Luke and Richard Pellew, and I was also descended on the quarter deck by

generosity of the English Nation.

"Your Lordship will see that it is necessity alone that made me change name, when I came to seek an asylum in England. I respect the Laws. The fiction I made use of when at Dover was merely local, and I hasten to pair it by a true declaration of myself."

"If my request can be granted, I will comply with whatever the prudence of the Minister shall require of me,"

"I have the honour to be, &c.
(Signed) "DUMOURIER."

Lord GRENVILLE's ANSWER.

"Whitehall, June 16, 1793.

"I received, Sir, this morning, your Letter you did me the honour to address to me. It is the business of the Secretary of State for the Home Department to take the orders of His Majesty relative to the residence of Aliens in this Kingdom, and to notify the fact officially; but as it is to me that you have addressed yourself on this occasion, I cannot do otherwise than acknowledge the receipt of your Letter, and answer the demands which it contains."

"Your stay in England will be subject to too many inconveniences, to make it possible for the Government of this Country to permit it. I cannot but regret, that you had not gained information in this particular before you came to England. If your wish had been made known to me before you undertook the journey, I would have informed you without reserve, that it would have been a useless one. It remains now with me to point out to you my opinion, that you must conform without delay, to the decision I have been under the necessity to communicate to you by this Letter."

"I have the honour to be, &c.

(Signed) "GRENVILLE."
M. DUMOURIER.

About the middle of the day, Thursday last, a dreadful fire broke out at Staaton St John's, about four miles from Oxford, which entirely destroyed twenty-one dwelling-houses, five barns and divers other out buildings, by which many of the inhabitants are reduced to the utmost distress.

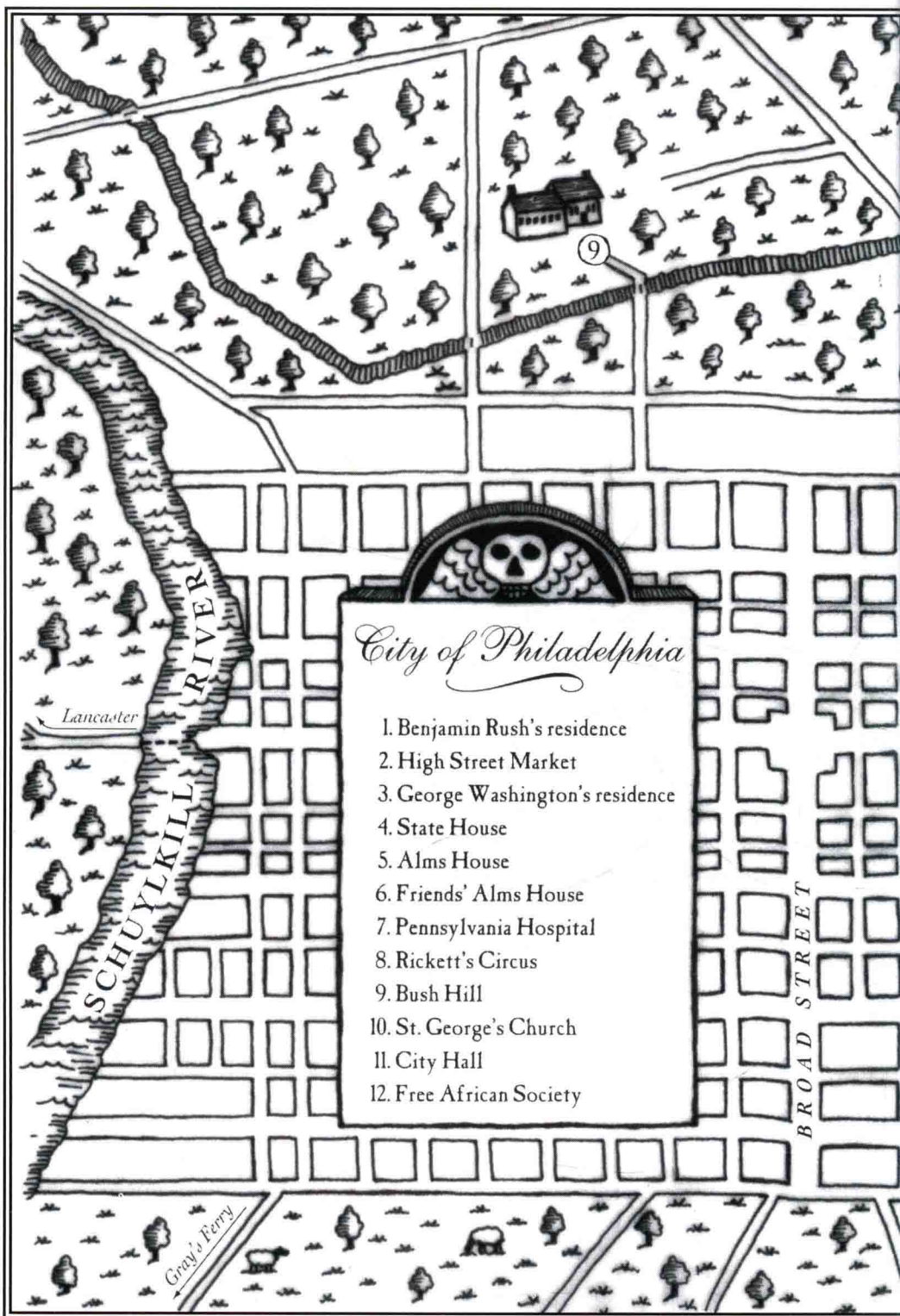
Commercial Failures.

THE malicious and absurd attempt to charge the late commercial failure to the account of the war is properly exposed in the following observations introduced into the fourth edition of Mr. Bowles's *Real Grounds of the War*.

"Imported however as the war is its object, and just in its principle, most illiberal endeavours are made to enhance its difficulties, to depreciate

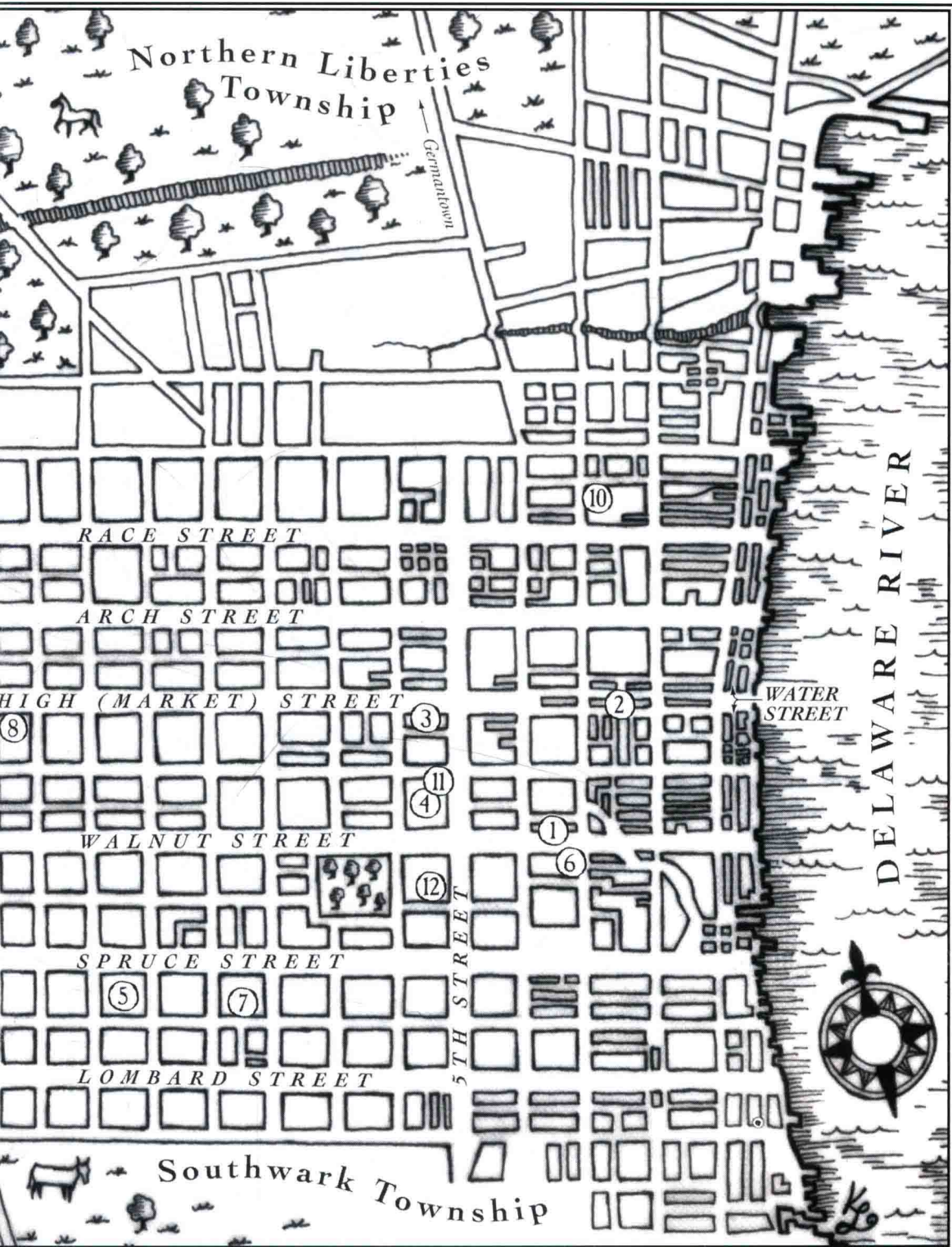
*For Mike and Ben—my wonderful, at-home
germ machines. This one's for you!*

With love, Dad



City of Philadelphia

1. Benjamin Rush's residence
2. High Street Market
3. George Washington's residence
4. State House
5. Alms House
6. Friends' Alms House
7. Pennsylvania Hospital
8. Rickett's Circus
9. Bush Hill
10. St. George's Church
11. City Hall
12. Free African Society



- Warner Swen, last and heel maker, 24, Chestnut St.
 Warner Joseph, last and heel maker, 14, Chestnut St.
 Warner Ann, 20, Mulberry St.
 Warner John, ivory turner and whale-bone cutter, 28, No. Fourth St.
 Warner James, hair-sieve maker, 1, Coombes's alley
 Warner Heronimus, brass founder, 26, No. Eighth St.
 Warren James, ship carpenter, 420, So. Front St.
 Warren Mary, schoolmistress, Shepherd's alley
 Warrington Benjamin, labourer, 19, Plumb St. Southwark
 Warrington Caesar, labourer, 123, Pine St.
 Wart Esther, widow, Sassafras near Broad St.
 Warts Jacob, labourer, 16, Plumb St. Southwark
 Wartman Adam, merchant, 169, No. Third St.
 WASHINGTON GEORGE, *President of the United States*, 190, High St.
 Wallem Christopher, labourer, 23, Vernon St.
 Waterman Jesse, schoolmaster, 103, Chestnut St.
 Waters Thomas, gentleman, 69, No. Second St.
 Waters Nathaniel, hatter, 87, No. Second St.
 Waters John, schoolmaster, 272, So. Second St.
 Waters Thomas, well digger back, 154, Spruce St.
 Watkins James, joiner, 121, Mulberry St.
 Watkins Thomas, bruthmaker, 13, Strawberry St.
 Watkins John, boot and shoemaker, 17, Cedar St.
 Watkins David, grocer, Crab lane, near Shippen St. Southwark
 Watkins William, tobacconist, 167, So. Front, and 166, So. Water St.
 Waton John, clerk in the bank of North America, 254, High St.
 Waton Charles C. taylor, 93, So. Second St.
 Waton Margaret, milliner, 177, So. Second St.
 Waton William, sea captain, 58, Duke St. No. Lib.
 Waton Thomas, grocer, 48, Lombard St.
 Waton Benjamin, coppersmith, 140, So. Fourth St.
 Watts George, sea captain, 13, Vernon St.
 Way George sen. coachmaker, 79, Dock St.
 Way Andrew, taylor, 1, Quarry St.
 Way George jun. coachmaker, 25, Carter's alley
 Wayne Elizabeth, widow, 440, So. Front St.
 Wayne Samuel, house carpenter, 13, Key's alley
 Wayne William, lumber merchant, 166, No. Front St.
 Wayne Jacob, cabinet and chair maker, 162, No. Front and 17, Key's alley
 Weatherby Samuel, corder of wood, 82, No. Water St.
 Weatherby Margaret, widow, 3, Strawberry St.
 Weatherstone Peter, hottler, 393, No. Second St.
 Weatherstone John, butcher, corner of Crown and Vine Sts.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE	No One Noticed	1
CHAPTER TWO	"All Was Not Right"	11
CHAPTER THREE	Church Bells Tolling	21
CHAPTER FOUR	Confusion, Distress, and Utter Desolation	35
CHAPTER FIVE	"It Was Our Duty"	47
CHAPTER SIX	The Prince of Bleeders	57
CHAPTER SEVEN	"By Twelve Only"	67
CHAPTER EIGHT	"This Unmerciful Enemy"	79
CHAPTER NINE	"A Delicate Situation"	91
CHAPTER TEN	Improvements and the Public Gratitude	103
CHAPTER ELEVEN	"A Modern-Day Time Bomb"	125
SOURCES		141
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS		155
A NOTE ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATIONS		157
INDEX		159

CHAPTER ONE

No One Noticed

*About this time, this destroying scourge,
the malignant fever, crept in among us.*

—MATHEW CAREY, NOVEMBER 1793

Saturday, August 3, 1793. The sun came up, as it had every day since the end of May, bright, hot, and unrelenting. The swamps and marshes south of Philadelphia had already lost a great deal of water to the intense heat, while the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers had receded to reveal long stretches of their muddy, root-choked banks. Dead fish and gooey vegetable matter were exposed and rotted, while swarms of insects droned in the heavy, humid air.

In Philadelphia itself an increasing number of cats were dropping dead every day, attracting, one Philadelphian complained, “an amazing number of flies and other insects.” Mosquitoes were everywhere, though their high-pitched whirring was particularly loud near rain barrels, gutters, and open sewers.

These sewers, called “sinks,” were particularly ripe this year. Most streets in the city were unpaved and had no system of covered sewers

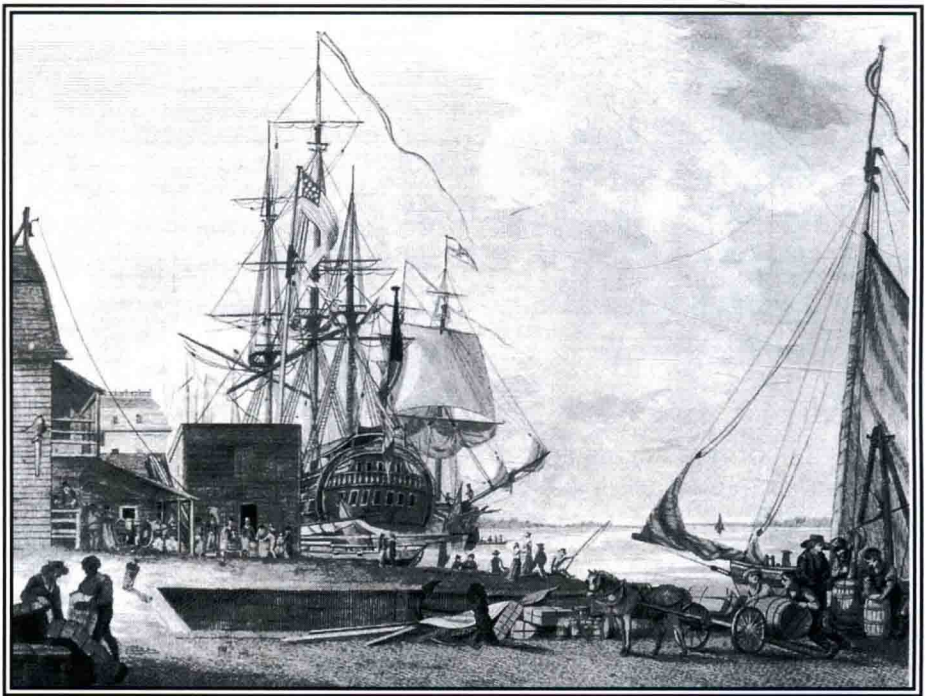
and pipes to channel water away from buildings. Instead, deep holes were dug at various street corners to collect runoff water and anything else that might be washed along. Dead animals were routinely tossed into this soup, where everything decayed and sent up noxious bubbles to foul the air.

Down along the docks lining the Delaware, cargo was being loaded onto ships that would sail to New York, Boston, and other distant ports. The hard work of hoisting heavy casks into the hold was accompanied by the stevedores' usual grunts and muttered oaths.

The men laboring near Water Street had particular reason to curse. The sloop *Amelia* from Santo Domingo had anchored with a cargo of

The ferryboat (right) from Camden, New Jersey, has just arrived at the busy Arch Street dock.

(THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA)



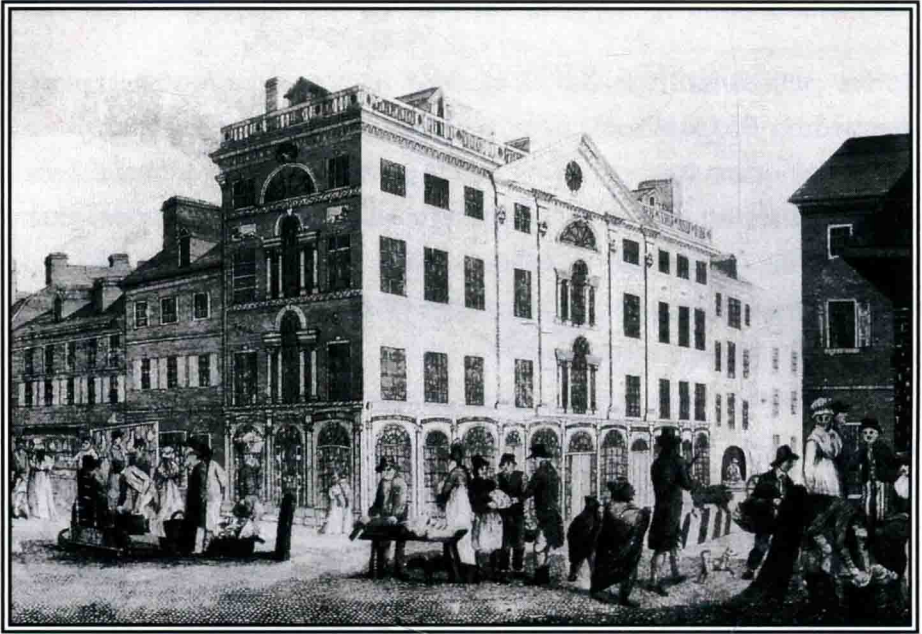
coffee, which had spoiled during the voyage. The bad coffee was dumped on Ball's Wharf, where it putrefied in the sun and sent out a powerful odor that could be smelled over a quarter mile away. Benjamin Rush, one of Philadelphia's most celebrated doctors and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, lived three long blocks from Ball's Wharf, but he recalled that the coffee stank "to the great annoyance of the whole neighborhood."

Despite the stench, the streets nearby were crowded with people that morning—ship owners and their captains talking seriously, shouting children darting between wagons or climbing on crates and barrels, well-dressed men and women out for a stroll, servants and slaves hurrying from one chore to the next. Philadelphia was then the largest city in North America, with nearly 51,000 inhabitants; those who didn't absolutely have to be indoors working had escaped to the open air to seek relief from the sweltering heat.

Many of them stopped at one of the city's 415 shops, whose doors and windows were wide open to let in light and any hint of a cooling breeze. The rest continued along, headed for the market on High Street.

Here three city blocks were crowded with vendors calling their wares while eager shoppers studied merchandise or haggled over weights and prices. Horse-drawn wagons clattered up and down the cobblestone street, bringing in more fresh vegetables, squawking chickens, and squealing pigs. People commented on the stench from Ball's Wharf, but the market's own ripe blend of odors—of roasting meats, strong cheeses, days-old sheep and cow guts, dried blood, and horse manure—tended to overwhelm all others.

One and a half blocks from the market was the handsomely refurbished mansion of Robert Morris, a wealthy manufacturer who had used his fortune to help finance the Revolutionary War. Morris was lending this house to George and Martha Washington and had moved himself into another, larger one he owned just up the block. Washington



Rich and poor do their food shopping along Market Street.

(THE LIBRARY COMPANY OF PHILADELPHIA)

was then president of the United States, and Philadelphia was the temporary capital of the young nation and the center of its federal government. Washington spent the day at home in a small, stuffy office seeing visitors, writing letters, and worrying. It was the French problem that was most on his mind these days.

Not so many years before, the French monarch, Louis XVI, had sent money, ships, and soldiers to aid the struggling Continental Army's fight against the British. The French aid had been a major reason why Washington was able to surround and force General Charles Cornwallis to surrender at Yorktown in 1781. This military victory eventually led to a British capitulation three years later and to freedom for the United States—and lasting fame for Washington.

Then, in 1789, France erupted in its own revolution. The common people and a few nobles and churchmen soon gained complete power in

France and beheaded Louis XVI in January 1793. Many of France's neighbors worried that similar revolutions might spread to their countries and wanted the new French republic crushed. Soon after the king was put to death, revolutionary France was at war with Great Britain, Holland, Spain, and Austria.

Naturally, the French republic had turned to the United States for help, only to have President Washington hesitate. Washington knew that he and his country owed the French an eternal debt. He simply wasn't sure that the United States had the military strength to take on so many formidable foes.

Many citizens felt Washington's Proclamation of Neutrality was a betrayal of the French people. His own secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson, certainly did, and he argued bitterly with Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton over the issue. Wasn't the French fight for individual freedom, Jefferson asked, exactly like America's struggle against British oppression?

The situation was made worse in April by the arrival of the French republic's new minister, Edmond Charles Genêt. Genêt's first action in the United States was to hire American privateers, privately owned and manned ships, to attack and plunder British ships in the name of his government. He then traveled to Philadelphia to ask George Washington to support his efforts. Washington gave Genêt what amounted to a diplomatic cold shoulder, meeting with him very briefly, but refusing to discuss the subject of United States support of the French. But a large number of United States citizens loved Genêt and the French cause and rallied around him.

Pro-French sympathies were further heightened in July by the sudden influx of 2,100 French refugees, who were fleeing a fierce slave rebellion in Santo Domingo. Pro-French demonstrations were held near the president's home and escalated in intensity. Vice President John

Adams was extremely nervous about this "French Madness" and recalled that "ten thousand people in the streets of Philadelphia . . . threatened to drag Washington out of his house, and effect a revolution in the government or compel it to declare war in favor of the French Revolution."

While Washington worried, the city's taverns, beer gardens, and coffeehouses—all 176 of them—were teeming with activity that Saturday. There men, and a few women, lifted their glasses in toasts and singing and let the hours slip away in lively conversation. Business and politics and the latest gossip were the favorite topics. No doubt the heat, the foul stink from Ball's Wharf, and the country's refusal to join with France were discussed and argued over at length.

In all respects it seemed as if August 3 was a very normal day, with business and buying and pleasure as usual.

Oh, there were a few who felt a tingle of unease. For weeks an unusually large supply of wild pigeons had been for sale at the market. Popular folklore suggested that such an abundance of pigeons always brought with it unhealthy air and sickness.

Dr. Rush had no time for such silly notions, but he, too, sensed that something odd was happening. His concern focused on a series of illnesses that had struck his patients throughout the year—the mumps in January, jaw and mouth infections in February, scarlet fever in March, followed by influenza in July. "There was something in the heat and drought," the good doctor speculated, "which was uncommon, in their influence upon the human body."

The Reverend J. Henry C. Helmuth of the Lutheran congregation, too, thought something was wrong in the city, though it had nothing to do with sickness of the body. It was the souls of its citizens he worried about. "Philadelphia . . . seemed to strive to exceed all other places in the breaking of the Sabbath," he noted. An increasing number of people shunned church and went instead to the taverns, where they drank and



A group of well-to-do men gather at the City Tavern to drink, smoke their pipes, and talk away the afternoon.

(THE LIBRARY COMPANY OF PHILADELPHIA)

gambled; too many others spent their free time in theaters which displayed “rope-dancing and other shows.” Sooner or later, he warned, the city would feel God’s displeasure.

Rush and Helmuth would have been surprised to know that their worries were turning to reality on August 3. For on that Saturday a young French sailor rooming at Richard Denny’s boarding house, over on North Water Street, was desperately ill with a fever. Eighteenth-century record keeping wasn’t very precise, so no one bothered to write