



Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82

By Elizabeth A. Fenn

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The astonishing, hitherto unknown truths about a disease that transformed the United States at its birth

A horrifying epidemic of smallpox was sweeping across the Americas when the War of Independence began, and yet we know almost nothing about it. Elizabeth A. Fenn is the first historian to reveal how deeply variola affected the outcome of the war in every colony and the lives of everyone in North America.

By 1776, when military action and political ferment increased the movement of people and microbes, the epidemic worsened. Fenn's remarkable research shows us how smallpox devastated the American troops at Québec and kept them at bay during the British occupation of Boston. Soon the disease affected the war in Virginia, where it ravaged slaves who had escaped to join the British forces. During the terrible winter at Valley Forge, General Washington had to decide if and when to attempt the risky inoculation of his troops. In 1779, while Creeks and Cherokees were dying in Georgia, smallpox broke out in Mexico City, whence it followed travelers going north, striking Santa Fe and outlying pueblos in January 1781. Simultaneously it moved up the Pacific coast and east across the plains as far as Hudson's Bay.

The destructive, desolating power of smallpox made for a cascade of public-health crises and heartbreaking human drama. Fenn's innovative work shows how this mega-tragedy was met and what its consequences were for America.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this engaging, creative history, Fenn (Natives and Newcomers) addresses an understudied aspect of the American Revolution: the intimate connection between smallpox and the war. Closed-in soldiers' quarters and jails, as well as the travel demands of fighting, led to the outbreak of smallpox in 1775. George Washington ended an outbreak in the north by inoculating American soldiers (the colonists had a weaker immune system against smallpox than the British). Indeed, Fenn makes a plausible case that without Washington's efforts, the colonists might have lost the war. Despite the future president's success at "outflanking the enemy" of smallpox, however, the disease spread on the Southern front, where there was "chaos, connections, and a steady stream of victims." Even as the war ended, the increased contact between populations spread the disease as far as Mexico and the Pacific Northwest. The outbreak eventually killed an estimated 125,000 North Americans more than five times the number of colonial soldiers who died (to her credit, Fenn admits that these numbers are inexact). Along the way, Fenn, who teaches history at George Washington University, recounts the fate of many blacks freed under a British "emancipation proclamation" of sorts; promised their freedom if they fought for the British, several thousand ex-slaves perished from smallpox. She also traces the disease's effect on the North American balance of power by devastating some Native American tribes in the 1780s. Long after the war, whites kept Native Americans passive with explicit threats of infection. Fenn has placed smallpox on the historical map and shown how intercultural contact can have dire bacterial consequences.³⁸ b&w illus. not seen by PW.

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From Library Journal

Many books have been written about smallpox, but few have this volume's scholarly focus. Fenn (history, George Washington Univ.) relies heavily on primary documents to illustrate the disease's devastating impact on the political and military history of North America during the Revolutionary War. Excerpts from diaries, letters, presidential papers, and church and burial records provide first-hand accounts of the spread of this disease. The result is an extensive discussion of the role of smallpox in the Colonial era, but the book's main strength is in the detailed analysis of smallpox among Native Americans, from Mexico to Canada. Fenn's study of the historical horrors of this devastating disease nicely complements Jonathan Tucker's *Scourge* (LJ 8/15/01), which considers what the future may be like if smallpox returns. Highly recommended for academic and medical libraries. Tina Neville, Univ. of South Florida at St. Petersburg Lib.

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From [The New Yorker](#)

When smallpox broke out during the American Revolution, conditions for contagion were ideal. People who were crowded in besieged cities, military encampments, or on ships infected one another, while travelling soldiers and sailors and fleeing civilians often unwittingly spread the disease. (Smallpox shows no symptoms during its two-week incubation period.) North America's peoples (black, red, and white) were far more vulnerable to the disease than the British, because they had been exposed to it far less, and many Americans suspected their enemies of waging germ warfare by deliberately infecting the civilian population. Fenn's use of contemporary sources, including Lakota pictographs, conveys the frightfulness of the disease and human helplessness when it struck. In an epilogue, the author points out that the epidemic took five times as many lives as the war did, hitting Native American populations especially hard: "While the American Revolution

may have defined the era for history, epidemic smallpox nevertheless defined it for many of the Americans who lived and died in that time."

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Users Review

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Cheryl Thornton:

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Cheryl Lopez:

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can the world has grown up. The vocabulary styles that writer use to explain it is easy to understand. The writer made some exploration when he makes this book. Honestly, that is why this book appropriate all of you.

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