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## Citation

Gamble, Vanessa Northington. “Justice to Our Colour Demands It”: Absalom Jones and Richard Allen’s Narrative of African Americans in Philadelphia’s 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic.” Harvard Library Bulletin No Volume.

## Permanent link

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# “Justice to Our Colour Demands It”: Absalom Jones and Richard Allen’s Narrative of African Americans in Philadelphia’s 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic

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Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793; and a Refutation of Some Censures, Thrown Upon Them in Some Late Publications* (Philadelphia: Printed for the Authors, by William W. Woodward, 1794)

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RC211.P5 J71

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“It is unpleasant for us to make these remarks, but justice to our colour demands it,” proclaimed Absalom Jones (1746–1818) and Richard Allen (1760–1831) in their impassioned pamphlet, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793; and a Refutation of Some Censures, Thrown Upon Them in Some Late Publications*.<sup>[1]</sup> The document, published

on January 7, 1794, served several critical objectives for these two leaders of Philadelphia's free African American community. First, it refuted accusations launched by the prominent publisher, Mathew Carey (1760–1839), that race members had stolen from and extorted white citizens during a recent yellow fever epidemic. Second, it decried the racist characterizations of Black people contained in Carey's work. Third, it announced that they would not be silent to racial prejudice in their city. And, finally, it placed a spotlight on the death and suffering of Black Philadelphians from the epidemic disease, presenting a blistering challenge to false medical and popular theories about African Americans' inherent immunity to yellow fever.

In 1793, the United States was a young nation, and Philadelphia was its most important city. It was the state and federal capital as well as the country's political, economic, and medical epicenter. Its bustling port along the Delaware River was the commercial center of the new nation and home to the First Bank of the United States. Philadelphia also had pride of place as a medical capital. It was the location of several of the country's first medical institutions, including the first hospital (Pennsylvania Hospital in 1751) and medical school (University of Pennsylvania in 1787). In addition, the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, a professional medical organization, opened in 1787. With a population of approximately 55,000 people, Philadelphia was also the nation's largest city.

In August 1793, a raging yellow fever epidemic struck Philadelphia and threatened the stability of the new republic.<sup>[2]</sup> By the time that it ended, in November, at least 5,000 people had died, equivalent to about ten percent of the population. 20,000 people fled the city, including President George Washington and his Cabinet, the governor of the state, and most city officials. To handle the crisis, Mayor Matthew Clarkson (1733–1800) convened a board of citizen volunteers to run the city.

One month into the crisis, Clarkson asked Absalom Jones and Richard Allen for their assistance. Both men had been born enslaved, later bought their freedom, and eventually emerged as the foremost religious and civic leaders of the largest free Black community in the United States. They had collaborated on the 1787 establishment of Philadelphia's Free African Society, the city's first independent Black organization. The goals of the nondenominational, mutual-aid society included providing financial assistance and promoting literacy and morality. In 1794, their renown became even more cemented when Jones became the nation's first African American Episcopal priest and Allen founded Bethel Church, the mother church of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination.

The prevailing medical theory that African Americans were naturally immune to

yellow fever prompted Clarkson's solicitation of Jones and Allen.[3] Dr. Benjamin Rush (1746–1813), a prominent physician, abolitionist, and signer of the Declaration of Independence, was one of the leading proponents of the theory. He assured them that Black people could not contract the disease and urged them to accede to the mayor's request. Jones and Allen agreed and organized the Black response to the epidemic. They saw their assistance as their moral duty and as a strategy for racial advancement. Subsequently, African Americans provided essential services during the epidemic, especially since so many whites had fled the city.[4] They cleaned streets, nursed the afflicted, transported the sick, buried the dead, and administered therapies such as bleeding and purging. Black Philadelphians performed many tasks that few others wanted to do.

In the waning days of the yellow fever epidemic, Mathew Carey, an Irish immigrant and the nation's leading publisher, penned his best-selling pamphlet, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia: With a Statement of the Proceedings That Took Place on the Subject in Different Parts of the United States*.<sup>[5]</sup> Within two months, he released four editions of the publication and sold about 10,000 copies.<sup>[6]</sup> In his history of the crisis, Carey included a paragraph that denigrated the contributions of African Americans, especially nurses, and accused them of price-gouging and theft. He charged, "The great demand for nurses, afforded an opportunity for imposition, which was eagerly seized by some of the vilest of the blacks. They extorted two, three, four, and even five dollars a night for such attendance, as would have been well paid for, by a single dollar. Some of them were even detected in plundering the houses of the sick."<sup>[7]</sup>

Carey's assertions provoked Jones and Allen to pen *A Narrative* about seven weeks after the release of the third edition of *A Short Account*. Writing with scorching prose, they sharply repudiated his allegations and vigorously defended the reputation of the African American community. They proclaimed, "We feel ourselves sensibly aggrieved by the censorious epithets of many, who did not render the least assistance in the time of necessity, yet are liberal of their censure of us."<sup>[8]</sup> Indeed, Carey had not provided any assistance during the devastating weeks of the fever. He had fled the city despite his appointment to the mayor's committee responsible for mounting a response to the epidemic. Instead, as Jones and Allen noted, "two thirds of the persons, who rendered ... essential services, were people of colour."<sup>[9]</sup> The two contended that it was not extortion, but supply and demand, that led to the increased fees paid to Black nurses as caregivers became scarce and whites outbid each other for their services. Furthermore, they argued that the number of African Americans who took advantage of the situation was minimal and that most had volunteered without expectations for pay. Jones and Allen detailed how they had used their own funds to take care of their white neighbors, recounting, "We have buried *several*

*hundreds* of poor persons and strangers, for which service we have never received, nor never asked any compensation.” By the end of the epidemic, the duo had accumulated a debt of £177.98 from helping their fellow Philadelphians.[10] Carey, on the other hand, they sarcastically claimed, had reaped income from the epidemic: “We believe he has made more money by the sale of his ‘scraps’ [his publications] than a dozen of the greatest extortioners among the black nurses.”[11]

*A Narrative* also refuted Carey’s statements about African American immunity to yellow fever. Carey admitted that during the epidemic, Black people “did not escape the disorder.”[12] He claimed, however, that they were not sickened as frequently as whites, and that those who did fall ill responded more favorably to treatment than whites. Carey contended that the inaccuracies about Black immunity to the disease had served a purpose. He wrote, “The error that prevailed on this subject had a very salutary effect; for, at an early period of the disorder, few white nurses could be procured; and had the negroes been equally terrified, the sufferings of the sick, great as they actually were, would have been exceedingly aggravated.”[13] Thus, Carey believed that the racial immunity theory had benefitted white Philadelphians.

Jones and Allen refused to allow the disease to be viewed solely from a white perspective and drew necessary attention to the detrimental effects of yellow fever on Black Philadelphians. They placed Black suffering, anguish, and death from the disease at the center of *A Narrative*. They acknowledged the widespread acceptance of the racial immunity theory and sought to dispute it. They informed readers, “We have suffered equally with the whites, our distress hath been very great, but much unknown to the white people.”[14] Jones and Allen would not let the efforts of African Americans who put themselves in harm’s way go unheralded and supplied a record of names with detailed accounts of their efforts and sacrifices. For example, they included the story of Sampson, who went door-to-door offering assistance “without fee or reward.” After Sampson’s death from yellow fever, Jones and Allen revealed, “His family were neglected by those he had served.”[15] Notably, they did not mention Allen’s own bout with the disease; instead, they emphasized the sickness and sacrifices of ordinary African Americans.

Jones and Allen made plain that many African Americans had indeed died from yellow fever during the epidemic. They noted the fourfold increase in the number of Black burials in 1793 compared to 1792, and asked, “Was this to a great degree the effects of the services of the unjustly vilified people?”[16] In addition, they linked grievance with grief. They powerfully declared, “When the people of colour had the sickness and died, we were imposed upon and told it was not with the prevailing sickness, until it became too notorious to be denied, then we were told some few died but not many.

Thus were our services extorted *at the peril of our lives*, yet you accuse us of extorting *a little money from you*.”[17]

Carey had exempted Jones and Allen from his censure, so their individual reputations were not at risk. They understood, however, that it was the collective reputation of African Americans that was at risk. They considered Carey’s comments a racial attack, and in *A Narrative* protested his broad mischaracterizations of Black people as thieves and extortionists. They admitted that a few Black nurses were guilty of misconduct, but noted that Carey had failed to mention the instances in which white nurses had also engaged in such behaviors, nor had he used those examples to besmirch the white community as a whole. Jones and Allen realized the fragile status of free African Americans in Philadelphia and were concerned about the consequences of this defamatory stereotyping. They asserted, “We have many unprovoked enemies, who begrudge us the liberty we enjoy, and are glad to hear of any complaint against our colour, be it just or unjust.”[18] Thus, Jones and Allen could not be silent when Carey smeared Black people as vile persons out to profit from white misery. *A Narrative* demonstrated that Jones and Allen could and would articulately represent and protect the interests of Philadelphia’s Black community.

Jones and Allen’s pamphlet did have an influence on Carey’s evolving depiction of the activities of African Americans during the epidemic. The fourth edition of his pamphlet appeared on January 16, 1794, nine days after the release of *A Narrative*, and Carey added a footnote to the sentence that mentioned the activities of “the vilest of the blacks.” It read, “The extortion here mentioned, was very far from being confined to the negroes: many of the white nurses behaved with equal rapacity.”[19] Carey released the final edition of *A Short Account* in 1830—twelve years after the death of Absalom Jones. It contained a major revision to his characterization of the behavior of Black nurses, and those edits had been moved from a footnote to the main text. He wrote, “The great demand for nurses, afforded an opportunity for imposition, which was eagerly seized not by some of those who acted in that capacity, both coloured and white.”[20] Jones and Allen had finally won their battle of words with Carey.

*A Narrative* is a significant document in the history of epidemics and in African American history for several reasons. It is the only account of the 1793 yellow fever epidemic that illuminates the perspectives of Black people. Historian Philip Lapsansky has called it “the first account of a free black community in action” and “the first African-American polemic in which black leaders sought to articulate black community anger and directly confront an accuser.”[21] In addition, *A Narrative* was the first publication written by Black authors to receive a federal copyright in the United States. *A Narrative* had a run of 250–500 copies and was distributed in both the United States and Britain.[22] One pamphlet found its way to Providence, Rhode



Island, and the library of Moses Brown (1738–1832), a Quaker merchant, philanthropist, and abolitionist who was one of the co-founders of Brown University. It is his copy that is in the Countway Library’s collection.

## Notes

[1] Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793; and a Refutation of Some Censures, Thrown Upon Them in Some Late Publications* (Philadelphia: Printed for the Authors, by William W. Woodward, 1794), 12.

[2] The classic history of this epidemic is J. H. Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, [1949] 1993).

[3] For an extensive discussion of the history of racial immunity and yellow fever, see Rana A. Hogarth, *Medicalizing Blackness: Making Racial Difference in the Atlantic World, 1780–1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 17–47.

[4] For accounts of African Americans during the 1793 Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic and extended analysis of *A Narrative*, see Phillip Lapsansky, “‘Abigail, a Negress’: The Role and the Legacy of African Americans in the Yellow Fever Epidemic,” in *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation: The Public Response to the 1793 Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic*, ed. J. Worth Estes and Billy G. Smith (Canton, MA: Science History Publications/USA for The College of Physicians of Philadelphia and the Library Company of Philadelphia, 1997), 61–78; Jacqueline Bacon, “Rhetoric and Identity in Absalom Jones and Richard Allen’s ‘Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia,’” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 125 (2001): 61–90; Jay Clayton and Joanna Brooks, *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American Literatures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 151–78; Richard S. Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 78–127; Samuel Otter, *Philadelphia Stories: America’s Literature of Race and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Derrick R. Spires, *The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 35–78.

[5] Mathew Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever Lately Prevalent in*

*Philadelphia: With a Statement of the Proceedings That Took Place on the Subject in Different Parts of the United States, Third Edition, Improved* (Philadelphia: Printed by the author, November 30, 1793).

[6] Newman, *Freedom's Prophet*, 94.

[7] Carey, *A Short Account*, 78.

[8] Jones and Allen, *A Narrative*, 5.

[9] Jones and Allen, *A Narrative*, 5.

[10] Jones and Allen, *A Narrative*, 7.

[11] Jones and Allen, *A Narrative*, 8.

[12] Carey, *A Short Account*, 78.

[13] Carey, *A Short Account*, 78.

[14] Jones and Allen, *A Narrative*, 15.

[15] Jones and Allen, *A Narrative*, 11.

[16] Jones and Allen, *A Narrative*, 16.

[17] Jones and Allen, *A Narrative*, 15.

[18] Jones and Allen, *A Narrative*, 13.

[19] Mathew Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia, With a Statement of the Proceedings That Took Place on the Subject in Different Parts of the United States, Fourth Edition, Improved* (Philadelphia: Printed by the author, January 16, 1794), 63.

[20] Mathew Carey, *A Brief Account of the Malignant Fever Which Prevailed in Philadelphia in the Year 1793: With a Statement of the Proceedings That Took Place on the Subject in Different Parts of the United States, Fifth Edition, Improved* (Philadelphia: Clark and Raser Printers, 1830), 68.

[21] Lapsansky, "Abigail, a Negress," 61.

[22] Newman, *Freedom's Prophet*, 102–105.