

A Malignant Tale

Welcome to The Malignant Tale! This activity will set you and others in Philadelphia in 1793 during the yellow fever epidemic. Before you go through the activity, be warned that there are some serious topics (death, disease, race), as well as some gross ones, discussed throughout the activity.

Materials:

Letter strips	Storyboard	Garlic (mashed)
Hard boiled eggs	Wistar-Haines family tree	Vinegar

Background:

What is yellow fever?

- **Yellow fever** is a virus that people can get through a mosquito's bite.
 - A **virus** is a germ that causes you to get sick with things like the cold or the flu.
 - To help stop the spread of viruses you need to wash your hands often, especially after you leave the bathroom and before you eat or touch any food.
- You can get yellow fever specifically through a type of mosquito (*Aedes aegypti*) usually found in sub-Saharan and tropical areas.
- Yellow Fever has two stages of symptoms:
 - The acute phase: fever, headache, chills, nausea, vomiting. (Kind of like the flu.)
 - Toxic phase:
 - Jaundice - your skin turns yellow which shows that there is damage to your liver.
 - Delirium and confusion
 - Bleeding from the nose, mouth, and eyes at times
 - Throwing up black vomit - partially digested blood



Aedes aegypti
Image Credit: CDC

What's happening in Philadelphia in 1793?

- Philadelphia is the capital of the United States, as well as the center of trade, government, medicine, and science. (The US Constitution was only signed in 1787.) Gradual Abolition Act of 1780 passed that ensured enslaved people who were brought to Philadelphia were legally freed after six months in the city.
- Population: 50,000 - out of that the Black population was 2,159 with 310 of whom were enslaved.
- In 1793, doctors weren't curing diseases. They were attempting to cure symptoms instead. Philly's scientists and doctors were debating whether yellow fever was **contagious** (can spread from person to person) or not. Because there were so many professionals in Philly, a lot of written materials about yellow fever came out of the city (and still exist today in places like the APS).
- Ideas of curing yellow fever symptoms ranged from getting fresh air to bloodletting.
- **Bloodletting** is when a doctor would cut a patient and allow some blood drain out. In the 1700s they believed that when you were sick you had an imbalance of bad stuff and not enough good stuff in your body. To get rid of the bad blood, they would bleed a person and then the body would create good blood to circulate throughout the body.
- The hardest thing to understand while looking back, is how they didn't know what caused it! Today, we know mosquitoes transmitted the disease, but we didn't learn that until over 100 years after this epidemic. It's the same mosquito that transmits the zika virus.

Activity:

Your job is to put together letter fragments that tell the story of Caspar Wistar Haines during the yellow fever epidemic of 1793. Caspar stayed in Philadelphia to take care of his mother who was sick with yellow fever. During the epidemic, Caspar sent his family to their other house in Germantown, what is now the historic Wyck House. You will have to answer the before, during, and after questions below and on the storyboard to tell the full story of how different Philadelphia communities tried to survive yellow fever.

Download the “Yellow Fever materials.” Take the four letter fragments, read them, and answer the questions below to complete the story the of The Malignant Tale. One strip of letter will answer one of the questions on the storyboard. However, there is one decoy strip of letter so you will not use one of the strips.

Before, During, and After

- **Before:** What does Caspar do to prevent himself from getting yellow fever?
 - Hint: Does Caspar take anything in particular to defend himself from yellow fever?
- **During:** What does Caspar witness when his mother is sick?
 - Hint: Who takes care of Caspar’s mother?
- **After:** What does Caspar do after his mother’s death to get rid of yellow fever left in the room?
 - Hint: What does Caspar do to clean the room after his mother dies?

Tips and Tricks

- Having trouble figuring where a letter fits in? Look at the hints to help you out.
- Need help figuring out the cursive handwriting? Flip the letter over to see a full text transcription.
- If you’re doing this at home with younger kids take out the decoy letter strip.
- Look for context clues after reading the questions and hints.
- Flip back and forth between the cursive and the printed back and read the cursive together.

When you are finished with the activity move on to the Facilitation stage starting on the next page to discuss each letter piece in more detail.

Answer: “I have not been in the Room nor do I intend it. I have been near the Door and spoke to her twice and have garlick [garlic] or segar [cigar] constantly in my mouth besides using the vinegar and salts. So that thee sees I am not quite so bad in these respects.”

Essential Points:

- No one knew if it was contagious or not (what does contagious mean?).
 - Contagious means an illness can be spread from one person to another through direct or indirect contact. Remember they didn’t know it at the time but yellow fever is actually caused by a mosquito bite -- meaning yellow fever is not contagious.
 - If one person is infected with an illness and comes into contact with a group they can spread it to everyone in that group. Then, all those people in the group will spread it to more people and the illness will continue to spread to the rest of the population.
 - Individuals can practice social distance, wear a mask, quarantine, seek medical advice, wash their hands, and continue to do proper hygienic or clean practices to help prevent the spread of a contagious illness.
- No one knew what caused it!
 - Some thought it was from some bad coffee beans by the docks and others thought it was some miasma or something bad in the air. People also incorrectly blamed refugees from Haiti seeking safety in Philadelphia.
 - In the 1790s refugees from Haiti, both French planters and enslaved Africans were arriving and increased Philadelphia’s Black population. Though Philadelphia was a home to a rising abolitionist movement, the sudden increase of Black enslaved and free people to the city in the wake of the Haitian revolution created racial fear and anxiety in the city’s white population.
 - How would you feel if people were getting sick and you didn’t know what caused it?
- All this helplessness and death created enormous fear in Philadelphia.
 - Around 17,000 people left the city to get away from yellow fever. Who do you think those people were? Who stayed in the city?
- Other people were left in the city to take care of themselves.
 - How did Caspar treat his mother? Was he in the room with her?
 - No, he was on the other side of the door, keeping his distance.
- What did Caspar take specifically to help prevent himself from getting yellow fever?
 - He always had garlic or a cigar in his mouth. What do those things have in common?
 - They’re smelly! If you ever had a really garlicky garlic bread before, you know afterwards people are avoiding you. Caspar was hoping that the garlic or cigar would keep the miasma (or the bad stuff in the air) away.
- **Action:** If you have some garlic around the house, have someone take a small bite of it and see their reaction. How does it taste? If they didn’t know what caused yellow fever, why do you think Caspar was doing this? Afterwards let that person have a mint.

Facilitation of “During and If Infected...”

Answer: “Our mother is tenderly nursed by 3 blacks, one of them is an excellent person; The doctors are here now: she has little to no fever; but cold all over.”

Essential Points:

- Symptoms (pg1)
 - Caspar’s mom had reached the final stages where she seemed to have lost the fever, but it will then come back and later end in her death.

(During continues on page 4.)

- What was the survival rate?
 - 11,000 people contracted it. Of that 11,000 who contracted yellow fever, 5,000 died. That means, if you contracted yellow fever, you had a 45% chance of dying.
 - Out of the 5,000 that died, at least 240 were Black people. Although it seems records were not as reliable when documenting Black Philadelphians deaths.
- How were the sick treated? Who took care of them?
 - Isolated, cared for by Black (often female) nurses (why might that be?), blood-letting, expulsions, vinegar, fresh air.
 - Dr. Benjamin Rush called on the Black community and the Free African Society which was run by Absalom Jones and Richard Allen.
 - Rush had an incorrect theory that African Americans were immune to (could not get) yellow fever.
 - Rush told the public that Black people in the West-Indies and other areas that yellow fever occurred were immune to it. He then believed that Black people in America were thus immune. He published this idea in a Philadelphia newspaper.
 - This is an example of a prominent scientist using claims of racial “difference” to advance the needs of the white community.
 - Jones, Allen, and William Gray headed the effort for bringing in nurses to care for the sick and gather people to take care of the dead bodies.
 - William Gray was a fruit seller and was a part of the Free African Society.
 - The Free African Society's mission was to provide help to the African American community and help them to develop leaders in their communities. The effort to help combat yellow fever was lead by Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and William Gray. They were just one part of the African American community in Philadelphia. At one point Jones and Allen were in dire need of more help so they hired men to help carry the dead who succumbed to yellow fever.
 - The Black community did get yellow fever, but continued to provide help for the city.
 - After all this, Mathew Carey would go on to accuse the African American community of wrongdoing during the epidemic and taking advantage of the sick and dying in his pamphlet, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever*.
 - Jones and Allen responded to his claims and defended African Americans in their 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*.
 - The rates paid to white nurses and Black nurses during this period were roughly equal, but there was only public outcry about the supposedly extortionate wages demanded by Black nurses.
 - The category “black”—as opposed to other terms for people of African descent that were used at the time—was commonly used to describe people working as nurses and medical aids during the epidemic, probably to preserve a sense of racial difference between white Americans and Black Americans who were suddenly essential workers.
- **Action:** Drink a tiny sample of diluted vinegar. Take a tiny amount of white vinegar at home and mix it with some water.
 - People would drink vinegar and soak clothes and wear them in a way to prevent getting yellow fever.
 - What did the vinegar taste like? Did it sting?
 - Think about cherry cold medicine. Your doctor says it won't taste like medicine, but once you drink it, it has that medicinal taste. Same thing with the vinegar, when you drink it it has a sting to it so people thought it was working to keep them healthy. Though vinegar has some healthful properties, it is not a cure for yellow fever.

Facilitation of “After Yellow Fever Strikes”

Answer: “Fill an iron pot with layers of charcoal and brimstone, light a fire or the top with a few chips and it will burn slow by several hours filling the room with a suffocating smoke.”

Essential Points:

- Unfortunately Caspar’s mother does not survive yellow fever. But there’s still the miasma in the air -- or so they thought.
- Burial: Only those who could afford a burial would be buried.
 - However, places like Washington Square became a potter’s field. Potter’s fields, were for strangers or for people who had no money for a graveyard burial. People were buried in these places without coffins, markers, or headstones.
- Cleaning: People would use smoke and brimstone (which is sulfur, a smelly mineral) to cleanse objects and rooms of the miasma or bad stuff that they thought was in the air.
- When does it end?
 - When the fall and winter arrive, the cold kills off the mosquitoes which stops yellow fever.
 - Philadelphia slowly comes back as a functioning city with government, trade, and commerce.
- Who did it affect?
 - Everyone. However, it took heavy tolls in neighborhoods with a lot of stagnant water (breeding grounds for mosquitos) like along Dock Creek.
 - Since many of the wealthy left the city for their second homes those who were left behind (middle and lower classes) were affected more by yellow fever than the elites of Philadelphia.
- **Action:** Take a strong sniff of some hard boiled eggs. Brimstone smells like rotten eggs.
 - What does Caspar put into the pot to clean the room.
 - How does Caspar describe the smoke?
 - Think about being in the room with the windows and doors shut and the smell of brimstone and smoke filling the room. How would you feel in that room?

Reflection

- How can an individual help or hurt the effort to stop the spread of a contagious illness?
- Is medical information consistent throughout a pandemic? What would make it change?
- What can the government or public institutions do to help stop the spread of an illness?
- Are all communities/people in a city affected the same by a pandemic? Who suffers the most? Why?

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