

American Plague: The End of the Epidemic

Toward the end of October, the fever seemed to be on the wane. A cold spell had swept in and with it a cleansing rain. Burials were falling in number, from a high of 120 on October 11 to half that number on October 21. Unfortunately after several good days in the city, warm weather reappeared and deaths increased, jumping to 82 on October 22. Clearly, the city was not yet safe. (paragraph 1)

Most doctors had predicted the fever would end when the cold weather returned. Almost all epidemics followed the same pattern, striking during warm weather, disappearing with the first frost. The same was true for Philadelphia. The number of deaths would go above twenty only twice after October 27. (paragraph 2)

Those who had escaped the city began to trickle back home. Those returning found their city a changed place. Most changed were those who had been left behind. The survivors were exhausted and haggard looking, their clothes frayed and soiled and smelling heavily of vinegar and camphor.. People who had hidden themselves indoors began to emerge and walk the streets again. Shop doors opened for business, and ships once again sailed upriver to discharge cargo; farmers arrived, their wagons loaded with provisions bound for the markets of a very hungry city. The city seemed to be awakening after a long, inescapable nightmare. (paragraph 3)

No one would ever know precisely how many Philadelphians died of yellow fever in 1793. Many of those who traditionally kept such count - ministers, sextons, and city officials - had either fled the city or been ill themselves. The best estimates put the number of victims at between four and five thousand men, women, and children. What was clear to all was that life would never be the same. The fear had gone too deep, the losses were all too real and personal. (paragraph 4)