

American Plague : Free African Society

... The Free African Society was the first organization in America created by blacks for blacks. Its purpose was to help members who were destitute and to provide care for widows and fatherless children. At the meeting, the Society's leaders assembled to consider something extraordinary – Would they use the Society's members and their skills to help their struggling white neighbors?
(paragraph 1).

A few days earlier, a letter had arrived from Benjamin Rush urging the society to help nurse the sick and to attend to the dead. One reason they should come forward, Rush contended, was that God had seen fit to grant blacks a special resistance to the dreaded disease. If any group of individuals had reason to ignore the sufferings of their neighbors, the Free African Society certainly did, yet they did not hesitate. Free African Society leaders, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, said it was their “duty to do all the good we could to our fellow mortals.” In the end, the Free African Society was the one and only group to step forward and offer its services. (paragraph 2)

Whenever anyone requested help, the society sent a volunteer as quickly as possible. No set fee was charged for their services, which might include nursing the individual, cleaning up the sickroom, washing clothes and linens, going out to buy food and medicine, and caring of other family members. If an individual could afford to pay a dollar or two for a full day's care, the money was accepted. But since the people they helped were usually poor, the black nurses often stayed and helped a person for no money at all. (paragraph 3)

And then the inevitable happened. Traveling through the diseased city, blacks began coming down with the fever. Suddenly, almost overnight, scores of them were seized with the same horrible symptoms as their white neighbors. Richard Allen fell ill, and Absalom Jones had to shoulder the entire burden of keeping the relief effort organized. As more and more blacks sickened and died, a shudder went through the white community. What would happen if blacks responded to the pestilence in the same way as whites, with panic and flight? Who would be left to deal with the sick and dead?
(paragraph 4)