

## The Rush to Save the III

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History 1483

Benjamin Rush is not to be dismissed as history has shown—his extensive medical training and experience, when contextualized within his own time, was highly beneficial to the people of Philadelphia during the summer 1793 yellow fever outbreak. In the late summer months, a lethal fever swept its way from the docks of America’s capital to the heart of the city. From the beginning of August until November, four thousand and forty-four individuals died from the outbreak.<sup>1</sup> This killed a tenth of Philadelphia’s 50,000 citizens with half of that population escaping to the countryside.<sup>2</sup> Among those who stayed behind, many encompassed the city’s physicians including Dr. Benjamin Rush—signer of the Declaration of Independence, surgeon general of the Continental Army, and chair of the Institutes of Medicine and Clinical Practice at the University of Philadelphia.<sup>3</sup>

Modern historians like J.H. Powell have portrayed Dr. Rush as practicing irresponsible medical techniques that did more harm than good. One doctor even describes his methods as “furor therapeutics.”<sup>4</sup> However, these views do not contextualize Rush within his own time period and instead used a modern explanation to devalue his contributions to Philadelphia.

Yellow fever is a disease transmitted by mosquitos and is found in Africa, Central America, and South America. Infected carrier mosquitos transported the disease on ships from

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Rush, *An Account of the Bilious Remitting Yellow Fever, as it Appeared in the City of Philadelphia, in the Year 1793* (Philadelphia, PA: self-published, 1794), 125.

<sup>2</sup> Jeanne Abrams, “Death Stalks the Capital,” *American History*, vol. 49, issue 6 (2015), accessed November 11, 2017, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com>.

<sup>3</sup> “Benjamin Rush.” *Penn University Archives & Records Center*. Accessed November 11, 2017. [http://www.archives.upenn.edu/people/1700s/rush\\_benj.html](http://www.archives.upenn.edu/people/1700s/rush_benj.html).

<sup>4</sup> Leon Eisenberg, “Furor Therapeuticus: Benjamin Rush and the Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793,” *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 164, Issue 4 (2007): 552-555.

those areas to the docks of Philadelphia.<sup>5</sup> The disease itself is characterized by attacking the liver and causing jaundice—a yellowing of the eyes and skin—which gave the disease its name.<sup>6</sup> Some of the other symptoms include “fever, headache, muscle pain, nausea, vomiting and fatigue” as well as bleeding from the mouth, nose, or eyes.<sup>7</sup> Today, doctors distribute vaccinations to prevent the disease. Public health officials also try to control mosquito populations. Once a patient is infected, there is no cure for the disease; patient care relies on “good supportive treatment in hospitals.”<sup>8</sup> The supportive treatments include the administration of fluids, the monitoring of vitals, and controlling the temperature of the patient. While the methods that the doctors used in 1793 to help their patients were different, the concept of supportive treatment remains the same.

Dr. Rush’s experience with a previous outbreak of yellow fever allowed him to be able to identify the disease and gave him an edge over his contemporaries. He first began studying medicine in 1761 in Philadelphia under the guidance of Dr. John Redman.<sup>9</sup> It is here that Rush first observed yellow fever in a 1762 outbreak. He kept a journal during this time detailing the symptoms including “rigors...violent fever, and pains in the head and back...eyes inflamed and a yellowish cast, and...vomiting attended.”<sup>10</sup> This is the reason why the physician was able to identify the disease in 1793 quickly. Other doctors in the city disagreed with Rush’s diagnosis—Dr. William Currie wrote in the *Federal Gazette* that the disease was nothing more than a fall

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<sup>5</sup> “Yellow Fever,” *World Health Organization*, May 2016, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs100/en/>.

<sup>6</sup> “Yellow Fever,” *World Health Organization*, May 2016.

<sup>7</sup> “Yellow Fever,” *World Health Organization*, May 2016.

<sup>8</sup> “Yellow Fever,” *World Health Organization*, May 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Robert L. North, “Benjamin Rush, MD: assassin or beloved healer?” *Baylor University Medical Center Proceedings*, Vol. 13, Issue 1 (2000): 45-49.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Rush, *An Account of the Bilious*, 13-14.

fever that only affected those weakened by influenza.<sup>11</sup> The next day, Dr. Rush published an argument against Dr. Currie stating how he had seen the disease decades prior and that “all the fevers now in the city are from *one* cause.”<sup>12</sup> Later, when Dr. Rush wrote his account of the disease, he detailed this exchange with Dr. Currie without naming him. He also reported how after treating several patients in the beginning of the outbreak, he affirmed that what was causing so many citizens to be sick was another outbreak of yellow fever like he had seen before. Rush’s diagnosis caused many in the city to become panicked and “many of the citizens joined the physicians in endeavoring to discredit the account [Rush] had given of this fever, and for a while, it was treated with ridicule or contempt.”<sup>13</sup>

Benjamin Rush’s treatment methods were suitable for the time period in which he was attending to patients. His methods of treatment called for “mercurial purges” (using mercury to evacuate the bowels) and “to lose ten or twelve ounces of blood” as the main treatment for the disease.<sup>14</sup> He also believed that “cool air, cold drinks, low diet, and applications of cold water to the body” would be helpful in treating the disease.<sup>15</sup> Doctors in the present continue to use some of these methods in their treatment of yellow fever. Soon after trying these methods and finding them successful, other doctors in the city began using Dr. Rush’s approach as well.<sup>16</sup> Rush even described the case of a fellow physician running across the street after several days of using these new practices to inform him that “the disease yielded to them in every case.”<sup>17</sup> Since the number of people who were sick surpassed the amount of patients the doctors could see, Rush put

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<sup>11</sup> William Currie, “For the Federal Gazette,” *The Federal Gazette* (Philadelphia, PA), Sept. 17, 1793.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Rush, “Philadelphia,” *The Federal Gazette* (Philadelphia, PA), Sept. 18, 1793.

<sup>13</sup> Rush, *An Account of the Bilious*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Rush, “Philadelphia,” *The Federal Gazette* (Philadelphia, PA), Sept 15, 1793.

<sup>15</sup> Rush, *An Account of the Bilious*, 203.

<sup>16</sup> Rush, *An Account of the Bilious*, 203.

<sup>17</sup> Rush, *An Account of the Bilious*, 203.

together a recipe and instructions for the purges he used and gave these to the local pharmacist—this allowed families of citizens to help treat the sick using his methods without requiring a doctor to be present.<sup>18</sup> This shows that Rush was a public servant and wanted to help as many of those infected as he could, even without personally seeing them. Eventually even Dr. Currie, who previously argued with Dr. Rush over what the disease itself was, issued a statement in the *Federal Gazette*<sup>19</sup> in October agreeing with Rush’s practices. He said, “All the physicians engaged in practice at present in the city agree with Dr. Rush that blood-letting and copious purging are requisite in the cure of the prevailing epidemic.” On September 19, Dr. John Porter published in the newspaper a letter detailing the success of Rush’s approach—“As I know it will afford you much pleasure...I have been called to 37 persons laboring under the prevailing epidemic...nearly half of them are so far recovered as to require no further assistance from me.”<sup>20</sup> There was also another doctor, William Annan, that wrote to Benjamin Rush on September 13<sup>th</sup> that since he had started using Rush’s treatment methods that “[He has had] the pleasure to inform you, that the greatest success has been the result of my practice,” and Annan went on to explain that he fully believed that the disease was misjudged.<sup>21</sup> It was, in fact, yellow fever. The physician’s opinions in the city changed, and they began utilizing Rush’s methods and commended him for his technique.

The residents of Philadelphia viewed Benjamin Rush as a saving grace. These citizens believed that his approach to the disease was completely effective and he was doing the best that he could for the community. One man even felt compelled to place an article in the *Federal*

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<sup>18</sup> Rush, *An Account of the Bilious*, 205.

<sup>19</sup> The *Federal Gazette* is quoted so frequently because it was the only newspaper still printing during the epidemic.

<sup>20</sup> John Porter, “Letter,” *The Federal Gazette* (Philadelphia, PA), Sept 19, 1793.

<sup>21</sup> William Annan, “A letter from Dr. William Annan to Dr. Rush,” *The Federal Gazette* (Philadelphia, PA), Sept 13, 1793.

*Gazette* to “express his gratitude to Dr. Rush.”<sup>22</sup> The man, George Hunter, describes how Rush’s methods saved six persons in his family and many more in his neighborhood. He expressly declared that “If your publishing the above will induce any of my fellow citizens to follow the same plan; I feel confident they will meet with the same success as [us].”<sup>23</sup> Along with the medical professionals in the city, the citizens of Philadelphia felt grateful to Benjamin Rush for helping to save their lives.

Modern historians and modern doctors have a much different opinion of Rush than his contemporaries. Writing in 2007, Dr. Leon Eisenberg believed that “Neither the best education...nor dedication so great he risked his life to minister to others, nor employing the same remedies on himself...was sufficient to prevent Rush from committing grievous harm in the name of doing good.”<sup>24</sup> The historian J.H. Powell said that “[Rush] had no common sense.”<sup>25</sup> Dr. Robert L. North likens Benjamin Rush to an assassin and believes that the only contribution to history that Rush has left is “his embarrassing, obdurate, messianic insistence, in the face of all factual evidence to the contrary, on the curative powers of heroic depletion theory.”<sup>26</sup> North also describes how Rush’s methods of treatment were “profoundly erroneous and sometimes fatal.”<sup>27</sup>

However, these negative views of Dr. Rush’s methods come from the tidy hindsight of doctors living in the modern age who know the causes of yellow fever. These modern views do not take into account the lack of knowledge that physicians at the time of the yellow fever

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<sup>22</sup> George Hunter, “For the Federal Gazette,” *The Federal Gazette* (Philadelphia, PA), Oct 1, 1793.

<sup>23</sup> Hunter, “For the Federal Gazette.”

<sup>24</sup> Eisenberg, “*Furor Therapeuticus*.”

<sup>25</sup> J.H. Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949), ix.

<sup>26</sup> North, “Benjamin Rush, MD: Assassin or Beloved Healer?” 45-49.

<sup>27</sup> North, “Benjamin Rush, MD: Assassin or Beloved Healer?” 45-49.

epidemic in Philadelphia did not have. Dr. Rush was relying on his training and approaches that he believed would work to help the most people as possible. As a doctor he was attempting to assist countless patients—occasionally visiting over one hundred patients in one day.<sup>28</sup> This, as well as the opinions of his contemporaries, who believed his treatments were their best chance at survival, showed that in his own time period he was not thought of as negatively as he is in the modern age. Benjamin Rush can also not be given sole responsibility for the inherent failures of his methods. He relied upon some of the best medical advances available at the time and his own experiences in the field. While doctors today regard his practices such as purging blood or prescribing mercury as harmful to the patient, Dr. Rush was responding to the positive outcomes he and his contemporaries observed. J.H. Powell said that “[Rush] was wrong, tragically, disastrously, frightfully wrong, everyone was not to realize this for more than a century.”<sup>29</sup> Powell’s statement is exactly why he should not be portrayed in such a negative light—his methods were not known to be erroneous until *one hundred years* after the epidemic, before germ theory was even discovered or mosquitoes were found to be the culprit, yet he is represented critically as if he was intentionally using methods that were not effective. Rush even noted that “Mosquitoes (the usual attendants of a sickly autumn) were uncommonly numerous.”<sup>30</sup> He was observant of this fact but had no reason to believe they were responsible for the spread of the disease. Rush’s rational observations, coupled with the fact that even today there are no medicines to treat yellow fever and that the main treatment of the disease is still supportive care, were not as intentionally harmful as modern historians and doctors have made them out to be.

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<sup>28</sup> North, “Benjamin Rush, MD: Assassin or Beloved Healer?” 45-49.

<sup>29</sup> Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead*, 122.

<sup>30</sup> Rush, *An Account of the Bilious*, 108.

Benjamin Rush, using the best of his abilities, attempted to help thousands of citizens during a time of panic and chaos. The city of Philadelphia was devastated and best described by a 1793 poem written by Philip Freneau during the epidemic:

Hot, dry winds forever blowing,  
Dead men to the grave-yards going:

Constant hearses

Funeral verses

Oh! What plagues—there is no knowing!<sup>31</sup>

During this harrowing time, Benjamin Rush put his life on the line to help as many people as possible using the best medical training available. When contextualized with the time period that Dr. Rush was operating in and using everything he had learned, Dr. Rush was a passionate physician who wanted to aid the citizens of Philadelphia. While his methods were unconventional and doctors later discovered them to be disastrous, history has remembered him far more adversely than what he deserves.

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<sup>31</sup> Philip Freneau, "Pestilence," in Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead*, n.p.



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