

Smallpox in the Colonies

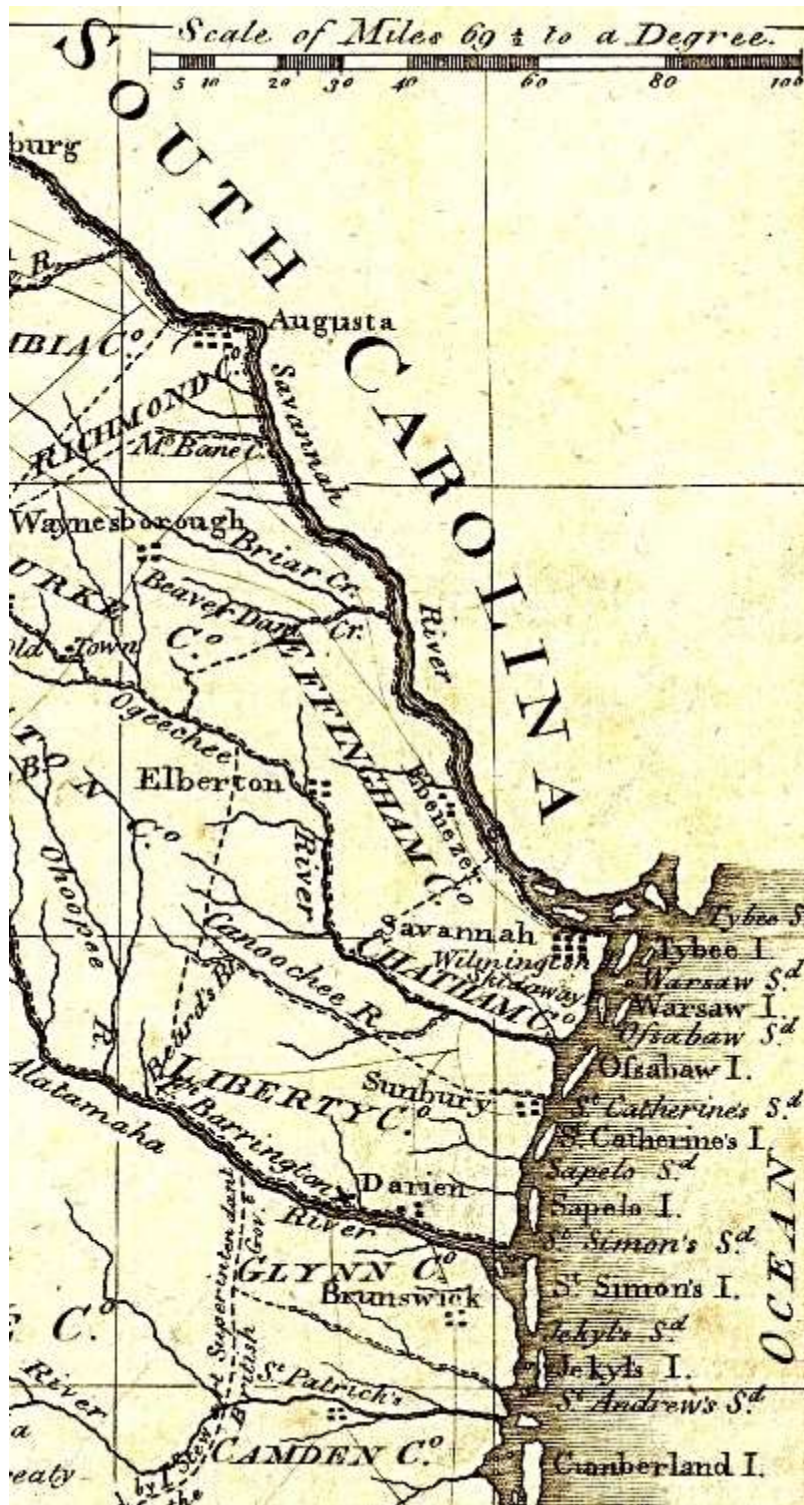
Smallpox was a dreaded disease. Epidemics started in Boston in 1721, killing more than 850 persons during the winter of 1722. The repeated outbreaks of 1721, 1752, 1764, and 1775 were particularly severe. Death rates were high.

Even among survivors, the suffering was immense. Some of the clinical features attest to the atrocity of the affliction as described in a quote reported by Forman: "The head is swollen to a monstrous size, the eyes are entirely closed, the lips swollen and of a livid color, the face and surface of the whole body are covered with matured pustules, from which issue purulent matter; the miserable being has the appearance of a putrid mass, and scarcely the semblance of a human form remains."

In April of 1771, the ship *HMS Seahorse* dropped anchor in Boston. By the winter of 1772, smallpox had infected half of the city's population. Afterward, smallpox infected the armies during the American Revolutionary War. Smallpox was common in England, so most British soldiers had already been exposed and were immune, but the disease was less common in America. In 1775, General George Washington knew smallpox was a Deadly Scourge. Thus, during the winter at Valley Forge in 1776, George Washington decided to begin inoculating soldiers against smallpox, a disease he had experienced as a teenager in 1751 while visiting the island of Barbados.

As in the Canadian campaign, returning soldiers and deserters carried smallpox home with them, sparking outbreaks that lasted well into 1777 in Tidewater Virginia, and Maryland. In 1777 and 1778, the disease seemed to fade away for while because of General Washington's decision to inoculate the Continental Army.

The Battle of the Rice Boats. Savannah, Georgia, March 2-3, 1776



The Battle of the Rice Boats, also called the Battle of Yamacraw Bluff, was a naval battle of the Revolutionary War that took place in and around the

Savannah River, on the site of the former village of the Creek Indians (downtown Savannah on the bluff).

It all started during December of 1775; when the British Army in Boston was in great need of provisions. Hence, a Royal Navy fleet was sent to Georgia to purchase rice and other supplies. The arrival of this fleet prompted the colonial rebels who controlled the Georgia government to arrest the British Royal Governor, James Wright, and to resist the British seizure and removal of supply ships anchored at Savannah. Some of the supply ships were burned to prevent their seizure, some were recaptured, however, most vessels were successfully captured by the British Army.

Smallpox was found in Savannah before and throughout the Revolutionary War began, dating circa 1764. Savannah and Charleston were thriving port cities plagued with this infection. One proof of lies in the old newspapers which reported arriving vessels from the New England States, and Barbados. So it was that merchant ships having infected passengers onboard were delivering the disease to port cities. During the 1764 infections, there is a family story relating that a small child was found lying next to the bodies of his parents on the streets of Savannah. The child was taken to Ebenezer, and raised by a kindly German family. People on the street provided the child's surname!

He was baptized, yet no further record was found to identify his parents. Searching for the origin of this child seemed to lie in the fact that there were vessels in the region hailing from Maryland with the same surname. This is a family story that appeared to have some truth to it based upon the origin of merchant ships from Maryland.

Sources:

<https://www.wsav.com/news/national-news/old-records-shed-new-light->

[on-smallpox-outbreaks-in-1700s/](#)

[https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/HMS Seahorse \(1748\)](https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/HMS_Seahorse_(1748))