

An American Plague: The True and Terrifying Story of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793

History Book by Jim Murphy

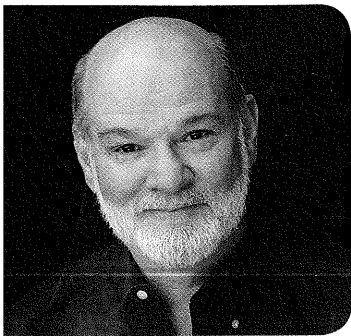
Meet Jim Murphy

Jim Murphy didn't read much as a child. It wasn't until a high school teacher told his class that they weren't allowed to read a particular novel that Murphy became inspired to read. At first, he did it just to be rebellious. Murphy says that as he continued to read, he developed a love of history, because it enabled him to "visit many different times and places in the past."

Today, Murphy is the award-winning author of over 25 books about American history. He finds his work rewarding, and he especially enjoys the research stage of each project. He seeks out eyewitness accounts of events and loves to uncover the vivid details that add drama and emotion to his work. "One of my goals in writing about events from the past is to show that children weren't just observers of our history," Murphy says. "They were actual participants and sometimes did amazing and heroic things."

Try a History Book

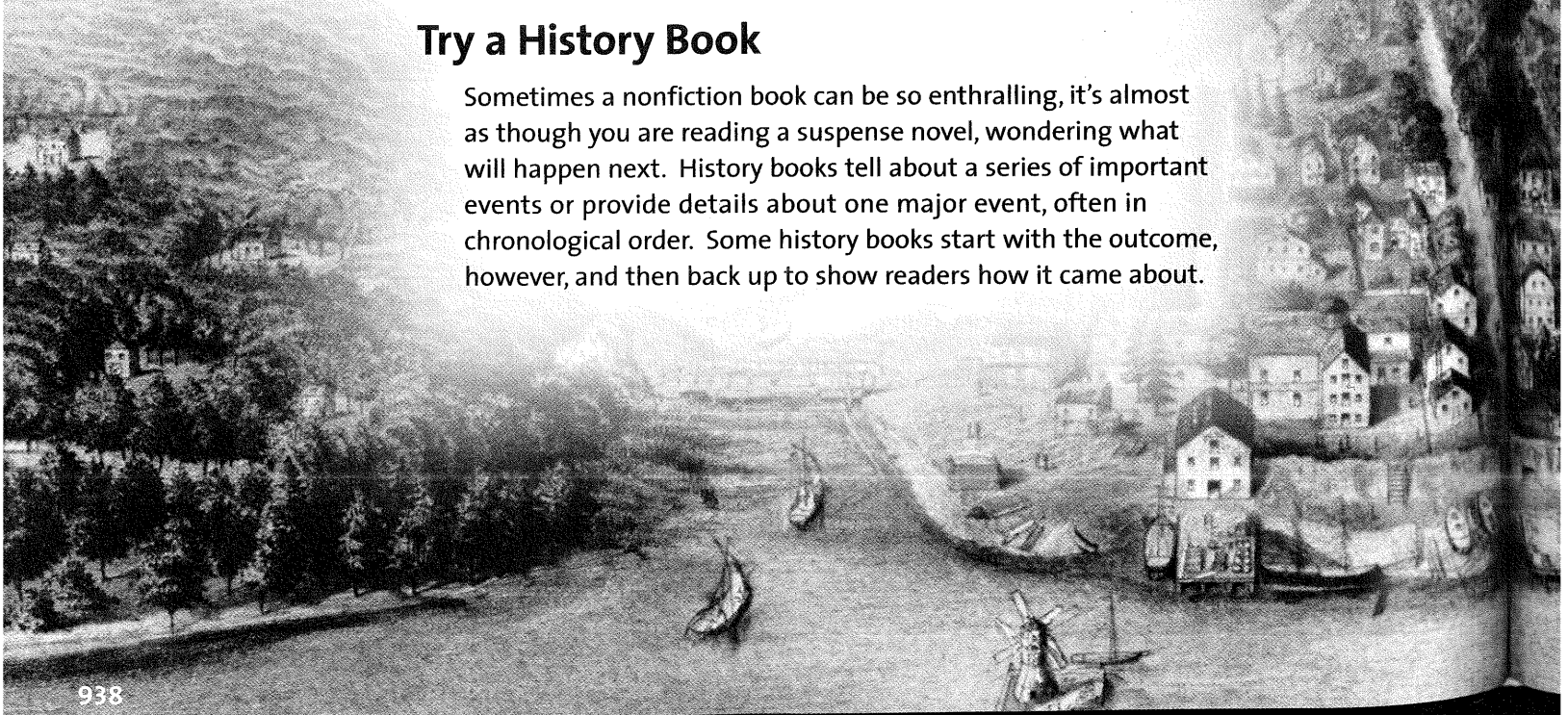
Sometimes a nonfiction book can be so enthralling, it's almost as though you are reading a suspense novel, wondering what will happen next. History books tell about a series of important events or provide details about one major event, often in chronological order. Some history books start with the outcome, however, and then back up to show readers how it came about.



Jim Murphy
born 1947

Other Books by Jim Murphy

- *Blizzard!: The Storm That Changed America*
- *The Great Fire*
- *A Young Patriot: The American Revolution as Experienced by One Boy*



Read a Great Book

In 1793, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was the nation's capital. It was also a city at the mercy of an invisible enemy. In this vivid account of the yellow fever epidemic, Jim Murphy highlights some of the conditions in Philadelphia at that time and shows how those conditions contributed to the spread of a deadly disease.

from

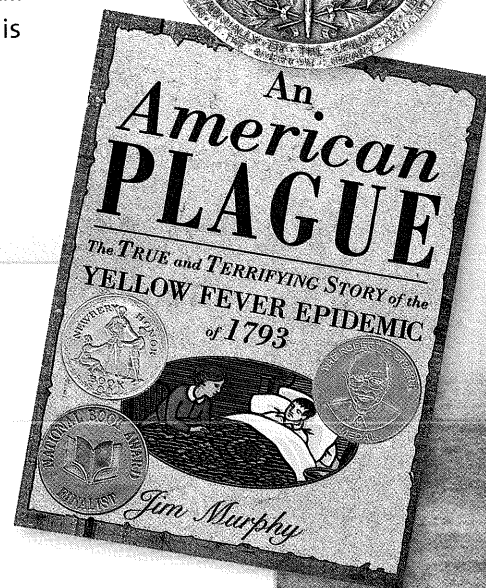
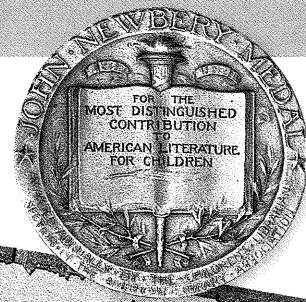
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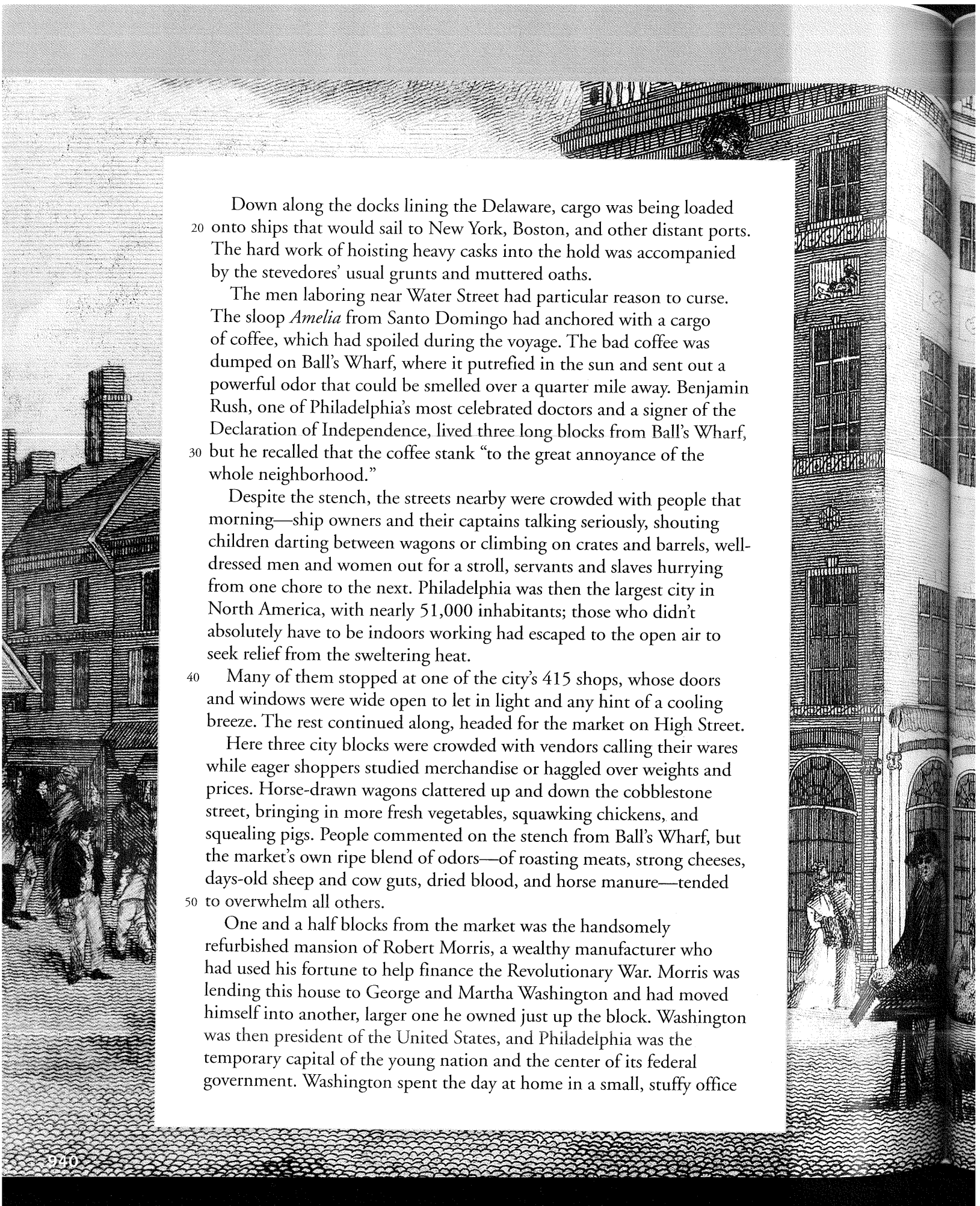
The True and Terrifying Story of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793

Saturday, August 3, 1793. The sun came up, as it had every day since the end of May, bright, hot, and unrelenting. The swamps and marshes south of Philadelphia had already lost a great deal of water to the intense heat, while the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers had receded to reveal long stretches of their muddy, root-choked banks. Dead fish and gooey vegetable matter were exposed and rotted, while swarms of insects droned in the heavy, humid air.

In Philadelphia itself an increasing number of cats were dropping dead every day, attracting, one Philadelphian complained, “an amazing
10 number of flies and other insects.” Mosquitoes were everywhere, though their high-pitched whirring was particularly loud near rain barrels, gutters, and open sewers.

These sewers, called “sinks,” were particularly ripe this year. Most streets in the city were unpaved and had no system of covered sewers and pipes to channel water away from buildings. Instead, deep holes were dug at various street corners to collect runoff water and anything else that might be washed along. Dead animals were routinely tossed into this soup, where everything decayed and sent up noxious bubbles to foul the air.





Down along the docks lining the Delaware, cargo was being loaded
20 onto ships that would sail to New York, Boston, and other distant ports.
The hard work of hoisting heavy casks into the hold was accompanied
by the stevedores' usual grunts and muttered oaths.

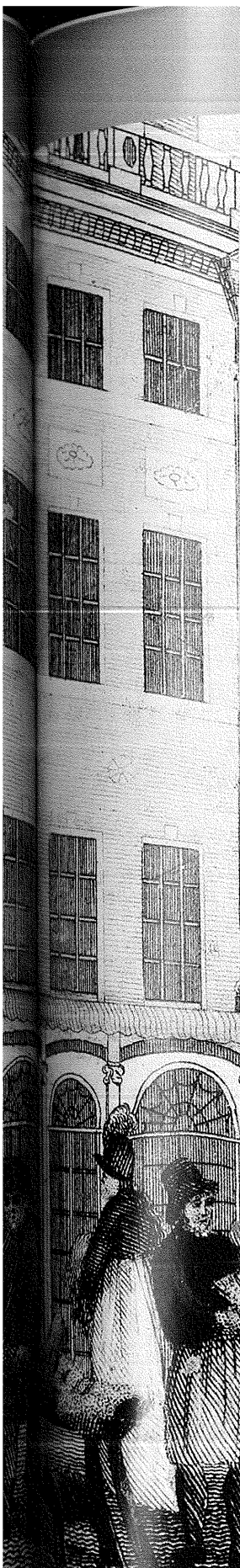
The men laboring near Water Street had particular reason to curse.
The sloop *Amelia* from Santo Domingo had anchored with a cargo
of coffee, which had spoiled during the voyage. The bad coffee was
dumped on Ball's Wharf, where it putrefied in the sun and sent out a
powerful odor that could be smelled over a quarter mile away. Benjamin
Rush, one of Philadelphia's most celebrated doctors and a signer of the
Declaration of Independence, lived three long blocks from Ball's Wharf,
30 but he recalled that the coffee stank "to the great annoyance of the
whole neighborhood."

Despite the stench, the streets nearby were crowded with people that
morning—ship owners and their captains talking seriously, shouting
children darting between wagons or climbing on crates and barrels, well-
dressed men and women out for a stroll, servants and slaves hurrying
from one chore to the next. Philadelphia was then the largest city in
North America, with nearly 51,000 inhabitants; those who didn't
absolutely have to be indoors working had escaped to the open air to
seek relief from the sweltering heat.

40 Many of them stopped at one of the city's 415 shops, whose doors
and windows were wide open to let in light and any hint of a cooling
breeze. The rest continued along, headed for the market on High Street.

Here three city blocks were crowded with vendors calling their wares
while eager shoppers studied merchandise or haggled over weights and
prices. Horse-drawn wagons clattered up and down the cobblestone
street, bringing in more fresh vegetables, squawking chickens, and
squealing pigs. People commented on the stench from Ball's Wharf, but
the market's own ripe blend of odors—of roasting meats, strong cheeses,
days-old sheep and cow guts, dried blood, and horse manure—tended
50 to overwhelm all others.

One and a half blocks from the market was the handsomely
refurbished mansion of Robert Morris, a wealthy manufacturer who
had used his fortune to help finance the Revolutionary War. Morris was
lending this house to George and Martha Washington and had moved
himself into another, larger one he owned just up the block. Washington
was then president of the United States, and Philadelphia was the
temporary capital of the young nation and the center of its federal
government. Washington spent the day at home in a small, stuffy office



60 seeing visitors, writing letters, and worrying. It was the French problem that was most on his mind these days.

Not so many years before, the French monarch, Louis XVI, had sent money, ships, and soldiers to aid the struggling Continental Army's fight against the British. The French aid had been a major reason why Washington was able to surround and force General Charles Cornwallis to surrender at Yorktown in 1781. This military victory eventually led to a British capitulation three years later and to freedom for the United States—and lasting fame for Washington.

70 Then, in 1789, France erupted in its own revolution. The common people and a few nobles and churchmen soon gained complete power in France and beheaded Louis XVI in January 1793. Many of France's neighbors worried that similar revolutions might spread to their countries and wanted the new French republic crushed. Soon after the king was put to death, revolutionary France was at war with Great Britain, Holland, Spain, and Austria.

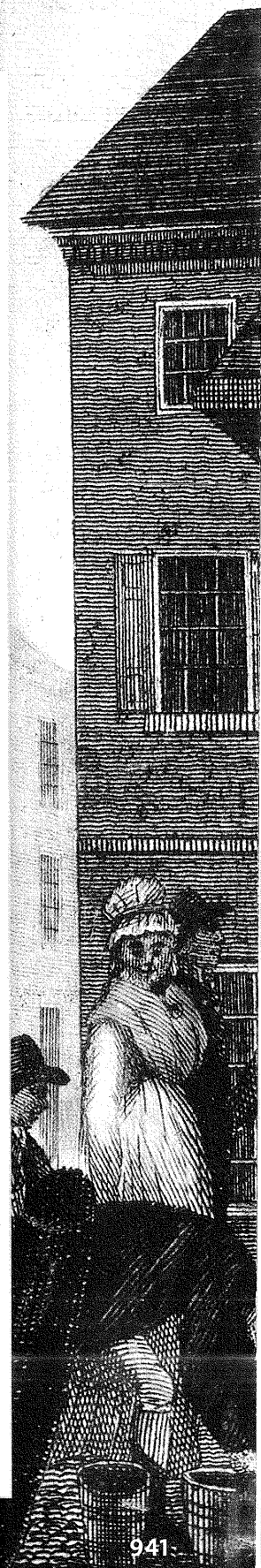
Naturally, the French republic had turned to the United States for help, only to have President Washington hesitate. Washington knew that he and his country owed the French an eternal debt. He simply wasn't sure that the United States had the military strength to take on so many formidable foes.

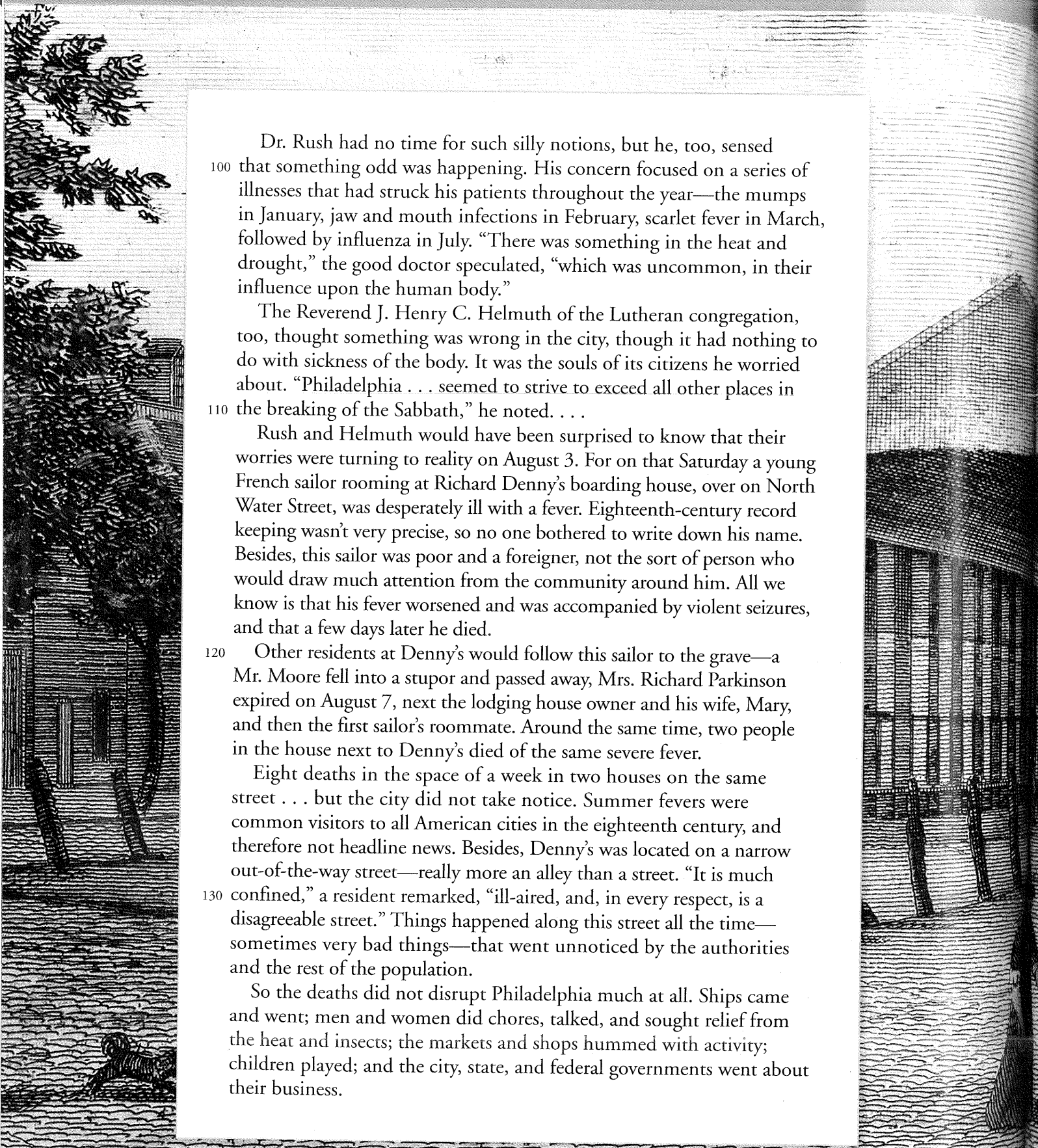
80 Many citizens felt Washington's Proclamation of Neutrality was a betrayal of the French people. His own secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson, certainly did, and he argued bitterly with Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton over the issue. Wasn't the French fight for individual freedom, Jefferson asked, exactly like America's struggle against British oppression? . . .

90 While Washington worried, the city's taverns, beer gardens, and coffeehouses—all 176 of them—were teeming with activity that Saturday. There men, and a few women, lifted their glasses in toasts and singing and let the hours slip away in lively conversation. Business and politics and the latest gossip were the favorite topics. No doubt the heat, the foul stink from Ball's Wharf, and the country's refusal to join with France were discussed and argued over at length.

In all respects it seemed as if August 3 was a very normal day, with business and buying and pleasure as usual.

Oh, there were a few who felt a tingle of unease. For weeks an unusually large supply of wild pigeons had been for sale at the market. Popular folklore suggested that such an abundance of pigeons always brought with it unhealthy air and sickness.





Dr. Rush had no time for such silly notions, but he, too, sensed
100 that something odd was happening. His concern focused on a series of
illnesses that had struck his patients throughout the year—the mumps
in January, jaw and mouth infections in February, scarlet fever in March,
followed by influenza in July. “There was something in the heat and
drought,” the good doctor speculated, “which was uncommon, in their
influence upon the human body.”

The Reverend J. Henry C. Helmuth of the Lutheran congregation,
too, thought something was wrong in the city, though it had nothing to
do with sickness of the body. It was the souls of its citizens he worried
about. “Philadelphia . . . seemed to strive to exceed all other places in
110 the breaking of the Sabbath,” he noted. . . .

Rush and Helmuth would have been surprised to know that their
worries were turning to reality on August 3. For on that Saturday a young
French sailor rooming at Richard Denny’s boarding house, over on North
Water Street, was desperately ill with a fever. Eighteenth-century record
keeping wasn’t very precise, so no one bothered to write down his name.
Besides, this sailor was poor and a foreigner, not the sort of person who
would draw much attention from the community around him. All we
know is that his fever worsened and was accompanied by violent seizures,
and that a few days later he died.

120 Other residents at Denny’s would follow this sailor to the grave—a
Mr. Moore fell into a stupor and passed away, Mrs. Richard Parkinson
expired on August 7, next the lodging house owner and his wife, Mary,
and then the first sailor’s roommate. Around the same time, two people
in the house next to Denny’s died of the same severe fever.

Eight deaths in the space of a week in two houses on the same
street . . . but the city did not take notice. Summer fevers were
common visitors to all American cities in the eighteenth century, and
therefore not headline news. Besides, Denny’s was located on a narrow
out-of-the-way street—really more an alley than a street. “It is much
130 confined,” a resident remarked, “ill-aired, and, in every respect, is a
disagreeable street.” Things happened along this street all the time—
sometimes very bad things—that went unnoticed by the authorities
and the rest of the population.

So the deaths did not disrupt Philadelphia much at all. Ships came
and went; men and women did chores, talked, and sought relief from
the heat and insects; the markets and shops hummed with activity;
children played; and the city, state, and federal governments went about
their business.

No one noticed that the church bells were tolling more often than usual to announce one death, and then another. They rang for Dr. Hugh Hodge's little daughter, for Peter Aston, for John Weyman, for Mary Shewell, and for a boy named McNair. No one knew that a killer was already moving through their streets with them, an invisible stalker that would go house to house until it had touched everyone, rich or poor, in some terrible way. ☹

Keep Reading

You've just read about the start of the 1793 yellow fever outbreak. Thousands of people in Philadelphia will die before the cause of the numerous deaths is discovered, and the public's fear is spreading even faster than the fever. Keep reading to learn about the heroic efforts of many citizens to care for the sick and search for a cure.

