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# The “King of Terrors”: Smallpox in the American Revolution

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 00:07

In a letter that John Adams wrote to Abigail Smith from Boston on the 26th of April in 1764. He talked about the process of undergoing inoculation for smallpox.

**Daniel Hinchey** 00:20

Don't conclude from anything I have written that I think inoculation a light matter. A long and total abstinence from everything in nature that has any taste, two heavy vomits, one heavy cathartic, four and 20 mercurial and antimonial pills and three weeks close confinement to an house are, according to my estimation, of things, no small matters. However, who should not cheerfully submit to them rather than pass his whole life in continual fears, in subjection under bondage.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 00:48

The fear of smallpox, the fear of contracting smallpox for Adams, was akin to living in a type of slavery, where one's life was constantly threatened.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 01:10

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

**Lauren Gray** 01:12

This is Lauren Gray.

**Cassie Cloutier** 01:14

This is Cassie Cloutier.

**Lauren Gray** 01:15

And this is The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:21**

Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve and communicate the building blocks of history.

**Lauren Gray 01:29**

Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts.

**Cassie Cloutier 01:36**

We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections.

**Lauren Gray 01:43**

We are dedicating the entirety of season five of *The Object of History* to topics related to the American Revolution.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:50**

In this episode, we look at the origins of smallpox inoculation in the colonies, discuss the experiences of the Adams family, and consider how the disease entered into debates about a general inoculation of the troops of the Continental Army. We call on the talents of MHS staff to bring John and Abigail Adams to life. Reference Librarian Daniel Hinchey portrays John Adams and Sarah Hume, an Editorial Assistant in the Adams Papers Project portrays Abigail Adams. We also speak with Andrew M. Wehrman, a professor of history at Central Michigan University, an expert on the topic and author of *The Contagion of Liberty: The Politics of Smallpox in the American Revolution*.

**Cassie Cloutier 02:38**

In the 1770s as the American colonies fought for independence, they were simultaneously besieged by another terrifying invader, smallpox. While the war claimed many lives, the virus itself was an equally destructive force. During the American Revolution, it is estimated that at least 100,000 people died from smallpox in the colonies, a massive toll for a population of just over 2 million people. Smallpox was a highly infectious and dangerous disease caused by the virus *Variola major*. It killed up to 30% of those

who contracted it. Smallpox typically began with flu-like symptoms followed by a painful eruption of red sores or pox across the entire body. These sores filled with mucus, and if they didn't kill a patient, often left survivors disfigured by lifelong scars. In some cases, smallpox survivors were left permanently blind. Protection against this terror originated from the knowledge of an enslaved man in Boston named Onesimus. He shared with his enslaver, the minister Cotton Mather, a practice common in parts of Africa, inoculation. Inoculation involved intentionally infecting a healthy person with pus from a sick patient's source. While it sounded counterintuitive to many colonists at the time, it triggered a mild case of the disease that granted lifelong immunity. Despite facing a storm of public outrage from physicians and the local community, Mather convinced physician Zabdiel Boylston to test the method himself. Boylston first inoculated his own son and his enslaved workers. The experiment was ultimately a success, proving that those inoculated had a much higher survival rate against the disease. While Boylston was later hailed by scientists in London and around the world for his public health breakthrough, the man who brought the lifesaving knowledge to America, Onesimus was largely left out of the history books. Let us turn to our conversation with Professor Andrew Wehrman to learn more about how this disease affected Boston in the Revolutionary era.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 04:44**

What I thought was really most striking about some of your arguments in the book, and it's at the end of one of your chapters, where you talk about Boston emerging from the inoculation and the quarantine of 1764 that when John Adams is inoculated, and they emerge from this, they've survived this as a society together, and they find out that all of these laws, the passage of all these acts, these taxes, are coming from London. And I was just so fascinated by what psychological effect that might have on the people who've just been through that and are now going to bear the brunt of some of these laws that are coming out of parliament in London. Would you like to just briefly talk a little bit about that, and then maybe that'll give us a way to talk about the 1764 outbreak and inoculation process?

**Andrew Wehrman 05:39**

This was something that occurred to me, and it may not have really come together for me if I hadn't also been writing my final draft of this book during covid. So that had an impact. That that part of the end of the chapter, and that it is sort of speculation on my part, came out via that experience and sort of the anger that people were feeling and but it's mostly about timing. So, this epidemic in in Boston in 1764

begins in the early months of '64 January, February, by the end of March, I think early April, the town of Boston calls for a general inoculation of smallpox. So, the whole town is basically shut down while people inoculate the town Boston. We can go into the details of it. So that's happening, April, May, June, Boston has been dealing with a smallpox outbreak for the first six months of 1764, really intently throughout the spring. The inoculation order, and the town isn't open back up until June '64. The notices of the Sugar Act, which, in, you know, every textbook of the causes of the Revolution, right, this first Revenue Act, or parliament and ministers in England are trying to pay off their debt from the previous French and Indian War and reorder the customs service and all of this, that's announced while Boston is still under quarantine during the sort of peak of that epidemic is when Bostonians are learning that there's going to be this new tax. They also learn in that spring of 1764 that parliament is working on a Stamp Tax that won't actually come about until '65 but they know that it's coming while they're suffering and Boston bears no expense during this crisis, which is in there looks well on Boston that they pay for the poor to get inoculated. This is the first place, really in the history of the Western world, Europe or the Americas, where you see inoculation on this large of scale, where they're paying for poor people to get inoculated. They're also paying a lot of the expenses that poor people might face because the inoculation process took about a month. So, they're paying for clean linens and clothing for the poor during this time. You have to change your clothes and bedding. Smallpox is gross. They're paying for bakers to make bread for the people to make sure nobody's going hungry. The city's closed. The markets are closed. They're paying for all this stuff. It's really expensive. And at the same time that the city of Boston is wondering how they're going to pay off the expenses of this inoculation, they're also getting news of this new tax. So, some of these early arguments, James Otis, arguing that parliament just has no right to tax the colonies. It's coming at the same time that Boston's wondering how they're going to actually pay their own expenses, let alone these new taxes that are coming from parliament. And it's a bit speculative. The timing is exactly right. And so, one of the questions is, you know, why Boston? Why does Boston in particular get so angry about these new taxes? They're leading the way these taxes are going to affect more than just Boston or Massachusetts, but the real crucible is there in Boston. The real anger is coming out of it. And I think you have to look at that anger coming out of smallpox and inoculation, and that they're thinking that parliament is tone deaf, that they don't really understand us. They don't understand what we've just gone through. Why would you levy a new tax system? Why would you reorganize the way taxes are produced while we're all here under inoculation, experiencing this smallpox epidemic? Some of the language they're using in these arguments are similar, but I have to

say, and this is further research, somebody can go to the MHS and try to find closer quotations or details. I didn't find anyone specifically making that claim in the 1760s or afterwards, saying, 'You know what, it was that anger over smallpox that bled into these protests.' Didn't see anybody saying it directly, but the timing, especially after our own covid experience made Americans so angry. Just imagine if April of 2020, the government announces that there's a new tax system that's going to come in place while everyone is really worried and still trying to take care of their own business and protect their families from disease.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 10:23**

I think that makes sense. Another episode for this season, we're looking at maps, and our friends over at the Leventhal Map Center at the Boston Public Library are trying to show with maps why Boston was the center of the rebellion and its geography and all that. And I happen to be reading this roughly the same time I learned about their argument, and it just made sense that disease and the experience of the community and what they went through goes to the heart of how they're interpreting what's coming across the water.

**Andrew Wehrman 10:55**

There's also the idea, and I argue this too in that chapter, that Boston is learning what they expect of government here. There's an expanded sense of what government should do, right? And so, here's the city of Boston with the support of the colony of Massachusetts as a whole saying, 'Yes, we should take care of the poor. Our doctors should volunteer their services. We can close the town. We can regulate ourselves really well.' And so, Boston gets through this crisis in a really innovative way, but it's all their own doing. This isn't directed at all from parliament, from the King, and I think it gives Bostonians and a real sense of pride. They're proud of their town selectmen. They're proud of their assembly and at the same time, they're probably thinking, what's the point of this distant parliament government that we're going to pay taxes to when our own government is doing, you know, a damn good job on its own.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 11:56**

And it's this system that it put in place, if I remember correctly, is it the '20 family rule' that they're going to try to quarantine homes where there have been outbreaks, but if it reaches 20 homes, they know

that they've lost control, and that's when inoculation can begin. This is a public health enactment that they put in place in is it 1731? Somewhere in there.

**Andrew Wehrman 12:17**

I think in general people, when we think of the 18th century, the American Revolution, we think of smallpox, and we just think that smallpox is kind of out there, and it kind of happens to everybody, that it's ubiquitous. It's everywhere, but it's not. It is epidemic. It happens sometimes, and then it goes away for decades at a time. But it doesn't just go away on its own. Boston especially, has a is really good at public health and has a system in place, a reporting system. If you get sick, you're required by law to report your symptoms to your selectmen. They take count of how many people have smallpox at any one time. Where they're located. They're tracking this pretty early in the in the 18th century, and then the selectmen in Boston have a pretty good sense that if it's in fewer than 20 households, they can track it. So, if you're sick from smallpox, a selectmen or will order some carpenters to build a fence around your house so no one can get in or out. You're not going to transmit the disease to anybody else. They'll deliver food, leave it at the fence for you to pick up. You're not going to starve in there. There's going to be a guard placed out there, so no one's coming in or out. And so, they would do that. And a lot of times there would be one or two or three cases the quarantine, since some of these fences would work and things would get back to normal, they'd stop the spread of the disease, but sometimes the disease would transmit. It would be hard to control, and they figured once it got to 20 houses, it's beyond the selectman's control, they're not going to be able to fence in all these locations. And it was after that that they allowed the public to inoculate. Inoculation probably worth mentioning, it's a precursor to vaccination. It is the purposeful giving of smallpox through the skin to a patient so they take a little bit of the smallpox matter, scrape it into skin, make a very slight scratch or incision in the arm, and then within about a week, that patient would show mild smallpox symptoms and would get through it with a with a very high chance of life, right? Natural smallpox was much more fatal. And so, the problem was that when you inoculate someone in this method, that mild case of smallpox can lead to other people catching it. You were still contagious, and so inoculated patients had to be quarantined for about three weeks to be on the safe side. They usually made it a good month that a patient had to be quarantined, and that's what made the logistics of this difficult. It's expensive to be inoculated because not only do you have to pay the doctor for this service, and you have to pay for, you know, to make sure you've got groceries and food for a month, you're also going to miss work for a month. So, if you're an average

working person or a person that has four or five kids at home, it's a really expensive process, and so Bostonians realized that this was costly, and so they did this '20 family rule' to make sure that no one was inoculating. So, there's no illegal spread of the disease happening. You had to report it. No one's allowed to inoculate because it was thought that might actually spread it unless an epidemic was declared, unless it was in 20 households, then inoculation could persist. It was a smart system. It kept smallpox at bay for decades at a time and then but by the 1760s, Boston realized that it would be better once an epidemic is declared to try to inoculate as many people as possible. In previous epidemics, it was just people privately paying their doctors to be inoculated. But in '64 Boston tries something revolutionary, and that doctors start going door to door, inoculating every family in the city for free for those that couldn't afford it. And so that system of Boston's public health was really advanced. They weren't doing that in London or any British city at that point.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 16:35**

The beginning is this quotation from John, which you, I think, use in your introduction. So, this is him writing to Abigail in April of 1764.

**Daniel Hitchen 16:45**

Many have been the particular reasons against my writing for several days past, but one general reason has prevailed with me more than any other thing, and that was an absolute fear to send a paper from this house, so much infected as it is to any person liable to take the distemper, but especially to you. I am infected myself, and every room in the house has infected people in it, so that there is real danger in writing. I join with you sincerely in your lamentation that you were not inoculated. I wish to God the doctor would set up an hospital at Germantown and inoculate you. I will come and nurse you. Nay, I will go with you to the Castle or to Point Shirley or anywhere and attend you. You say, rightly, safety there is not. And I say safety there never will be. And parents must be lost in avarice or blindness, who restrain their children. I believe there will be efforts to introduce inoculation at Germantown by Doctors Lord and Church. However, be careful of taking the infection unawares. For all the mountains of Peru or Mexico, I would not that this letter or any other instruments should convey the infection to you at unawares. I hope soon to see you. Meantime, write as often as possible to yours, John Adams. PS -Don't conclude from anything I have written that I think inoculation a light matter. A long and total abstinence from everything in nature that has any taste, two heavy vomits, one heavy cathartic, four and 20

mercurial and antimonial pills and three weeks close confinement to an house are, according to my estimation of things, no small matters. However, who should not cheerfully submit to them rather than pass his whole life in continual fears, in subjection under bondage.

**Andrew Wehrman 18:22**

And he is not saying that smallpox itself is the enslaver. It's the fear, it's the anticipation that you might get it, that you go throughout your life and maybe your neighbor catches it, or maybe you have to watch out for it. But that inoculation is this great salvation, this great liberator of people that you know once you're immune, and of course, that's what makes this inoculation such an amazing discovery of mankind, that it provided lifelong immunity to the disease. But once you're immune, you're free. So yeah, it's incredible how he describes it in that way. In those letters, he's describing people who catch the disease naturally. He witnesses a poor guy who's blind and the skin is terrible. He says it's black as bacon and that he can't understand anyone who isn't on board with inoculating.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 19:19**

All right, so 1764, quarantine is lifted. Boston opens again, and they find out all this news. What parliament has been up to, political news in the empire. Seventeen seventy-six Boston's also shut down in quarantine. Is there anything big that happens?

**Andrew Wehrman 19:37**

So, it's true. So, there's these two major epidemics happening in in Boston two times where Boston completely shuts down. Just after the British evacuate, after Bostonians get their city back, they're kind of struggling to get things going again, but smallpox is still spreading. They managed to snuff it out a few times. The selectmen are working hard to stop it. But then again, in spring of 1776, Boston declares epidemic. Can't stop it and they open themselves for inoculation again. This is the time where a lot of people in Boston are now immune. They got inoculated in '64 or they've had it in some of these smaller epidemics or outbursts. But still, any children that have been born since 1764, anybody under 12, still needs to be inoculated again. Any newcomers, there's a lot of newcomers, because of the war may need to be inoculated again in 1776. As they did in '64, people from outlying communities are allowed to come into Boston to get inoculated too. This is why Abigail Adams brings her children into Boston just for the purpose of getting inoculated. Boston allows inoculation on July 3, 1776, the day before the

Declaration of Independence is adopted in Philadelphia. So, they're happening absolutely at the same time. And you get, as you know, these wonderful letters between John Adams, who's in Philadelphia, writing to his wife Abigail about independence being declared at the same time as Abigail's writing back giving news about the smallpox and smallpox inoculations that are happening in Boston.

**Cassie Cloutier** 21:27

In early July of 1776, Abigail packed up her children and headed for quarantine Boston. On July 14, just 10 days after the declaration was adopted, she wrote to John. Listen to how she reflects on this moment of liberation from both the British and the fear of smallpox.

**Sarah Hume** 21:46

Sunday, July 14, 1776. By yesterday's post, I received two letters dated three and four of July. And though your letters never fail to give me pleasure, be the subject what it will yet, it was greatly heightened by the prospect of the future happiness and glory of our country. Nor am I a little gratified when I reflect that a person so nearly connected with me has had the honor of being a principal actor in laying a foundation for its future greatness. May the foundation of our new constitution be justice, truth and righteousness like the wise man's house, may it be founded upon those rocks, and then neither storm or tempest will overthrow it. I cannot but feel sorry that some of the most manly sentiments in the Declaration are expunged from the printed copy. Perhaps wise reasons induced it. Poor Canada. I lament Canada, but we ought to be, in some measure, sufferers for our past folly of our conduct. The fatal effects of the smallpox there has led almost every person to consent to hospitals in every town. In many towns already around Boston, the selectmen have granted liberty for inoculations. I hope the necessity is now fully seen. I had many disagreeable sensations at the thoughts of coming myself but to see my children through it, I thought my duty, and all those feelings vanished as soon as I was inoculated, and I trust a kind Providence will carry me safely through. Our friends from Plymouth came into town yesterday. We have enough upon our hands in the morning. The little folks are very sick then and puke every morning, but after that, they are comfortable. I shall write you now very often. Pray inform me constantly of every important transaction. Every expression of tenderness is a cordial to my heart. Unimportant as they are to the rest of the world, to me, they are everything.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 23:49**

That's the only reason that Abigail hears them read the Declaration of Independence from the balcony of what is now the Old State House. She's in Boston. She would not necessarily be there to witness that. But that's because everyone is stuck there.

**Andrew Wehrman 24:04**

Everyone is stuck. So, you know, Boston, the listeners of the show probably know, at this point, was basically a little peninsula with a narrow neck. They had a town gate too. And so, in '76 when they're doing this inoculation, they want to make sure that smallpox doesn't spread outside of Boston. So, no one's allowed in or out, and unless you had a reason, unless you had a pass, especially out of Boston without authorization from a doctor. So, everybody in Boston is stuck there, lots of smallpox patients, lots of inoculation patients, like Abigail herself. And so, Abigail goes to this reading of the Declaration, this huge celebration. And there are some historians that write that Abigail is kind of acting monstrously. She just got inoculated a week before. She's contagious when she's probably hearing the Declaration or about to be contagious, cutting it close. But everyone was under inoculation. Everybody who was there was either immune to smallpox or was undergoing inoculation. There was no great risk to be out and about. And so it had to just be incredible to not only celebrate independence from Britain, but the same time as all these people, your neighbors, your family, your friends, are also celebrating getting through smallpox together, taking down what they call the 'King of Terrors,' at the same time as declaring independence from the King of Great Britain. But these letters between John and Abigail, they were separated in 1764, too. So, we have John's letters to his fiancée, Abigail, in 1764. She was not allowed to inoculate in '64. She was still living at home with her parents. Her father wouldn't allow it, so John went alone, but is writing these letters about the experience to Abigail. And then in '76 John Adams is in Philadelphia, and Abigail has been waiting, you know, 12 years, for the next opportunity. She actually, literally writes that she hopes smallpox will spread so that an inoculation order will be declared so she'll finally have her chance to be inoculated. Massachusetts, again, really strictly regulated when and where inoculations could occur. And she writes to John, even before the epidemic is declared, that as soon as it is she's going to rush their children in to get inoculated. She says she doesn't care how expensive it is that she'll run you into debt if she has to and John is all for it. He says, 'Yes, you should do that. Absolutely.' They've been talking about it there, and you get it out of out of these, these letters a real sense of how important immunity was to them, how much they value inoculation.

**Cassie Cloutier 26:54**

But as the days progressed, the situation became more desperate. Their sons, Charles and Tommy, did not develop any symptoms, perhaps pointing to the fact that the inoculation was unsuccessful. Abigail, trapped in Boston until her sons were safe, wrote to John.

**Sarah Hume 27:09**

Abigail Adams to John Adams, July 30, 1776. As to myself, I am comfortable. Johnny is cleverly. Nabby, I hope, has gone through the distemper. The eruption was so trifling that to be certain, I have had inoculation repeated. Charles and Tommy have neither had symptoms nor eruption. Charles was inoculated last Sabbath evening, a second time. Tommy today, the three time from some fresh matter taken from Becky Peck, who has enough for all the house beside. This suspense is painful. I know not what to do with them. It lengthens out the time which I can but ill afford, and if they can have it, I know not how to quit till I can get them through. Youth. Youth is the time. They have no pains but bodily, no anxiety of mind, no fears for themselves or others, and then the disease is much lighter. The poor doctor is as anxious as we are, but begs us to make it certain, if repeated inoculations will do it. There are now several patients who were inoculated last winter and thought they passed through the distemper but have now taken it in the natural way. Mrs. Cranch and two of her children are in this uncertain state with a great number of others which I could mention. Tis a pestilence that walketh in darkness. Mrs. Warren, with whom I was yesterday, lay the whole day in a state little better than nonexistence. I greatly feared she would not survive it. But today she is revived, and many pox appear upon her. But tis a poor business at the best where I entertained one terror before I do 10 now. The season of the year is very unfit for the distemper. The tone of every person's vessels are relaxed, very little spring in the air, and the medicine too powerful for weak constitutions.

**Cassie Cloutier 29:06**

After a sleepless night, Abigail, with cautious relief, wrote one more line to John.

**Sarah Hume 29:12**

July 31- I have the pleasure to tell you this morning that I think Tommy's second inoculation has taken as he was very ill last night, and the eruptive fever seems coming on. Tis 10 days since the second.

**Cassie Cloutier 29:26**

What is most remarkable about these letters is what they reveal about Abigail as a mother. She demanded that physicians repeat inoculations, insisted that they use fresh matter from patients with active cases, and even refused to leave Boston until she is certain that the procedure was successful. She made calculated medical decisions, weighed risks and consulted with physicians as an equal partner.

**Andrew Wehrman 29:50**

John Adams writes fairly frequently that his uncle, Zabdiel Boylston, he's sort of a distant uncle. I forget how the family lines were a great uncle, something like that was the doctor who first performed inoculations in Boston that Cotton Mather and his slave Onesimus had learned about inoculation from his slave Onesimus and Zabdiel Boylston is the one that performs them in 1721, and so John Adams is really proud of that legacy, that his family's connected to it, but that Boston does it. He writes to Abigail, I can't believe anybody would oppose this. Talking about Abigail's parents, he says, you know that it must be blindness that causes people not to want their children to be inoculated. The letters are really easy to read. There's a lot to be learned from them. I hope people that listen go back and find them both the '64 letters when they're young, not yet married. They delay their wedding so that John can go get inoculated. And then the letters in '76 where now they're a young family with young children, and they're also again, prioritizing protecting themselves from this disease.

**Lauren Gray 31:04**

The Adams family had a very personal struggle with smallpox in the years leading up to the War for Independence. The American Revolution occurred during an extensive continent wide epidemic of smallpox. We ended the episode by asking Professor Wehrman about smallpox's impact during the war and the communities it touched. We started by asking him about the British soldier's experience with smallpox.

**Andrew Wehrman 31:28**

Smallpox was an epidemic disease in America, but it was not in England. It was endemic, especially in port cities, places like Liverpool and London. It was a childhood disease, and devastating childhood disease. It's not that it was, it was any less severe there, but people would contract it in childhood, high

childhood mortality from it. If you were living in rural parts of England, you maybe wouldn't experience it in childhood, but it was much more common in England, and a lot of British soldiers who were coming out of these out of London or larger port cities, would have already had smallpox as children. They survived it. So, the British Army had a higher level of immunity to smallpox. It wasn't 100% but maybe 70 or 80% of the soldiers had already had immunities. So, when British soldiers come and are fighting in the Revolution, commanding officers, General [William] Howe say just sort of poll their troops and ask them, 'How many of you have had smallpox before?' There's a few hands that are raised that haven't, and those people can be inoculated, whereas the vast majority of colonial Americans, of the colonists, have had no exposure to smallpox, in part, because of public health measures that, like Boston was doing to prevent the spread, but most of these smaller rural communities in America, you could go your whole life without ever being in a smallpox epidemic or without ever catching it.

**Lauren Gray 33:03**

Yeah and that becomes a problem for people like George Washington, who are moving in to take command of these forces gathering around Boston in the wake of Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill. And he was immune to smallpox. Kind of an interesting story there I think.

**Andrew Wehrman 33:19**

He was. And I think it's important to note that Washington is a Virginian. Virginia has no big urban areas, so smallpox wasn't a major problem in Virginia. Virginia doesn't have many laws to prevent smallpox before the 1760s or 1770s whereas Boston has been dealing with smallpox epidemics about every decade since 1600s almost since its founding. So, Washington got smallpox when he was a teenager, but he contracted it in Barbados on his one trip, sort of outside the continental, what we call the continental US, but outside Virginia, in Barbados, he catches it. He's 19. He survives it. It's a pretty tough bout. He writes a diary about it. So, he's immune to it himself, but he doesn't have much experience with epidemics like the Bostonians or people in Massachusetts do, and he doesn't have much firsthand experience with inoculation. He's never really had to be had to learn about it or be invested in it, because he was immune himself since he was a teenager, and throughout the 18th century, inoculation has become more popular, more widely used. And I think Washington, when he comes to Boston, has to kind of get an education about public health and about how Boston handles epidemics. Washington is sort of skeptical of broad use of inoculation of troops. Bostonians are sort of saying, 'Look, in 1764 we

inoculated 5000 people at once. Clearly, mass inoculation works.’ But Washington is really hesitant to inoculate the troops under his command for his first couple of years in office. There’s good reasons why he’s hesitant. He’s worried that this would that while the army was under inoculation, that they could be subject to attack. He’s worried about, you know, his army, especially at different stages in the war, is never as robust, is never as large an army as he would like it. So even losing a few soldiers would be potentially harmful to him. So, he’s cautious, but I argue in the book, it’s a little bit overly cautious. He knows less about it than New Englanders do, and then a lot of his doctors do, who are trying to convince him that it can be done safely. Eventually, to Washington’s great credit, in February of 1777, he changes his mind. He writes that the doctors have convinced him that it can be done safely. And he does give the order, which I think is a great credit to Washington, that he changes his mind, that he goes in, and initially he says that it’s that the people who inoculate are traitors to their country. It’s not just that he doesn’t do it. He’s actively opposed to soldiers and officers inoculating. But he does a complete 180 in 1777. He realizes he can’t stop it. The soldiers themselves, the officers, the doctors, are all demanding it. His own medical director has written a pamphlet on the necessity of inoculating in America, and Washington relents. After he does it, after he makes a decision, Washington is forever a champion of inoculation, and he writes that he regrets how long it took for him to take to make that decision.

**Lauren Gray 36:42**

Historically, smallpox and other Western diseases devastated indigenous populations in the Americas after contact in the 16th and 17th centuries. We then asked Professor Wehrman how 18th century smallpox epidemics affected indigenous people and communities during the American Revolution.

**Andrew Wehrman 37:00**

It’s a devastating disease. By the 18th century, though we’re talking about the Revolution, native populations have fallen, of course, but they’ve started to rebound a bit. Native people understand that smallpox is particularly dangerous for them. At this point, they know how to stay away from disease, to be skeptical of disease too. If they have rumors that a town has smallpox, they won’t meet there. So, there’s some of that happening. But nevertheless, the disease spread is so much that it does it sweeps across the continent. Elizabeth Fenn’s book *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82* is the best of sort of tracing these epidemics in and during the Revolution. There’s an epidemic that spikes in in Mexico City, and then that epidemic travels throughout the southwest and the west of the

United States. It's carried by in the southern colonies, carried by Cherokee, other nations, especially as the war comes to those areas, as both as really, American soldiers are preying on going into the indigenous lands, burning indigenous towns and fields. They're carrying smallpox with them. There's this persistent question of how purposeful is the spread. We know that in just before the 1764 epidemic that we're talking about in 1763 there's the incident at Fort Pitt in Pennsylvania, where British soldiers, British officers like Jeffery Amherst, are plotting to use smallpox to spread it amongst native people, to thin them out. So, they're definitely plotting it. It's genocidal. They're absolutely thinking about how to transact this. It does seem like they do send blankets and handkerchiefs out from a smallpox hospital. There's questions about how sort of effective that was. Again, it's thinking that smallpox spreads on surfaces. So, if you give a blanket to somebody that that will carry the disease. That's not usually how smallpox is spread. It's usually spread person to person. So how effective were blankets, I don't know, but it's a it's a terrible genocidal. At the same time, Native Americans, by this time, are getting more wary of things like that. But there's all sorts of rumors throughout the Revolution that individuals are spreading smallpox on purpose, whether to Native people or British people, trying to infect Americans. There's a lot of rumors about that in Boston and elsewhere. It's part of what makes the whole episode the American Revolution so much more tense. It's one thing to be having a sort of colonial protest over government structure and taxes, but it's another level to think that the British are trying to kill us. They're trying to spread the most deadly, dangerous disease to us. They're trying to wipe out noncombatants or children and things like that, with smallpox. And that was certainly a rumor that was being spread. There's no evidence of real attempts to do that. The British Governor Howe was suspected of trying to spread smallpox among the people. There's no evidence in his letters or anything like that, that that was a motivation, the way that it was with Amherst and the Indians outside Fort Pitt. But nevertheless, those rumors are powerful, and it's certainly part of why Americans became so obsessed and determined to wage a war, to win a war to become independent. Smallpox is part of it. We can't forget that this was a war that was fought during an epidemic of smallpox and carried all of those emotions and anger and fear that some of us were all used to from covid, which was a much less dangerous disease than smallpox. So, you have to imagine everything even more heightened during this period.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 41:06**

At the start of this episode, I quoted a letter from John Adams written in 1764 where he talked about how it was worth all the suffering that one went through the process of inoculation to not have to live one's life in quote, continual fears in subjection under bondage. Adams, in that letter, likened smallpox to being in bondage, to the disease which ravaged humanity for so long. In 1959, the World Health Organization launched a smallpox eradication program that within a few decades was successful in eliminating the disease from human civilization. In 1980, the WHO issued a statement, quote, 'The world and all its peoples have won freedom from smallpox, which was the most devastating disease sweeping in epidemic form through many countries since earliest times, leaving death, blindness and disfigurement in its wake.' Note that the WHO here also used the language of freedom. Quote, 'The world and all its people have won freedom from smallpox,' and so very much like John Adams in 1764 many people perhaps view living in fear of smallpox as being enslaved to it, of being in perpetual fear of catching it, of spreading it, of suffering its horrible effects. One of the battles that Americans of the Revolutionary period waged, therefore continued on into the 20th century, when finally, through cooperation, through science, through trust, humanity was able to turn the page on this terrible disease.

**Cassie Cloutier 42:54**

[Outro music fades in] To look at the items discussed in today's episode, visit our show website at [www.masshist.org/podcast](http://www.masshist.org/podcast). This episode of The Object of History was made possible by support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Object of History was produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Daniel Hinchey, Reference Librarian at the MHS, Sarah Hume, Editorial Assistant in the Adams papers project. Andrew M. Wehrman, professor of history at Central Michigan University, and Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer at the MHS. Music in this episode is by Ketsa Music and Podington Bear. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening and please rate, review, and subscribe to both the MHS produce shows wherever you listen to podcasts.