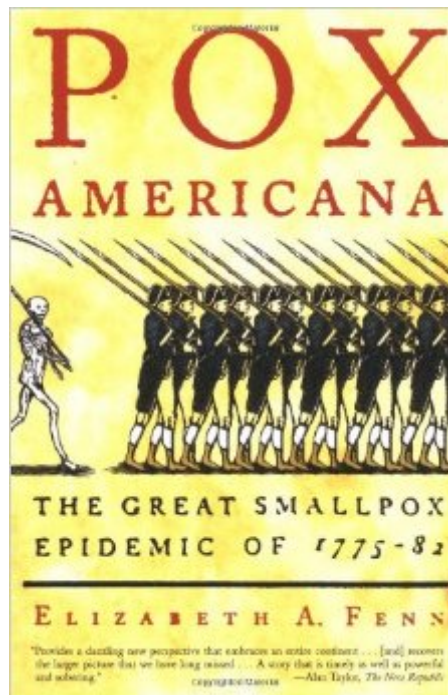


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Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic Of 1775-82



Synopsis

The astonishing, hitherto unknown truths about a disease that transformed the United States at its birthA horrifying epidemic of smallpox was sweeping across the Americas when the American Revolution began, and yet we know almost nothing about it. Elizabeth A. Fenn is the first historian to reveal how deeply variola affected the outcome of the war in every colony and the lives of everyone in North America. By 1776, when military action and political ferment increased the movement of people and microbes, the epidemic worsened. Fenn's remarkable research shows us how smallpox devastated the American troops at QuÃ©bec and kept them at bay during the British occupation of Boston. Soon the disease affected the war in Virginia, where it ravaged slaves who had escaped to join the British forces. During the terrible winter at Valley Forge, General Washington had to decide if and when to attempt the risky inoculation of his troops. In 1779, while Creeks and Cherokees were dying in Georgia, smallpox broke out in Mexico City, whence it followed travelers going north, striking Santa Fe and outlying pueblos in January 1781. Simultaneously it moved up the Pacific coast and east across the plains as far as Hudson's Bay. The destructive, desolating power of smallpox made for a cascade of public-health crises and heartbreaking human drama. Fenn's innovative work shows how this mega-tragedy was met and what its consequences were for America.

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Customer Reviews

I first read of the devastation that smallpox wrought on the Continental Army while reading David McCullough's terrific biography, "John Adams" and was lucky enough to have seen, subsequently,

"Pox Americana" author Elizabeth Fenn delve more deeply into the topic on cable TV's C-Span "Booknotes." Professor Fenn has written a well-researched book on smallpox....one that is not only informative, but generally easily readable. This is really two books. The first half covers the trail of Variola (smallpox) transmission throughout the course of the American Revolution and in this first half, Ms. Fenn writes with a prose that captures the reader with graphic details of the harshness of the disease itself, the suffering of those who were unlucky enough to have caught it, and the fear that became a constant in the lives of not only those who fought militarily but those in the civilian ranks as well. She gives us facts about how the smallpox incubates, how long it takes to run its course and how it was so easily transmittable. The reader can almost hear the agony of those inflicted and see the smallpox spread over their bodies. Ms. Fenn points to a tie-in (also in the McCullough book) that it is very likely that the British had tried to use the transmission of smallpox from their more disease-tolerant armies to the weaker American ones as an example of the first "germ warfare" thrust upon our newly independent country. The fact that George Washington had the timely sense (and good fortune) to inoculate his army during the winter of 1777, thus proving it to be a turning point in the war, is a remarkable story in itself....not one I'm sure that most students learn in school! The narrative in the second half of "Pox Americana" is weaker. Ms.

If we think that America has never known an infectious epidemic other than the Great Influenza after World War I, we'd be wise to consider the smallpox pandemic that swept the length & breadth of the North American continent just as the Revolutionary fever did. Pox American: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82 is a fascinating way to learn about the early years of our nation when cultures collided on this continent. Each chapter starts with a story of one man - a ship's captain exploring the Straits of Juan de Fuca or a New England volunteer in the Continental Army or a missionary riding the dusty Southwest trails. From these individual's stories we can see scope of the virus' reach. With pictographs, maps, charts & photographs, this author brings this contagion close to home! Sometimes the dread disease was an invisible passenger upon an unsuspecting carrier that would arrive in a tribe of otherwise healthy people & within weeks, the entire community would be dead. Sometimes it was intentionally sent forth by our wily forefathers to do their deadly work. Smallpox haunted our ancestors from coast to coast; from Russian promyshlenniki (hunters & traders) who first explored & then enslaved the residents of Alaska to America's breadbasket, where entire native communities of farmers & hunter-gatherers were wiped out in weeks to Hudson Bay, New Orleans, The South as well as Mexico City. Elizabeth Fenn writes: "The pestilence can teach us the ways in which other upheavels - native warfare, missionization, the fur trade, and the acquisition

of horses and guns...reshaped human life on the North American continent. The movement of the virus from one human being to another shows us how people actually lived in the late eighteenth century.

I found Elizabeth Fenn's *Pox Americana* to be an excellent read. It isn't very often that I really get pulled into a page turning history book. I only meant to skim through the parts that weren't about the American Revolution, and before I realized it I had read two and a half chapters in full and was reaching for my reference books on Plains Indians cultures. I was struck by how smallpox impacted military operations in the Revolution for both sides. Fenn made it pretty clear just how nasty smallpox was. I personally haven't had to deal with it although it hadn't been eradicated until just before I joined the Army. After reading this book I'm glad I don't have to face it. I've studied the Revolution quite a bit and I understand just how chaotic it was. I don't think many people understand this fact. War brings a great deal of change and the Revolution was a period of great change in the American colonies as they transitioned into states and a new nation. That change involved the movement of a great deal of people between the colonies as refugees or soldiers. Patterns of life were disrupted and into that chaos a smallpox epidemic erupted. On the surface we shouldn't be surprised. Disease was the number one killer of soldiers until the middle of the 20th century. We here in America and the industrialized world forget that because none of us have experienced the great epidemics that accompanied the wars we were involved in prior to World War II. I know I didn't have a good grasp of how much smallpox affected the people of the 18th century because I had completely forgotten that George Washington had contracted smallpox as a young man. I just didn't pay much attention to it.

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