

Battling Disease: The Inoculation Campaign Against Smallpox in

Revolutionary America

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Introduction and Methodology

- In the early 18th century, smallpox infected the American colonies. While most British soldiers were already immune, the colonists were not, and suffered severe losses from the disease. The spread of smallpox was swift through the colonies, especially so once the Revolutionary War began. The colonists attempted to use past disease control practices, such as quarantining, but it was not enough, with the colonies seeing high mortality and infection rates. **What this project explores** is what occurred leading up to and following George Washington's order, despite legal pushback from continental legislatures, to mandate inoculation for his Continental Army.
- The practice of inoculation involves infecting an individual with contaminated material from another, and it had been known in Africa and Asia for centuries prior to its introduction in Europe. The legitimacy, morality, and efficiency of inoculation were all points of contention, as inoculation could lead to outbreaks of smallpox, and it was potentially lethal to the individual undergoing it but those arguments were drowned out by the success of Washington's decisive decision, seeing a plummet in the mortality and infection rates.
- The methodologies for this project** consisted of primary and secondary research of historical documents. It was necessary to gather a greater understanding of the colonial perspective of this matter, to remove any modern biases when valuing the impacts and implications of any actions made over the course of this epidemic in the American colonies.

Racial Disparities

- During the smallpox outbreak and subsequent acceptance and usage of inoculation, **neither slaves nor Native Americans saw the same level of consideration for treatment as white colonists did.**
- The notion of inoculation was made known by a former slave, Onesimus, but it was not given attention at first, as it was not a European discovery.
- The colonists carried the belief that it would be dangerous for slaves and themselves should they be inoculated, as they viewed slaves as inherently dirtier and predisposed to illness.
- Slaves only began to see more treatment when slavers and slave owners realized it would save them more money by having them inoculated, than not.
- Unlike how some slaves were initially considered, Native Americans were never thought of for inoculation.
- Many colonists and British hoped that the smallpox would kill off vast majorities of the Native Americans so they could take the land.
- Colonists applied a similar belief to the Native Americans as they did to the slaves for inoculation.
- Native Americans only started to be treated when Thomas Jefferson was president, as he wanted to win their trust.

Aftermath and Lasting Impacts

- Following Washington's inoculation order, mandates to inoculate troops spread quickly. Before this, the Continental Army was losing more men not to the British, but to smallpox. As the Continental Congress saw new recruits, and long withstanding soldiers, have success with the treatment, more local governments began to adopt the practice despite being previously opposed. More hospitals came up, more quarantines for those that had been inoculated to keep it safe for both the infected and untreated. Even once the war ended, the acceptance of inoculation continued to spread throughout the States. While it still posed some danger, inoculation granted a much higher chance of survival than not, a risk many were willing to take.
- Inoculations, while not a perfect form of defense, played a major role in the development of the modern form of immunization utilized today: vaccinations. It set the groundwork for its creation, based upon the notion that if someone is infected with a more mild form of a smallpox, they gain immunity. From there, vaccines have since been developed for many purposes beyond smallpox treatment. However, just like back in the 18th century there was opposition to inoculating against smallpox, there is still opposition to such treatments today; especially when recommended or mandated by the government. To be able to look back retrospectively, and understand the progress and success from which we started, would aid our communities in seeing the benefits for coming together and acting for the greater good's health.

Backlash and Support

There were three primary arguments **against** inoculation for smallpox that held the practice from being widely instated earlier than when Washington set his order for it in 1777:

- Inoculation endangered those who were not yet infected
- It went against the will of God, and was thus immoral
- It was very expensive

Inoculation was not dismissed by everyone, and many pivotal figures gave their **support** for the practice.

Their support aided in easing the dissenting governments into also ultimately legalizing inoculation:

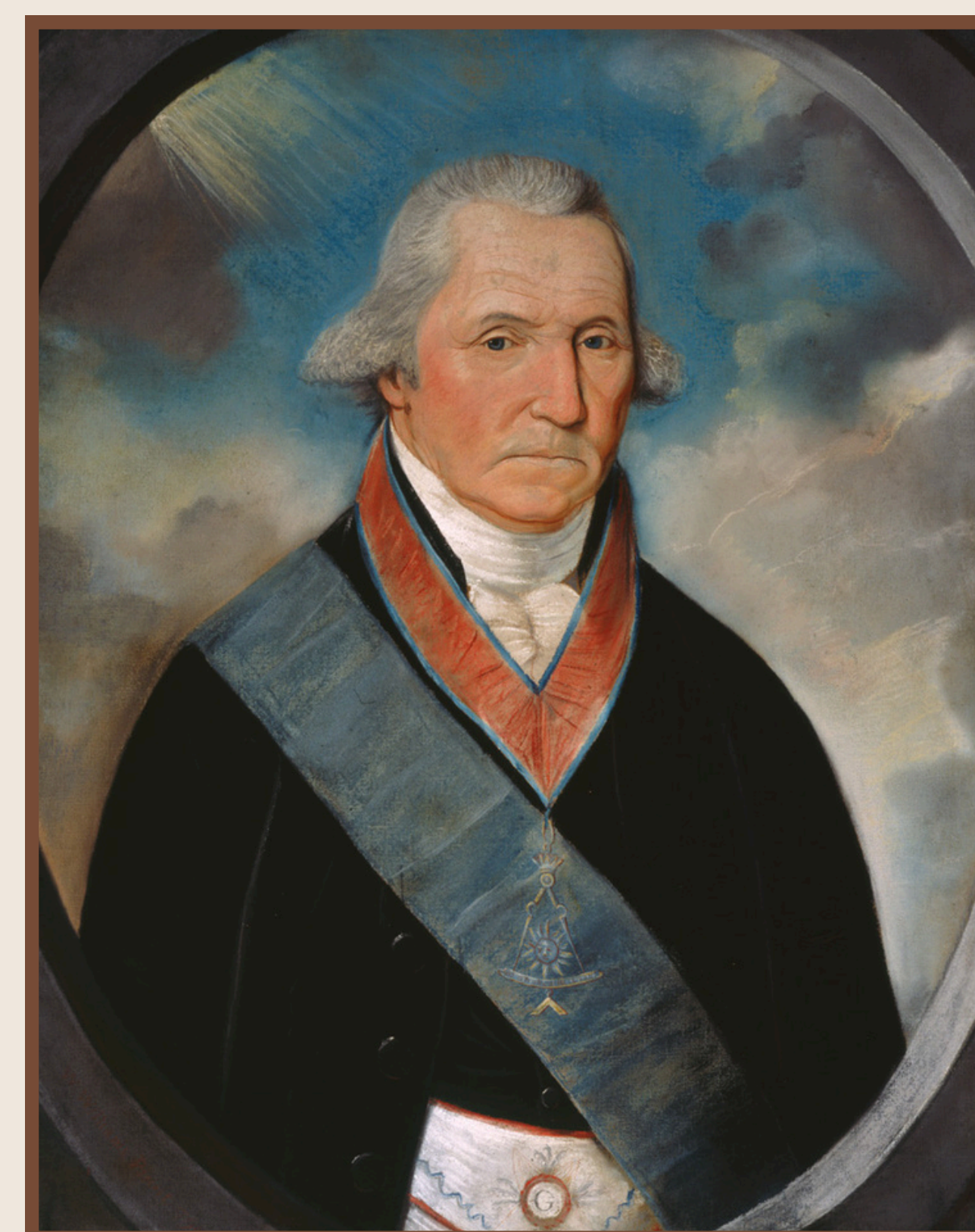
- Benjamin Franklin
- George Washington
- John Adams
- Thomas Jefferson



F. One: Posthumous portrait of Francis Franklin, who died of smallpox.



F. Two: Drawing depicting the inoculation of colonists in the 18th century.



F. Three: Portrait of George Washington that depicts his scarring from his bout of smallpox.

Acknowledgements and References

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