

Onesimus and Smallpox

How did an enslaved man help the human race?



A South East View of the Great Town of BOSTON in New England in America
Printed for W. Greenough, Painter, Map & Perspective, at No. 15, in St. Pauls Church Yard, London.

Resource 1

TO BE SOLD, on board the
Ship *Bance-Island*, on tuesday the 6th
of *May* next, at *Ashley-Ferry*; a choice
cargo of about 250 fine healthy



NEGROES,
just arrived from the
Windward & Rice Coast.
—The utmost care has
already been taken, and
shall be continued, to keep them free from
the least danger of being infected with the
SMALL-POX, no boat having been on
board, and all other communication with
people from *Charles-Town* prevented.

Austin, Laurens, & Appleby.

N. B. Full one Half of the above Negroes have had the
SMALL-POX in their own Country.

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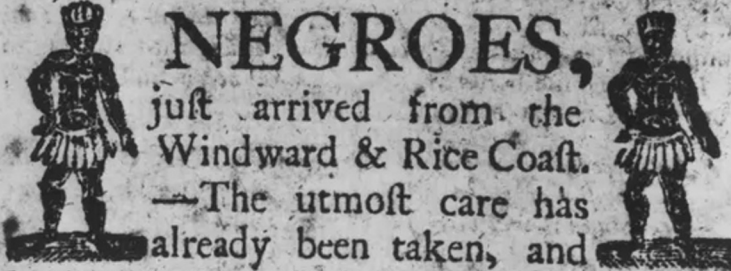
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- What kind of document is this?
- What is the purpose of this document?
- What is the document drawing special attention to?
- What can we conclude from the document based on what it is drawing special attention to?
- Why do you think the note at the bottom of this document states that one half of people on board “have had the SMALL-POX” in their own Country”?

Resource 2: About Smallpox

Every now and then in history a disease will pop up and make people really sick. Some are so bad that people die from them. Most recently, people around the world have had to deal with COVID-19. So far, it has killed 6 million people around the world.

What Deadly Disease Existed in Colonial Times?

People in Colonial times had to deal with smallpox. Smallpox was terrible. It ranks among the most devastating illnesses ever suffered by human beings. It even helped bring an end to some civilizations.

Sixty million people in Europe died of smallpox in the 1700s. Just mentioning the word “pox” caused fear in colonists. The city of Boston had severe epidemics in 1721, 1752, 1764, and 1775.

Were People the Only Things that Traveled on Ships?

Smallpox did not exist in America before Columbus and the Europeans arrived. It was an “Old World” disease. People coming to America on ships from Europe and Africa brought smallpox, spread it to others, and caused devastating outbreaks.

Nearly 3 million Native Americans in Mexico alone died from smallpox after the Europeans landed in America. This helps to explain why the Europeans were able to conquer Native American civilizations in America.

People who got smallpox would develop a fever, headaches, back pain, vomiting, and red spots with blisters containing pus. On average, 3 out of every 10 people who got it died. Victims were left with permanent pox scars all over their bodies. The photo to the right shows a boy from Bangladesh who got smallpox in 1974.



Is Smallpox Still Around?

Fortunately, the world has not had to deal with smallpox in recent years. The last known case of smallpox in our country was way back in 1949. World health officials declared it eradicated [eliminated or ended] from our planet in 1980.

So how did they get rid of it? To find part of the answer we have to go back to colonial times.

About Smallpox

Resource 3: Onesimus - a Very “Useful” Man (adapted from [here](#) and [here](#))

In 1706, members of a Puritan Church in Massachusetts gave their minister Cotton Mather an enslaved man from West Africa to help the minister with his work.

Cotton Mather named the enslaved man Onesimus, after an enslaved man in the Bible whose name meant “useful.” Mather would soon learn how useful Onesimus would be.

In 1716, Onesimus told Cotton Mather something that caught his attention. He told Mather that he got smallpox in Africa. He also said that he no longer had it and that he knew how to prevent other people from getting it. That really got Mather’s attention!

What Made Onesimus Especially Useful?

Onesimus described a procedure used in Africa that involved rubbing pus from a person with smallpox into an open wound on an uninfected person’s arm. DON’T TRY THIS! This was done VERY carefully using a tiny bit of the smallpox virus. By exposing people to a tiny bit of the virus, their bodies went to work fighting off the smallpox virus. It was like sending an army of good cells to fight the bad ones that carried smallpox.

Mather checked Onesimus’ idea with other enslaved Africans and learned that the procedure was used successfully in places like Africa.

How Did People React to Onesimus’ Idea?

Mather spread word of Onesimus’ idea throughout Massachusetts and elsewhere in the hope that it would help prevent smallpox.

But Mather’s ideas were not well received. People were frightened by the idea of putting deadly virus cells inside of their bodies. It seemed dangerous and unproven. Even worse, it could start another outbreak of smallpox. Some colonists were so upset with Mather that they tried to burn his house down.

Did They Try Onesimus’ Procedure?

In 1721, Mather and Dr. Zabdiel Boylston got their chance to test Onesimus’ idea. That year, a smallpox epidemic spread from a ship to the people of Boston. Dr. Boylston sprang into action, using the procedure that Onesimus described on his own son and his enslaved workers. Then, he tried it with other people. Of the 242 people he used the procedure on, only six died. Thirty-five people who did not get the treatment died.

Onesimus introduced an idea that led to what is called inoculation. Inoculation involves introducing an infected germ or cell into a person. This helps to prevent people from getting seriously sick. Today, doctors don’t use live viruses to inoculate people like Onesimus suggested. Instead, they use dead virus cells that trick the body into thinking they are live germs. Our bodies react by producing cells to fight them off.

Onesimus - A Very “Useful” Man

Does Inoculation Work? The image below is from a real photograph taken in 1901. It shows two boys who got smallpox. The boy on the left got smallpox but was never inoculated. The boy on the right got smallpox but had been inoculated.



Epidemics in America: Learning from the Past



Checks for Understanding

1 - Create a timeline that describes events dealing with the history of smallpox. Use events from the following years that were explained in Resources 2 and 3 but be sure to put them in chronological order.

- 1721
- 1980
- 1706
- 1949
- 1716

Year	Event

Checks for Understanding

2 - Use the timeline above to explain one thing that changed from colonial times to today.

3 - Decide which of the following were **CAUSES** and which were **EFFECTS** of smallpox in Colonial America and write the letter to the left of each statement in the correct columns below.

- A. Ships coming from to America from Europe
- B. 3 million Native Americans in Mexico died
- C. Doctor Boylston tested Onesimus' idea
- D. People are now inoculated against diseases

CAUSES	SMALLPOX	EFFECTS

Delaware Connection

The source below is an excerpt from a letter written by Joshua Turner to John Dickinson on March 5, 1802.

*Dover March 5
This To
John Dickinson
At Wilmon Town*

My Esteemed friend

I have had the New kind of Smallpox that I was onocolated for at your house and I had it very light but my arm has been very bad and is not well at this time and I have onocolated my family and they have had it light and Some of My Neighbours hath been onocolated from my family and some have but little faith in it... This from your friend Joshua Turner

March
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Check for Understanding: Write **Yes** or **No** in Column 2 if the conclusions in Column 1 are ones that we can (yes) or cannot (no) draw from Joshua Turner's letter to John Dickinson.

<h2>Conclusions</h2>	Is this a conclusion we can draw from the letter? Yes or No
1- Some people listened to the idea that Onesimus introduced in 1716	
2- The smallpox inoculation had no bad effects	
3- People who were inoculated had milder symptoms of smallpox	
4- In 1802 there were still people who were afraid to be inoculated	
5 - The smallpox in 1802 was different from the smallpox in 1721	

Design a Historic Marker

A blank, decorative outline of a historic marker. The marker has a central rectangular area with a thin black border, containing a horizontal line at the top and several horizontal lines below. The top and bottom of the marker are decorated with ornate, symmetrical scrollwork. The entire marker is set against a white background.

