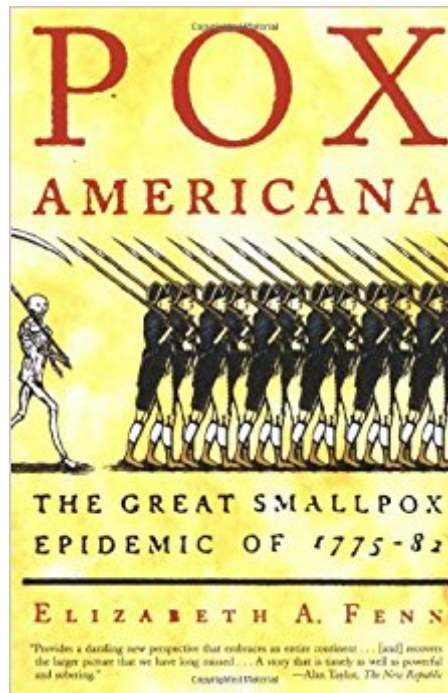




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# **Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic Of 1775-82**



## 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¢Â©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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In this engaging, creative history, Fenn (Natives and Newcomers) addresses an understudied aspect of the American Revolution: the intimate connection between smallpox and the war.

Closed-in soldiers' quarters and jails, as well as the travel demands of fighting, led to the outbreak of smallpox in 1775. George Washington ended an outbreak in the north by inoculating American soldiers (the colonists had a weaker immune system against smallpox than the British). Indeed, Fenn makes a plausible case that without Washington's efforts, the colonists might have lost the war. Despite the future president's success at "outflanking the enemy" of smallpox, however, the disease spread on the Southern front, where there was "chaos, connections, and a steady stream of victims." Even as the war ended, the increased contact between populations spread the disease as far as Mexico and the Pacific Northwest. The outbreak eventually killed an estimated 125,000 North Americans more than five times the number of colonial soldiers who died (to her credit, Fenn admits that these numbers are inexact). Along the way, Fenn, who teaches history at George Washington University, recounts the fate of many blacks freed under a British "emancipation proclamation" of sorts; promised their freedom if they fought for the British, several thousand ex-slaves perished from smallpox. She also traces the disease's effect on the North American balance of power by devastating some Native American tribes in the 1780s. Long after the war, whites kept Native Americans passive with explicit threats of infection. Fenn has placed smallpox on the historical map and shown how intercultural contact can have dire bacterial consequences.<sup>38</sup> b&w illus. not seen by PW. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Many books have been written about smallpox, but few have this volume's scholarly focus. Fenn (history, George Washington Univ.) relies heavily on primary documents to illustrate the disease's devastating impact on the political and military history of North America during the Revolutionary War. Excerpts from diaries, letters, presidential papers, and church and burial records provide first-hand accounts of the spread of this disease. The result is an extensive discussion of the role of smallpox in the Colonial era, but the book's main strength is in the detailed analysis of smallpox among Native Americans, from Mexico to Canada. Fenn's study of the historical horrors of this devastating disease nicely complements Jonathan Tucker's *Scourge* (LJ 8/15/01), which considers what the future may be like if smallpox returns. Highly recommended for academic and medical libraries. Tina Neville, Univ. of South Florida at St. Petersburg Lib. Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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. Fenn brought it to my attention with vivid detail and clearly illuminated the perils of smallpox in that era. She also did the same for tuberculosis which killed Washington's brother. Disease was part of the everyday world for those people. There was no vaccination program available. Healthcare wasn't available for the average person and what there was in that time was rudimentary. Actually, what passed for cures or treatment programs was almost as bad as the ailment one was afflicted with. Fenn built a solid case in explaining how smallpox existed in the colonies at that time. The historical work was excellent because it matched the other historical facts of the Revolution. It also filled in some gaps as well. I think that is important. While we're never going to have a complete one hundred percent knowledge of what transpired in any time, we as historians strive to learn as much as possible about the era we study. This book is a great aid in doing just that. She answered several questions I had about the Revolution with the biggest one being why did Lord Dunmore's offer of freedom to the slaves in Virginia fail to accomplish anything? Now I understand why it failed. I'm certain that I read why it failed in other books, but because I didn't have a good understanding of just how smallpox affected the people in the 17th century I failed to understand the situation as it was. That's a very good example of how important contextual understanding is for any era. The idea that smallpox influenced the Revolution is kind of interesting. I didn't realize there was a way to inoculate people prior to the Revolution either. I thought it was something that had just been devised as the Revolution started. Fenn described how variolation

came about in the colonies. I thought she also did a good job in explaining how many people opposed the practice throughout the colonies which shows that medical practitioners weren't highly regarded and that home remedies were still a way of life. Also, she hinted at how people were just a bit superstitious regarding the process. I was also interested in learning that the process was expensive. The authorities preferring quarantining the population over inoculation seems to be a combination of cost and a lack of understanding how an inoculated population could prevent epidemics of smallpox from breaking out in the crowded and filthy cities of the 17th century. I was really interested in Fenn's assessment that the smallpox epidemic that affected the Revolution was just a small part of a much wider epidemic that ravaged North America. I knew that the Indian tribes had been in movement as a result of contact with white men and the various things that were part of the European civilization. There is no question that the introduction of the horse in North America or the gun as well brought about significant change to many cultures. I understand that the Columbian Exchange also had introduced diseases to the Native Americans that they had almost no immunity to. What I didn't realize was just how much that impacted the tribes just as Americans fought their revolution and looked west. Fenn's book explains why things were the way they were just as Louis and Clark went across the continent. Nothing else could explain the ruined villages of the Hidatsa and Mandan tribes. It's almost as if the explorers entered a region that had become a wasteland and might explain why they didn't lose any men in battle on that trip. The tribes were still reeling from the impact of smallpox. The two tribes that would give major problems to Americans for many years were the Blackfeet and Sioux. Those tribes were able to take advantage of the horse, the gun, and the smallpox and established their dominance over much of the Great Plains. Fenn also explained how smallpox forced change on Indian cultures. They didn't have a choice. It wasn't just the Indians either. The Spanish populations had to adjust as well. Smallpox didn't distinguish between races. The only advantage the Europeans had was that most people had been in contact with smallpox at some point in their lives and therefore were immune when this great North America epidemic swept the continent. Yet, this was something that they weren't able to utilize to any great advantage. The Spanish needed laborers. The epidemic hurt them economically because it killed so many workers that it brought about significant cultural, social, and economic change that required rebuilding populations. It set them back at least a generation if not more. When we look forward from the epidemic we see when the Texians were able to successfully revolt against Mexico and then the white Texians pushed the Hispanic population to a lower social status. Had the epidemic not killed so many people, it is very likely that the Republic of Texas would not have happened. The same goes for the United States invasion of Mexico. The northern provinces would have had a

much larger population which might have prevented the invasion. The battle of Buena Vista could easily have been a Mexican victory. The capture of California by John Fremont could very well have been a Mexican victory. The American Southwest would probably still be part of Mexico and even the entire West Coast for that matter. You can just continue the historical changes from that point. Fenn's book brings up a new question for historians of the American Revolution. Often I'm asked what George Washington's biggest decision was or what event could have lost the Revolution for the Americans. I used to point to Washington's decision to march south and attack Cornwallis at Yorktown which resulted in the capture of a British army and definitely ended the military phase of the Revolution. Now I have to wonder if Washington's decision to inoculate the troops in 1777 was the biggest decision of the war. One can only wonder what would have happened if the British would have faced an American army reeling from smallpox at any point that year. As it was the British took Philadelphia, but couldn't crush the American Army. Had smallpox been raging in the American ranks how many more soldiers would the British have captured? Could they have destroyed that army and ended the war or at least affected the course of the war at that point even with Saratoga and the Franco-America alliance? All of that would be speculation of course, but I can't help but wonder at how our history would be if Washington had decided to continue trying quarantining troops. The same goes for the Americans defeating Mexico or conquering the Indian tribes in the west. In the end, *Pox Americana* really drives home just how lethal smallpox was, what effect it had on the American Revolution, and what effect the epidemic had in other regions of North America. It isn't just speculation on her part either. She used primary sources to construct her theory and it matches with what I know of our history in that time. Again, Fenn fills in some of the gaps in American history with this book on smallpox in America.

The problem with the history they teach you in school is that it's really just a highlights reel. For instance, there's how early American history is usually taught: Pilgrims landed at Jamestown --> more people came and settled New England --> King George III demanded taxes --> American Revolution. By shifting the focus from geopolitical issues to social/health issues -- specifically the Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-1782 - Fenn gives us an account of "all the other stuff that was going on" -- an account of North America during this pivotal time in history, give or take a few decades either way - and what an interesting, heretofore largely neglected, tale it is! Given the number of diseases that plagued North America's earliest European settlements -- to include measles, influenza, mumps, typhus, cholera, plague, malaria, yellow fever, scarlet fever, whooping

cough, and diphtheria. Why does Fenn choose to focus on smallpox, aka Variola? For one thing, the disease is transmitted only through human contact, thus ensuring that tales of spreading infection are also, de facto, tales of human migration and communication. Also, Variola's insidiously long incubation period (as long as 14 days might pass between initial infection and the first symptoms) immeasurably increased the odds that it would spread without detection. Yes, the American Revolution still features large in Fenn's account. In fact, the author offers a fairly convincing argument that smallpox played a heretofore entirely unappreciated role in determining the fate of many of the war's most crucial battles. I admit these chapters left me somewhat unnerved, because before reading them I thought I was pretty familiar with the major events of the American Revolution. Not so much now! I gasped at the spectacle of Lord Dunmore's 1000-strong "Ethiopian Regiment" marching to war in shirts boldly emblazoned "Liberty for Slaves!" only to perish in anguished heaps upon the shore of Gwynn Island; thrilled at the doomed attempt by valiant Daniel Morgan and his Virginia Riflemen to scale the walls of Quebec while there were still enough American troops alive to attempt the feat; and was shocked to learn that John Adams attributed his Congressional appointment to the fact that he was one of the few candidates willing to travel to smallpox-infested Boston to attend the meetings of the Continental Congress. Truly, I never imagined the extent of the devastation that Variola wrought within American cities and encampments during the war years, and I'm inclined to agree with Fenn's conclusion that had George Washington not had the foresight to require all the men in his army to be inoculated against the disease, the outcome of the war might have been quite different. But it was the chapters of the tale not specifically related to the American Revolution that I found most fascinating. Fenn chooses to relate the tale not so much chronologically as histologically, tracking each smallpox outbreak from its probable origin and then tracing it via Native American oral traditions and settler diaries and church death records - the paths it travelled as it spread across the American continent, sometimes via the Canadian trappers and Native American middle-men who travelled to the Hudson Bay Company's trading posts annually, only to carry back with them the fatal infection; sometimes via Franciscan monks who carried the infection with them into the Indian villages they attempted to convert; up and down the bustling trade road joining Mexico City to European settlements along the Rio Grande; in the saddlebags of Indian Raiding parties whose plunder included blankets and clothing teeming with disease; in the company Russian adventurers demanding "fur tributes" from the Inuit and other native

tribes unlucky enough to inhabit the northeastern coasts, 10,000 of which were killed by smallpox in a single year. In the end, though, all these paths converge upon one truth: that one European-borne pestilence was probably, in and of itself, responsible for reducing the population of North American by 20-50% during the years of its terrifying reign. One can quibble with Fennell's conclusions that smallpox very nearly altered the outcome of the American Revolution; that smallpox permanently shifted the balance of power among Native American tribes by selectively devastating traditionally peaceful agricultural tribes (such as the Shoshone) while sparing their more nomadic rivals (such as the Sioux); that Variola triggered the decline of Native American civilization by devastating whole tribes and undermining their confidence in traditional gods and healing rituals; that had it not been for Variola, African Americans might have gained their freedom 100 years earlier. But, as Fennell's meticulously footnoted narrative makes clear, it's hard to overstate the role that smallpox played in shaping the destiny of North America and the young republic that emerged from the chaos that Variola left in its wake.

This is an example of how hard it is to write history for the general public. I assume that this book was not first written for the general public but became so out of its compelling contribution to the field. As a member of the public, reading this book for an online course, I would have wished for more vignettes and perhaps a bit more editing of repetitious material. I have tremendous admiration for the meticulous sorting of records and data and the attempt to consider alternative hypotheses in this work. That this is an academic work is suggested by a full 40% of it being footnotes and index. It is an important contribution but a bit of a slog to read.

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