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Yellow Fever and White Racism in Philadelphia in 1793

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During July 1793, Philadelphia, then the capital of the United States, was hit with the worst outbreak of yellow fever in the history of the country. However, in spite of, the disease came the help of free black people, who were thought to be immune to the disease; and, later, racist claims that the very people who volunteered to help the sick and dying were the only ones that took unconscionable financial advantage of the situation. Despite their honorable deeds in attempting to aid the sick, the Free African Society was criticized in local papers for what was seen as charging for their services and accused of stealing personal belongings of the deceased. The writing, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Coloured People During the Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in the Year 1793; and a Refutation of Some Censures Thrown Upon Them in Some Publications*¹, written by Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, two black Philadelphian religious leaders of the time, provides historical documentation of the political and social state of Philadelphia in 1793, along with insight into the noxious effects of the disease known as yellow fever, race relations between African-Americans and Caucasians, and the general discrediting of the works performed by free black men working as nurses to the gravely ill and dying. Additionally, Allen and Jones' *Narrative* illustrates a whitewashing of history to disrepute the heroic actions of African-Americans in times of crisis, making their writing especially poignant in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

¹ Richard Allen and Absalom Jones "A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Coloured People During the Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in the Year 1793; and a Refutation of Some Censures Thrown Upon Them in Some Publications," *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen to which is Annexed the Rise and Progress of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America* [Book on-line] (Philadelphia: Martin & Boden, 1833; accessed 19 February 2007); available from <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/allen/allen.html>; Internet.

It is clear throughout Allen and Jones' narrative that there was good reason for those who could, mostly the wealthy white folks of Philadelphia, to flee during the height of the epidemic. In the *Narrative*, Jones and Allen portray Philadelphia in 1793 as a hellish place, both socially and politically. The social fabric of the city was disintegrating with each death. By the end of September of that year, nearly four thousand people had succumbed to the fever.² Those who had the means to flee from the epidemic, nearly two-fifths of the population, including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and other members of the federal government, left Philadelphia while underprivileged poor whites and blacks faced one of the most horrible health crises the United States has ever known.³

As the number of people who were able and willing to aid the sick declined due to the increasing death toll and mass migration from the city in fear of being infected by the sick and dead, the need for nurses, cart drivers, and grave diggers rose. Because of this, Jones and Allen note, "Early in September, a solicitation appeared in the public papers, to the people of colour, to come forward and assist the distressed, perishing, and neglected sick..."⁴ While white people of Philadelphia were either unable or unwilling to aid their sick, they looked to the free black citizens for help. As Gary B. Nash points out in Forging Freedoms: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community 1720-1840, the majority of doctors, city authorities, nurses, carters, and gravediggers regarded the disease as contagious, and thus refused to be within proximity of the sick or the deceased.⁵ Dr. Benjamin Rush, a well-known Caucasian doctor and signer of the Declaration of Independence, also called upon both Allen and Jones to aid him in attending to the sick, "When the sickness became general and several of the physicians died, and

² Gary B. Nash *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community 1720-1840* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) 124.

³ Nash, 124.

⁵ Nash, 122.

most of the survivors were exhausted by sickness or fatigue.”⁶ Additionally, Jones and Allen state that as the demand for nurses increased along with their fees, the mayor of the city, Matthew Clarkson, sought the black religious leaders' help. Jones and Allen write “He sent for us, and requested we would use our influence to lessen the wages of the nurses. But on informing him of the cause, i.e. people over bidding one another, it was concluded...it was left to the people involved.”⁷ Because of the miserable state the city of Philadelphia was in, where the mortality rate was beyond the scope of those who were willing to help at an affordable rate, hundreds perished for lack of treatment, and they “died unseen and unassisted.”⁸

Jones and Allen imply their position on Philadelphia politics through their alliance to Dr. Benjamin Rush, whose work was linked to his politics. Although they were not motivated by Federalist or Republican political gain, by allying themselves with Dr. Rush and his “bleeding” method, Jones and Allen aligned themselves with the “Republican” cure.⁹ In their account, Allen and Jones describe how they attended the sick using the techniques Dr. Rush taught them, and make no mention of the “bark and wine” techniques that were identified with the Federalists’ approach to the disease. Because of this, the following description of bleeding has political implications:

...When we were called, on the first appearance of the disorder, to bleed, the person frequently, on the opening of a vein, and before the operation was near over, felt a change for the better, and expressed a relief in their chief complaints...those who omitted bleeding any considerable time, after being taken by the sickness, rarely expressed any change they felt in the operation.¹⁰

⁶ Allen and Jones, 29.

⁷ Ibid, 33.

⁸ Ibid, 39.

⁹ Martin S. Pernick, “Politics, Parties, and Pestilence: Epidemic Yellow Fever in Philadelphia and the Rise of the First Party System,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 29, No. 4 (1972): 574

¹⁰ Allen and Jones, 40.

In *Politics, Parties, and Pestilence: Epidemic Yellow Fever in Philadelphia and the Rise of the First Party System*, Martin S. Pernick argues that Rush did not deny accusations that his medical techniques were tied to his politics.¹¹ In order to gain political support for his “cure,” Rush declared his method to be the only truly egalitarian approach because it was easy to master and could be practiced by anyone with little formal training. When Allen and Jones state that Rush “called us more immediately to attend upon the sick, knowing that we could both bleed,” it is apparent that Rush was putting his medical and political beliefs into practice by calling upon the two black men.¹² Pernick makes an additional argument that, because of his political motivations, Rush pushed for his potentially lethal “bleeding” method’s continued use, while needlessly endangering the lives of his patients. According to Pernick, the amount of blood drawn from the patient was in excess of the quantity possessed by most people, and the amount of mercury administered to his patients caused severe disfiguration to the teeth and skin.¹³

The desperation of the people of Philadelphia is felt throughout Allen and Jones’ *Narrative*. The effects of yellow fever ravaged the city’s people physically, psychologically, and sociologically. Jones and Allen provide lasting imagery of the physical manifestations of the disease. They describe the way they found the sick, stating:

They were taken with a chill, a head-ache, a sick stomach with pains in their limbs and back. This was the way the sickness in general began; but all were not afflicted alike. Some appeared but slightly affected with some of those symptoms. What confirmed us in the opinion of a person being afflicted was the colour of their eyes. In some it raged more seriously than in others. Some have languished for seven and ten days, and appeared to get better the day, or some hours before they died, whole others were cut off in one, two, or three days.¹⁴

¹¹ Pernick, 575

¹² Allen and Jones, 30.

¹³ Pernick, 586.

¹⁴ Allen and Jones, 38-39.

In the racist writing that incited Allen and Jones to write their *Narrative*, titled *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever which Prevailed in Philadelphia, 1793*, Mathew Carey similarly describes the horrific physical effects of yellow fever, including a list of symptoms as described by Dr. William Currie. The first symptoms experienced by the afflicted included a chill, inflamed eyes, stomach pains, violent vomiting, and bile-filled stools. These symptoms would increase in their seriousness, and then subside for a short period of time. The next level of the fever was accompanied by a yellow coloration in the skin and eyes and the patient would begin to vomit black substances. The body began to hemorrhage from all orifices. Dr. Currie states that the patient usually died five to eight days after the appearance of the first symptoms. Some experienced days during or after this time period when they did not experience symptoms. Dr. Currie points out that many of these people later suffered more serious symptoms and death from hemorrhaging.¹⁵ Allen and Jones continue to describe the horror of the physical effects of yellow fever, in their accounts of the gruesome encounters with the deceased:

We have found them in various situations—some lying on the floor, as bloody as they had been dipped in it, without any appearance of having had even a drink of water for their relief; others lying on a bed with their clothes on, as if they had come fatigued, and lain down to rest; some appeared as if they had fallen dead on the floor, from the position we found them in.¹⁶

As Allen and Jones describe it, the physical effects of yellow fever left the sick with much pain, suffering and little hope.

In learning of the physical effects of Yellow Fever it is not hard to imagine the harsh psychological toll yellow fever took upon its victims. In their *Narrative*, Allen and Jones also describe the psychological effects of the disease, again illustrating the bleakness faced by

¹⁵ Mathew Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever which Prevailed in Philadelphia*, 1st ed. [book on-line] (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1793; accessed 15 April 2007); available from http://www.uoregon.edu/~mjdennis/courses/history%20456_carey.htm; Internet

¹⁶ Allen and Jones, 40.

Philadelphians in the midst of the epidemic. They share grim accounts of the black nurses, stating,

The case of the nurses, in many instances were deserving of commiseration: the patient raging and frightful to behold. It has frequently required two persons, to hold them from running away; others made attempts to jump out of a window; in many chambers they were nailed down, and the door kept locked to prevent them from running away or breaking their necks; others lay vomiting blood, and screaming enough to chill them with horror.¹⁷

Some lost their reason, and raged with all of the fury madness could produce, and died in strong convulsions; others retained their reason to the last, and seemed rather to fall asleep than die. We could not help remarking that the former were of strong passions, and the latter of mild temper. Numbers died in a kind of dejection: they concluded they must go, (so the phrase for dying was), and therefore in a kind of fixed, determined state of mind went off.¹⁸

Although Allen and Jones wrote nearly one hundred years before the advent of modern psychology, their *Narrative* illustrates their aptitude for connecting the physical effects of yellow fever to its effects on the minds of its victims and the mental state of the afflicted in relation to their actions. They point out the relationship between body and mental outlook, accounting,

A gentleman called one evening to request a good nurse might be got for him when he was sick, and to superintend his funeral, and gave particular directions how he would have it conducted. It seemed a surprising circumstance; for the man appeared at the time to be in perfect health; but calling, two or three days after, to see him, found a woman dead in the house, and the man so far gone, that to administer any thing for his recovery was needless--he died that evening. We mention this as an instance of the dejection and despondence that took hold on the minds of thousands, and are of opinion that it aggravated the case of many; while others who bore up cheerfully, got up again, that probably would otherwise have died.¹⁹

The psychological effects of yellow fever were noted by others during the crisis. In addition to the physical symptoms experienced by those afflicted with yellow fever, Dr. Currie mentions that

¹⁷ Ibid, 37.

¹⁸ Ibid, 39.

¹⁹ Ibid, 40.

anxiety, “deep and distressed sighing,” restlessness, and comatose delirium were often experienced.²⁰

Along with the descriptions of the psychology of their patients, Allen and Jones recount the social psychology of Philadelphia during the epidemic. The city whose name translates as, “Brotherly Love” was in a state of social panic, wherein fear of the disease motivated some Philadelphians to act with what Allen and Jones label as “barbarity.”²¹ They include several accounts of behavior that indicate the distressed state of the city, stating,

We have picked up little children that were wandering they knew not where, (whose parents had been cut off), and taken them to the orphan house; at this time the dread that prevailed over people’s minds was so general, that it was a rare instance to see one neighbor visit another, and friends, when they met in the streets, were afraid of each other; much less would they admit into their houses the distressed orphan that had been where the sickness was.²²

They continue, discussing their disappointment with the inhumane behavior they witnessed, “With reluctance we call to mind the many opportunities there were in the power of individuals to be useful toward their fellow men, yet through the terror of the times were omitted.”²³ They tell of a woman who had been staggering in the street who eventually fell face-forward into a gutter. Assuming she merely drunk, a man approached her to check if she was suffocating. When he realized that she was afflicted with yellow fever, “The hard hearted man threw her down, shut the door and left her.”²⁴

The social panic illustrated by Allen and Jones is also seen in Carey’s report, most vividly in Chapter IV titled, *General Despondency. Deplorable Scenes. Frightful View of Human Nature.*

²⁰ Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever which Prevailed in Philadelphia, 1793.*

²¹ Allen and Jones, 41.

²² Ibid, 41.

²³ Ibid, 41

²⁴ Ibid, 41.

A Noble and Exhilarating Contrast.²⁵ He describes such actions as moving out of the street upon sight of a hearse, avoiding houses where it was known that a resident was afflicted, and shunning interactions with others.²⁶ He speaks of husbands and wives deserting each other even as their spouses lay on their deathbeds, and children fleeing from their parents upon appearance of the disease. He describes the cold indifference experienced with the death of a loved one, which Carey argues, at any other time would have been treated as the death of a servant.²⁷

Not to be excluded from the discussion of the social state of Philadelphia in 1793, are race relations and racism, which was rampant at the time. Prior to the outbreak the white people of Philadelphia avoided interaction with the black people, with whom they had an ambivalent relationship, primarily engaging with them only when it was convenient. There was no more convenient of a time for the whites to call upon the black community than when the epidemic took hold and the only white people who remained in the city were poor who couldn't afford to flee and doctor's who remained for political reasons. Given the fact that the black people of Philadelphia faced rampant racism and were not even considered full citizens due to their lack of voting rights, it is nothing short of heroic that Allen and Jones answered Dr. Rush's the and mayor's pleas for help. In their *Narrative*, Allen and Jones indicate that they felt a Christian moral obligation, stating "we have been the instruments in the hands of God, for saving the lives of some hundreds of our suffering fellow mortals."²⁸ According to Nash, they saw this as a God-sent opportunity to prove their courage and their worth and to show that they could drive anger and bitterness from their hearts. Perhaps they could dissolve white racism by demonstrating that

²⁵ Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever which Prevailed in Philadelphia*, 1st ed.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Allen and Jones, 30.

in their capabilities, civic virtue, and Christian humanitarianism.²⁹ Nash draws a connection between the actions of Philadelphia's black Christians and the biblical story of the Good Samaritan, reenacting the drama of the despised man who aided a man in desperate need when all of the respected men in the community turned their heads.³⁰

In addition to their vision that this was a God-sent liberating opportunity, Allen and Jones were under the false impression of a widely held myth that black people were immune to yellow fever. Historical documents dispute the origin of this myth, however, Dr. Rush is often cited as having perpetuated this belief.³¹ Allen and Jones state,

The public were informed that in the West Indies and other places where this terrible malady had been, it was observed that the blacks were not affected with it. Happy would it have been for you, and much more so for us, if this observation had been verified by our experience. When the people of colour had the sickness and died, we were imposed upon, and told it was not with the prevailing sickness, until it became too notorious to be denied; then we were told some few died, but not many.... The Bill of Mortality for the Year 1793, published by Matthew Whitehead and John Ormrod, clerks, and Joseph Dolby, sexton, will convince any reasonable man that will examine it, that as many coloured people died in proportion as others.³²

Unfortunately, Rush's claims of black immunity to yellow fever proved to be a deadly and destructive error. Even Carey writes that the widely-held belief of black people's immunization to the disease proved false and erroneous. However, in a way, he validates the lie, arguing that if the black nurses were as terrified by the disease as white nurses, the suffering of the sick would have been aggravated.³³ In essence, he says that a lie perpetrated on blacks proved to be a boon to white and so, it was acceptable, and the fact that it was a lie is of little consequence.

²⁹ Nash, 123.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 124.

³² Allen and Jones, 38.

³³ Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever which Prevalled in Philadelphia*, 1st ed.

This is not the only part of Carey's pamphlet that was offensive to the black community. Allen and Jones' primary motivation in writing their essay was to publicly address accusations made by Mathew Carey, an Irish immigrant and affluent publisher, in his popular pamphlet *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever*. In the first paragraph of Allen and Jones' narrative, they state, "we were solicited by a number of those who felt themselves injured, thereby, and by the advice of several respectable citizens, to step forward and declare facts as they truly were."³⁴ Later in their writing, Allen and Jones name Carey as one of their accusers and directly address his statements. They write, "We feel ourselves hurt most by a partial, censorious photograph in Mr. Carey's second edition of his account of the sickness in Philadelphia, pages 76 and 77, where he asperses the blacks alone, for having taken advantage of the distressed situation of the people."³⁵

The first and second editions of *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever*, vary little in content, however, there is a distinct difference between Carey's rhetoric in regard to his accusations of opportunistic pilfering by those who attended the sick. In the first edition he implicates nurses in general, stating that both white and black nurses engaged in pilfering. In his second edition, however, Carey leaves out the phrase "both coloured and white" and instead writes, "The great demand for nurses afforded an opportunity for imposition, which was eagerly seized by some of the vilest of blacks."³⁶ Allen and Jones, not only as members of the black community who had attended to the sick, were also religious leaders who had rallied their community to aid those afflicted with the disease. They were among the elite of Philadelphia's free black men because they could read and write and they had access to funding to publish their

³⁴ Allen and Jones, 29.

³⁵ Ibid, 32.

³⁶ Mathew Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever which Prevailed in Philadelphia*, 2nd ed. [book on-line] (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1794; accessed 15 April 2007); available from <http://eee.uci.edu/clients/bjbecker/PlaguesandPeople/week7a.html>; Internet.

views. While their response is defensive, they sharply bring into question Carey's actions and motivations, arguing,

Had Mr. Carey been solicited to such an undertaking, for hire, what would he have demanded? But Mr. Carey, although chosen a member of that band of worthies who have so eminently distinguished themselves by their labours for the relief of the sick and helpless; yet, quickly after his election, left them to struggle with their arduous and hazardous task, by leaving the city. 'Tis true Mr. Carey was no hireling, and had a right to flee, and upon his return, to plead the cause of those who fled; yet, we think, he was wrong in giving so partial and injurious an account of the coloured nurses; if they have taken advantage of the public distress, is it any more than he hath done of its desire for information?³⁷

Allen and Jones point out that rather than staying in Philadelphia to aid the sick and dying, Carey fled from the plague, like many other privileged whites. Although they do not blame Carey for having abandoned the city, they call on his integrity in returning after the storm had cleared only to criticize those who stayed to aid the sick. Allen and Jones continue and turn the tables on Carey by accusing him of profiteering from the epidemic, stating, "We believe he has made more money by the sale of his 'Scraps' [the street name for Carey's pamphlet] than a dozen of the greatest extortioners among the coloured nurses."³⁸ In a strategic move, Allen and Jones shift the blame to their accuser.

Allen and Jones continue to address the accusations of overcharging and pilfering made by Carey and others throughout the *Narrative*. They argue that they received little if no compensation and that black people were no guiltier of pilfering than white people. They state,

Our services were the production of real sensibility; we sought not fee nor reward, until the increase of the disorder rendered our labour so arduous that we were not adequate to the service we had assumed... We set no price until the reward was fixed by those we had served. After paying the people we had to assist us, our compensation was much less than many will believe.³⁹

³⁷ Allen and Jones, 32.

³⁸ Ibid, 32-33.

³⁹ Ibid, 30.

Rather than overcharging and profiting from their affairs for the sick, Allen and Jones state that they were actually “out of pocket £177 9s. 8d.” They state, “that by the employment we were engaged in we lost £177 9s. 8d. But if the other expenses, which we have actually paid, are added to that sum, how much then may we not say we have suffered! We leave the public to judge.”⁴⁰ They continue to address the issue of overcharging for their services, by stating, “...we have buried several hundreds of poor persons and strangers, for which service we have never received nor never asked any compensation.”⁴¹ In saying this, they position themselves as philanthropists rather than profiteers.

On the issue of pilfering, Allen and Jones declare that the white nurses were as guilty, if not worse than their black counterparts. However, the black nurses were portrayed by Carey and others as being the main perpetrators of such crimes. They state,

We can assure the public that there were as many white as black people detected in pilfering, although the number of the latter, employed as nurses, was twenty times as great as the former, and that there is, in our opinion, as great a proportion of white as of black inclined to such practices; and it is rather to be admired that so few instances of pilfering and robbery happened, considering the great opportunities there were for such things. We do not know of more than five coloured people suspected of any thing clandestine, out of the great number employed.⁴²

Throughout the *Narrative*, Allen and Jones relate accounts of fraudulent behaviors by white nurses and other attendees to the sick and dying. They tell of a white woman who demanded six pounds for “laying” a dead married couple out and then stole the husband’s buckles and other belongings. Another white woman stole the rings off a dead woman’s finger.⁴³ They also accuse the white attendees of over-bidding, which led to the perceived over-charging of services. They state, “We know as many whites who were guilty of it; but this is looked over, while the

⁴⁰ Ibid, 31.

⁴¹ Ibid, 32.

⁴² Ibid, 37.

⁴³ Ibid, 34.

blacks are held up to censure. Is it a greater crime for a black to pilfer than for a white to privateer?"⁴⁴

This question gets to the heart of the issue of race relations in Philadelphia in 1793: despite their efforts to help people, white and black, the black nurses of Philadelphia received little to no acknowledgement for their deeds and what scarce recognition they did receive by the white press is littered with racism and clear attempts to discredit their work. During the epidemic, there was a complete break down of white "society" in the city as the wealthy whites fled the city due to their misguided understanding of yellow fever as an air-borne disease. As demonstrated in Allen and Jones' *Narrative* and Carey's pamphlet, the remaining whites frequently declined to take care of their own families, much less other whites. The situation became desperate and white doctors turned to blacks who did not have the means to flee the city for help in attending to the remaining whites. As the wealthy white people, such as Mathew Carey, who were afforded the luxury of leaving during the outbreak began to return to Philadelphia, a cover-up was perpetrated to whitewash the records of white extortions upon whites, thus erasing the history of the deeds of the black nurses and highlighting the actions of their Caucasian peers through the practice of accusing them of crimes and indignities they did not commit. Blacks were a convenient target because they possessed no political power, and very little wealth. Dr. Rush and his contemporaries virtually ignored the black contribution that they had sought. Carey wrote his pamphlets and they were widely read and commonly believed. Those who were not in Philadelphia during the epidemic now believed that blacks took unfair advantage of poor whites and in fact stole from the dead. Nash points out that Philadelphia's saviors in Carey's account were the immigrant merchant Stephan Girard and a list of several

⁴⁴ Ibid, 33.

other white people who organized an emergency hospital outside of the city.⁴⁵ Nash also notes that Mathew Carey had virtually no good words to say about the black Philadelphians who drove the death carts, buried the dead, and nursed the afflicted in the back streets and alleys of the city.⁴⁶ Bad news made headlines and Carey made money from his work. Unfortunately, the true stories of black heroism, sacrifice, and social service rarely make it into the history books. People who should have been treated as heroes are vilified and great service to Philadelphia's citizens was forgotten.

Because of this, Allen and Jones' narrative is representative and reflective of race relations throughout American history. As European-Americans settled the North America by means of violent occupation, and developed a nation supported by the African slave trade and oppression of women, the history books were written by the white-supremacist, patriarchal masters who controlled the pen and the presses. The writers of history conveniently left out the accomplishments and contributions of women and people of color. In his article, *A Mode for Caleb: Is this Progress? Part II*, Caleb McDaniel reflects on race relations in Philadelphia, stating, "I'm mainly left with the realization that there is a long history of white Americans leaving black Americans behind."⁴⁷ *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Coloured People During the Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in the Year 1793; and a Refutation of Some Censures Thrown Upon Them in Some Publications* is of immense importance. It is of great consequence because its rediscovery could shift the control of the story of what happened in Philadelphia in 1793 by shedding the light of truth on what really happened. McDaniel writes that Allen and Jones understood the enormous damage caused by partial representations. Allen and Jones

⁴⁵ Nash, 124.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 125.

⁴⁷ Caleb McDaniel, "Is this Progress? Part II" *Mode for Caleb*, 15 Sep 2005, [on-line] available from <http://modeforcaleb.blogspot.com/2005/09/is-this-progress-part-ii.html>; accessed 15 April 2007.

outwardly challenged the popular beliefs of the time that black nurses were profiteering and pilfering from the dead. Without this document, Carey's mistruths would still hold ground today.

In this regard, what happened in 1793 Philadelphia is disturbingly similar to what happened in New Orleans during and after Hurricane Katrina. Those who could leave the area before the hurricane did. Most of them were white and upper-to-middle class. Like Philadelphia during the yellow fever epidemic, there was a total breakdown in New Orleans and social chaos occurred. Then, political fighting between Democrats and Republicans broke out and made a bad situation worse. Those who were hurt most were those who were left behind, poor blacks and whites in a disaster with the politicians arguing around them.

A similar picture of black people was painted by the white-controlled news media. Blacks were again portrayed as opportunistic, as taking advantage of their FEMA welfare resources. Images of African-American "looters" pervaded television reports in contrast to the images of white people who were acting in the same way as their black counterparts, but were portrayed in the media as survivors providing for their families. Stories of rape and murder in the Superdome and convention center spread. Bad news makes news and the media organizations made profits.

As Gordon Russell and Brian Thevenot point out in their article, *Reports of Anarchy at Superdome Overstated*, although these stories were later proved false, the damage was already done and these mistruths have pervaded Americans' consciousness.⁴⁸ The real stories of black heroism and black people helping others have never been and maybe never will be widely circulated. There were many thousands of blacks who were stranded who helped blacks and

⁴⁸ Brian Thevenot and Gordon Russell "Reports of Anarchy at Superdome Overstated," *Seattle Times: Nation and World*, 26 September 2005 [newspaper on-line]; available at http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/nationworld/2002520986_katmyth26.html; Internet; accessed 15 April 2007.

whites and their deeds, probably based in large part on similar motivations as Allen and Jones, that will never be known and may never appear in our history books. The sad truth is that what black people experienced in Philadelphia was not the first time black people's experiences were whitewashed to serve a racist agenda, and was certainly not the last, as we see more than two hundred years later.

Absalom Jones and Richard Allen's writing titled, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Coloured People During the Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in the Year 1793; and a Refutation of Some Censures Thrown Upon Them in Some Publications*, provides important historical documentation of the political and social state of Philadelphia in 1793, along with insight into the horrific effects of yellow fever, race relations between African-Americans and European-Americans, and the disregard for the deeds performed by black nurses. The narrative is particularly relevant today as it illustrates the whitewashing of history to disrepute the actions of African-Americans throughout history and a reminder about how American history has been written from a racist, white perspective. Allen and Jones' writing is of great significance for all minorities who have had to reclaim their stories from the patriarchal, class bound, and white supremacist American media and portray them with accuracy. This is particularly relevant today, as New Orleans and the nation recovers physically, psychologically, and sociologically from Hurricane Katrina, the aftermath of which has an uncanny resemblance to the experiences of black Philadelphians in 1793.