

Old records shed new light on smallpox outbreaks in 1700s

May 21 2021, by William J. Kole

Lord's Day April 1^m 1764.

Thro' the Goodness of God I have this day had an opportunity to send a note of thanks to his house, to praise his name for his great mercy to me, in recovering my dear children & the others in my Family from the Small Pox - O that this affecting Instance of the divine Goodness to me might be deeply impress'd on my mind, & have a lasting & abiding effect there.

O most gracious God, I desire unfeignedly to adore & bless thy holy name for this repeated Instance of thy great goodness, thou hast visited ^{me}

In this image provided by the American Ancestors & New England Historic Genealogical Society, a digitized copy of a page from a handwritten 18th century diary by the Rev. Ebenezer Storer, during a period of smallpox, in Boston, shows an April 1764 entry that includes a prayer Storer wrote weeks after arranging to have his own children inoculated. In the prayer, Storer gives thanks for the recovery of family members from the disease. Credit: American Ancestors & New England Historic Genealogical Society via AP

A highly contagious disease originating far from America's shores triggers deadly outbreaks that spread rapidly, infecting the masses. Shots are available, but a divided public agonizes over getting jabbed.

Sound familiar?

Newly digitized records—including a minister's diary scanned and posted online by Boston's Congregational Library and Archives—are shedding fresh light on devastating outbreaks of smallpox that hit the city in the 1700s.

And three centuries later, the parallels with the coronavirus pandemic are uncanny.

"How little we've changed," said CLA archivist Zachary Bodnar, who led the digitization effort, working closely with the New England Historic Genealogical Society.

"The fact that we're finding these similarities in the records of our past is a very interesting parallel," Bodnar said in an interview. "Sometimes the more we learn, the more we're still the same, I guess."

Smallpox was eradicated, but not before it sickened and killed millions worldwide. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention say the last natural outbreak of smallpox in the United States occurred in 1949. In 1980, the World Health Organization's decision-making arm declared it eradicated, and no cases of naturally occurring smallpox have been reported since.

But in April 1721, after an English ship, the HMS Seahorse, brought it to Boston, it was a clear and present danger. By winter of 1722, it would infect more than half of the city's population of 11,000 and kill 850.

Much earlier outbreaks, also imported from Europe, killed Native Americans indiscriminately in the 1600s. Now, digitized church records are helping to round out the picture of how the colonists coped when it was their turn to endure pestilence.

The world's first proper vaccination didn't occur until the end of that century, when an English country doctor named Edward Jenner inoculated an 8-year-old boy against smallpox in 1796.

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Lord's Day March 11. 1764. as it
has pleas'd God in his sovereign pro-
-vidence to permit that contagious distem-
-per the Small pox to spread in the
Town, I have this day caus'd my dear
children with several others in my
Family to receive it by Inoculation,
humbly depending upon Almighty
God for Success, & earnestly praying
for a blessing on the means us'd
to lessen the malignity of the disorder.

O Almighty God, the Author of
our beings & the Father of our Spirits,
I would humbly & earnestly look up
to thee in this day of distress & calamity,
How hast in thy alwise providence
permitted a contagious disease, w^{ch}
has

In this image provided by the American Ancestors & New England Historic Genealogical Society, a digitized copy of a page from a handwritten 18th century diary by the Rev. Ebenezer Storer, during a period of smallpox, in Boston, shows a March 1764 entry that includes a prayer Storer wrote after arranging to have his own children inoculated. In the prayer, Storer praises the discovery of means used in the late 18th century to treat the disease. Credit: American Ancestors & New England Historic Genealogical Society via AP

Before then, doctors used inoculation, or variolation as it was often called, introducing a trace amount of the smallpox virus into the skin. The procedure, or variations of it, had been practiced since ancient times in Asia. Jenner's pioneering of vaccination, using instead a less lethal strain of the virus that infected cows, was a huge scientific advance.

Yet just as with COVID-19 vaccines in 2021, some took a skeptical view of smallpox inoculations in the 18th century, digitized documents show. To be sure, there was ample reason to worry: Early smallpox treatments, while effective in many who were inoculated, sickened or even killed others.

The Rev. Cotton Mather, one of the era's most influential ministers, had actively promoted inoculation. In a sign of how resistant some colonists were to the new technology, [someone tossed an explosive device through his window](#) in November 1721.

Fortunately, it didn't explode, but researchers at Harvard say this menacing message was attached: "Cotton Mather, you dog, damn you! I'll inoculate you with this; with a pox to you."

Among the recently digitized Congregational Church records are

handwritten diary entries scrawled by the Rev. Ebenezer Storer, a pastor in Cambridge, Massachusetts. On March 11, 1764, as smallpox once again raged through Boston, Storer penned a prayer in his journal after arranging to have his own children inoculated.

The deeply devout Storer, [his diary shows](#), had faith in science.

"Blessed be thy name for any discoveries that have been made to soften the severity of the distemper. Grant thy blessing on the means used," he wrote.

Three weeks later, Storer gave thanks to God "for his great mercy to me in recovering my dear children and the others in my family from the smallpox."

For Bodnar, the archivist, it's a testament to the insights church records can contain.

"They're fascinating," he said. "They're essentially town records—they not only tell the story of the daily accounting of the church, but also the story of what people were doing at that time and what was going on."

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