

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Letter from a Yellow Fever Victim Philadelphia, 1793

THE story of the yellow fever plague of 1793 in Philadelphia is well known to every student of the period. It began in August, down near the Delaware River, on Water Street, a densely populated, ill-kept area of the town. By the time that the plague died down with the coming of frosts in October, more than 4,000 persons had died.¹

Many descriptions of the horrors of the epidemic have been published over the years, including the excellent study by John H. Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead*. The letter printed below is a contemporary description of the plague conditions, written by one of its victims.² Little is known about Isaac Heston. Apparently, he was born in October, 1770, the son of Edward W. Heston.³ He was a member of the Religious Society of Friends, and probably was living with Levi Heston, a currier, at 72 North Front Street, at the time he wrote this long letter to his brother Abraham in Blockley Township.⁴ He died ten days later, and was buried in the Friends Burial Ground on September 29.⁵

Isaac Heston wrote on September 19 that he believed the "disorder has rather abated since the Cold weather," but the death rate was averaging seventy a day during the last two weeks of September, and went higher in October before the frosts came and

¹ John H. Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead* (Philadelphia, 1949), 8-12, 281.

² This letter is in the possession of Harry J. Murphy, Jr., 5358 Jackson St., Philadelphia.

³ *Record of the Family of Zebulon Heston . . .* (Bridgeton, N. J., 1883). The information about Isaac Heston was on a sheet pasted into the book. His death is noted as Sept. 20, 1793, but that must be an error, for he wrote this letter the day before.

⁴ *Philadelphia Directory* (1794).

⁵ W. W. Hinshaw, *Encyclopedia of American Quaker Genealogy* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1938), II, 374.

brought a sharp decline.⁶ Heston was one of ten persons buried in the Quaker plot at Third and Arch Streets on September 29.⁷

Temple University

EDWIN B. BRONNER

Dear Brother

You can not immagin the situation of this city. How deplorable. it Continues to be more and more depopulated, both by the removal of its Inhabittants into the Country, and by the distructive Fever which now prevails. They are a Dieing on our right hand & on our Left. we have it oposit us, in fact, all around us, great are the number that are Calld to the grave, and numbered with the silent Dead. last third day [*Tuesday*] there were buried in Potters field 26. in the Dutch Calvinist ground 22 & in Friends 7. that is, in three Burial grounds only, 55. it is said there were that Day upwards of one hundred. some say one hundred and thirty odd. but true it is there was upwards of one hundred. those who at first appeared stout harted, are now moveing out of the city. there is now Scarsely any body to be seen in many parts of the town, and those who are seen are principally French, and Negroes. amongst whom it dose not seem to be so prevalent, especially among the negroes. indeed I dont know what the people would do, if it was not for the Negroes, as they are the Principal nurses.⁸

Doct Rush has had it, but has recovered. Doct Morris Widdow is Dead with it. Richd Wells, Cashier of the Bank, in whose house she Died is now ill of it. said to be daingerous. Widdow Morris was lead from the grave of her husband, to to [*sic*] her fathers Door (Benedic Dorseys) when he shut it, and would not admit her in.⁹ Richard Wells then sayd, as one door was shut god would open an other, and immediately took her to his own house.—here let me paus for a moment, and quit a relation, which ought to Cause a tear to

⁶ Powell, 234.

⁷ Mathew Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever . . .*, 4th ed. (Philadelphia, 1794), second unnumbered page after 112.

⁸ Later, the Negroes also proved susceptible to yellow fever and died in great numbers. Powell, 95 ff.

⁹ John Morris, M.D., who lived at 11 Pear St., died Sept. 8, 1793. Robert C. Moon, *The Morris Family of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1898), II, 586–589. Benedict Dorsey, grocer, lived at 3 and 5 South Third St.; Richard Wells, cashier at the Bank of North America, lived at 28 North Third St. *Philadelphia Directory* (1794).

fall from the Eye of every humin being. of what service is religion I would ask, When a Father is so forgetfull of his Duty to a child as to shut her out, when there Could be no fear but for him self. all his family having gon out. at the thoughts of this, my Blood is made to run Cold, and I am Caused to disavow every outward show of religion, as onely a Cloak to hide the heart of a viper. At this time of general Calamity, when ever[y] one must be roused to a sence of their Dainger, to Continue firm and unshaken is no easy matter [;] you may well be assured there is hardly a smile to be seen in the Countinence of any person walking in the streets. those who have not removed are afraid to se any boddy, even their nearest Friends, and keep themselves Close confined in their Houses. and this City never wore so gloomy an aspect before. they have it in newyork this Days Paper says, they have it in Derby. I come through it yesterday. & the Doctors are now differing about the Disorder, and the methods of Cureing. some of the presses are stopt, (your Paper has not Come in) so that the public mind by every circumstance together, is almost distracted; not onely here but all around. the govener of New York, and meriland, have published their proclimations, injoining the strictest serch to be made of ever[y] person that arrives from Philadelphia. Poleticks, that run so high lately, are now all laid aside, and almost every one who have property, are making their wills, not knowing how soon it may be their turn to be Summoned to the bar of justice, and obliged to leave all behind, to se the hurst [*hearse*] go by, is now so common, that we hardly take notice of it, in fine we live in the midst of Death, as we may stand in the Door and se the dead Bodies carried out. Yet we have Confidence and trust in our fate. Those who live, and not se what I se, perhaps may think this account Exagerated; but if they were here and saw, what may be seen, though now they may put on a Chearfull Countinence, would then, when they saw Death's shafts flying on all sides, evin to the next Door, with all their boasted Courage and disbeleif, would find their hearts to fail them, and wish to escape. But through all the dainger, thanks be to god, we have yet been preserved, but how long It may continue so, it is imposable to say, for this hour we may be well, and ne[x]t find our selves past recovery. I had no Expectations when I begun this letter, to have made it so lengthy, but being led on from one thought, to a nother, it seams almost imposable to stop,

when humanity Calls my attention, when I se the Metropolis of the United States depopulated, it is too distressing and afecting a sean, for a person young in Life to bear, without moralizeing. and Causing those Serious reflections, which will be as a healing balm to the humain and Tender heart.

I believe the disorder has rather abated since the Cold weather, but there are a grate number stil Dying—the Sheriff now comes in and says, there has now a 11 been buried out of the ally he lives in, which runs to 2 [nd] street from front, he has been unwell, and all his Children are now sick. I had like to have forgot to tel you, that 17 have been buried out of Pair Street.¹⁰ Mr. Enk, one of the Clarks in the bank took it, and Could not get any body to nurs him, when his brother, younger brother, went, he took it and they both Died, but while the 2 [nd] was sick, the 3 [rd] came and took it, while the 2 [nd] was Dying the father Came to se the 3 [rd] and, took it and, they are all dead, thus is the Father, & three Sons gone to their everlasting homes, in a short time.

September 19, 1793

Isaac Heston

¹⁰ Pear St., also called Chancellor St., is just south of Walnut, between Second and Third Sts.

Joseph Breintnall
and a Poem in Praise of Jacob Taylor

IN 1830, Joshua Francis Fisher, in his “Early Poets and Poetry of Pennsylvania,” said in reference to Joseph Breintnall that “he continued . . . the essays of the Busy Body, of which Franklin had written the first five—we may, I presume, attribute to him the rhymed description of Market street which forms part of the 18th No. Some verses to the author of Bachelor’s Hall are the only other poem of Breintnall’s I can discover. . . .”¹ It can now be said that there is a high degree of possibility that Breintnall is the author of an unsigned poem in praise of Jacob Taylor, the almanac maker,

¹ *Memoirs of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, II, Pt. II (Philadelphia, 1830), 68.

which appears in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* for December 30–January 6, 1735/6.

*Still green with Bays each ancient Altar stands,
Above the Reach of sacrilegious Hands.* Pope.

Where Nature does her greatest Gifts bestow,
Much more to her than to the Schools we owe;
And where she fails her Blessings to impart
In vain we strive to fill her Wants with Art;
Nought can so great Deficiency supply;
Each fond Attempt gives its own self the Lie:
But on the deep Foundation which she lays
Art's Superstructure may arise with Praise.

The Statuary, or the Painter can
Display the well-form'd Outside of a Man;
Mechanicks too, by rules can Motion give;
But who on Earth can make the Picture live?
What Art, what Science can perfect the Whole,
While yet it wants—it wants the thinking Soul?

This Heav'nly Gift let Writers learn to prize,
And, where they can't repay, not rob the Wise.

High in Esteem let each bright Genius stand,
Those who can teach deserve the chief Command;
And those Contempt, who to fine Things pretend
For nothing but the pleasure to transcend.
Their weak Endeavours on weak Eyes may shine:
A diff'rent praise, my Friend, is due to thine.
For thy great Parts, and Works, thy Name shall be
Grateful to Men of Thought, and dear to me.

Has thy long Silence made thee stupid seem?
Thou nod'st sometimes, but some forever dream.
Does any Man traduce thee, let him rise;
He knows thee not, or envies one more wise.
But I, warm'd with thy unextinguish'd Fire,
Thy lasting Sense and Spirit must admire.

The poem appears under the caption “An Acquaintance of Jacob Taylor's perusing the Reading in Jacob's Almanack for the Year 1736, had the following Thoughts.”

A letter from Breintnall to Andrew Bradford, dated October 29, 1739, reads in part:

. . . As you are the printer of Jacob Taylor's Almanack, you are a fit person for me to communicate a thought to that I lately had while I was perusing *several* of Jacob's Almanacks to find out a remark I had formerly

seen in one of them. That which I first look'd over was for the year 1737, wherein are many scraps of Wit and learning. The Thought I have to impart is to publish an Enchiridion that shall contain a collection from his almanacks for some number of years past, of Poetry, pieces of History &c., &c.

Your Friend

J. Breintnall

Perhaps Jacob's consent & assistance should be asked.²

This letter certainly reveals Breintnall to have been a great admirer of Jacob Taylor's almanacs, one who might well write verses in their author's praise. And we cannot overlook the fact that Benjamin Franklin described Breintnall as "a great lover of poetry, reading all he could meet with, and writing some that was tolerable."³ The verses in question must have been the work of a "tolerable" poet. Furthermore, a comparison of the letter with the caption of the poem reveals striking similarities of thought and phrasing. First, the author in both cases refers to "Jacob's Almanack," although it was more usual to refer to almanacs by the author's last name unless speaking in derision, or referring to a pseudonym, such as Poor Richard, Poor Robin, and the like. Second, the author in both cases speaks of "perusing" the almanac and of having a thought while doing so that he felt he must communicate.

We should not be misled by the sentence in Breintnall's letter which reads, "That which I first look'd over was for the year 1737. . . ." This, without doubt, was not intended to mean that the first issue of Taylor's almanac that Breintnall ever saw was the one for 1737. It seems to mean only that in his search for the "remark I had formerly seen in one of them" the first issue he examined was that for 1737. Finally, the very fact that the letter was written some three years after the poem, expressing substantially the same ideas and couching them in the same phraseology, would seem to indicate that the author was the same in each case. Apparently, when Breintnall wrote his letter to Andrew Bradford he referred to and expressed his admiration of Taylor's almanacs in terms that were habitual with him. Thus, while there is perhaps no absolutely conclusive evidence, it seems highly possible that the poem in question is Joseph Breintnall's.

University of Maryland

J. PHILIP GOLDBERG

² *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XXI (1897), 130.

³ Nathan G. Goodman, ed., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1932), 65.