The Wages of Blackness: African American Workers and the Meanings of Race during Philadelphia’s 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic

YELLOW FEVER STRUCK PHILADELPHIA with a vengeance in 1793, killing approximately 10 percent of the population between August and December. During the city’s four-month ordeal, heads of households frequently hired outsiders to help tend their sick. Quaker widow Margaret Morris was no exception. In mid-September, after her son John and his wife, Abigail, contracted the fever, Morris obtained the services of “a black man and woman who were but just nursing at another place.” When two other members of her household became ill in early October, Morris hired another black man and a white woman, each at the rate of three dollars a day. After both of these individuals came down with the fever, Morris quickly found a replacement—another white woman. In short, Morris hired black men, black women, and white women as nurses during these trying times, apparently paying them comparable wages. Nevertheless, when Morris complained to family members about the cost of care, she disparaged only African American nurses, noting that “many

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1 Because the terms “black” and “white” were salient in the postrevolutionary era and are currently in common usage in academic circles, I continue that practice here. I also use “African American” to refer to people either born in Africa or of African descent. In addition, the nature of the sources I am using has forced me to portray racial identities as bifurcated and, thus, to ignore the existence of multiracial individuals of both African and European lineages.

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of them became extortionate in their demands, exacting the sum of three, four, and five dollars a day for their attendance.”2 Morris’s sentiments regarding the wages paid to African American nurses were not atypical. In fact, they paralleled the better-known public accusations of Philadelphia printer and bookseller Mathew Carey, who also complained in his published account of the epidemic that the “great demand for nurses afforded an opportunity for imposition, which was eagerly seized by some of the vilest of blacks.” According to Carey, these black nurses “extorted two, three, four, and even five dollars a night for attendance, which would have been well paid by a single dollar,” and “some of them were even detected in plundering the houses of the sick.”3

Because of Carey’s prominent position in Philadelphia society and the public nature of his comments, many historians interested in race relations during the epidemic have focused on what prompted Carey’s allegation and on his ensuing debate with African American leaders Absalom Jones and Richard Allen over the validity of his charge of extortion. They have attributed his critique of black nurses to his Irish roots and ensuing desire to support Hibernian immigrants competing with former slaves for jobs, his general racist sentiments, his fear of the vagaries of impersonal market forces, and his effort to create a dramatic narrative of community regeneration based on a portrait of a white, male, “public-spirited citizen.”4

2 Margaret Morris to Richard Hill Morris, Sept. 19, 1793, Margaret Morris Papers; M. Morris to Milchah M. Moore, Sept. 25, Oct. 10, and Oct. 24, 1793, Edward Wanton Smith Collection; M. Morris to R. H. Morris, Oct. 10, 1793, Margaret Morris Papers; M. Morris to [Sarah and George Dillwyn], Oct. 24, 1793, Edward Wanton Smith Collection; and Benjamin Smith to M. Morris, Sept. 7, [1793], Gulielma M. Howland Collection. All in the Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library.

3 Mathew Carey, A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1793), 76–77. Carey’s public condemnation was published in his “instant history” of the 1793 epidemic, eventually selling over ten thousand copies in four editions. Carey published the first edition on November 13, 1793; a second on November 23, a third on November 30; and a fourth edition on January 16, 1794. For publication information on Carey’s account, see Sally F. Griffith, “A Total Dissolution of the Bonds of Society: Community Death and Regeneration in Mathew Carey’s Short Account of the Malignant Fever,” in A Melancholy Scene of Devastation: The Public Response to the 1793 Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic, ed. J. Worth Estes and Billy G. Smith (Canton, MA, 1997), 45, 47.

Despite the similarity between Morris’s and Carey’s comments, however, we cannot simply transfer as a whole piece historians’ interpretations regarding Carey’s motives to the case of Morris, especially given their religious, ethnic, class, and gender differences. We know very little about how race functioned for white Philadelphians who, like Morris, were not in the limelight and who recorded their views in more private writings. An examination of the extant private documents produced during the epidemic by almost forty individuals—largely well-to-do Quakers who had Federalist leanings—reveals a different impetus for Morris’s censure of African American nurses, one that grew out of a dire need for domestic workers within a shifting labor market. To understand Morris’s censure, then, requires a broad analysis of how racial and class identities intersected.

In his recent study of racial identity and the writing of history, Thomas Holt argued that “power can only be realized at the level of everyday practice, and it is dependent . . . on the reproduction of the relations, idioms, and the world-view that are its means of action.” My study documents how individuals like Morris and her Philadelphia contemporaries struggled to maintain power over lower-class workers at the level of “everyday practice” through a process of creating racial distinctions. It also points out some of the inconsistencies and tensions in these authors’ racial categories and the ways in which context determined the use of particular racial terms.

5 I recognize that the sources I am labeling as private have a quasi–public dimension in that these types of documents often circulated among a wide circle of individuals. I am making a distinction, however, between documents that were intended for publication, in other words for the public at large, and those written to be read by people the author knew personally.

6 Although approximately one-third of these authors were women and a few were Presbyterian or Anglican, with one Lutheran, I found no significant gender, religious, or political differences in their racial attitudes. Admittedly, the number of non-Quaker and non-Federalist authors is very small. In my years of searching for sources on the yellow fever epidemics of the 1790s, I am confident that I have tracked down most of the extant documents housed in archives in the Philadelphia area. The approximately forty authors whose writings comprise the evidence for this essay include: Thomas Affleck, William Barton, Moses Bartram, Sarah J. Bassett, Charles Biddle, Elias Boudinot, William Bradford, George W. Campbell, Thomas Clifford, Caleb Cresson Sr., Elizabeth Drinker, Sarah Logan Fisher, Miers Fisher, Samuel Fisher, B. Fuller, Joshua Gilpin, Peter A. Grotjan, Catherine Haines, Margaret Wistar Haines, Thomas Hartley, Ebenezer Hazard, John Mease, Margaret Morris, J. M. Nesbit, John Pemberton, Timothy Pickering, James Read, Benjamin Rush, Julia Rush, Beulah Sansom, Joseph Scattergood, Thomas Scattergood, Robert Simpson, Benjamin Smith, William Smith, Ann Stockton, Edward Tilghman, John Welsh, and Oliver Wolcott, all of whom lived in or around Philadelphia during the yellow fever epidemics of the 1790s.

A closer look at Carey’s and Morris’s accounts reveals a subtle yet important divergence in racial thinking in Philadelphia during the epidemic. Unlike Morris, whose privately expressed sentiments, incidentally, preceded Carey’s comments by three weeks, Carey qualified his negative remarks by adding, “it is wrong to cast a censure on the whole for this sort of conduct, as many people have done. The services of Jones, Allen, and Gray, and others of their colour, have been very great, and demand public gratitude.” In contrast, when writing her family members, Morris did not distinguish between different groups of African Americans, but continued to express her outrage toward “black nurses” by asking her sister and brother-in-law, “what will thee think when I tell thee that an hundred dollars have been paid in one week.” Morris’s tendency, which was displayed repeatedly by many private authors during the epidemic, was to downplay differences among African American workers and, instead, to portray these wage earners of African descent as members of a homogeneous racial group.

This brief examination of these two documents builds on and lends support to several leading interpretations of race relations in late eighteenth-century America, including important studies by Winthrop Jordan, Gary Nash, Jean Soderlund, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and Joanne Melish. As a group, these scholars have pointed out a number of inconsistencies, slippages, and instabilities within the racial rhetoric of this period while also emphasizing the hardening of racial categories. Through a close

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8 Carey, Short Account, 76–77.
9 Margaret Morris to [Sarah and George Dillwyn], Oct. 24, 1793, Edward Wanton Smith Collection.
examination of language, my study of racial thinking during the 1793 epidemic confirms Nash's contention that white self-interest hindered the development of social equality between whites and blacks. It also offers support to Smith-Rosenberg's and Melish's arguments that the process of racialization was complex and often unstable, even in the case of individual actors.

This study, however, also goes beyond these and other works in several ways. It focuses on the day-to-day activities of private citizens to document a multifaceted process of racialization in order to understand how race functioned in the domestic realm during the era of Philadelphia's gradual emancipation. By examining how these white authors used terms such as "Negro," "black," and "African," I provide historical context for the existing literature on the history of racial designations during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.  

My study reveals a semantic complexity in the meaning of race. Racialist terms operated at various levels: they could refer to a category designation (nonwhite), a status (nonslave), or a set of behavioral characteristics.  

Alongside these various levels of racial meaning, however, these authors generally accepted the view that racial difference contained a biological component. These authors highlighted physical difference by designating black bodies as biologically distinct from white bodies through their discussion of black immunity to yellow fever. Lastly, I examine the ways in which racial and class interests and


12 While some of the eighteenth-century views examined in this essay could be labeled as blatantly prejudiced or racist, my purpose here is not to document evidence of racism, but rather to explore the existence and development of racialist attitudes.

13 These authors did not note whether they considered these physical differences as innate or as a consequence of certain environmental conditions. By focusing so consistently on racial difference, however, these writings did establish a set of conditions that were in some ways congruent with a theory of essentialism. For studies that address the development of an essentialist theory of race, see Melish, Disowning Slavery; Jordan, White Over Black, 529, 533–41; Nash, Race and Revolution, 48; William Ragan Stanton, The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes toward Race in America, 1815–59 (Chicago, 1960); Reginald Horsman, Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism (Cambridge, MA, 1981), chap. 3; Noel Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White (New York, 1995), 76–89; Alexander Saxton, The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America (New York, 1990), 385–87; and David R.
identities intersected. The goal of this essay, then, is to document the
complex story of how private figures such as Morris went about con-
structing a category of "black people" within the context of the 1793
yellow fever epidemic and to explore the ways in which this multifaceted
approach to creating racial distinctions and characterizations often served
to promote a class agenda.

While eighteenth-century natural philosophers and their popularizers
debated issues such as the rank of world peoples according to Linnaean
classification, the humanity of slaves, and the origins and meaning of
blackness in the public press, these white Philadelphians participated in a
separate though no less significant dialogue regarding race in their private
correspondence.\textsuperscript{14} Unlike their public counterparts, these white authors
did not qualify their views or defend "scientific" arguments about race
with citations, case studies, or other supporting data.\textsuperscript{15} Instead, they used
their writings to reinforce what everyone already seemed to "know" about
African Americans by just sharing "factual" information with friends,
business associates, and loved ones in a less guarded forum. Consequently,
characterizations of African Americans as biologically and culturally
different went largely unchallenged by letter recipients. These correspon-
dents' acceptance of racial difference was reflected in their belief that
African Americans were immune to yellow fever (despite growing evi-
dence to the contrary), even though a general theory of group biological
determinism was not common at the time.\textsuperscript{16} Philadelphians believed

Roediger, \textit{The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class} (New


\textsuperscript{15} For Rush's most direct statement on race, see his "Observations Intended to Favour a
Supposition that the Black Color (as it is called) of the Negroes is derived from the Leprosy,"
\textit{Transactions of the American Philosophical Society} 4 (1799): 289–97. For an important analysis of
how Rush deploys race "as a white strategy for managing social anxieties about instability, chaos, and
fragmentation," see Dana D. Nelson, "Consolidating National Masculinity: Scientific Discourse and

\textsuperscript{16} The topic of race and immunity to disease is complex and needs much more scholarly attention.
On the one hand, there is evidence from other eighteenth-century sources that many individuals
recognized smallpox and measles as nonracially specific diseases. Advertisements for slave sales often
contained information stating that slaves had had smallpox and the measles. For example, see ads
dated Mar. 24, 1784, and July 21, 1790, in the \textit{Pennsylvania Gazette}. For a more general statement
about the universality of smallpox, see Elizabeth A. Fenn, \textit{Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox
Epidemic of 1775–82} (New York, 2001), 3, 109–11. On the other hand, several scholars of slavery
whites became ill with yellow fever for a variety of reasons, including an imbalance of the humors; overstimulation or atrophy of the nervous system; contagion; God’s displeasure; miasmas that were produced from rotting coffee, crowded and unclean dwellings, or cleared woods; a lack of seasoning to climatic changes; one’s place of origin, age, or sex; or individual character flaws, such as a lack of emotional self-control, drunkenness, or general “high living.”

During the epidemic, then, “whiteness” as a racial category, on the whole, allowed for much more complexity, embracing a diversity of experiences and individual actions; “blackness” tended to represent a single set of group characteristics and behaviors.

The epidemic of 1793 provides a useful lens through which to study private assumptions about race. Since the advent of the disease caught Philadelphians off guard, this event produced a number of personal papers centered on similar concerns and activities. Many individuals found themselves separated from their kin, thus in desperate need of news of their families’ personal and business affairs. Julia Rush, for example, was visiting relatives in Trenton, New Jersey, when news of the epidemic reached her. Margaret Morris’s son Richard, who had been away on business in early August, eventually settled at the home of his sister Gulielma Smith outside of Burlington, New Jersey, during much of the ordeal. William Bradford was caught out of the city while performing his duties as attorney general of Pennsylvania and sent a series of letters home to his wife from a number of towns across New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The need to make decisions on whether to leave the city, when and where to

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17 For a summary of many of these different views, see J. Henry C. Helmuth, A Short Account of the Yellow Fever in Philadelphia, for the Reflecting Christian, trans. Charles Erdmann (Philadelphia, 1794), 6–22; Benjamin Rush, An Enquiry into the Origin of the Late Epidemic Fever in Philadelphia: In a Letter to Dr. John Redman (Philadelphia, 1793), 13–14; and William Currie, A Treatise on the Synochus Icteroideus, or Yellow Fever; As it Lately Appeared in the City of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1794), 8–12.

go, and who, if anyone, should remain behind to take care of business and property led to a great deal of discussion among relatives and friends on topics not often addressed in their previous or subsequent correspondence. In addition, the desperate nature of the event required people to act quickly, often with little time for reflection. Consequently, this event allows us to observe these white correspondents responding to new situations, though in ways that were often in line with old assumptions about how they thought the world should work.

In addition, the epidemic intensified social dynamics already at work in the society at large. For instance, nonslave African Americans had long been an important component of Philadelphia's labor market. But with the passage of Pennsylvania's gradual emancipation bill in 1780 and the migration to Philadelphia of former slaves, Philadelphia's free black population rose noticeably at the end of the eighteenth century. According to Susan Klepp, as late as 1775 free blacks accounted for only one in five resident African Americans. By 1800, however, Philadelphia had one of the largest free black communities in North America, with less than 1 percent of African Americans enslaved. The first federal census reported 301 slaves in 1790, while the second listed only 55 at the end of the century. In addition, the African American population doubled between 1780 and 1790 to just over two thousand inhabitants and nearly tripled again between 1790 and 1800. At the same time, there was an increase in the number of African Americans living in white households either as indentured servants, domestics, or boarders. By 1793, then, whites had been negotiating labor contracts with free blacks for more than two decades. The major difference during the epidemic, however, was that white Philadelphians now operated from a position of dire need and a


sense of helplessness, while African Americans contracted for cash wages from a position of great demand for their services. B. Fuller’s pleas to Benjamin Rush, “Oh that I could have a nurse of any kind,” demonstrated just how desperate many white Philadelphians felt. Dr. Benjamin Rush first diagnosed yellow fever on August 19, 1793, at the Water Street home of French importer Peter LeMaigre, whose wife, Cathy, eventually died from the disease. While at the peak of the pestilence hundreds of victims succumbed on any given day, the number of deaths subsided substantially by mid-November with the coming of the winter frosts and the demise of the mosquito population. During the epidemic, civil government at all levels collapsed, since government officials closed up their offices and left town in droves. Innumerable tales of tragic deaths and countless stories of abandoned spouses, children, parents, servants, and masters circulated throughout the country. While many of their peers fled to the countryside, a number of physicians, ministers, and other public officials, including Mayor Mathew Clarkson, felt obliged to attend to their duties in spite of the risk of infection. A variety of other groups stayed in the city in 1793, particularly the poor, including many African Americans, who were without the means to retreat even if they wanted to; a number of merchants and business folk who were more afraid of losing their income, reputations, or earthly belongings than their lives; and recent refugees, both white and black, from Saint-Domingue. The total population of Philadelphia and its urbanized suburbs just prior to the epidemic was about 51,200, and 94 percent white and 6 percent black. By November 1793 approximately 29,000 whites and 2,600 blacks remained for a total of about 31,600, and a new population ratio of 92 to 8 percent.

25 Powell, Bring Out Your Dead, 100–119.  
26 Susan E. Klepp, Philadelphia in Transition: A Demographic History of the City and Its
This analysis of racial thinking during the epidemic begins with an awareness that Philadelphians, like Europeans for centuries, used language that denoted skin color as a symbol of dissimilarity to establish a distinction between persons who were perceived to be of African rather than of European descent.\textsuperscript{27} This language of color was not consistent. Authors used different racial terms depending on a variety of social or linguistic contexts. As a category label, these white authors typically, although not invariably, preferred the term “black,” instead of “Negro” or “Mulatto,” to designate individual African Americans, and the term “blacks” or “black people” to designate a group identity, although they did use the expression “Negro” more frequently than “colored” or “African.”\textsuperscript{28} When, for example, merchant Miers Fisher wrote his son Thomas about the impact of the epidemic on their family’s affairs, he noted that “we keep the sick separate from the well and have intercourse with them only by black attendants.” When Elizabeth Drinker mentioned in her diary that one of her hired servants had taken ill, she referred to him as “poor black Joseph.” Thomas Scattergood wrote that “the innocent black girl who nursed” the widow of Daniel Offley had died, while Benjamin Smith informed his mother-in-law that he was having trouble finding someone to work as a nurse “thro’ the medium of those blacks who have undertaken to provide.”\textsuperscript{29}

\textit{Occupational Groups, 1720–1830} (New York, 1989), 336; Klepp, “Appendix I: ‘How Many Precious Souls are Fled? The Magnitude of the 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic,” in \textit{Melancholy Scene of Devastation}, 164, 166–68. I arrived at the second set of figures by recalculating information provided on p. 168 and p. 180, n. 11 of “Appendix I.” According to Klepp, the figures of 22,929 whites and 1,746 blacks in the November 1793 census reported only 79 percent of whites and 67 percent of blacks in Philadelphia and its suburbs. I have calculated totals based on a 100 percent reporting scale.


\textsuperscript{28} In the only African American authored account of the epidemic, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones also primarily used the term “black” to designate African American laborers. Nevertheless, during this period of Philadelphia’s history, African Americans created a number of churches and other self-help organizations and almost exclusively utilized the term “African” in their titles. These institutions included the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Free African Society. Allen and Jones, \textit{A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793: And a Refutation of Some Censures, Thrown upon Them in Some Late Publications} (Philadelphia, 1794); and Nash, \textit{Forging Freedom}, 88, 98–104.

\textsuperscript{29} Miers Fisher to Thomas Fisher Jr., Sept. 25, 1793, Fisher Family Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; \textit{The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker}, ed. Elaine Forman Crane (Boston, 1991), 1:497; Thomas Scattergood to [unknown recipient], Oct. 30, 1793, Scattergood Family Papers, Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library; and Benjamin Smith to Margaret Morris, Sept. 7, [1793], Gulielma M. Howland Collection.
The use of "black" as a descriptor is nearly ubiquitous in the extant sources of the era and served to highlight racial differences. For example, when Fisher informed his son that the nurses caring for his family members were "black," he did so to distinguish them from whites who were also working as nurses. Benjamin Smith's use of "those blacks" to refer to the African American leaders coordinating the placement of nurses, cart drivers, and burial attendants, instead of their well-known names, racialized Richard Allen, William Gray, and Absalom Jones. Drinker's reference to her servant Joseph Gibbs, who was a free black man who hired out for wages, as "poor black Joseph" seems unnecessary since it was part of a diary entry. But Drinker's and these other authors' habitual use of descriptors of difference in their private correspondence, particularly with regard to African Americans who were not slaves or long-term servants, served an important cultural purpose—to reify distinctions based on biological difference, in this case skin color, in order to highlight these individuals' racial identity and their social position as laborers.

These authors were not merely describing a real "black" person—Philadelphians of African descent came in a variety of colors, very few of whom could be described as literally being the color "black"—but were constituting individuals as "black persons." By using the term "black," they were identifying individuals as different. In contrast, they only rarely marked non-African American servants as "white" and never labeled them as "white people," evidence that "whiteness" was assumed as a normative category. Instead, they usually referred to white servants in terms of their position or occupation ("maid," "housekeeper," "apprentice," or "servant"), by their name, or by both. For example, Joshua Gilpin wrote his friend Thomas Fisher Jr. that "thy father's Servant Joseph appeared infected with the disorder," and Thomas Affleck referred to "my apprentice Wm Young" when writing to Levi Hollingsworth of his servant's death. Edward Tilghman informed his cousin Ann Pemberton that although "we have Polly, Dolly and Nicholas," if Pemberton intended to stay with his family, she would need "to bring with you a servant who can help at cooking and other hard work."30 Nor did these authors typically label white servants with a geographic or cultural marker, such as Irish or German, suggesting that an earlier understanding of race based on com-

common ancestry or stock originating from a specific location was on the wane.31 Only B. Fuller noted the ethnic identity of a servant when he informed Benjamin Rush, “I am in a most deplorable situation—My family consists of a German servant, I lately bought—an elderly woman as a house keeper, & a young girl.”32 This lack of racial labeling in terms of ancestral location may also explain why these authors seldom used the term “African.” Consequently, these authors identified African Americans racially while marking white servants by their class position and occupations within the household. Whites in general, then, could be racially unmarked apprentices, housekeepers, servants, nurses, physicians, merchants, and masters or mistresses, while African Americans could only be “black” workers of some sort.

These particular white Philadelphians did not use the designator “black” indiscriminately, however, but predominantly to denote the broad social category of nonslaves. Winthrop Jordan implies that the terms “Negroe” and “black” were interchangeable in the eighteenth century, and there are a few instances when some of the white authors under study used “Negro” instead of “black” as a racial label.33 For example, Ebenezer Hazard wrote Robert Ralston that “Negroes charged four Dollars per Day for nursing,” and Sarah Logan Fisher noted that “a drunken Negro man” nursed several of her family members.34 In general, however, these white authors used the term “black” instead of “Negro” or “African,” but in a way that differed from its usage in runaway-slave advertisements. It appears that these authors used the term “black” as a code word for “free black,” or, at the very least, for African Americans who were not considered integral members of a white household.35 The terms invariably used in the Pennsylvania Gazette’s advertisements to refer to runaway slaves between 1728 and 1790, however, were “Negro” and “mulatto.” In these

33 Jordan, Black Over White, 257.
34 Ebenezer Hazard to Robert Ralston, Oct. 25, 1793, Hazard Family Papers; and Sarah Logan Fisher diary, v. 22, Oct. 14, 1793, both at The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. It is pretty clear that Hazard is referring to nonslaves. Fisher, however, may be referring to a free black man. While these examples challenge any monolithic argument about racial designations, during the epidemic they were the exceptions and not the rule.
35 I have examined available materials, such as remaining family letters, the 1790 national census, tax lists, account books, and probate records to help determine the status of these individuals. I will make it clear to the reader when I have not been able to ascertain this status beyond a reasonable doubt.
advertisements slave owners used the term “black” almost exclusively to refer to the shade of color of a particular slave, not as a general designator of dark-skinned people. For example, in 1790 James Allen described his slave, “a Negroe woman, named Nancy,” as being “of a black cast, but not the very blackest.” When Sheriff Nicholas Fairlamb described two “Negroe men” who had recently broken out of the Delaware County jail, he noted that Harry was “not very black,” while Bill was “blacker than the other.” Other runaways were described as “very black,” “not very black,” or “not so black as some Negroes.”36 Slave owners and legal officials, then, normally surrounded the word “black” with qualifiers in order to distinguish one slave from another.

Slaveholders used the term “black” differently, however, when referring to a nonslave. In a September 1790 advertisement, John Wilson of Tredyffrin Township, in Chester County, described his runaway slave, Kate, as “a Mulatto girl,” but then noted that “it is supposed she went off with a black man, named Charles, who served his time with Dr. Vanlear.”37 It appears that Wilson, like the white Philadelphians of this study, chose the term “black” to describe Charles because he was a free man. By 1793 the Spanish-derived word “Negro” had evidently lost some of its original association with the color black, causing whites to search for a different means of categorizing persons of African descent based on skin color; thus the preference for the term “black.”

While these white epidemic-era correspondents seemed very willing to group certain persons of African descent under the rubric of “black,” they did so with a bit of a twist when it came to their personal servants and slaves. As a consequence, race was further defined by one’s status within the domestic sphere. The individuals in this study usually referred to their personal servants and slaves either by name or by a possessive and infantilizing qualifier followed by a diminutive, such as “my boy” or “our girl.”38 When members of the extended Fisher family wrote each other


38 For references to “my black boy,” “our black man,” and “your black man,” see William Smith to Benjamin Rush, n.d., Rush Manuscripts, 35:121; William Barton to Tench Coxe, Sept. 11, 1793, Coxe Family Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; and James Read to Levi Hollingsworth, n.d., Hollingsworth Collection.
during the epidemic, they always referred to Samuel Fisher’s servant as Prince, not as “black” Prince. For example, when Miers Fisher’s son Jabez died of yellow fever, he informed his relatives that “Prince went for the Coffin & the black undertakers.” Furniture maker Thomas Affleck talked about his servant by name in a number of letters to his patron and business associate Levi Hollingsworth. Affleck asked Hollingsworth to leave his “most valuable effects” with his servant, “if Cato can be prevailed on to stay in the house.” Clearly making a distinction between his trusted servant and other African American workers, Affleck told Hollingsworth that if Cato agreed to stay “he should hire some Black man to lodge in the house with him.”

In another case, Julia Rush asked her husband, Benjamin, to remember her to “our valuable friend Marcus,” a slave who had been raised from infancy by Julia’s mother, Ann Stockton. Therefore, despite the fact that others clearly considered Marcus as a “Negro” or a “black” man, i.e., as a slave and as nonwhite, his long-term relationship with the Stockton and Rush families meant he was not usually described as such in their private correspondence. His character and status within the household were described in other ways. Although Benjamin once referred to Marcus as “our humble black friend,” the Rushes and Stocktons more often described him as “my poor Marcus,” “the poor fellow,” or just “Marcus.” It is evident, then, that slaves or familiar household servants were not always named with the descriptor “black,” while free African Americans working for wages in white households were invariably labeled as such. This practice did not necessarily mean that the relationship between master or mistress and servant was unracialized, as Benjamin Rush’s comment, “I passed a most comfortable night, and was the first white person that rose in the family this morning,” attests.


40 Thomas Affleck to Levi Hollingsworth, Sept. 20 and 27, 1793, Hollingsworth Collection. Emphasis added. I know Cato is African American because when Affleck hears that Cato is ill, he says, “I am in great hopes that it is not the malignant fever and have not heard of one instance of a Black person having died with it” (letter of Sept. 27). For information on Affleck’s relationship with Hollingsworth, see Deborah Anne Federhen, “Politics and Style: An Analysis of the Patrons and Products of Jonathan Gostelow and Thomas Affleck,” in Shaping a National Culture, 294–308.


about their relationship with long-time servants and slaves as they did with unfamiliar employees. The fact that these correspondents did not use the term “black” to distinguish one shade of skin color from another or as a label for all African Americans, but, instead, as a category designation to mark some African Americans as a racially distinct group suggests that whites were using language in subtle ways to articulate the changing social relationships of early national Philadelphia.

Given his status as a very public figure, Benjamin Rush’s situation differed somewhat from the other authors; nevertheless, Rush provides a good example of someone who was sorting through these complicated relationships in creative, though racialist, ways. Rush had a public relationship with a number of African American community leaders during the epidemic, including William Gray, Absalom Jones, and Richard Allen, which he worked out in two ways. First, Rush mediated between these men and white Philadelphians who wanted to procure African American nurses to tend their sick and, second, he trained them to treat yellow fever patients in line with his controversial methods of copious bloodletting and purging. This close association influenced Rush’s racial categories in interesting ways. In his private letters Rush used a variety of terms to mark African Americans as different from whites, including “black,” “Negro,” and “African,” but when referring to nurses hired for wages, he invariably turned to the term “black.” For instance, he noted at different times that “we have two black nurses in the house who attend the apprentices,” and that “the sick are nursed by blacks.” The two times Rush used “Negro” he referred to African Americans more generally and most likely meant to include both free and slave. On September 13 he commented that “even the negroes who do not take the disease discover that mark of infection,” and on September 25 he noted that “the negroes are every where submitting to the disorder.” Rush, then, employed the term “black” to assign certain African Americans a particular status location and “Negro” to designate a racial category.

Rush preferred the terms “African brethren” or “the Africans,” however, when talking about the specific African American leaders with whom he was in contact. For instance, Rush remarked on two separate occasions to his wife, Julia, that “you will see by this days paper what my African brethren have done for the city. . . . They furnish nurses to most of my

patients,” and “my African brethren are extremely useful in attending the sick. . . . Billy Grey and Ab[salom] Jones have been very active and useful in procuring nurses.” And in a letter to Mathew Carey on October 29, he observed that “the only information which I am capable of giving you relates to the conduct of the Africans of our City. In procuring nurses for the sick, W[illia]m Gray and Absalom Jones were indefatigable.” By using “African” to refer to Gray and Jones, Rush clearly signaled their uniqueness and higher status among African Americans. It is also important to note that the term African was self-selected by individuals like Absalom Jones and Richard Allen who formed the Free African Society, a group of exemplary black men, or “brethren,” whose lifestyles closely resembled those of elite white Philadelphians. Rush may have used “African” as a sign of support for these men’s label preference and his use of the term “brethren” may have been in reference to members of the Free African Society. At the same time, however, Rush’s use of “African” designated these men as foreign and different, as non–American. This difference is evidenced by the fact that when Rush used the term “brethren” without a qualifier—“I have been obliged to contend with the prejudices, fears, and falsehoods of several of my brethren, all of which retard the progress of truth and daily cost our city many lives”—he was clearly referring to his white peers. In addition, despite Rush’s nuanced use of referents to African American persons, his use of the words “black” and “African” referred to more restricted groups of African Americans than did “Negro.” While Rush reserved “African” for a very select group, he almost exclusively attached the term “black” to those individuals who served as nurses in white households for wages. Rush, like his white contemporaries, was working out a system of racial and status designations to adapt to changes taking place in Philadelphia society during the era of gradual emancipation.

Within this white community, belief in the existence of differences between people of European and African ancestry, however, went beyond skin color or status. In fact, these white authors’ underlying assumption of inherent racial differences helps to explain why so many readily accepted the idea in 1793 that African Americans were immune to yellow fever. Whites made no distinction between African Americans who lived in

white homes and other African Americans hired during the epidemic when it came to the issue of immunity, making it apparent that, in the end, close contact did little to erase the tendency to view individual African Americans as biologically, or racially, different. Susan Klepp has noted that this emphasis on black immunity was curious given the widespread view that "some individuals were 'seasoned' to specific diseases because of living in areas where those diseases were prevalent."44 This common belief in general black immunity is less curious, however, within the context of a society that was already thinking in racial terms. This context helps explain why, even when evidence of African American vulnerability to yellow fever presented itself, these whites largely persisted in their belief in racial divergence rather than recognize that immunity was determined for all Philadelphians by prior exposure to the fever either in the South, in Africa, or in the West Indies where yellow fever was most common. Their racialized worldview prevented them from developing a more nuanced theory of disease in 1793.45 Theories of disease, then, were not just expressions of "fact," but were often shaped to serve certain perceived needs—in this case a ready labor force.

Benjamin Rush first articulated his belief in black immunity in 1793, when he wrote to the black Methodist minister Richard Allen in early September requesting assistance from the African American community in caring for the fever's victims. According to Rush, "it has pleased God


to visit the city with a malignant and contagious fever, which infects white people of all ranks, but passes by persons of your color.” As a consequence, Rush argued, “persons of your color” were “under an obligation . . . to attend the sick who are affected with this malady.” Without a hint of irony, Rush promised that the help of the African American community “will be very grateful to the citizens,” meaning whites, and “pleasing to the light of that God who will [reward] every act of kindness done to creatures whom he calls his brethren.” Rush based his belief on the views of colonial physician John Lining from Charleston, South Carolina, thereby adapting ideas developed in the prewar, slaveholding South to the needs of whites in a postwar northern city. Rush recognized as early as September 10 that the recent French exiles from Saint-Domingue did not take the disorder, but he never suggested publicly or privately that they serve the citizens of Philadelphia in ways that African Americans were asked to do. Whether this had to do with assumptions regarding race, class, language, or other factors is not clear. Members of the Free African Society, however, trusting Rush’s “kind of assurance, that people of our colour were not liable to take the infection,” decided that “it was our duty to do all the good we could to our suffering fellow mortals.” Because the situation was too dire for this small group to handle on its own, African American leaders Absalom Jones and William Gray coaxed other African Americans to serve as nurses, cart drivers, and grave diggers by promising them wages.

The white authors under study here widely accepted the view that blacks were immune to yellow fever. Elizabeth Drinker believed without question the newspaper report of September 7 that “not one Negro has yet taken the infection.” Quaker abolitionist John Pemberton, who generally pitied the “suffering people” of African descent for their plight in

46 For information regarding Benjamin Rush’s involvement in perpetuating the idea that African Americans were immune to yellow fever, see Benjamin Rush to Richard Allen, [Sept. 1793], Rush Manuscripts, 38:32–33; Rush, An Account of the Bilious Remitting Yellow Fever, as it Appeared in the City of Philadelphia, in the Year 1793 (Philadelphia, 1794), 95–97; Nash, Forging Freedom, 122; and Jordan, White Over Black, 528.

47 John Lining, “A Description of the American Yellow Fever, in a Letter from Dr. John Lining, Physician at Charles-Town in South Carolina, to Dr. Robert Whytt Professor of Medicine in the University of Edinburgh,” Essays and Observations, Physical and Literary 2 (1756): 370–95. The text of this letter was also published in Philadelphia in 1799. See John Lining, A Description of the American Yellow Fever, Which Prevailed at Charleston, in South Carolina, in the Year 1748 (Philadelphia, 1799).


49 Jones and Allen, Narrative, 3–4.
life, was happy to report to his niece Ann that "the poor oppressed black people have hitherto been favored to escape [the fever] however deprived and rejected by many and evilly entreated." Writing her sister and brother-in-law in late October, Margaret Morris noted that because "it pleased divine providence to spare" them, the "poor black people" suffered little from the yellow fever. Not only did Beulah Sansom inform Sarah Biddle that "negrows do not take the infection," but she emphasized racial difference by noting "amost the whites, high and low—rich and poor—old and young alike fall victims." Charles Biddle, on the other hand, recognized differences among whites with regard to their susceptibility to yellow fever, arguing that "a person who had been long in the West Indies were not as liable to take the fever." He did not make a similar distinction among African Americans, however, but instead noted in his autobiography that "it was the general opinion at this time that the blacks did not take the fever." Only John Pemberton noted in his autobiography that "some few mulattoes" had been "reported" with the disease, though he quickly downplayed the distinction by adding that "not one Black person that I know of [is] taken off." In terms of immunity, then, these white correspondents assumed that "blacks" were different from whites in terms of their physical response to the disease.

While white Philadelphians readily accepted the idea of black immunity, their writings, with a single exception, are silent as to why they thought African Africans responded to the disease differently. Only John Pemberton gave a rationale for their immunity. According to Pemberton, "These people, have been a suffering People, & it may have seen meet with Infinite wisdom, to give evidence of his Protecting Providence & mercy towards them." In general, however, laypersons felt no need to justify their views, perhaps because they were already convinced of some form of innate racial distinctions. It is significant, too, that even though Pemberton's evaluation of the situation was sympathetic to the plight of blacks, he was nevertheless convinced that through divine intervention it was possible for blacks to have a different reaction from that of whites.51


An acceptance of biological difference, for whatever reason, negated the need, in general, for these white authors to explain black immunity.

White Philadelphians’ belief in black immunity persisted in the face of evidence, as the epidemic progressed, that African Americans were in fact vulnerable to the fever. Merchant Benjamin Smith was unusual among his peers in that he did reassess his views. Smith initially thought that both “children & the blacks were not liable to the disorder.” It is not clear why Smith lumped children and blacks together. Whatever the reason, after his children, Daniel and Peggy; his “black woman,” Nelly; and his “bound boy & girl” all came down with the fever, Smith noted that “yet all its members of these descriptions [children and blacks] are taken first,” extrapolating from the specific experience of individuals within his household to a new, but equally generalizing, theory of disease susceptibility that, like the general category of “black,” categorized all peoples according to their social standing within the household.52 Consequently, he continued to use a theory of disease based on the categories of race and age to undergird traditional domestic hierarchies of dependency and authority.

Benjamin Rush, too, had trouble granting African Americans a status equal to that of whites. Rush made private statements—“even the negroes who do not take the disease discover that mark of infection” and “the negroes are every where submitting to the disorder”—that suggest that he eventually recognized that African Americans were not inherently immune to yellow fever.53 Other evidence, however, makes clear that Rush did not completely give up his idea of racial difference. In his published 1794 account of the epidemic, Rush began by saying that “it was not long after these worthy Africans undertook the execution of their humane offer of services to the sick, before I was convinced I had been mistaken. They took the disease, in common with the white people, and many of them died with it.” Not content to leave the matter there, however, Rush immediately qualified his statement by adding that “I think I observed the greatest number of them to sicken after the mornings and evenings became cool. A large number of them were my patients. The disease was lighter in them, than in white people.” He further noted that he “met with no case of hemorrhage in a black patient.”54 These last three claims, then, undermined Rush’s original comment about racial common-

52 Benjamin Smith to Daniel Smith, Oct. 8, 1793, Edward Wanton Smith Collection.
54 Rush, Account of the Bilious Remitting Yellow Fever, 97.
ality and reestablished a racial boundary based on difference.

Like Smith and Rush, a number of other white correspondents noticed that their black servants and hired help were getting sick, but, unlike them, they did not link these individual cases to any general discussion of the susceptibility of “black people” to yellow fever or to a more nuanced theory of disease. For example, J. M. Nesbit informed Miers Fisher that the “two black servants” he had left with his brother “are both got sick & my Brother has been obliged himself to attend to them.” Margaret Morris continued to emphasize the immunity of blacks by noting, even after two of the African Americans she had hired took the fever while in her service, that “it pleased divine providence to spare the poor black people very few of whom had the disorder.” No further elaboration followed Morris’s simple statement, indicating that she continued to cling to the view that black people were largely immune. As late as 1797, Catherine Haines continued to believe that “those who nurse them [yellow fever patients], don’t take it.”

One reason these particular white Philadelphians so easily accepted the idea of black immunity and were so resistant to the idea of black vulnerability to yellow fever was their dire need for labor. Thus, black immunity provided them a clear justification for hiring African Americans to perform many unpleasant tasks. This interpretation is complicated, however, by the knowledge that several of these well-off white authors also employed poor whites throughout the epidemic. Despite the widespread opinion, then, that yellow fever was a white person’s disease and, according to some, particularly dangerous among the poor, these particular white Philadelphians felt no need to justify exposing poor whites to the disease as nurses, housecleaners, or buriers of the dead. For example, when five individuals out of seven in Benjamin Smith’s household became ill, he hired a white woman as a nurse. Two of the five individuals

55 J. M. Nesbit to Miers Fisher, Sept. 26, 1793, Fisher Family Papers; Margaret Morris to [Sarah and George Dillwyn], Oct. 24, 1793, Edward Wanton Smith Collection; and Catherine Haines to Reuben Haines, Sept. 12, 1797, Wyck Association Collection, American Philosophical Society. These comments offer a more nuanced understanding of how these white Philadelphians viewed physical difference between blacks and whites than Winthrop Jordan’s statement that “as the grim evidence of death accumulated, a degree of consensus emerged on the subject of Negro immunity” suggests. See Jordan, White Over Black, 526–29.

56 For information regarding whites and susceptibility to yellow fever, see Mathew Carey, Short Account, 4th ed., 61; Abraham Shoemaker, Poultson’s Town and Country Almanac, for the Year of Our Lord, 1795 (Philadelphia, 1794); Benjamin Rush to Elias Boudinot, Sept. 25, 1793, in Letters, 2:681; and Edward Tilghman to Ann Pemberton, Sept. 8, 1793, Pemberton Family Papers.
Margaret Morris hired to nurse yellow fever victims were white women. Miers Fisher's servant, Joseph Viebert, took ill in late September, while Hannah Norris, an indentured servant, helped nurse the sick members of the Fisher household, including Viebert, before she died of the fever in late October. Tench Coxe hired a white man, a Mr. Gitts, to oversee his affairs during the epidemic. Gitts's wife and two daughters also remained in town, and all three women took the fever as a result. Well-off Philadelphians were able to hire poor whites during the epidemic because members of the latter group desperately needed an income no matter what the dangers. It is telling, however, that these authors did not feel the need to rationalize their employment of these individuals in writing. This silence probably had to do with the fact that employers did not consider poor whites to be as threatening to the social structure as African recently freed slaves who were demanding high wages. Unskilled African American workers had long served as a reserve labor force in Philadelphia, keeping wages low for all workers. Racializing all African Americans in terms of immunity from yellow fever helped to keep them in their perceived proper class status in the Philadelphia labor market.

Evidence from the 1798 yellow fever epidemic supports this view that the immunity issue helped to create and maintain a reserve labor force. Despite the fact that members of the Scattergood family knew that an "innocent black girl" had died of the fever in 1793 while nursing the Offley family, they still expected their African American servant to care for sick family members in 1798. In another case, Sarah Bassett's biographer noted that in 1798 "Mrs. S. succeeded in obtaining for Mrs. Bassett the services of a trusty colored woman" as a nurse. Also in 1798, Caleb Cresson Sr. informed his brother that when his son Caleb Jr. had contracted yellow fever, he had hired "a blackman who is well recommended

57 Benjamin Smith to Daniel Smith, Oct. 8, 1793, Edward Wanton Smith Collection; Margaret Morris to Richard Hill Morris, Sept. 19, 1793, Margaret Morris Papers; M. Morris to Milchah M. Moore, Sept. 25, Oct. 10, and Oct. 24, 1793, Edward Wanton Smith Collection; M. Morris to R. H. Morris, Oct. 10, 1793, Margaret Morris Papers; M. Morris to [Sarah and George Dillwyn], Oct. 24, 1793, Edward Wanton Smith Collection; and B. Smith to M. Morris, Sept. 7, [1793], Gulielma M. Howland Collection. For evidence regarding a white indentured servant, see Samuel Fisher to Miers Fisher, Oct. 12, 1793, Fisher Family Papers; John Welsh to Robert Ralston, Oct. 24, 1793, Society Miscellaneous Collection; and William Barton to Tench Coxe, Sept. 16, 1793; and John Mease to Tench Coxe, Oct. 28 and 31, and Nov. 5, 1793, Coxe Family Papers.

to attend him." And, despite his awareness that many African Americans had sickened and died of yellow fever in 1793, Benjamin Rush continued to serve as a liaison between African American leaders and whites seeking nurses during the 1798 epidemic. Thanking Rush for "the nurse you was so obliging as to find," Dr. George W. Campbell from Woodbury, New Jersey, noted that he had received a "note from Richard Allen by Edward Catin" who "sent also as a nurse, on your application." 59 Whites continued to hire blacks as nurses in 1798 despite awareness that many African Americans were not immune to yellow fever. 60 Their perception of African Americans as social inferiors and their need for a reserve labor force kept them from acting on this new knowledge.

In 1793, white Philadelphians also tended to focus on certain behavioral characteristics to create racial boundaries. Given that most of the characteristics these whites applied to African Americans were negative, this process of racialization functioned to justify paying them lower wages than white workers. While Mathew Carey publicly charged African Americans with extortion, many other white Philadelphians were privately even more critical of African American workers. 61 When Robert Simpson, an out-of-work laborer, wrote his father in Scotland about life in Philadelphia during the epidemic, he offered only words of criticism for African Americans, noting that their "wages are shamefully high" and that "some of them get a guinea for sitting up with the sick one night and

59 One of his children to Thomas Scattergood, Oct. 1, 1798, Scattergood Family Papers, Memoir of Sarah J. Bassett: Compiled from Authentic Papers Furnished by Her Friends, and Published at Their Request (Philadelphia, 1848), 7–8; Caleb Cresson to John E. Cresson, Sept. 20, 1798, Morris Wistar Wood Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library; and Dr. George W. Campbell to Benjamin Rush, Aug. 30, 1798, Rush Manuscripts, 37:18. Peter Grotjan mentions hiring a nurse for five dollars a day during the 1798 epidemic, but she was probably white since he describes her only as "an old lady." Peter A. Grotjan memoirs, 1796–99, 2:96–97, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. See also Miers Fisher to Lydia Gilpin, Aug. 23, 1798, Fisher Family Papers.

60 The College of Physicians of Philadelphia had even issued a statement during the 1797 epidemic encouraging employers to hire "Negroes who were natives of Africa" to nurse the sick. See Richard Folwell, Short History of the Yellow Fever, That Broke Out in the City of Philadelphia, in July, 1797 (Philadelphia, 1797), 23.

61 Carey, Short Account, 2nd ed., 77. Only John Pemberton appears to have challenged Carey's negative portrayal of African Americans. Pemberton wrote Carey, "I have thought thy remarks respecting the Black People, Casts too general a Reflection, & may give a wrong Idea & Byas, in Europe, especially in England, where much labour has been exercised to have the Abominable Slave trade abolished." See Pemberton to Carey, Nov. 25, 1793, Lea and Febiger Records, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Pemberton's sentiments coincide with those expressed by the author of an anonymous account of the epidemic, leading me to believe that Pemberton was probably the author of the document. An Account of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1793), 28–31.
this they consider very moderate.” Unlike Carey, he included no expression of appreciation for any of the work they had done, despite the fact that he believed “there is hardly any body that will attend the sick” and that “parents have been known to fly from their children when taken sick, and children from their parents,—so dreadful is it become.” Thomas Affleck, also intensely upset about the issue of pay for nursing, informed Levi Hollingsworth, who was looking after his house and workers while he was in Marcus Hook, that “with regard to the demand of 15/p day for nursing [his apprentice] William Young it is so exorbitant that I never can admit it.” He was particularly upset given that the nurse, “her husband, sister, & child were Boarded . . . at my house ever since my absense.”

All of these individuals were either personally or had family involved in manufacturing or commerce and certainly were accustomed to the vagaries of the market. Perhaps, then, they were merely expressing their opinions regarding fair labor practices, especially given that these were unusually high salaries for this type of work at this time. The evidence, however, suggests a more complex explanation.

African Americans were not the only individuals to charge higher prices for their labor or products, but they were the only ones to be singled out for private censure. Margaret Morris specifically mentioned paying white nurses identical wages as black nurses, but she criticized only members of the latter group. In addition, these white authors noted that a number of farmers, artisans, and other workers also benefited from the crisis by raising prices. Benjamin Rush’s mother complained about the costs of housekeeping during the epidemic, including the price for washing and for apples, while Rush mentioned to his wife that “provisions have risen very much and many people begin to dread the calamity of famine, in addition to that of the pestilence.” Robert Simpson informed his father that “provisions of every kind are very high . . . even coffins which a few weeks ago cost 10 dol. are now 30,” while John Welch predicted in late October that the coming of cooler weather would increase the price of firewood. Joseph Scattergood, a tanner, noted that “the country people do not care to venture themselves in town, so that provision is very high, butter is now from 2/6 to 3/9 per lb. and should not the sickness abate, it


is probable it will be much higher.\textsuperscript{64} In line with their tendency to view the world from a racialist perspective, however, and despite their recognition that prices for a variety of products and services were much higher than usual, these white correspondents did not accuse white nurses, farmers, artisans, or anyone other than African Americans of “extortionate” behavior. What these white authors seemed to have resented more than economic impropriety per se was the potential social mobility of free blacks.

White criticism of black nurses did not stop with the issue of wages, but also included complaints to friends and relatives about general incompetence, drunkenness, and theft. These authors did not assign such negative attributes to casual white laborers, but only to black workers. For instance, whites often denigrated African Americans for their lack of nursing skills. In mid-September Sarah Logan Fisher recorded in her diary that the only nurses to be had were “black people” who were mostly “quite ignorant of the business.” Writing to Robert Ralston about how his family was faring, Ebenezer Hazard noted that despite the fact that “Negroes . . . charged four Dollars per Day for nursing, [they] were but poor hands after all.” Margaret Haines also complained to her sons, Casper and Reuben, about the intellectual deficiencies and the inferior care provided by African Americans by saying that “negro nurses can’t read so that there is but poor doings.”\textsuperscript{65} The level of training provided to those who served as nurses during this epidemic is difficult to determine, though it seems unlikely that either African American or white nurses would have received much professional instruction prior to the event. Of course, some workers, particularly those who were female, surely had some experience taking care of sick employers, friends, or family members prior to the epidemic. It is also probable, however, that others (both black and white) had never worked in this capacity before and did not perform their duties well, providing a basis of truth to some of these white authors’


\textsuperscript{65} Sarah Logan Fisher diary, v. 22, Sept. 14, 1793; Ebenezer Hazard to Robert Ralston, Oct. 25, 1793, Hazard Family Papers; and M[argaret Wistar] Haines to Casper and Reuben Haines, [1793], Wyck Association Collection.
claims. Nevertheless, it does not seem realistic that poor performance was completely racially specific, as these authors implied.

Benjamin Rush’s views about African American nurses were somewhat more complicated. When writing to Mathew Carey in a professional capacity, Rush noted that “many of the black nurses, it is true, were ignorant, and some of them were negligent, but many of them did their duty to the sick with a degree of patience and tenderness that did them great credit.” Perhaps Rush was thinking of his own house servant, Marcus, who had nursed him to health during his own bout with the fever in mid-September. Rush praised Marcus for his “integrity, industry, and fidelity,” but he also privately made several negative comments about the activities of black nurses in general. For example, in reporting the death of a man named Alston, who died, he believed, from “drinking a pint of cold water immediately after taking a dose of medicine,” Rush argued that “such accidents must often happen where the sick are nursed by blacks ignorant of their business, and frequently asleep or out of the room.” Given this view, it is not surprising that he repeated the rumor to his wife that “Daniel Offly’s death has been ascribed wholly to his black nurse having fallen asleep, and to having passed a whole night without drinks or food.” Rush also emphasized African American ignorance when he criticized one of his fellow physicians by noting that “this man has seen a great deal of the disorder, but he is no more the wiser for it than the black nurses who attend the sick.”

Rush, then, like other white authors, singled out hired African American nurses for criticism.

While white nurses were not denigrated in the same way as black nurses, they were not praised in general either. Only one of these authors commented positively on the skills of a white nurse. When five members of his household became ill with the fever, Benjamin Smith noted that he had hired a “clever elderly white woman as a nurse.” While the authors under study did not single out white workers for criticism in terms of their nursing skills, neither did they characterize them as superior to black nurses. Instead, they used racial distinctions to distinguish an underclass of black workers whom they ranked below poor white laborers.

These white authors used this same racializing process with regard to the attributes of drunkenness and thievery. Sarah Logan Fisher grumbled

67 Benjamin Smith to Daniel Smith, Oct. 8, 1793, Edward Wanton Smith Collection.
about family members being tended by "a drunken negro man," while Thomas Clifford charged that many individuals had been "left to the care of merciless and perhaps drunken black people." Even the nurses at the Bush Hill epidemic hospital, who were predominantly black, were thought to be "often in liquor." 68 Other whites associated African Americans with thievery. Julia Rush was very concerned to learn that her husband had hired two black nurses to care for sick members of their household. In a letter written while she was in Princeton, Julia asked Benjamin to have either his "mother or sister give a little heed to my clothes" and to make sure that "my chest of drawers [is] to be locked in that room." The reason? In Julia's words, "if that room is a hospital and black nurses about the house, I shall have a poor account of them I fear." Mathew Carey publicly charged African Americans of theft by noting that "some of them [black nurses] were even detected in plundering the houses of the sick." The author of a September 11 newspaper essay did not explicitly accuse African Americans of pilfering fruit from private orchards, but made the link between "blackness" and thievery implicit. According to A. Z., "wickedness is represented by darkness, as a fit emblem of its black and heinous nature," and he threatened that if the thievery did not stop immediately, he would humiliate the perpetrators of this crime by "giving [the public] a long, but black catalogue of names." 69 Considering that Mayor Matthew Clarkson did release convicts from the city jail who volunteered to serve as nurses at the hospital at Bush Hill, there may have been some basis for white concerns about thievery during the epidemic. The fact that one-third of the prisoners released were white, and still these white authors did not charge white nurses with extortion, theft, drunkenness, or incompetence, though, reveals the degree to which many of these authors may have resented the prospects of black mobility and self-determination. 70

Prosperous white Philadelphians did not totally let poor whites off the

68 Sarah Logan Fisher diary, v. 22, Oct. 14, 1793; Thomas Clifford to John Clifford, Dec. [27], 1793, Pemberton Family Papers; and M[argaret Wistar] Haines to Casper and Reuben Haines, [1793], Wyck Association Collection.


70 Jones and Allen, Narrative, 4–5.
hook, however, but criticized them according to a different criterion. These white authors tended to fault members of this group primarily for their lack of prudence, which they thought contributed to their susceptibility to yellow fever. For example, in several letters to her sister Milciah, Margaret Morris complained of her maid Sally’s imprudence for “leaving off a jacket in the heat of the day,” which presumably resulted in the girl getting sick. On another occasion, Morris referred to the “weak mind” of her son Richard’s apprentice, William, whose fear she believed would prove as fatal as an attack of yellow fever. B. Fuller also commented on two of his servants who were “so imprudent as to wash the house,” and Benjamin Rush noted that “the mortality falls chiefly upon the poor who by working in the sun, excite the contagion into action.”71 These white authors, therefore, criticized both poor whites and African American laborers for acting inappropriately, but in accordance with a divergent set of criteria. Perhaps this difference involved not only the process of racial categorization, but also the creation of different statuses of workers within the household. If household servants died from yellow fever, they put their white employees in the position of having to hire strangers as a new source of labor. And that was something these white authors did not want to do.

Though a few white correspondents portrayed African American nurses and workers in a positive light, even in these instances the authors emphasized racial distinctiveness. For instance, United States comptroller Oliver Wolcott informed his father that “the Africans are said not to be afflicted, and much to their honor they have zealously contributed every aid in their power.” In another instance, Benjamin Smith gave a highly affirmative account of the behavior of an African American couple who boarded with his cousin Caleb Hoskins. When Hoskins fell ill with the fever, the wife was “employed in applying a warm bath to his feet & giving him some herb tea to drink having got him to bed which had produced a copious sweat.” According to Smith, he considered “it as a great favor that he [Caleb] has two such persons . . . about him,” and that, in particular, the woman treated his kinsman “with as much tenderness and assiduity as if he was her own child.” In contrast, Smith believed that if Hoskins had “taken sick in a white family, not his relations, he would probably have

been neglected.” Smith’s full description of this event demonstrates that he thought, like other white Philadelphians in this study, in terms of racial categories. In particular, Smith diminished this unnamed African American couple’s deeds greatly by qualifying his praise with the comment that “black folks mostly believe they are in no danger,” noting “this woman in particular is not afraid of catching the disorder.” Wolcott’s and Smith’s praise of “Africans” and “black folks,” then, highlighted collective over individual action. Only one other author in this study praised African American nurses. In late December Thomas Clifford informed his brother that “we left a young woman extreme ill under the care of two dependable black women.” In this situation, however, Clifford obviously felt guilty about leaving his servant behind. Consequently, his comment likely was intended more as a defense of his own actions than as praise.

Except in a very few cases, these white Philadelphians focused on members of their own social group as exemplars of selflessness and virtue in the face of great calamity. For example, Sarah Logan Fisher praised Patty Norris for risking her life to care for Betsy Gardener and her husband, who were both ill with the fever. According to Fisher, Norris’s behavior was “a truly Christian act indeed, and which no doubt will be rewarded, by the sweet peace of mind, that follows an act of duty.” She also commended the work of Margaret Haines, “a woman who for extensive Charity to the poor, and true benevolence of Heart has left few equals.” On several occasions Margaret Morris valorized the selfless behavior of her sister and nieces for taking in her daughter-in-law, Abby. Morris had collapsed with grief following the death of her son, John, and was not able to care for Abby, who had contracted the fever around the same time as her husband. When Morris’s brother-in-law, Richard Wells, informed Abby’s father, Benedict Dorsey, of the situation, Dorsey refused his daughter entry to his house because of his fear of infection. It was then that Wells consulted “his dear wife and girls” who “readily consented to her coming there where she was tenderly taken care of.” Morris made it clear that it was her sister Rachel and her nieces Hannah and Rachel who deserved the praise for caring for Abby and not the three black women who nursed her as well. According to Morris, “it is true that our sweet

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72 Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., Sept. 12, 1793, Oliver Wolcott Jr. Papers, microfilm reel 7, David Library of the American Revolution, Washington Crossing, PA; and Benjamin Smith to Daniel Smith, Sept. 4, 1793, Edward Wanton Smith Collection.

73 Thomas Clifford to John Clifford, Dec. [?], 1793, Pemberton Family Papers.
H[annah] and R[achel] Wells nursed her day and night—tho Leonard Dorsey [Abby's uncle] sent one of his servants there & toward the last had 2 black women.” Despite the fact that “the black woman” apparently “lay down in her [Abby’s] room at night” while Morris’s nieces would “sit in the easy chair in the entry,” Morris paid tribute only to her female kin by saying that “I fear it will be long ere they recover the fatigue they have gone thro’ & never—never, shall I think myself out of their debt.”

Because Benjamin Rush was one of the few physicians who remained in Philadelphia throughout the epidemic, whites often lauded his efforts to treat the sick. Timothy Pickering, for instance, felt that Rush deserved “much praise for his indefatigable attention,” while Joshua Gilpin noted to his cousin Thomas Fisher that Rush had “exerted himself with a zeal and humanity that does him great credit.”

These white authors distinguished between members of their own class who volunteered their services and white and black servants and slaves, many of whom received payment for their efforts. But they also made distinctions based upon racial identity. It is significant that even those African Americans, including Absalom Jones, William Gray, and Richard Allen, who offered their services without expectation of financial reward were largely denied praise in the private writings of these white authors. Only in the case of clergyman William Smith, who in a letter to Benjamin Rush noted that his family was “assisted by a worthy and pious black Richard Allen” in laying his deceased wife in her coffin, did one of these authors single out an African American leader for commendation.

Authors of public accounts of the epidemic tended to be more generous. Although historian Sally Griffith is quite right in saying that Mathew


Carey’s larger image of the “public-spirited citizen” had no room for people of color, or for women,” in his account of the epidemic he noted that “the services of Jones, Allen, and Gray, and others of their colour, have been very great, and demand public gratitude.” Likewise, an anonymous author of an account of the epidemic recognized the debt owed to African American workers, pointing out that “had it not been for the exertions and attentions of some of these despised people, the calamity and distress of the city would have been much aggravated.” Following Carey’s lead, the author condemned the actions of those “black people” who had exacted “three and four dollars a day . . . with the utmost rigor from starving families, and then not doing their duty,” but went further than Carey in eschewing racial categories. Explaining why African Americans may have acted as they did, the author argued that “those who are acquainted with human nature, will readily allow that the principle of self preservation, must operate upon the blacks as strongly as upon other people.” He then added that “it should be considered that their education has been such as to keep them in ignorance of the finer feelings of nature, that they have generally been in the habit of being imposed upon, that they are universally poor, and possess with others, an ambition of procuring something for future contingencies.” Associating African Americans with “other people,” this author allowed for a commonality of experience across a racial line that was absent from the private writings of the epidemic.

The creation and maintenance of racial identities was a complex and multifaceted process for these white authors in 1793 Philadelphia. Affluent white Philadelphians developed a complicated system of racial labeling that made distinctions among household slaves or servants, free laborers working for wages, and African American leaders who volunteered their services. As these authors went about constructing a category of “black people” in terms of their class assumptions and needs, at different times they used “black” and “blackness” to refer to a category designation (nonwhite), a status (nonslave), or a set of behavioral characteristics. These authors also created racial identities on the basis of biological difference, and while there is no evidence that they adhered to an essentialist theory of race, their consistent emphasis on racial difference made

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78 Carey, Short Account, 2nd ed., 29; and Account of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the Malignant Fever, 28–31. The fact that this was the only anonymously published account and made the strongest defense of African American activities during the epidemic other than those made by Allen and Jones raises some intriguing questions about the racial climate of Philadelphia.
it more difficult for them to view African Americans as potential equals. Instead, they characterized “blacks” or “black people” in ways that promoted an inferior status and ensured that African Americans remained in a position of low-wage servitude. In the end, even for those workers newly freed from the burden of slavery, the “wages of blackness” would continue to be high.79

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