

## **Yellow Fever Strikes**

By Bob Josuweit

In the early years of Philadelphia the city had known the declaration of independence, the devastation of war and occupation, and serving as the nation's capital. Yet an especially cruel epidemic paid a visit in 1793.

The end of August had a lot of rain. The streets were muddy. It was damp along the docks and nearby streets. Coffee and other foods were rotting on the docks. It was a perfect breeding ground for mosquitoes and disease. The disease which began near Market Street quickly worked its way along Water Street. By September 1 it was spreading at an alarming rate. Thomas Jefferson thought there would be 200 deaths by the end of the week. His estimate was low. On Sunday, Sept. 1, (17 died), Sept. 2 (18), Sept 3 (11), Sept 4 (23). More than 20 burials each day for the rest of the week. On Sunday, Sept 8 forty-two. The following week had about 30 deaths a day and by Sept 14, forty-eight had died. By November when the disease slowed down, over 6000 people, one-tenth of the City's population, had perished. Over 17,000 had fled the City. An additional 4000 people (total) died of the disease during outbreaks in 1797, 1798, and 1799.

Government leaders quickly fled the town. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Alexander Hamilton all left town to get away from the disease. They left lesser known people in Philadelphia to deal with the disease the best they could. Benjamin Rush, the famous doctor, would treat up to 120 patients a day.

As the City expanded in size and population other outbreaks of the disease occurred along Water Street. By 1805 the docks on Water Street reached Southwark. In fact yellow fever broke out between New Market and the Swedes Church. The Church Death Records tell many stories of the deceased's last days and how yellow fever was the cause of death. Nicholas Collin's wife succumbed to yellow fever in September, 1797. Rev. Collin said Hannah "in her 49 year, on the 9th day of her illness in the epidemic fever. The God of consolation give me support under this dispensation."

There were other cities besides Philadelphia that had yellow fever epidemics. As doctors learned more about the disease they were able to treat it and prevent it with better sanitary conditions. While yellow fever has been eradicated in the United States, the mosquito can still be a carrier of serious diseases.

