

# Washington's Bout *with* Small Pox.

Taken from *Elizabeth Anne Fenn's* book [Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82.](#)



Lawrence Washington, half brother of George Washington.

**The date: September 28<sup>th</sup>, 1751.** Actually time has left the early pages of George Washington's diary so damaged that the exact date remains uncertain. But it was probably on this day that nineteen-year-old George set sail from the colony of Virginia to the island of **Barbados** with his brother, Lawrence. The trip was intended to cure Lawrence's constant coughing and congested lungs, symptoms of the *consumption* that was to kill him within a year. In earlier centuries travel was a favored treatment for consumption, the contagious bacterial disease that we call **tuberculosis**. People thought a pleasant climate of salt air or mountain breezes would cure the disease.

## 1. **Barbados** is located in the ...

*English Channel*

*Chesapeake Bay*

*the Caribbean Sea*



The Clarke home on Barbados: Where the brothers stayed.

**The trip was difficult.** The brothers endured a week of rain squalls and high seas. However, they arrived safely at Barbados, on November 2<sup>nd</sup> - but soon George *too* lay seriously ill - not from tuberculosis but from smallpox! On the day after landing, the brothers had dinner at the home of *Gedney Clarke*, a merchant and slave trader with ties to Washington's family. "*We went... (but) with some reluctance, as the smallpox was in his family,*" George wrote in his diary. His worries were justified. For a **fortnight** afterward, the two brothers continued to socialize, unaware of a virus silently multiplying in George's body. Then, on November 17, when the virus's incubation period had passed, the infection hit hard. "*Was strongly attacked with the small Pox,*" George wrote.

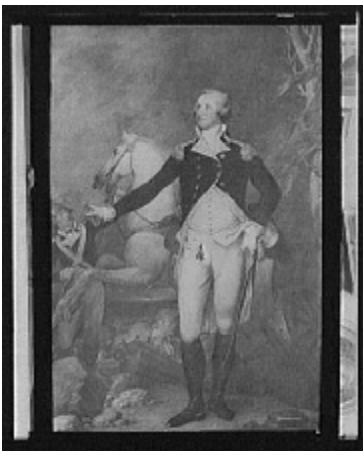
**Thereafter, his journal entries stop.** Not until a month later was he well enough to go out. In the meantime his brother was not as fortunate ... *“This climate has not afforded the relief I expected from it,”* wrote Lawrence. In December the brothers parted ways - George returning to Virginia and Lawrence remaining in the Caribbean. Although Lawrence returned that summer to George’s home in Virginia, tuberculosis took Lawrence’s life on July 26, 1752.

**2. On the previous page, the word fortnight means ...**      *the night before*      *for two weeks*

**Fast forward twenty three years later, July, 1775.** The British occupation of Boston and its siege by the colonists is under way. The siege of Boston is the result of the battles of **Lexington and**



**Concord** during the previous April where angry militiamen had routed British troops attempting to seize a store of ammunition from the town of Concord. Exhausted and humiliated, the king’s soldiers had staggered the sixteen miles back to Boston under relentless American sniper fire. Here the local patriots surrounded Boston - trapping the British in the city for eleven months.



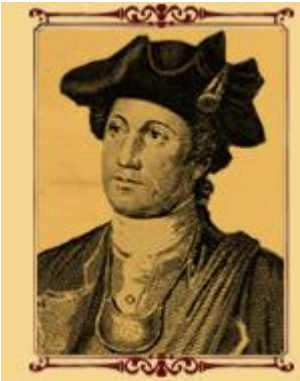
George Washington. Library of Congress.

**That summer forty-three year old George Washington** stepped out of a carriage in nearby Cambridge, Massachusetts to take command of the Continental Army – but by the time Washington arrived the siege had taken on a new phase - smallpox was spreading throughout the besieged city – now it was a medical battle as well as a military one. As Washington knew from personal experience smallpox could be devastating and he also knew that most of his soldiers were from Boston and therefore were likely susceptible to the disease - an exposure they shared with many others in eighteenth-century America.

**3. Which Revolutionary War battle occurred first?**

*Lexington*

*Concord*



**When smallpox struck George Washington** in Barbados in 1751 his diary entries stopped for twenty-four days. This blank in Washington's diary is telling as its silence speaks of a misery commonplace then but unfamiliar to the world today. Although the route of his infection is impossible to determine, it's most likely that Washington picked up *variola* – the virus that causes smallpox - through direct contact with a sick member of the Gedney Clarke household.

**The contagious person may have been Mrs. Clarke** herself who was known to be “*much indisposed*” at the time of George's visit. If Washington had a face-to-face meeting with her, he might have inhaled tiny infectious droplets or his hands might have carried the virus to his mouth or nose. Such an encounter is the most likely **mode** of infection but not the only way possible. Even smallpox's dried-out scabs can transmit the virus. If someone had recently swept the floors or changed the bedclothes in a sickroom in the Clarke home **dehydrated** particles may have circulated in the room's air. Finally, one last form of transmission was also possible - *variola* can survive for weeks outside the human body and retain its **virulence** for years. It's conceivable that Washington caught smallpox from a contaminated object such as a blanket.

- 4. The word **mode** in this paragraph means...      *amount*                      *method*
- 5. The word **dehydrated** means...                      *moist*                      *dried out*
- 6. The word **virulence** means...                      *poisonous*                      *life*

**How do we know** that Washington caught smallpox in Barbados? The known presence of the disease in the Clarke household is one clue. Timing is another. The incubation period for smallpox usually ranges from ten to fourteen days... the first symptoms appearing thirteen days after exposure. Washington's case was typical. He dined at the Clarke home on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, and according to his diary, his first symptoms appeared two weeks later. We have no firsthand description... But to judge by the experience of other victims, his early symptoms would have resembled a very nasty case of the flu - a general **malaise** with high fevers, accompanied by excruciating headaches, backaches and vomiting are among the initial signs of infection. The **Lakota (Sioux) Indians** often drew a spiral symbol to illustrate the intense pain they felt in their stomach.

- 7. The word **malaise** means ...                      *emotional discomfort*                      *danger*
- 8. Where did the **Lakota (Sioux) Indians** live during George Washington's life?  
*West of Lake Superior*                      *along the Delaware*

## Variola.

**Smallpox** is the disease caused by the *variola* virus that emerged in humans thousands of years ago. The word **variola** is derived from the Latin word for “spotted” and refers to the *pustules* that appear on the body of an infected person. **Pox** refers to the small but profuse pock marks that scar a survivor. There is no treatment for smallpox, and the only prevention is a **vaccine**. There are three forms of the disease. Exposure to smallpox can lead to “**ordinary smallpox**” - which accounts for ninety percent of cases, or the weakest form of the disease called “**mild smallpox**” - the type George Washington may have contracted. The most dangerous form is called “**hemorrhagic small pox**” – the patient bleeds internally causing organ failure.

9. Small pox is caused by exposure to ...

*a virus*

*a bacterium*

10. The word pox refers to ...

*pustules*

*a curse*

To judge by the outcome of Washington’s bout with smallpox his was the less severe kind with few or no skin sores. With this form the fever usually lowers after the first day... and many patients rally - some may even think they have had a mere bout of the flu. But the disease can be deceptive, for the fever sometimes returned and sores began to appear - often in the mouth, throat, and nasal passages - making breathing and drinking difficult. The rash quickly spreads - on some it turned inward - **hemorrhaging** under the skin. In most the rash covered the victim with blisters in places that caused pain and anguish such as on the soles of their feet, on their palms and on their face.

11. The word hemorrhage means ...

*bleeding*

*appearing*



Smallpox lesions on trunk. Bangladesh, 1973. Public Health Images Library (PHIL) ID # 284. Source: CDC/James Hicks

In **severe cases** scabs encrusted the body, making movement painful. The Puritan leader William Bradford described this condition among the **Narragansett** Indians in 1634: “*They lye on their hard matts .... their skin cleaving to the matts they lye on; when they turne ... a whole side will flea off*”. Often, a peculiar odor developed. “*The small-pox pustules begin to crack, run and smell,*” wrote a Boston physician in 1722.

12. Where did the Narragansett Indians live?

*Mexico*

*Rhode Island*

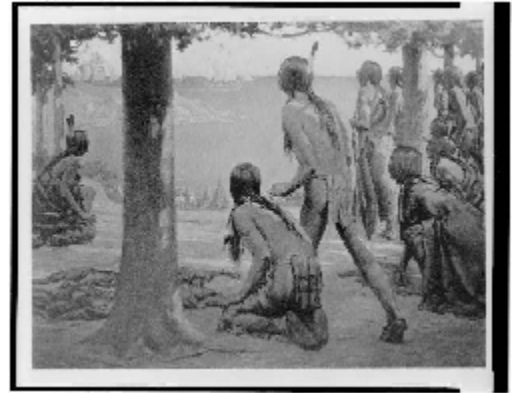
Patients at this stage of the disease could be hard to recognize. **Secondary infections** would also set in, proving to be as severe as those from smallpox. If they survived, their fever dropped and their pustules and scabs were replaced by unsightly scars.

**13. What's does secondary infection mean?**

*another disease*

*a weaker disease*

**Outbreaks have occurred throughout history.** Attempts to stop the disease go back thousands of years. In China's early history the arm was scratched with the pus from a smallpox blister. This was dangerous but could produce a milder form of the disease that stimulated the production of antibodies, creating some immunity. The practice was also used in 18th century Europe and North America. However, colonists brought many **communicable** diseases which spread quickly among Native Americans, who had no immunity.



Native Americans. Library of Congress.

**14. The word communicable means ...**

*found in small villages*

*contagious*



Dr. Edward Jenner, inventor of the vaccine.

**In 1796, British physician Edward Jenner** observed that milkmaids, young women who milked cows for a living, often developed a skin infection known as *cowpox* on their hands but seemed immune to smallpox. Jenner experimented on an eight-year-old boy scratching his arm with pus from a cowpox lesion. Later, when Jenner scratched the boy's arm with pus from a smallpox lesion, the boy did not contract smallpox. This new procedure - 'vaccination' - from the Latin word **vacca** meaning 'cow' - created immunity setting the stage for its eradication.

**15. The word vaccine comes from the Latin word for ...**

*variola*

*cowpox*

*cow*

**In the middle of the twentieth century** a worldwide vaccination program eradicated the disease. The last naturally occurring case in the world was in Somalia in 1977. The last case in the United States was in 1949. For the general public vaccination against smallpox is no longer necessary.

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