

Yellow Fever in the 18th Century

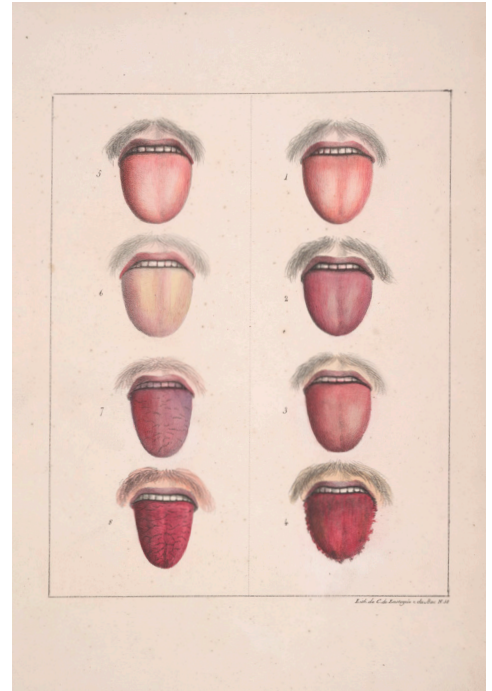
ACCESS THIS RUBENSTEIN LIBRARY INSTRUCTION SESSION GUIDE ONLINE AT:
guides.library.duke.edu/instruction-yellowfever

BRIEF OVERVIEW

In the late 18th century, yellow fever spread quickly in the eastern United States. The disease, although now known to be a mosquito-borne virus, was poorly understood at the time. When major cities, like Philadelphia and New York City, saw large outbreaks of the often deadly disease, local leaders and medical professionals struggled to treat the sick and control the epidemic. Through the lens of 18th century yellow fever epidemics, this module introduces students to multiple types of primary sources, including digitized resources, and provides activities designed to guide the critical analysis of primary sources.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **Practice** textual and visual analysis using multiple types of primary sources.
- **Discuss** the author (creator), audience, and intended purpose of historical documents.
- **Engage** with digital collections as primary sources.
- **Develop** an understanding of 18th century yellow fever outbreaks and consider how past epidemics relate to those in the present.



BEFORE CLASS

- Although this is an online session, we want students to know a little bit about the Rubenstein Library! Ask students to watch [our short welcome videos](#).
- Have your students take a moment to [read the Rubenstein Library's approach to classes](#). It's very short, but includes things students will want to keep in mind as they work with primary sources now and in the future.
- Direct your students to briefly read through [Malignant Fever](#), an online exhibit from Duke University Libraries that will provide historical context for the rest of the session.

SESSION OUTLINE

Activity 1

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In this activity, students will work in small groups to select a primary source and complete a short worksheet that will guide their critical analysis of the item. This activity can work for synchronous (e.g., a Zoom class session that includes breakout rooms) or asynchronous (e.g., a multi-step discussion on an online forum) class sessions.

1. Have students select an item available [here](#) or assign an item to each small group. If your class is large, more than one group can work with an item—each group will bring different perspectives to the primary source analysis.

2. Next, have students work in their small groups to analyze the item using the [Document Analysis Worksheet](#) as a guide. Encourage students to take notes as they work. Feel free to adjust the worksheet questions to better meet the goals of your class.
3. Have groups share what they've learned about each item with the entire class, either in an online discussion post or by an informal report at the end of a Zoom session.
4. Finally, after the groups share, encourage the class to think about how the primary sources connect, consider common themes, and ask questions of each other in a class wide discussion. The discussion questions below can serve as a starting point for this larger discussion. Instructors should feel free to alter questions as needed for their specific class.

CLASS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What kind of information (about the symptoms, treatments, etc.) did you learn about yellow fever from the primary sources? Or about what life would have been like during an epidemic?
2. If you wanted to do more research about yellow fever and how epidemics were experienced by people at the time, what other primary sources might be useful to include? Are there additional perspectives that should be included?
3. Primary sources can often raise more questions than answers. What questions do these items raise for you and how might you go about finding answers?
4. What connections can you make between the yellow fever epidemics of the 18th century and more recent disease outbreaks (including coronavirus)?
5. If you were to write a history of the current coronavirus pandemic, what types of primary sources would you include in your research? How might those sources be different (or similar) to those from the 1790s?

Activity 2

DIGITAL COLLECTIONS SEARCH

In this activity, students will learn to search for digitized primary sources and practice reading and transcribing a handwritten document. This portion of the module can easily be done asynchronously or as an after-class activity for a synchronous session.

1. Students should start by watching the [Rubenstein Library's short instructional videos](#) that explain a bit about digital collections and give suggestions for searching the collections.
2. Next, students will visit the [Benjamin and Julia Stockton Rush Papers Digital Collection](#) and locate one additional document (not included in Activity #1) that dates from the 1793 Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic.
3. After students select a document, have each student read and transcribe the first 8–10 lines of the document. Students can then post their transcriptions to a Sakai forum or other shared online space to compare their results.

Note: Students could easily work in pairs or in groups to transcribe the same document and may be able to get further working together.

Additional Resources:

If you are interested in expanding this learning module or incorporating additional primary sources, here are a few resources:

- [Research Guide to Pandemics and Epidemics in the Rubenstein Library](#) (guide to additional material available in the Rubenstein Library and online).
- [Politics of Yellow Fever in Alexander Hamilton's America](#) (digitized primary sources and teaching modules from the U.S. National Library of Medicine).
- [The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878](#) (primary source set and teaching guide from the Digital Public Library of America).

QUESTIONS?

special-collections@duke.edu

DEVELOPED BY:

Brooke Guthrie

Research Services Librarian

brooke.guthrie@duke.edu



DUKE UNIVERSITY
LIBRARIES



THIS WORK IS LICENSED UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION-NONCOMMERCIAL 4.0 INTERNATIONAL LICENSE. TO VIEW A COPY OF THIS LICENSE, VISIT [CREATIVECOMMONS.ORG/LICENSES/ BY-NC/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) OR SEND A LETTER TO CREATIVE COMMONS, PO BOX 1866, MOUNTAIN VIEW, CA 94042.