



# Revolutionary Times



Containing the Latest News from the Sons of the American Revolution

## Smallpox

Because few American colonists had contracted the disease before, the colonies experienced sporadic and deadly outbreaks of smallpox.

There was never a widespread epidemic that resulted in herd immunity.

Colonial Boston had faced many smallpox outbreaks throughout the 1700s, the most severe of which occurred in 1721, 1752, 1764, and 1775.

When American colonists launched their revolution against Britain, they quickly encountered a second but invisible enemy that threatened to wipe out the new Continental Army: highly contagious smallpox.

Smallpox crippled the forces in Canada, preventing them from launching an attack on Quebec in late 1775.

Many soldiers' scheduled enlistment ended on January 1, 1776 and a majority warned their superiors they planned to not reenlist due to fear of the disease. These soldiers would rather desert the cause than risk death by smallpox.

Washington understood the grave threat smallpox imposed upon the Continental Army and their chances of winning the war.

He even described smallpox as "more destructive than the sword."



Washington also feared the spread of smallpox between soldiers who did not quarantine after inoculating.

In a February 6, 1777 letter to Dr. William Shippen Jr., director of the medical department of the Continental Army, Washington proclaimed:

"Finding the Small pox to be spreading much and fearing that no precaution can prevent it from running through the whole of our Army, I have determined that the troops shall be inoculated."

With this order, George Washington enacted the first medical mandate in American history.

Washington declared his order to Congress that all troops must be inoculated, and he ordered that all new recruits entering Philadelphia must be inoculated upon entry.

To offset the temporary loss of soldiers while they healed from the inoculation, military doctors inoculated divisions in five day intervals.

The military used private homes and churches as isolation centers to control spread of the disease.

Smallpox was under control, supplies were adequate, patients were, for the most part, housed in buildings specifically designed for their care, the staff was large in proportion to the number of patients.

This broadsheet is dedicated to the 250th Anniversary Celebration of the Declaration of Independence for more information visit the National Society Sons of the American Revolution website at: [www.sar.org](http://www.sar.org)

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