

The Slave Who Saved a City

It is April 1721 and Boston is booming. Founded ninety years earlier by Puritans seeking refuge to practice their religion, the town had since grown into the busiest and most profitable port in North America, thanks to its natural harbor and savvy merchant class. The center of all this activity was Long Wharf, extending almost half a mile into the harbor. There, a seemingly never-ending parade of ships loaded and unloaded raw materials, finished goods and, tragically, slaves who involuntarily played a vital role in the notorious Triangle Trade of slaves, sugar, and rum.

On April 22nd, the *HMS Seahorse* arrived from Barbados and docked at Long Wharf. The crew had recently survived a bout of Smallpox, but none displayed any symptoms so the ship was cleared to unload passengers and goods. A day later a sailor reported a rash about his mouth and throat - early symptoms of the dread disease. With the experience of five previous outbreaks Boston authorities wisely had the sailor quarantined. But it was too late. Passengers had disembarked and other sailors had already begun their shore leave. The virus spread viciously through the town, sowing fear and death.

Smallpox.

For thousands of years, there was abject terror in the word, and with good reason. The infection from the virus caused high fever, extreme body aches and, for one out of three patients, death. Survivors were often left with horrifying, disfiguring scars. Panic caused by a virus is all-too familiar in the summer of 2021, as much of the world is still battling the deadly COVID-19 pandemic and its variants. Now imagine a small town perched on the edge of the North American wilderness, its residents isolated from their home country by three thousand miles of ocean, again and again suffering the loss of thousands from these epidemics.

Many prayed to stop the horror from spreading. Others asked if there was anything which could be done to prevent it from happening at all. Turns out there was, but the answer was easily ignored because most residents did not even acknowledge the man giving them the answer even qualified as a human being.

He was known, in Boston, as Onesimus. His original, true name will never be known as he was abducted from his west African village when he was just eleven years old. After a horrific trans-Atlantic voyage in shackles in the hold of an over-crowded British frigate he arrived in Boston in the mid-1600s. Onesimus was purchased by minister Cotton Mather, who gave him his new name, one not without irony or, as we shall see, some prescience. In the New Testament's Epistle of Paul to Philemon we read Paul's friend, Philemon, had a slave named Onesimus. (In ancient Greek the word onesimus means "useful" and "profitable.") According to the Epistle, Onesimus escaped bondage and fled to Rome. There he met Paul, who was imprisoned at the time. In the Epistle, Paul converts Onesimus and returns him to his friend "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother."

A few years before this latest epidemic began, Onesimus had gone to his master with a story. As recounted on Harvard University's Science in the News website, Mather wrote Onesimus "...told me that he had undergone the operation which had given something of the smallpox and would forever preserve him from it, adding that was often used in West Africa."

This was a remarkable moment from several angles. We begin with Cotton Mather who, as a second-generation leader of the First Church of Boston, was a prominent member of Boston's ruling class. A

devout Puritan icon who said his life was “a continual conversation with heaven,” Mather was also a man of frustrating contradictions. In his 1689 book *Memorable Providences* he wrote of “spectral evidence... in the... detection of witchcrafts.” and after the witch trials of 1692 and 1693 when twenty people were executed, one burnt at the stake, he was said by one contemporary to have “conducted much to the kindling of those Flames.” Yet he later wrote a defense of the trials which led to the execution of 20 people. The contradictions pile up; here was a slave owner who opposed the slave trade. A man devoted to his religion Mather was also a child of the Enlightenment, making advances in corn hybridization, promoting Newtonian science and corresponding frequently with the Royal Society of London on scientific matters.

His scientific curiosity, when seen through the lens of the devastating loss of his wife and three children to a measles epidemic in 1713, might explain why Mather did not reject Onesimus’ story outright. Instead, he sought out other West African slaves for verification. They told him the same story of how pox was collected from infected villagers, placed inside a cut on the arm of a healthy person, who contracted a mild form of disease, and then recovered. When the next epidemic struck, almost all of who had received the pox treatment lived, while a large percentage of those who did not, succumbed. They proudly displayed inoculation scars on their arms to back up their story.

Most Boston doctors were aghast at the idea of prevention by infection, even after Mather also shared published reports of successful inoculations in Turkey. In an era in which bloodletting was the default treatment for just about any ailment what Mather was advocating was nothing less than a medical “Hail Mary.” It didn't help their cause that the idea had come from Black slaves.

Spurred on by his friend and lone inoculation ally, Dr. Zabdiel Boylston, Cotton Mather doubled-down on inoculation by preaching its benefits to his congregants from the pulpit of the First Church of Boston. Mather and Boylston faced an eighteenth century version of an anti-vax movement, fueled in no small part by sensationalist articles on the dangers of vaccination in the widely read *New England Courant* newspaper. There were also many who believed inoculation to be against God’s will. The panic against inoculation grew until it was almost as fraught as that for Smallpox. Someone went so far as to throw a bomb into Mather’s home on which was attached a note. “Cotton Mather, you dog, dam you! I’ll inoculate you with this; with a pox to you.” (How Mather was expected to read the note after the bomb exploded was never explained. Thankfully, it was a dud.) Bowing to local fears the City Council condemned inoculation and ordered Boylston to cease his activities.

Boylston was not deterred by threats of violence, and would eventually inoculate almost 300 people, including his own son, Thomas (how about that for a show of confidence?). By late 1722, when the epidemic finally abated, over half of Boston's 11,000 citizens had been infected and one out of six of them had died. Of the inoculated, only one in fifty perished. Thomas, Reverend Mather, and Dr. Boylston were among the inoculated who survived.

For his courage in proving inoculation worked, Boylston would later travel to England to be honored by King George. Building on this and other successes Englishman Edward Jenner would discover a safe and reliable method of vaccination. In 1980 this dread disease was declared eradicated by the World Health Organization.

Now we come back to Onesimus, the slave whose vital role saving thousands of Bostonians deserves discussion. Because many considered his race *less than* human they could justify his race's being treated no better than chattel. Could he be faulted, then, if he watched the enslavers of his race continue to perish? Instead, he revealed the preventative benefits of inoculation and saved their lives. The

obvious, compelling question is, why? Unfortunately Onesimus' answer was never written down so we can only speculate on what drove him to display the uniquely human trait of compassion. And, since we lack any contemporary writing on the incident, we can only speculate how Onesimus' act impacted the opinion of townspeople on African slavery.

We do know Cotton Mather later granted Onesimus his freedom. Freedom for all indentured servants in Massachusetts would occur sixty years later after lawyers argued the statement “All men are born free and equal...” (found in the Commonwealth's Declaration of Rights in its recently passed constitution) really did apply to people of all races. Six years later slave trade was declared illegal in the state. While we cannot draw a direct, legal line between Onesimus' act to the abolishment of slavery we cannot dismiss the events of the smallpox epidemic of 1722 and Onesimus' demonstration of *humanity* which, for some, surely opened their eyes about the morality of owning a human being.