

[Laura A. Leibman](#), Reed College

Early American Jews and Epidemics: One Family's Story



Figure 1: The Progress of Yellow Fever. *Observations sur la fièvre jaune, faites à Cadix*. Paris: Etienne Pariset and André Mazet, 1820

Introduction

In 1817, [Joshua Moses](#) married [Sarah Rodrigues Brandon](#) in London at [Congregation Bevis Marks](#) [Source 1]. Joshua was born to a wealthy Ashkenazi family in New York, and while Sarah was born on the island of Barbados to a Sephardic father and an enslaved mother. By the time of their marriage, however, she was not only Jewish and free, but a great heiress. Despite their different beginnings, they shared a knowledge common to most Jews at the time: the power of epidemics to overturn lives.

When Sarah's older brother [Isaac Lopez Brandon](#) was just a year old, a "malignant pestilential fever" ravaged the Caribbean, jumping from island to island. It reached Barbados in late 1793, and 800 men, women, and children died before October was out. Their skin took on a yellow cast and blood oozed from their noses, mouths, and eyes before the delirium and seizures set in [[Figure 1](#)]. Those who didn't die often wished they had (Geggus 39).

That same year, yellow fever also ravaged New York where Joshua was in the school of [Congregation Shearith Israel](#). Although yellow fever was common in the Caribbean and Southern United States [Source 2], the disease was relatively new to the Northeastern

cities. In Philadelphia, one of the doctors who helped both Jews and non-Jews alike treat the epidemic was a Jewish doctor from Suriname, David Cohen Nassy [Source 3].

Nassy had grown up in [Suriname](#), which lies along the top of South America and the southern rim of the Caribbean basin. At the time, Suriname had one of the largest communities of Jews in the Americas, as well as one of the best educated. Nassy was no exception, as you can see from the list of books in his library [Source 3] In fact before he travelled North, Nassy had written a [history of the Jews of Suriname](#). After the epidemic in Philadelphia, he spread his knowledge through a pamphlet he wrote [Source 3]. Other Jews weren't so lucky: many died in this and later epidemics, including doctors who were treating the sick [Source 4].

The history of Jews and epidemics impacted how Joshua and Sarah Moses raised their family. After their 1817 marriage, the couple moved to New York where they made sure to inoculate their children for Kine Pox [Source 1]. Kine pox—or “cowpox”— was a smallpox vaccine developed by Edward Jenner in England in the late 1790s that had made immunization safer and more reliable (Jenner 54). Unfortunately there was no vaccine at the time for yellow fever. In fact people didn't even understand how yellow fever was spread.

When the yellow fever epidemic hit New York in 1819 and 1822, the Moses family were caught up in the chaos. Joshua's brother-in-law Aaron Levy kept a record of events during this era, including how Jews coped with the disease [Source 5]. Like today, isolation was a key strategy. Just like in the earlier yellow fever epidemic, thousands of people fled Philadelphia and New York. The Moses family escaped to the nearby town of Greenwich Village, which was still quite rural and where they had a country house. Maps by non-Jews show how the city functioned in exile and how in 1819-1822 people were still trying to figure out how exactly the disease was spreading [Source 5].

Primary Sources:

1. **Inoculations Against Smallpox:** Joshua Moses, [Family Record Book](#), p. 6. [Tip: Need help reading Joshua's handwriting? Check out this [Early American Handwriting Game](#).]

2. Yellow Fever in the Early Southern United States: [Frances Sheftall, Letter](#) (Charleston, 1780) from JAA.

3. Jews Trying to Figure out Small Pox: Dr. David Cohen Nassy.

- [Who was David Cohen Nassy?](#)
- Nassy, David De Isaac Cohen. [Observations on the Cause, Nature, and Treatment of the Epidemic Disorder, Prevalent in Philadelphia](#). Philadelphia:: Printed by Parker & for M. Carey., 1796.
- [Books owned by David Cohen Nassy](#) from JAA.

4. Jews who Lost Their Lives to Yellow Fever and other Epidemics

- E. D. C. "The Jewish Dead During the 1793 Yellow Fever." *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, no. 35, 1939, pp. 285–287. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43058481.
- [Gravestone of Dr. Walter J. Judah](#) (New York, 1798)
- [Gravestone of Samuel Hart](#) (1773), aged 53, in Enclosure B of the Jewish Cemetery in Bridgetown, Barbados [died of a "putrid fever--possibly typhus?]
- [Gravestone of David Davega](#) (1822), aged 4 years and 7 months, of a fever of 42 hours in Cheraw, South Carolina, in the Coming Street Cemetery, Charleston, South Carolina

5. Yellow Fever Epidemic in New York

- [Diary of Aaron Levy](#) (New York 1806-1826) from JAA.
- [Map of New York City services while in exile in Greenwich Village](#) [James DeForest Stout, Plan of Greenwich from actual survey, 1822. M7.5.45, negative no. 80058d, New-York Historical Society.] [Description from NYHS](#): "This tiny guide map of Greenwich Village was issued during the Yellow Fever epidemic of August 3-October 26, 1822, when many Wall Street-area businesses sought refuge 'out of town.' The map pinpoints the temporary homes of six banks, an insurance company, the Custom House, the Post Office, the Merchants Exchange, and two coffee houses."
- [Fever Map of NYC as the 1819 Epidemic started to unfold](#). Star (added by me) indicates the location of the Mill Street synagogue. [From Pascalis's map of yellow

fever cases near Old Slip, New York, 1819. [Full text of Original Source](#). [U.S. National Library of Medicine explains](#): "Plotting cases of yellow fever on a map allowed physicians to visualize the epidemic in new ways. Using this data in 1819, Dr. Felix Pascalis Oviere concluded that yellow fever was the result of impure air, not contagion." Fatal cases are numbered sequentially by time of death.



Figure 2: Esther H. Oppenheim and Delano Studios, [Second Mill Street Synagogue](#). Porcelain plate with transfer with hand-colored overglaze. 10 1/2 inches as shown. Collection of Author. [More information](#)

Bibliography

The research and information presented here comes from my forthcoming book *Once We Were Slaves: The Extraordinary Journey of a Multiracial Jewish Family* (Oxford UP, 2021).

Geggus, David. "[Yellow Fever in the 1790s: the British Army in Occupied Saint Domingue.](#)" *Medical History* 23, no. 1 (1979): 38–58. doi:10.1017/S0025727300051012.

Jenner, Edward. [An inquiry into the causes and effects of the variolae vaccinae: a disease discovered in some of the western counties of England, particularly Gloucestershire, and known by the name of the cow pox.](#) London: Sampson Low, 1798.

Jews in the Americas, 1776-1826, edited by Michael Hoberman, Laura Leibman, and Hilit Surowitz-Israel. Routledge, 2017. ProQuest Ebook Central. [JAA]