

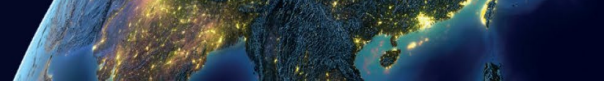
Volume 2: Chapter 3

Source 3.2

John Lining's Description of Yellow Fever in the Colonial Atlantic

John Lining (1708–1760) was a physician who was born and raised in Scotland. He studied medicine in Europe, and in 1728 he settled in the English colony of South Carolina. He quickly became part of Charleston's medical elite. In the 1730s, he began researching the connection between climate and disease in the colony. In 1753, he wrote his most significant work, A Description of the American Yellow Fever, which first appeared as a letter to a physician at the University of Edinburgh in 1753, and was subsequently published by the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh. This was one of the earliest medical essays on yellow fever, a mosquito-borne viral disease that cause massive epidemics in the colonies in Caribbean and continental Americas in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. During this period, the cause of yellow fever was unknown. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Lining's essay was widely circulated across the Atlantic basin during the period that slavery and plantation agriculture were central to the Atlantic economy. During this time, it was one of the most widely read and cited sources on yellow fever among medical professionals in Europe and North America. Lining's work provided detailed descriptions of yellow fever, including his observations of symptoms, causes, relation to weather patterns, susceptibility, and immunity.

I wrote this history, so far as it relates to the symptoms and prognostics, in the year 1748, when we had the disease last in this place; intending afterwards, if it returned, to add, from further experience, the method of cure, and likewise an account of any other symptoms which might attend it; but as no such opportunity has offered, I must now omit that part. However, I hope the description which I have given of this dreadful malady, which so

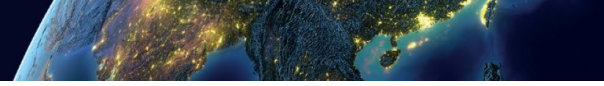


frequently rages like the plague in the southern parts of America, is so full, that a physician may, from thence, not only form a true judgment of its nature, but likewise be able to deduce and communicate some more certain method of cure, than has perhaps hitherto been used.

I am sorry I could not give a fuller account of the dissections of those who died of this disease, having unfortunately lost my notes taken from those dissections. . . .

That *fever*, which continues two or three days, and terminates without any critical discharge by sweat, urine, stool, &c. leaving the patient excessively weak, with a small pulse, easily depressible by very little motion, or by an erect posture; and *which* is soon succeeded with an icteritious colour in the white of the eyes and the skin, vomiting, haemorrhages, &c. and these, without being accompanied with any degree of a febrile pulse and heat, is called in America, the *yellow fever*.

For within these twenty-five years, it has only been four times epidemical in this town, namely, in the autumns of the year 1732, 39, 45 and 48, though none of these years (excepting that of 1739, whose summer and autumn were remarkably rainy) were either warmer or more rainy (and some of them less so) than the summers and autumns were in several other years, in which we had not one instance of any one being seized with this fever; which is contrary to what would probably have happened, if particular constitutions of the weather were productive of it, without infectious *miasmata*. But that this is really an infectious disease, seems plain, not only from this, that almost all the nurses caught it and died of it; but likewise, as soon as it appeared in town, it soon invaded newcomers, those who never had the disease before, and country-people when they came to town, while those who remained in the country escaped it, as likewise did those who had formerly felt its *dire* effects, though they walked about the town, visited the sick in all the different *stadia* of the disease, and attended the funeral of those who died of it. And lastly, whenever the disease appeared here, it was easily traced to some person who had lately



arrived from some of the West-Indian Islands, where it was epidemical. Although the infection was spread with great celerity through the town, yet if any from the country received it in town, and sickened on their return home, the infection spread no further, not even so much as to one in the same house. . . .

The subjects which were susceptible of this fever, were both sexes of the white colour, especially strangers lately arrived from cold climates, Indians, Mistees, Mulattoes of all ages, excepting young children and of those only such as had formerly escaped the infection. And indeed it is a great happiness that our constitutions undergo such alterations in the small-pox, measles and yellow fever, as forever afterwards secure us from a second attack of those diseases. There is something very singular in the constitution of the Negroes, which renders them no liable to this fever; for though many of these were as much exposed as the nurses to the infection, yet I never knew one instance of this fever amongst them, though they are equally subject with the white people to the bilious fever. . . .

Source: John Lining, *A Description of the American Yellow Fever, which prevailed at Charleston South Carolina in the year 1748* (Philadelphia: printed for Thomas Dobson, 1799): 4-7.

- How does Lining describe the symptoms and causes of yellow fever? Which observations do you think are significant?
- What are Lining's theories about susceptibility and immunity to yellow fever?
- How do you think this text would have influenced medical ideas about race?
- How do you think Lining's ideas could be used to support African slavery in the Atlantic colonies?