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1793: The Anatomy of Crisis Leadership — Smerconish

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6-7 minutes

In August 1793, Philadelphia, then the nation's capitol and center of commerce, devolved into a state of political and social chaos. The cause: Yellow Fever, a viral scourge also known as "the black vomit."

In his impeccably researched book, *Stephen Girard: The Life and Times of America's First Tycoon [amazon.com],* historian George Wilson sums up the scourge: "It was an ugly, agonizing killer that would leave more than five thousand people dead... [and deal] the largest city in the United States a devastating blow. Thousands fled. Almost everybody in the federal government, including President Washington... sought sanctuary outside the city."

Of the 48,000 in the Philadelphia area at the time, 17,000--one-third of the total--fled. Of those remaining, 5,000--16% of the population--died. According to Wilson source J. H. Powell, Philadelphia's decimation was "the most appalling collective disaster that has ever overtaken an American city."

Another Wilson source who lived through the epidemic, Philadelphia publisher Matthew Carey, observed the following: "a

stampede from the city," "fires in the streets," "[citizens] burning gunpowder," and vomit "predominantly black, usually [containing] blood...." "Even when not vomiting," Wilson adds, "a victim often was bleeding from the nose and mouth... [and] the skin turned yellow...." Continuing, he describes babies suckling dead mothers, corpses crawling with maggots, nerve-jangling gunfire, filth, stench, and uncountable things broken and abandoned, including homes.

Even more devastating than environmental chaos and ugly death was the epidemic's social toll. Here Carey's eyewitness account is chilling: "Who without horror can reflect on a husband... deserting his wife in the last agony--a wife unfeeling abandoning her husband on his deathbed--parents forsaking their only children--children ungratefully flying from their parents and resigning them to chance... exhibited in every quarter of our city."

The epicenter of the scourge was a private mansion turned makeshift hospital just outside the city limits called Bush Hill. Here two great streams of community responsibility were colliding--one to care for the sick and dying, the other to remove and properly bury the dead.

With Pennsylvania Governor Thomas Mifflin and most federal, state and city officials having fled, Philadelphia Mayor Matthew Clarkson published in the city's one remaining newspaper--the *Federal Gazette*--a desperate plea for leadership volunteers. Ten citizens answered the Mayor's call, including Stephen Girard, a recently-minted American citizen from France and Philadelphia's largest shipper and merchant, known at the time only in port-city business circles.

To the tiny citizen leadership group's astonishment, Girard volunteered for Bush Hill. His first step was to fire the four doctors attending Bush Hill who, fearing for their lives, refused to tend to the sick and dying on a regular schedule, and whose extreme medical methods, even for the times, were suspect.

Next, he recruited and deployed a team of French doctors experienced both in treating and caring for Yellow Fever victims from their past service in St-Domingue (present-day Haiti).

Girard then set into play his now-legendary organizational skills and capacity for work: he separated men and women; instituted hygienic practices and sanitation; organized regular meals; hired apothecaries to prepare and administer medicines; recruited builders, craftsmen and artisans to produce materials and supplies; enlisted required labor; and met daily with officials and local leaders to coordinate and manage the response.

But it wasn't his administrative accomplishment during the epidemic--the scope of his organizational genius and Herculean capacity for work--that explains the fact that, three decades later, when Stephen Girard died, the attendance at his funeral was the largest and most grief-stricken in the new nation's history.

It wasn't what mattered most.

What mattered most was that, during the epidemic, for 20 hours a day, Girard personally held, cradled, fed, bathed, carried, and physically supported in every imaginable way the desperately sick, the desperately dying, and the dead. Girard's example of leadership in the 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic makes the terms "leading by example" and "leading from the front" seem hollow. The eyewitness accounts of his service catalogued in

Wilson's book are worthy homework for a saint.

In part as a result of Girard's example, other self-sacrificing Philadelphians stepped to the fore, most notably: Peter Helm, an expert cooper and handyman who, according to Wilson, "supervised the [Bush Hill] grounds, outbuildings and carts... received patients... buried the dead... and repaired things that could not be replaced and built things that could not be procured;" and free black community leaders Absalom Jones, Richard Allen and William Gray, who called to action free black citizens to work as nurses, cart drivers and grave diggers.

Last, but not least, Girard's live-in housekeeper and mistress, Sally Bickham, was continually at his side, except when tending to one of the scourge's victims lodging in their home.

As the Covid-19 pandemic grows, the crisis response of the 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic's unsung heroes has much to teach, specifically: *local* political, business and community leaders must work side-by-side *daily* to coordinate response; *experts*, no matter what their countries of origin, should be recruited to lead in their areas of expertise; anyone and everyone can make a difference; and, most importantly, there is no substitute for palpable compassionate leadership and death-defying courage.