According to Cicero, history “is the witness that testifies to the passing of time.” With that passing of time, it is important to recognize how the past, the present, and what may lurk in the imminent future conjoin and define the entirety. Of equal importance are the building blocks of history—the men and women whose contributions to society shape this passing of time. The individuals who play the leading roles in history tend to receive more of the limelight, but recognition for the renowned does not necessitate that the supporting cast be forgotten. The “little people,” the nameless figures whose involvement in history somehow gets undervalued, deserve their own unique praise as well. Let us not forget the “little people.” This is a commemoration. This is the showcasing of a slighted group of people, the lower level of the social order, who just so happened to bolster a new nation through one of its earliest crises.

During the late eighteenth century, a miniature society had developed within the vast midst of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Anti-black sentiments, fueled largely in part by racism, had caused this miniature society, the African American community, to be one of the most despised groups of people in the city. Despite this juggernaut, the minority, comprised of free blacks and escaped slaves congregating in a large American city for the first time, joined together to establish churches, schools, and other institutions that would ultimately define their community. As early as 1787, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, two former slaves, along with other African Americans, worked to establish the Free...
African Society. The Free African Society “served first as a beneficial society but quickly grew into a religious, mission-like organization promoting morality and discipline among blacks. Along with providing financial aid for the sick and disabled, the group also encouraged marriages, family formation, and organized religious life.” A century later, W.E.B. Du Bois would attest that “it [the formation of the Free African Society] was the first wavering step of a people toward organized social life.” Ultimately, this people, rejected and spurned by the white community, would transcend their dismal situation and become the humble heroes who would rescue a dying city during a very virulent epidemic.  

Let us begin at what can best be considered “the beginning.” The year is one thousand seven hundred and ninety-three. Having achieved the long sought for independence from Great Britain, Americans most likely imagined a prosperous future in which liberties, at least for white males, were clearly distinguished. In February, George Washington held the first Cabinet meeting as President of the United States, and was sworn in for his second term as president on March 4th. The territory identified as America was less expansive than it is now, predominantly maintaining nominal claim to the eastern coast of the continent, but the nation had acquired its own identity, particularly as one of the first democratic nations. Together, the little-“rebel”-Colonies-that-could was America.

As the newly dubbed Americans romanticized what would later be recognized as the “American Dream,” hardship was just around the corner. By 1793, Philadelphia,  

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Pennsylvania was the nation’s largest city, the capital of the newly established country, and one of America’s busiest ports. In this city alone, there were 55,000 inhabitants, some German-speaking, some French, and approximately 2,500 black Americans (free and enslaved). Each year 2,500 people were born and 1,400 were expected to die, though by the end of this year the death rate had skyrocketed. Though there were many inhabitants, Philadelphia was also home to the most prominent and affluent citizens, such as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, perhaps manifesting America’s potential worth. The Residence Act decreed that Philadelphia was to remain the nation’s capital until 1800, for Washington was being constructed on the Potomac. America’s “greatest figures” gathered here, although late eighteenth-century Philadelphia may not seem up to par for accommodating such important people, at least according to the standards of today’s modern Americans.

Philadelphia was a low, level town, hottest and dampest of all the American seacoast, hotter than even Charleston, Savannah or the West India cities, people said. Wharves jutted out into the river and cut off the current; high tide deposited rotting stuff on the banks and in the mud. Below the city were swamps, marshes, pools in clay pits, stagnant water. Most of the streets were unpaved. There was no water system, and only one sewer, under the serpentine of Dock Street. Elsewhere holes were dug, as at Market and Fourth Streets, to receive water from the gutters. These “sinks” exhaled a noxious effluvia, for dead animals and all kinds of nauseous matters were hurled into them to putrify. All the wells were shallow; citizens continually pronounced them polluted.

That particular summer of 1793 was uncommonly hot and dry. In an attempt to escape political turmoil in the Caribbean, numerous refugees deluged the dock area, and Philadelphia’s ports were inundated with human cargo. Philadelphia was not only the hot spot for America’s greatest figures and expatriates, but also a hot spot for various insects;

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3 Ibid.
the number of mosquitoes and flies plaguing the dock area had swelled. These mosquitoes, the tiniest and seemingly most insignificant creatures, would halt what appeared to be a time for America’s grandeur to burst forth. In essence, the stage was set for a health disaster.

This ultimate turn of events for the juvenescent nation was caused by what would eventually be coined the yellow fever. The pestilence earned its name because of the external symptoms, and was also entitled the Black Vomit. Once one succumbed to the malady, a long, usually fatal, viral peregrination ensued.

It begins with chills and pains in the head, back, and limbs; temperature rises rapidly to a great height, bowels are costive, urine scanty and albuminious. This lasts a few days. Then the fever declines, and sometimes the patient appears to have recovered. But a remission follows, after which temperature rises again, the victim turns yellow, throws up a stale blood, black in color; hemorrhages occur in the intestinal mucous membrane. Last comes a typhoid state, marked by stupor and hebetude, dry brown tongue, rapid feeble pulse, incontinent faeces and urine, rapid wasting.⁴

The first known case of the yellow fever was reported on Saturday, August 3, 1793, when a French sailor suddenly became ill with a fever and died a few days later after suffering from violent seizures. That same week, five more people succumbed to the disease. Many specious theories about the yellow fever arose, and citizens of Philadelphia concluded that if certain places where people had fallen ill were avoided, the contagion would not spread.⁵ To the horror of the citizens of Philadelphia, this disease attacked in an almost hostile fashion. Maintaining its violent beginning of claiming ten victims a day in August, the yellow fever proved its destructive merit as it claimed about one hundred

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⁴ Ibid., xx.
people per day by October. A macabre force, the yellow fever caused the inhabitants to drop like flies (though apparently not like the troublesome insects that spread the disease).

The yellow fever epidemic of 1793 caught America off-guard, the aggression of this disease confounding all. The leaders of this growing nation knew no more about the virulent disease that afflicted the inhabitants of Philadelphia than the common citizens did. Samuel Breck recalled that

The disorder was in a great deal a stranger to our climate, and was awkwardly treated. It led them [the physicians of Philadelphia] into contradictory modes of treatment. They, as well as the guardians of the city, were taken by surprise. No hospitals or hospital stores were in readiness to alleviate the sufferings of the poor. For a long time nothing could be done other than to furnish coffins for the dead and men to bury them.

Even more alarming was the realization that no one was truly safe from the yellow fever, although Dr. Benjamin Rush, a prominent physician at the time, formed a (ill-supported) theory that African Americans were not susceptible to the disease. In 1793, Philadelphia had about 55,000 inhabitants; some were German-speaking, many French; 2,500 were African American. All of these diverse people were at risk. No one was exempt from the panic that developed from the extensiveness of the yellow fever.

On August 27, Dr. Benjamin Rush encouraged all who had means to escape the city to leave while they still had the chance. Indeed, fearing for their lives, many citizens of the formerly thriving city fled, including a handful of Philadelphia’s leaders. In fact, during this time period, Matthew Clarkson, the mayor of Philadelphia, had to cope with

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7 Ibid.
9 Powell, xviii.
the fact that much of his government was fleeing for the countryside.\textsuperscript{10} John Harvey Powell commented in his analysis of the Yellow Fever that “this plague… precipitated a quaint constitutional crisis, … also affect[ing] politics.”\textsuperscript{11} Mayor Clarkson announced that he, unlike most, would not leave his city and that he would endure the crisis to the end. But as he looked to his hapless home, he knew that to restore Philadelphia to its former glory, or at least prevent the yellow fever from devouring the entire city as it had its many victims, he would need help. Preparing to battle with an invisible assassin, Mayor Clarkson asked for volunteers.\textsuperscript{12}

When Mayor Matthew Clarkson implored those who remained in Philadelphia to assist in the maintaining of the city, it was the African American community who rose to the task. On September 5, 1793, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, two prominent volunteers who were members of the free African American community, roamed the city to determine for themselves how they could be of assistance.\textsuperscript{13} What is so impressive about Jones’ and Allen’s willingness to join the Mayor’s efforts and help their city is that they were “two Negroes, former slaves, whom white men had insulted in a house of God, but…were now the first to show that fear could be conquered by the spirit of Christian love.”\textsuperscript{14} Their assistance encouraged other members of the African American community to join in the efforts until even the Free African Society became a type of relief organization during this time period. Desperate times called for desperate measures as is obvious from Philadelphia's white community's acceptance of help from the African American community.

\textsuperscript{10} Niderost, 64.
\textsuperscript{11} Powell, xviii.
\textsuperscript{13} Ward, 98.
\textsuperscript{14} Powell, xix.
American community. At a time period in which colored people were considered to be inferior and commodities, it is interesting to note that their help was not spurned.\textsuperscript{15}

Although numbers in the black community dwindled due to the illness, Dr. Benjamin Rush believed that “people of African American descent were immune to yellow fever,” and used this theory to justify the white community’s newfound dependency on the African American community’s aid.\textsuperscript{16} (Ironically, Dr. Benjamin Rush had been a leading abolitionist in Philadelphia since 1787.) The pestilence took several weeks to affect the black neighborhoods, but Rush’s theory was proved wrong as two hundred forty African Americans succumbed to the yellow fever. Making up only five percent of Philadelphia’s population, the death count shows that the same proportion of African Americans died from the yellow fever as that of the white population. And yet, this vulnerability did not deter the African American volunteers from helping in any way that they could.\textsuperscript{17}

African Americans served as volunteer helpers during the yellow fever epidemic often by acting as nurses or carters, and they certainly had their hands full when they undertook the task of caring for the city’s dead and dying. Jones and Allen later mentioned in their Narrative that

The case of the nurses, in many instances, were deserving of commiseration, the patient raging and frightful to behold; it has frequently required two persons, to hold them from running away, others have made attempts to jump out of a window, in many chambers they were nailed down, and the door was kept locked, to prevent them from running away, or breaking their necks, others lay vomiting blood, and screaming enough to chill them with horror. Thus were many of the

\textsuperscript{15} Ward, 98.
\textsuperscript{16} Niderost, 64.
\textsuperscript{17} Kenneth R. Foster, Anna Coxe Toogood, and Mary F. Jenkins, Bring out Your Dead, the Great Plague of Yellow Fever in 1793: Introduction (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1949), xi.
nurses circumstanced, alone, until the patient died, then called away to another scene of distress, and thus have been for a week or ten days left to do the best they could without any sufficient rest, many of them having some of their dearest connections sick at the time, and suffering for want, while their husband, wife, father, mother, &c. have been engaged in the service of the white people.  

The duties of those who buried the dead were not any less demanding. The city of Philadelphia had been so ravaged by the yellow fever that interment of the deceased had become literally an occupation, and those willing enough to do the dirty work, from which many had fled, found themselves callous to the surrounding decadence of the once promising city. Although their assistance must have been greatly appreciated, it is interesting to note that death was so prevalent that one could simply acclimate to it. Samuel Breck recalled that

The attendants on the dead stood on the pavement in considerable numbers soliciting jobs, and until employed they were occupied in feeding their horses out of the coffins which they had provided in anticipation of the daily wants. These speculators were useful, and, albeit with little show of feeling, contributed greatly to lessen, by competition, the charges of interment.

Even Mayor Clarkson, abandoned by his cabinet and standing his ground as the lone guardian of the Philadelphia, faced a conundrum. One problem that lay before the city's leader was how to deal with the afflicted who were not only extremely contagious but also poor. Before the last of his cabinet, James Wilson, Jacob Tomkins Jun., and William Sansom departed from the doomed city, they attempted to help Clarkson resolve this issue. Thus, Bush Hill was designated a place for the poor of the city. The designation of Bush Hill as a place for the afflicted may have been a simple way for the leaders of the

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19 Breck, 41.
“Contagion City” to go through the motions of caring about the poor and indigent as they deserted the community that depended upon them. The leaders' desertion of the inhabitants of Philadelphia and the relegation of Bush Hill, Andrew Hamilton's mansion and estate that offered a commanding view of the then-distant city of Philadelphia, to a makeshift hospital clearly delineate the chaotic tension endemic to the city. Of course, none of the leaders of Philadelphia maintained Bush Hill, or even remained within the city limits to witness the horrors of this crude infirmary—all of the aforesaid was left for the African American community to handle. Jones and Allen described Bush Hill by mentioning that

A profligate abandoned set of nurses and attendants (hardly any of good character could at that time be procured,) rioted on the provisions and comforts, prepared for the sick, who (unless at the hours when the doctors attended) were left almost entirely destitute of every assistance. The dying and dead were indiscriminately mingled together. The ordure and other evacuations of the sick, were allowed to remain in the most offensive state imaginable. Not the smallest appearance of order or regularity existed. It was in fact a great human slaughter house, where numerous victims were immolated at the altar of intemperance.

Despite the horrible conditions and the unfair and unwarranted castigation that the volunteers would later receive for their efforts, the leaders of the African American community were able to assert on behalf of their fellow brothers and sisters, “We feel a great satisfaction in believing, that we have been useful to the sick, and thus publicly thank Doctor Rush, for enabling us to so.”

How humble.

What makes the involvement of the African American community during the yellow fever epidemic so significant is not necessarily what their contributions were, but their willingness to contribute even when there was nothing for them to gain from

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20 Allen and Jones, 9.
21 Allen and Jones, 17.
assisting people who held them under bondage and oppression. Even before the epidemic had begun, in the summer of 1793 when the African American community attempted to raise money to organize what would later be St. Thomas Church, they received little assistance from the white community. Though white philanthropy did not serve the African American community’s interest, it did serve the interests of slaveholding refugees who fled to Philadelphia to escape slave rebellion in St. Domingue. The white community refused to help in the building of a local church, but willingly donated $12,000 to provide relief for refugee slaveholders. Months later, the same ill-treated people would turn around to help the citizens who so hostilely spurned them.

The contribution of the black American community cannot be slighted when it is considered that often members of the white community were so given to fear that they could not help their own family, let alone their fellow Philadelphians. In their Narrative, Jones and Allen admitted, “With reluctance we call to mind the many opportunities there were in the power of individuals to be useful to their fellow-men, yet through the terror of the times was omitted.” Families would abandon each other—husbands their wives; mothers their children; brothers their sisters—as fear of death and fear of this disease gripped and confounded even the leaders and doctors, on whom the general public depended to have answers, settled. Yet, Jones and Allen would later affirm that “we found a freedom to go forth, confiding in Him who can preserve in the midst of a burning fiery furnace, sensible that it was our duty to do all the good we could to our suffering fellow mortals. We set out to see where we could be useful.”

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22 Estes and Smith, 72 – 73.
23 Allen and Jones, 19.
24 Ibid.
And so this story for the African American community takes an inequitable turn for the worse. They begin as the heroes, along side the French-trained doctors who cared for the sick and the dead. They remained in the city doing what they could to be of assistance although many inhabitants and even the government officials were fleeing for the countryside. One would hope that all of their efforts would result in a newfound esteeming of the African American community, but history tends to have few immediate happy endings. These black people, who already had suffered from the unfairness of racial hierarchy, were accused unfairly after the epidemic subsided. Moreover, the Free African Society, founded by the two prominent volunteers, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, ultimately “went bankrupt from its relief effort during the plague, gathering the dead, housing the sick, and serving as nurses when hospitals refused to receive victims, who supposedly put other patients at risk.”25 The African Americans were a community of survivors who did not experience the redeeming satisfaction of enduring through this plague.

One of the foremost critics of the African American community’s efforts was a consummate in the bookselling and printing business, Matthew Carey. Carey established the Pennsylvania Herald, Columbian Magazine, and American Museum, another magazine, none of which turned a profit. His printing accomplishments vary from his printing of the first American version of the Douay Bible, and the King James Version.26

On November 13, 1793, the day before the governor of Philadelphia, Thomas Mifflin,

25 Niderost, 64.
would announce the “end” of the nation’s first major epidemic, Matthew Carey published his first analysis of the plague. In his Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Matthew Carey accused the African American volunteers of “extorting high wages, or even stealing from those they nursed,” among other inaccurate slander.\textsuperscript{27} Unfortunately for the African American community, A Short Account of the Malignant Fever was not the only piece Matthew Carey wrote about the African American volunteers’ “ineptitude” (he wrote four more Short Accounts), and the white community did not acknowledge Carey’s work for what it truly was—inaccuracies in published form. Carey’s essay, an influential and impacting text, is an artifact of the struggles of the first generation of free blacks in Philadelphia. It has affected its authors and subjects, and even later generations of African Americans.\textsuperscript{28}

Although Matthew Carey fled Philadelphia for some period of time, he was one of the few people who did remain at other times in the city to help voluntarily the victims. In his A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, he conveys many stories about the victims he encountered; it’s not just Carey’s story, it is also the story of the inhabitants of Philadelphia as a whole. Through his criticism of the African American community, one can see the prevalent racial biases and understand that once the epidemic had subsided, it was quite easy for people to accuse others of wrongdoing. For example, white nurses and volunteers were laudable for remaining in Philadelphia during such a calamity as the yellow fever epidemic of 1793 but the white citizens of Philadelphia did not graciously praise the African Americans who also aided the sickly, often without payment. Today, it may be easier for many of us to deem Philadelphia’s black volunteers “heroes” but even

\textsuperscript{27} Foster, Toogood, and Jenkins, xi.
\textsuperscript{28} Estes and Smith, 61.
Carey, who volunteered during the epidemic and who commended the ministers and even the poor who offered as much assistance as they could possibly provide, falsely accused prominent black leaders and volunteers of immoral conduct and of stealing money. Carey vituperatively stated, “The great demand for nurses afforded an opportunity for imposition, which was eagerly seized by some of the vilest of blacks. They extorted two, three, four, even five dollars a night for attendance, which would have been well paid by a single dollar.”²⁹ This dishonorable mention of the African American community, which was widely published after the plague had subsided, led leaders of the African American community, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, to retaliate with an account of their own. In their Narrative, Allen and Jones responded to Matthew Carey directly and boldly. The Narrative begins, “In consequence of a partial representation of the conduct of the people who were employed to nurse the sick… we are solicited, by a number of those who feel themselves injured thereby, and by the advice of several respectable citizens, to step forward and declare facts as they really were…”³⁰ Allen and Jones then asserted that

By naming us, [Mr. Carey] leaves these others, in the hazardous state of being classed with those who are called the “vilest.” The few that were discovered to merit public censure, were brought to justice, which ought to have sufficed, without being canvassed over in his "Trifle" of a pamphlet—which causes us to be more particular, and endeavor to recall the esteem of the public for our friends, and the people of colour, as far as they may be found worthy; for we conceive, and experience proves it, that an ill name is easier given than taken away.³¹

It was quite easy for members of the white community to cast stones at such a hated race.

On the other hand, this “privilege” was not reciprocated. Allen and Jones’ words are a

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²⁹ Matthew Carey, A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, (Matthew Carey: Philadelphia, 1793), 23.
³⁰ Allen and Jones, 10.
³¹ Allen and Jones, 12 – 13.
rare glimpse at black Americans, free or enslaved, calling the white community to take responsibility for their actions. They do not assert that black Americans are faultless but they do suggest that if white Americans can find fault with the black community, they should hold themselves responsible. Using a logical approach, the leaders of the African American community defended their fellow volunteers. Allen and Jones attempted to appease their adversaries and guaranteed, “We can assure the public, there were as many white as black people, detected in pilfering, although the number of the latter, employed as nurses, was twenty times as great as the former, and that there is, in our opinion, as great a proportion of white, as of black, inclined to such practices.” 32 The African American community did not ask for highly publicized recognition, or a parade, but merely for an absence of slander on their name. Even in the wake of the black community’s assistance, some members of the white community had to find a way to prevent Philadelphia’s African Americans from escaping the bonds of prejudice. Fighting back, incensed by this dose of unfairness—apparently the white community’s only largesse donated to the black community—Allen and Jones condemned Mr. Carey’s flight from the city and charged, “‘Tis true Mr. Carey was no hireling, and had a right to flee, and upon his return, to plead the cause of those who fled; yet, we think he was wrong in giving so partial and injurious an account of the black nurses; if they had taken advantage of the public distress? Is it any more than he hath done of its desire for information. We believe he has made more money by the sale of his “scraps” than a dozen of the greatest extortioners among the black nurses.” 33

32 Allen and Jones, 13 – 14.
33 Allen and Jones, 8.
In the *Narrative*, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones state that members of the black community were “prevailed upon” during the yellow fever epidemic especially because it was believed that African Americans were immune to the disease. Even when the African American volunteers began to succumb to the pestilence, the white community who needed their assistance endeavored to convince the volunteers that it was not the yellow fever that ailed them, until it became undeniably evident that it was indeed the fever that had begun to affect the African Americans as well. The white community’s attempt to keep the African American community in the dark manifests itself as an effort to play on the volunteers’ ignorance. Perhaps this specious behavior shows how much of a commodity blacks, even free blacks, were considered to be. They were manipulated and once their help was no longer needed, African Americans felt the brunt of spurious accusations. They were defended by few, one of their protectors being the man who enlisted their services. After the epidemic, Mayor Clarkson mentioned, “Having, during the prevalence of the late malignant disorder, had almost daily opportunities of seeing the conduct of Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, and the people employed by them, to bury the dead— I with cheerfulness give this testimony of my approbation of their proceedings, as far as the same came under my notice.” It is interesting to note that although he was white, the mayor of Philadelphia was capable of "deigning" to address the unfairness of the situation handed to the black volunteers, who were gracious enough to help out a populace that thoroughly disdained them, without needing to be coerced to do so. Despite his defense of the black community, the mayor does specify that he is accountable for defending only the actions that he was immediately aware of when he

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34 Allen and Jones, 23.
issued this support, showing that his defense was not so unconditional. The general mistreatment of Philadelphia’s black citizens reveals the power of racial prejudices during the late eighteenth century—a time period in America’s history that was not even the climax of racism. It is important to recognize how even the best of intentions can result in the most discriminatory outcomes in the contest between the majority and the minority.

One of the few positive outcomes of the yellow fever epidemic of 1793 was that it gave the black community a voice (or rather two voices) and a medium to air its concerns about the institution of slavery. Perhaps it was the white community’s unwarranted rebuke that motivated the African American community’s leaders to combat the oppressive nature of prejudice. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones made it clear that without a doubt, black people did not wish to be nor were they content with being enslaved despite the accepted view that justified slavery. They entreated, “We do not wish to make you angry, but excite your attention to consider, how hateful slavery is in the sight of that God, who hath destroyed kings and princes, for their oppression of the poor slaves.”35 Although Allen and Jones' Narrative was written with the intention of defending the black community from the white community's untenable scrutiny and castigation, the two prominent black leaders were sure to add as a supplement, their ideas in regard to the maintaining of one foul institution—slavery. Also, equally notable is the large role religion played in the lives of black Americans during this time period. Religion helped to motivate the black community to volunteer and aid the city of Philadelphia; they felt it was incumbent on their Christian spirit of love and duty to assist

35 Allen and Jones, 8 – 9.
the general community of Philadelphia. Now, religion proved a means to help defend the black community against the injustices that they suffered, appealing to what would amount to the white community’s fear of God’s censure. Unfortunately, their pleas did not resound in the ears of white men and women of this time period, for slavery would become a much more grandiose issue in succeeding decades. Their pleas do reveal an ever-present struggle for the black community to receive the respect and dignity they were sure that they deserved.

The yellow fever epidemic of 1793 ravaged the city of Philadelphia. By the end of the year and the epidemic, nearly 10,000 people had died from the disease. The African American community, which had provided volunteers to assist the city in need, a city that was abandoned by its own government officials and leaders, found that the battle was not over simply because the plague had subsided. Its leaders, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones stood up for their brothers and sisters, defending their community as a whole from the injurious accusations. Unappreciated for their efforts, the black citizens of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania did not regret their decision to volunteer, thankful to those who recruited them for enabling their people to play such a helpful but authoritative force in the city. But why would they work so hard to help a community that spurned, rejected, and oppressed them? Often, particularly in America’s history, in times of wars, natural disasters, and other crisis events whites have expected blacks and other minorities to “prove” themselves worthy of citizenship by making sacrifices.36 If they were responding to the white community’s challenge, Philadelphia’s African American community

36 Estes and Smith, 154.
certainly proved their worth, as they put aside their differences and helped out a populace that they probably believed did not deserve their aid. The African American volunteers were “behind the scenes” workers, confirming that they truly were humble heroes.


