Weather & Seasons: 18th Century South Carolina

Much of Colonial America faced outbreaks of disease. Carolina’s environment played a direct role in the frequency and severity of the outbreaks they faced.

In the summer and early fall of 18th century Charles Town, yellow fever and malaria ran rampant as mosquitoes thrived in the standing water of the rice plantations. The colonists called these months the “sickly season.” During this time, the wealthy planters left their plantation homes in the country in favor of the beach, the mountains, or their homes in downtown Charles Town where the wind and salt water kept the mosquitoes away. Some Carolinians escaped north to towns like Newport, Rhode Island in such large droves that the locals nicknamed it “The Carolina Hospital.”

Not everyone could escape the threats of the “sickly season.” The poor and the enslaved remained in the dangerous areas, harvesting rice and indigo at the peak of the malaria and yellow fever seasons. Many planters believed that enslaved Africans had immunity to these diseases because they did not appear as susceptible. Science partially supports this belief as many West Africans were exposed to these viruses as children and therefore, may have immunity. Africans also have a higher percentage of the sickle-cell trait and malaria does not bind to sickle-cells.

If given the opportunity to escape, would you?

Found largely in tropical and subtropical climates, yellow fever appeared in port cities like Charles Town, Port Royal, and Georgetown.

“The air of this Country is healthy.”
- John Oldmixon, historian, 1708

Massachusetts Reverend Cotton Mather called Yellow Fever the “horrible plague of Barbados” that killed “all the ministers of Charlestown,” including his uncle.

Doctor's Note:
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