

Pandemic!

By Ann Miller in the Orange County Historical Society *Record*:¹

Part 2: The 18th-Century Smallpox Pandemic in Orange County

“A number of references to the 18th-century smallpox pandemic can be seen in Orange County records and various family papers. Although fewer and smaller in size than the northern cities such as Boston, Philadelphia and New York, Virginia towns and small cities such as Winchester, Williamsburg and Fredericksburg saw significant outbreaks of smallpox. In addition, the disease moved through the countryside with people traveling between towns, markets, churches, farms, and larger plantations.

“The spate of deaths recorded for the interrelated Taylor, Chew, Conway and Madison families during 1760-1762 has been noted by a number of historians as likely related to the smallpox outbreak that had spread southward from Canada, the northern colonies, and the Indians of the Ohio valley in the last half of the 1750s. The spread of the disease was fostered by the troop movements of the French and Indian War. In Virginia the disease worked its way down through Frederick County in the northern Shenandoah Valley, and then eastward and southward, eventually moving into Orange County and the surrounding Virginia Piedmont. Probable victims in the Madison family group included the mother, mother-in-law, and grandmother of James Madison, Sr., along with at least one uncle and several cousins, although the young James Madison, Jr. (the future president), and his siblings, apparently escaped the disease.

“Contagion from smallpox victims was known and feared. It was common to ‘cleanse’ the house where smallpox victims had been, often by whitewashing the walls or treating them with sulfur and by burning the victims’ clothes, and, often, their bedding. This treatment could be extended to other items that the victim had touched. An example of such ‘cleansing’ can be seen in the case of another recorded local victim, John Pannill who lived in eastern Orange County. In December 1762, he made his will, noting that he was ‘in a low state of health.’ He was apparently unmarried as he left his property to his mother, his three brothers, and his sister. When William Pannill, apparently one of John’s brothers, presented his will for probate the following October, he made oath that what he was presenting was ‘a true copy’ of the original will. William noted that he had destroyed the original will as John ‘had the small pox when he made it.’

“Following on legislation enacted by the General Assembly in 1777, two requests for

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Court-sanctioned inoculations were presented to the gentlemen justices of the county court on January 22, 1778. William Cave and several others requested permission to undertake inoculations at Cave's house, and a separate request was made by Joseph Spencer. The justices, James Madison, Sr., Zachariah Burnley, Thomas Bell, Thomas Barbour, and Johnny Scott, duly gave their permission, with Madison, as presiding justice, signing the minutes..."

"Renewed outbreaks in the first part of the 1790s resulted in restrictions on people trying to travel into Virginia from the north...On November 13, 1793, guards were ordered posted in Loudoun County at crossings and ferries on the Potomac River, 'for the preventing the Introduction of the pestilential disease into this State.'

"...In his diary entries for the 1790's Francis Taylor, cousin of James Madison, Sr., noted several cases of smallpox in the region and among his kin. In his entry for May 17, 1791, he noted *after dinner I went to J Taylors, he had got a letter from his son that he and Maj' Hites family were getting well of the Small pox* (this is an apparent reference to Major Isaac Hite, a kinsman of the Taylors and Madisons, who lived in Frederick County). Not quite a week later, on May 22, 1791, Francis Taylor recorded that *J. Taylor j' returned from Maj' Hites where he had the Small pox.*

"The disease was still active in Orange County in 1797. In late April 1797, a request for permission to inoculate was submitted by, and approved for, John Stevens and his family, who lived in southeastern Orange County and feared that they were in 'Immediate Danger' of catching smallpox...The court specified that the inoculation was to take place within two weeks of the approval, at a site located at least a half mile from any road. After inoculation, of course, the family would be required to quarantine until they had recovered from the effects.

"...The pandemic eventually faded from Orange County, although there were periodic new cases of smallpox, including an outbreak in 1848...the final number of Orange County smallpox cases and the death toll from the 18th-century pandemic cannot be known with certainty...."

Vaccinations reached central Virginia by the early 1800s when Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse of Harvard, the first doctor to administer the vaccine in the U.S, persuaded Vice-President Thomas Jefferson to support vaccination in the U.S. Jefferson organized vaccination events for his enslaved population and offered vaccinations to his family and neighbors. By Jefferson's own estimate he had directed the vaccination of some 200 people including his Monticello slaves, his sons-in-law and some neighbors.