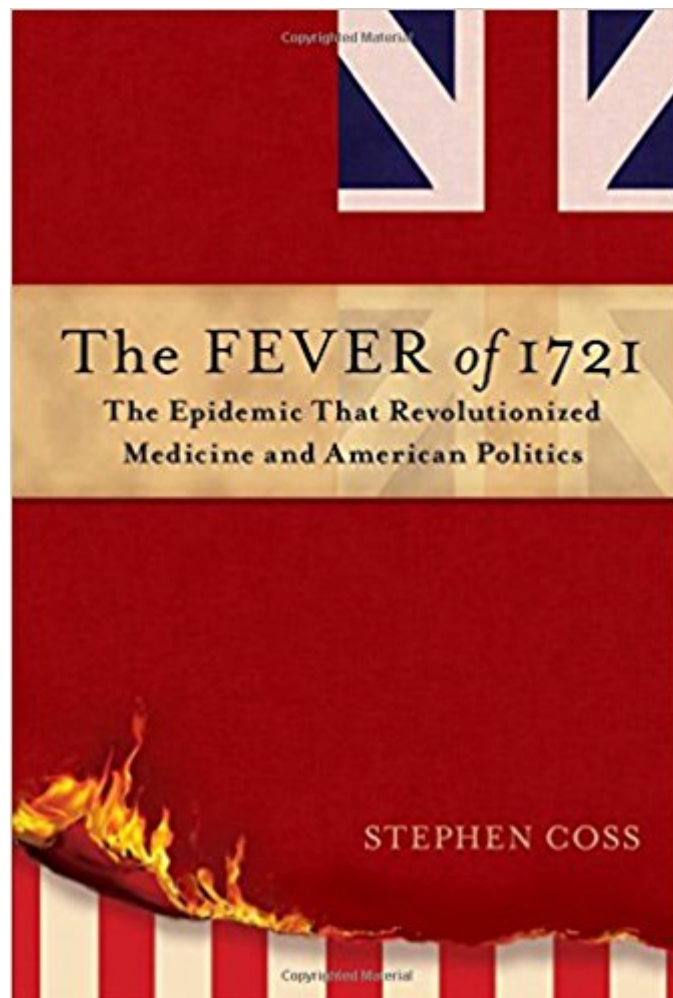




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# The Fever Of 1721: The Epidemic That Revolutionized Medicine And American Politics



## Synopsis

More than fifty years before the American Revolution, Boston was in revolt against the tyrannies of the Crown, Puritan Authority, and Superstition. This is the story of a fateful year that prefigured the events of 1776. In *The Fever of 1721*, Stephen Coss brings to life an amazing cast of characters in a year that changed the course of medical history, American journalism, and colonial revolution, including Cotton Mather, the great Puritan preacher, son of the president of Harvard College; Zabdiel Boylston, a doctor whose name is on one of Boston's grand avenues; James and his younger brother Benjamin Franklin; and Elisha Cooke and his protégé Samuel Adams. During the worst smallpox epidemic in Boston history Mather convinced Doctor Boylston to try a procedure that he believed would prevent death—by making an incision in the arm of a healthy person and implanting it with smallpox. “Inoculation” led to vaccination, one of the most profound medical discoveries in history. Public outrage forced Boylston into hiding, and Mather's house was firebombed. A political fever also raged. Elisha Cooke was challenging the Crown for control of the colony and finally forced Royal Governor Samuel Shute to flee Massachusetts. Samuel Adams and the Patriots would build on this to resist the British in the run-up to the American Revolution. And a bold young printer James Franklin (who was on the wrong side of the controversy on inoculation), launched America's first independent newspaper and landed in jail. His teenage brother and apprentice, Benjamin Franklin, however, learned his trade in James's shop and became a father of the Independence movement. One by one, the atmosphere in Boston in 1721 simmered and ultimately boiled over, leading to the full drama of the American Revolution.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“As Stephen Coss shows in his deeply researched account, *The Fever of 1721*, Boston society divided along lines that we would not expect today . . . Smallpox was finally eradicated in 1979, but our current politics demonstrate that the tensions between personal freedom and public health that erupted in Boston in 1721 have yet to be fully resolved.” (The Wall Street Journal)

“In 1721, Boston was a dangerous place . . . In Coss’s telling, the troubles of 1721 represent a shift away from a colony of faith and toward the modern politics of representative government.” (The New York Times Book Review)

“Intelligent and sweeping . . . The people portrayed in this public health story, their struggles and interactions, feel at once intimate and urgent, thanks to Coss’s lucid telling of this fascinating story.” (Booklist)

“Coss’s gem of colonial history immerses readers into 18th-century Boston and introduces a collection of fascinating people and intriguing circumstances. The author’s masterly work intertwines Boston’s smallpox epidemic with the development of New England Courant publisher James Franklin’s radical press. . . . Unlike many other works on colonial America . . . Coss’s focus on a specific location at a specific time fleshes out the complex and exciting scene in sharp detail, creating a historical account that is fascinating, informational, and pleasing to read.” (Library Journal, starred review)

“A fascinating glimpse inside the Boston mindset of the era.” (Kirkus Reviews)

“> is an all-American tale: a fire-and-brimstone minister, sensational media, hardball politics, a health panic. Stephen Coss depicts an uproarious colonial past not unlike our present.” (Richard Brookhiser, author of *Founders’ Son: A Life of Abraham Lincoln*)

“Stephen Coss has written an engrossing, original book about Boston a half century before the Revolution. It is a tale of medical drama, philosophical ferment, and journalistic beginnings—and it is a tale well worth reading!” (Jon Meacham, author of *Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush*)

“*The Fever of 1721* skillfully reveals early Americans who challenged both the dominant political order and prevailing scientific ideas about disease. That rebelliousness embodied in bold figures like Rev. Cotton Mather, Dr. Boylston, and the teenaged Ben Franklin would lead directly to revolution before the century was out.” (David O. Stewart, author of *Madison’s Gift and The Summer of 1787*)

“Long before the American Revolution colonial Boston was a hotbed of social and political ferment, key factors that produced, in the face of lethal epidemic, the first public trial of general inoculation ever practiced in the western world. In this lively and engaging

book, Stephen Coss brings to life the key players in that bold experiment—including Puritan icon Cotton Mather and Boston prodigy Ben Franklin—and unfolds in intimate detail their halting progress toward a genuine medical breakthrough. Closely observed, driven by quirks of character as well as fate, Coss delivers a story that illuminates the rambunctious soul of the budding new republic. (Charles Rappleye, author of *Sons of Providence* and *Herbert Hoover in the White House*)

The Fever of 1721 is Stephen Coss's first book. He lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

This is an interesting book about the serious smallpox epidemic in Boston beginning in 1721. This very serious disease infected half of the 11,000 residents of the city. It was only abated when the new (to America) technique of inoculation was tried by Doctor Zabdiel Bolyston, who while folks were dying nonetheless ran into serious opposition from religious and governmental leaders fearful about this new technology. However, the book takes a wider perspective than just the epidemic as its focus. Prominent in responding to the disease was Cotton Mather, the famous cleric forever identified and tarnished with the Salem Witch trials. So the reader learns a good deal about this "fire and brimstone" Puritan cleric and the struggle taking place with Boston individuals and groups seeking to weaken the Puritan stranglehold on the community. A second important dimension of the book is its extensive discussion of the early years of Benjamin Franklin, who at the time of the epidemic was an apprentice printer to his brother James at the *New England Courant*, an early newspaper that would make history in establishing freedom of the press. The author's description of Ben Franklin at this early stage of his career adds an important dimension of our understanding of Ben and the important figure he would become. Particularly effective is the book's discussion of Ben's anonymous satirical "Silence Dogood" purported reader's letters to the newspaper. A very important focus of the book is the battle that takes place for freedom of the press involving the *Courant* and the local religious and political establishments. The idea that a newspaper would not contend itself with reprinting government "press releases" but would undertake independent investigations and publish material highly critical of the government, was virtually unprecedented and set off a firestorm that foreshadowed the Peter Zenger trial in 1735. James Franklin, despite being arrested at one point, also established the principle that a newspaper did not have to reveal the identity of its sources and could fight censorship if necessary. But the heart of the book is the very nasty smallpox epidemic and how inoculation divided the community. It is an excellent case study of how ignorance and religious intolerance can severely hamper the benefits of medical

science--not exactly unknown in our own time. So all together, there are solid multiple reasons why this is a valuable book. The author's research and familiarity with the topic are impressive; his writing clear and cogent. Hopefully, further fine historical studies will be forthcoming from this author.

I just finished reading "The Fever of 1721" and I can honestly say it's the best book I've read so far this year. Stephen Coss tells this intriguing story of the smallpox epidemic of 1721 in Boston and the subsequent introduction of both inoculation and the first independent newspaper in the colonies with a page-turning flair worthy of a great suspense novelist. I love history and love reading about history. I do not invoke his name lightly, but reading this book reminded me of the work of the great David McCullough, a man myself among with millions revere. Coss, like McCullough, writes history in a way that makes the reader care about the subject, that makes the reader care about the characters, though they are long dead. I hope this book is a major success for him and that he writes many more books just as, if not more, successful. I think Stephen Coss has a wonderful writing career ahead of him.

This was a really fun book to read. I've read many Early American history books and biographies, but this book brings to life a small slice of history. Many books mention the characters that appear in The Fever of 1721 and smallpox in a sentence or two, but this book focuses on events that don't usually make the cut in other works and brings the events to life vividly.

Taking us through the small pox epidemic in Boston in 1721 as well as the politics thereof and adjacent to the outbreak is fascinating. It gives us windows into some famous and some not so famous early Americans - Cotton Mather, Benjamin Franklin, James Franklin and more. The governors during this time in part in reaction to small pox and in part just a new spirit of what politics should be found difficult straits ruling this ungovernable people. Add to this volatile mix a printer needing something to do and the free press is born with the Franklin brothers. You really can see the roots of the Revolution 50 years later.

A fascinating look at Boston in the years prior to the revolution. Well researched and written, this study brings to life a teenage Benjamin Franklin, a troubled fire and brimstone preacher looking for recognition, a trailblazing doctor and early republicans. All caught up in a smallpox epidemic and vindictive politics. A really enjoyable read.

I was fascinated to learn that Cotton Mather, of Salem Witchcraft Trials fame, was an early strong proponent of inoculation against smallpox. The parallel stories of Benjamin Franklin and the birth of the concept of a free press was very interesting.

I loved this book. The subject is very timely. This is a very clear and well written account of the first immunization attempts in the new colony. I found it very interesting that smallpox was well known in Africa and Asia and that many Africans who became slaves recounted the use of diseased material to render others immune. And the really interesting part of the account was the intersection of Cotton Mather and the Franklin brothers on opposite sides of public opinion about the experiments in protecting citizens against this deadly disease. Cross' research reminds us of the horrific public and private costs of communicable disease as he delves into individual stories of death.

I learned much of Massachusetts' early 18th century history while reading this book. It is more than a history of smallpox. In fact, it is largely about Benjamin Franklin, his brother and Cotton Mather, the latter infamous for his role in the Salem Witch Trials, but somewhat rehabilitated in this book. I will say that the illustrations as shown on the Kindle version cover the explanatory text in several instances making it illegible.

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