

Title – “Such a Spirit of Inoculation”: The American Founders and Vaccination, 1720-1820

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This paper examines the opinions of various American Founding Fathers regarding inoculation and later vaccination. COVID-19 has ravaged the world and left an indelible mark those who have experienced it, likely due to the relative absence of plagues in the contemporary United States, credited in large part to the efforts of scientists to mitigate previously endemic diseases via vaccination. This paper fills a void by tracing those efforts to their dawn and illustrating the critical role played by America’s Founding Fathers in the adoption of inoculation and vaccination. It examines the scientific principles of inoculation (and later vaccination): the intentional, limited exposure of a healthy person to a pathogen with the goal of imparting immunity to the pathogen without risking full-blown disease. It describes how, in 1721, the town of Boston became the western world’s first mass clinical study on smallpox inoculation at the instigation of Cotton Mather and his slave Onesimus. It furthermore traces the effect that the 1721 epidemic had on a young Benjamin Franklin, who went from working at his brother’s anti-inoculation newspaper to losing a child to the smallpox, inspiring him to endorse inoculation in his autobiography and even publish a how-to guide. The paper goes on to examine inoculation in the Revolutionary generation, describing how George Washington attempted the west’s first recorded mandatory inoculation and how Thomas Jefferson conducted trials of the then-new vaccination process while in office and encouraged its adoption based on his own experiments. Finally, the paper examines the first American general vaccine mandate, created by Massachusetts in 1809 and the US Vaccine Agency, created under the Madison administration

in 1813. Vaccination may have become a household topic throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is not new. Vaccination and inoculation are at the very heart of the American experience.