

## Transcript of “Eliza S. Bowne’s Notes on an Epidemic”

**Emily** Hello everyone and welcome back to the Bowne House Historical Society’s series: “Eliza Southgate Bowne: In Her Own Words”. My name is Emily and I am again joined by David. We have been chatting about the letters of Eliza Bowne for all of March, in honor of Women’s History month. What are we discussing today, David?

**David** Well today we are talking about Eliza’s experiences during the yellow fever epidemic at the turn of the 19th century. Naturally, we have been curious about how it compares to living through the covid-19 pandemic.

**Emily** I’m interested in what we can learn from her letters and this subject should be especially relatable. When was yellow fever a major issue for Eliza?

**David** Yellow fever reached an epidemic level in New York City in 1803, but it was also quite widespread in 1805. During these times, Eliza mentions “the fever” in many of her letters. The first of which is in a letter to her mother while Eliza and Walter Bowne were staying in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

*“If the alarm of the fever continues in New York we shall not return there again, but go in the neighborhood. Send in for a trunk , which I packed up for the purpose, in case I feared going in the City — and set off for the Springs or somewhere else. 'Tis very uncertain when we go to housekeeping; the alarm of the Fever hurried us out of town without any arrangement towards it, and may, if it continues, keep us out till middle of Autumn.”*

-Eliza S. Bowne, August 9, 1803 (pp. 175-176)

Luckily for Eliza and her husband, their trip coincided with a great uptick of the fever in New York, but as we see Eliza was well-prepared for that possibility as she packed a trunk before they left the city so that it could be sent to her.

**Emily** You can sense her rush in those lines and we can see that there is one similarity between this outbreak and today, that she avoided the city during the height of the illness.

**David** Many people would have tried to leave the city since it was the epicenter of yellow fever. Several businesses temporarily closed and anyone who had the

means to, left New York City during this time. Eliza must have sent for that trunk she packed because a month later she is now in Ballston Springs where she notes,

*“a great many New Yorkers have taken refuge here from the fever.”*

-Eliza S. Bowne, September 4, 1803 (p. 178)

Ballston Springs would have been a great place to visit while avoiding yellow fever so it makes sense that New Yorkers would have sought refuge there.. At this time, natural springs were becoming very popular tourist destinations and we may remember that Ballston was where Eliza met Walter just one year prior to this letter. Moreover, water from these mineral springs was generally believed to have a great effect on one’s health. So naturally anyone fleeing New York would seek out fresh spring water to drink and bathe in during their absence from the city.

**Emily** It seems to be the perfect place to relax while staying safe.

**David** It certainly was for Eliza. It would provide these health benefits, but it also would be quite a social affair since these springs were so fashionable. Eliza always describes the springs with glowing reviews, in particular she notes,

*“They dance much as usual; a fine ball to-morrow evening .”*

-Eliza S. Bowne, September 4, 1803 (p. 178)

Indeed she mentions dancing in every letter she sends from the springs. In 1803, she spent about five weeks between Ballston springs and another spring in Lebanon, New York.

**Emily** Five weeks of dancing, fresh water and pleasant baths does not sound too bad.

**David** I certainly agree. As a person with relative wealth, Eliza was able to escape the worst of the epidemic, but she notes a few ways that it negatively affected her. *“When we left New York Mr. Bowne sent it [a package of letters] to a Commission Merchant who does business for several Portland people, and requested him to send it by the first vessel. As you haven't received it, I suppose the fever which broke out immediately after induced him to shut up*

*his store, or perhaps prevented any Portland vessel from coming near the City.”*

-Eliza S. Bowne September 24, 1803 (p. 183)

The delay or total avoidance of shipments to or from the port of New York affected more than post. When yellow fever returns in 1805, Eliza writes to her sister asking for help.

*”Do ask Papa if he could send us 6 or 8 barrels of potatoes, there is like to be a great scarcity in New York; put them in the hold of the vessel or anywhere”*

-Eliza S. Bowne October 6, 1805 (p. 201)

**Emily** This account sounds more familiar. Supply shortages and delayed mail, even if the reasons were different, the experience is similar- we can relate!

**David** Yes, in 1805 Eliza and Walter again retreated from the city, but not to the spring this time. Instead they went out to Jamaica, Queens and even though they were removed from the city they still took familiar precautions since Eliza was in the very early stages of pregnancy.

*“Shopping at present is a prohibited pleasure to me... I can have anything sent to me to look at, and therefore 'tis quite as well as if I went for them. I don' t mean you shall understand because I don't go shopping that I am confined to the house. On the contrary, I am much better than could be expected and hope with care to do very well. I shall go out very little until the middle or last of the winter, when I hope, if I continue well, to be most as smart as other people. My husband does not allow me to go into a shop. I laugh at him and tell him I don't believe but the health of his purse is one - half his concern - a fine excuse.”*

-Eliza S. Bowne Nov. 10, 1805 (pp. 203-204)

**Emily** At least she can still have some humor about the situation!

**David** Once again her letters highlight her humanity and personality. .

**Emily** Thank you again for joining me, David and I are happy to announce that the Bowne House has decided to continue with our short chats! . During our next talk, we will be focusing on Eliza’s husband, Walter Bowne. Visit our website,

[www.bownehouse.org](http://www.bownehouse.org), to stay up to date on all our latest videos! I hope you all will join us again in two weeks!

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## Cited Text

Eliza Southgate Bowne (1783-1809). *A girl's life eighty years ago; selections from the letters of Eliza Southgate Bowne*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons (1887).

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