

## *The Weekly Historical Note*

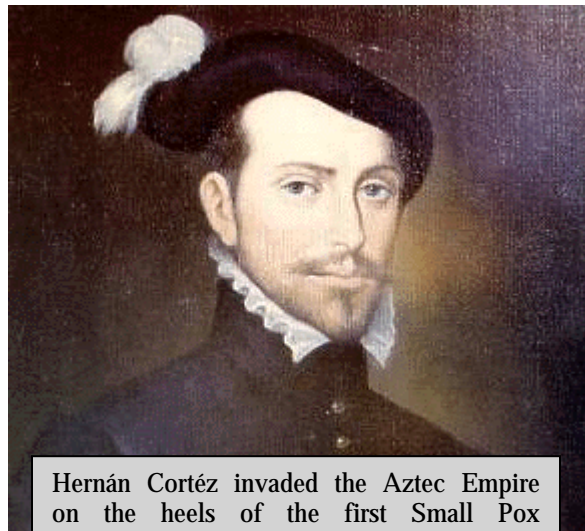
By: Nicolas Reynolds

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### *Small Pox in America*


On October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1492, at about 2:00 a.m., the sound of a single cannon shot echoed over the waters off the coast of the Island San Salvador. The signal of the cannon was to notify the captain, Christopher Columbus, that they had spotted land. Unbeknownst to the European foreigners, something much more subtle was waiting to spring forward with its own violent burst and leave untold numbers dead in its wake. After 517 years, it is unclear if these first visitor or their African slaves introduced *Variola Major*, or Small Pox, to the Americas. The result, nevertheless, was much like lighting a fire in a woodshed. Millions of people died often violent or lonely deaths over the next 400 years due to Small Pox.

The history of Small Pox on the mainland areas of the American continents most likely began with Hernán Cortéz, a young Spaniard to whom history often attributed the conquest of Mexico. Cortéz, seeking to establish himself and impress the Spanish Crown, directly disobeyed the orders of the Spanish Governor of Cuba, Velázquez, and took a small army of 600 men to the mainland of Central America to capture slaves. Landing on the Yucatan Peninsula, he marched to Tenochtitlán to confront the Emperor, Moctezuma. Governor Velázquez, as a consequence, sent the conquistador Pánfilo de Narváez to arrest Cortéz and bring him and his renegade army back to Cuba. Traveling with Narváez was an African slave who had Small Pox and the disease quickly spread to the Native population. Hearing of Narváez's arrival, Cortéz went to confront him. In the short window of time Cortéz was gone from the capital, the Aztecs re-took possession of the City. After confronting Narváez, Cortéz rallied his troops and prepared to re-invade the city of Tenochtitlán, taking with him some local natives he had recruited.



Hernán Cortéz invaded the Aztec Empire on the heels of the first Small Pox epidemic in America and was indirectly responsible for the death of millions.

“When the Aztec commander Guatemozin, a nephew of the deceased Moctezuma, finally surrendered Tenochtitlán on August 13, 1521, its streets were littered with the rotting bodies of the dead, most of



them victims of smallpox. As Cortéz inspected what he had once thought to be the loveliest city in the world, the merciless conquistador fell ill from the stench.”

About 3,000 miles to the North, Atlantic fishermen and whalers from Europe had discovered the vast majority of the American Coastline provided plentiful amounts of both Cod and whale oil. Still, for much of the sixteenth century, whalers kept small settlements an the Atlantic coast for the sole purpose of processing whale oil before shipping it back to Europe. Still, its not clear when Small Pox and other infectious disease began to afflict the Native populations along the east coast. It is clear, however, that disease was quickly spreading by about 1619. Tisquantum (or Squanto as he is sometimes referred to) a native made famous by the John Smith story, returned to his homeland after traveling to Europe.

“What Tisquantum saw on his return home was unimaginable. From southern Maine to Narragansett Bay, the coast was empty—“utterly void,” [Thomas] Dermer reported. What had once been a line of busy communities was now a mass of tumbledown homes and untended fields overrun by blackberries. Scattered among the houses and fields were skeletons bleached by the sun. Slowly Dermer’s crew realized they were sailing along the border of a cemetery two hundred miles long and forty miles deep. Patuxet had been hit with special force. Not a single person remained. Tisquantum’s entire social world had vanished.”

Small Pox and other disease were particularly devastating to the tribes of the East Coast and Northeast due to the lack of immunity. Europeans had centuries of exposure to disease which lead to the practice of the quarantine. Native populations in the Americas, however, had adopted the custom of gathering at the bedside of their sick family members, which only served to propagate the diseases. This custom, combined with the lack of immunity, created what some scientist called a “virgin soil” for the disease. Many communities suffered upwards of ninety percent mortality rates. Many of the sick may have been able to recover if they were given basic care, but since everyone was sick, many people died due to starvation while they laid on their sickbeds. Untold millions died due to the quick spread of disease throughout the Americas.

**Sources:**

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Robertson, R.G. *Rotting Face: Smallpox and the American Indian*. Caldwell: Caxton Press, 2001.

