Like other seaport cities in the early decades of American independence, Philadelphia was hit during many summers with waves of yellow fever. In those days no one had any idea that the dreaded malady was carried up from the tropics on sailing ships and spread by mosquitoes. So when epidemics swept in—killing hundreds of people per day during spikes, in a horror of delirium and bloody vomiting—all residents who could afford to do so escaped the city.

Not philanthropist Stephen Girard (pictured above right). At a time when he may have been the richest man in America, Girard doggedly remained in Philadelphia and plunged deeply into daily battle against the disease. During the pandemic of 1793 that killed up to 5,000 residents, he stayed in his ravaged hometown to recruit nurses, convert buildings into hospitals, fund sanitary operations, guide economic relief efforts, and provide direct care for individuals—often bathing and feeding the dying himself.

During outbreaks, Girard put his complex business affairs on hold. “As soon as things have quieted down a little you may be sure I shall take up my work with all the activity in my power,” he wrote to a commercial colleague in 1793. “But for the moment I have devoted all my time and my person, as well as my little fortune, to the relief of my fellow citizens.” He repeated all this again in 1797, 1798, 1802, and 1820.

Benjamin Rush (upper left) did likewise. One of America’s pioneering scientists and physicians, Rush several times worked himself to exhaustion assisting yellow-fever victims. During the 1793 outbreak he caught the disease himself. Yet even then he continued to attend to more than 100 patients per day—because so few other doctors remained on the scene.

At a time when no reliable cures for yellow fever were available, Rush labored to cool and comfort sufferers, calm their families, and remove infected corpses. As physicians frequently did in that era for all sorts of maladies, he aggressively bled and purged patients—which certainly did no good, and may have harmed many individuals. In the end, around 10 percent of the entire Philadelphia population died in 1793, and Rush was so severely criticized for the ineffectiveness of his ministrations that his medical practice was ruined.

Though neither man could save many of the afflicted, Girard and Rush did rescue some. And their philanthropic devotion brought comfort to victims who would have died alone. They also provided survivors and loved ones with assistance against the collateral damage that comes with any epidemic.

These deeply personal efforts were very much in keeping with the men’s wider natures. In addition to his career as a healer, Dr. Rush was a signer of the Declaration of Independence and prominent patriot, and an influential defender of the mentally ill, slaves, and other vulnerable populations.

Businessman Girard risked financial ruin during the War of 1812 by pouring virtually all of his means into bonds financing America’s defense against Britain. Among his many other charitable efforts, he created a landmark school for orphans that still shelters needy youngsters in Philadelphia.

And both men put much more than money into their charity. They poured themselves into the work. On the very front lines.

For capsule biographies of Stephen Girard and Benjamin Rush, visit the Philanthropy Hall of Fame—available online at AlmanacOfPhilanthropy.org/HoF or in printed editions of The Almanac of American Philanthropy.