

## Boylston AW (2008). Zabdiel Boylston (1679/80-1766).



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Zabdiel Boylston was born in the village of Muddy River, Massachusetts, now part of the Boston suburb of Brookline. He is remembered for his role as the first variolator in North America and one of a handful of men who introduced the practice into the Western world. In 1726 he published an account of his experiences with variolation ([Boylston 1726](#); Moore 1971).

Boylston received his early training from his father, Thomas, a largely self-taught 'doctor'. He had had military experience during King Phillip's War, the first significant native American uprising against the New England colonists. During 1675-1676, about five percent of the adult male colonists were killed and several towns were destroyed. The native Americans suffered over 30,000 casualties.

When his father died, Zabdiel was apprenticed to John Cutler, according to some sources the leading 'surgeon' in Boston, who also had had extensive military experience. Thus Boylston's training was similar to that of a typical surgeon/apothecary in rural England in the early 18th century. He was most certainly not self-trained or an illiterate country bumpkin, as implied in some sources (Winslow 1974; Mager 1975; Loudon 1986).

By 1721 Boylston had become a leading doctor in Boston, having performed well-publicized lithotomies and a mastectomy, at the time a rare operation (Earle 1965). For fifteen years he had practised from his home/shop in the commercial centre of Boston and numbered members of Boston's social elite among his patients. In contrast, William Douglass, who was the most outspoken opponent of inoculation, was a relative newcomer who had yet to establish a strong practice, despite holding the only university MD degree in town. The intense argument that followed Boylston's first inoculations was driven by two forces. One was Douglass' attempt to denigrate his main competitor for the lucrative treatment of smallpox victims; the other was the political antagonism between Cotton Mather, a proponent of inoculation, and Elijha Cooke Jr, the leader of the popular or anti-royalist and anti-ministerial faction in Boston politics (Warden 1970).

Douglass appears to have become allied to Cooke because many of his arguments attacking Mather are similar to those used by Cooke's cronies in previous political debates (Barrett 1942). Mather sent highly favorable reports of inoculation to London (Mather 1723), while Douglass reported the first deaths and implied that there had been many others (Douglass 1722). Boylston's invitation to London appears to have been motivated by James Jurin's desire to have the facts of what, at the time, was the single largest experience with inoculation, to set it alongside his own data collected from around England.

Douglass and his political allies eventually forced Boylston to agree to stop inoculating, but, by then, the epidemic of smallpox was over. Boylston won the debate in the end. In 1730, when smallpox next appeared in Boston, William Douglass had become an inoculator.

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