COVID-19 is a new disease, but Thomas Jefferson knew a thing or two about epidemics. At age 23, he traveled to Philadelphia for inoculation against smallpox, one of the deadliest diseases in human history. A high percentage of those infected died, and many who survived were blinded or badly disfigured.

Inoculation was frequently met with fear and opposition and was discouraged in many colonies. There were deaths associated with the inoculation process because it initiated the disease, though in a milder form. After inoculation, patients were infectious and needed to be quarantined.

When the procedure was brought to Norfolk County, Virginia, in 1768 and again in 1769, it provoked riots on both occasions. Jefferson, then practicing law, agreed to defend victims of the Norfolk riots, including Dr. Archibald Campbell, whose house was burned down by inoculation rioters. Jefferson gave up his law practice before the case was resolved, but he later served on a committee that placed a bill before the Virginia General Assembly to reduce the 1769 restrictions on smallpox inoculation.

Yellow fever was another of the most feared virulent diseases of Jefferson’s day. Unlike smallpox, there was no effective way to guard against or treat yellow fever at the time. The disease was little understood, and doctors bitterly disagreed on its origins and how it was transmitted. While Jefferson was in Philadelphia serving as the first United States secretary of state, the city experienced a devastating outbreak in the summer of 1793 that eventually killed approximately 10% of its population.

When yellow fever arrived in mid-August, carried on a ship from the West Indies, Jefferson was going to his office in the city each day to conduct official business. Even as deaths began to mount, Jefferson continued this commute and intended to continue on duty until President George Washington returned from a scheduled trip to Mount Vernon, feeling that one man or the other should remain at the seat of government. Eventually, however, so many people had fled that it became impossible to get anything done, and both men went back to Virginia to wait until the fever had subsided.

After becoming president in 1801, Jefferson expanded his commitment to combating smallpox. He followed British physician Edward Jenner’s pioneering use of the milder cowpox as an effective immunization against smallpox. Jefferson worked with American doctors to establish this new vaccine in the United States and allowed his name to be used as an endorsement.

During his second term as president, Jefferson penned a letter to Jenner’s nephew, praising the development of the smallpox vaccination, writing, “Having been among the early converts, in this part of the globe, to its efficiency, I took an early part in recommending it to my countrymen.”

ALL CHARGED UP

Six new charging stations for electric vehicles have been installed at Monticello’s David M. Rubenstein Visitor Center. Numerous charging stations have been installed throughout Virginia as part of the Volkswagen emissions settlement, which allocates $93 million for measures that reduce air pollution in the commonwealth.

“These car charging stations are a part of Monticello’s ongoing commitment to sustainability; we encourage guests to bring their electric vehicles when they visit,” says Steve Geis, director of guest relations. “Stay tuned for more information about our plans for more sustainability initiatives.”