

The Fever, Chapter 14: Epilogue (continued)



George Armstrong, center in the photo above, led his church for four decades and retired in 1891. COURTESY OF WALTER B. MARTIN JR.

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[\(... story continued\)](#)

After the 1855 epidemic, George Armstrong lived a long life and played a significant role in the young country's history.

What he saw that summer colored his perspective of life, his views on human nature and showed him the power of God's wrath. He detailed his observations in a series of a dozen letters to a friend, William Maxwell, secretary of the Virginia Historical Society. Even in the midst of the epidemic, Armstrong and Maxwell knew its devastation was fantastic, of historic proportions.

In the preface, Armstrong wrote: "There are scenes in nature which the painter ... will never undertake to transfer to canvas. So there are incidents in the history of the pestilence which no one, it seems to me, who has tried the capacities, or rather, I would say, the incapacities, of human language, will ever undertake to put upon record."

To Armstrong and others of his day, seeing the downtown harbor empty of ships would have been as eerie as the sky without jets in the days after Sept. 11, 2001.

Armstrong also saw good come from the pestilence, in the doctor and nurse volunteers, the donations and the notes attached.

Before the onslaught, a practical person such as himself might not have understood the importance of a letter, but afterward he did. The people of Norfolk and Portsmouth encountered the danger of a battlefield with little of its glory, and it had cheered them to know that others, living happier times, had not forgotten them.

He considered the outpouring a sign of the country's strength, and a warning to politicians at the state legislature, in Congress and even ministers who treated the union as "a thing of naught."

"Every kind word spoken, every dollar sent us, from the North, the South, the East, the West, is a witness at once for the existence and might of this slumbering power," he wrote to a friend.

"I have faith to believe that, for his own wise purposes, God means to keep us one people."

Ironically, a few years later, Armstrong's opinions about slavery and the Union landed him in trouble with the federal government. By today's standards, his views seem unacceptable and it's difficult to say what caused him to turn from outrage at whippings in Weldon, N.C., to writing a book titled "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery."

Maybe he had become indoctrinated to Southern norms after moving from New Jersey to Virginia at age 19. More likely, some who knew him suggested, he recoiled against Northern ways being forced upon Southerners and his Irish blood meant he wouldn't back down from an argument.

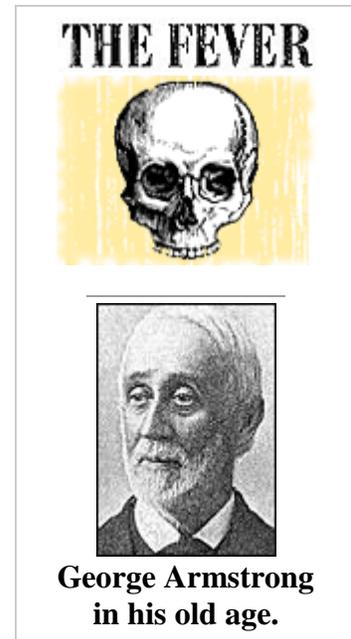
When Norfolk fell under Northern hands in 1862, Maj. Gen. Benjamin Franklin Butler took over the city's churches and had Armstrong arrested. Butler sentenced him to hard labor at Fort Hatteras. He remained there, in solitary confinement, writing letters to his new wife for six months.

After the war, Armstrong again took over First Presbyterian and, with a vision for the future, established a string of churches for the city's suburbs.

He started what became Second Presbyterian in 1872; he sent two elders to Berkley and they started what became Armstrong Memorial Presbyterian; a few years later, he built a church in the Brambleton section of town; then one in Huntersville, which later moved to Park Place and became Knox Presbyterian.

After leading the church for four decades, Armstrong retired in 1891.

Neither Norfolk nor Portsmouth ever built memorials to honor Armstrong or Winchester Watts or any of those who gave their lives helping others during the summer of 1855.



In Norfolk, a small plaque at a lot on Hampton Boulevard marks the site of a mass grave. Beginning at Old Dominion University, Quarantine Road follows the path to the state's first quarantine house set up for crew of ships thought to be carrying the disease.

The only proper monument to any of those who risked their lives is a memorial at Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia, which people there paid for and erected themselves.

Dr. William Collins rests in Portsmouth's Cedar Grove Cemetery, just at the edge of downtown, where a monument bought by the Seaboard and Roanoke Railroad pays tribute to him: The bottom of the statue is engraved with a locomotive with a broken rod.

Dr. John Trugien, whose long hours ground down his body's ability to fight through the fever, is buried in Portsmouth's Oak Grove Cemetery. A big urn that is part of his marker has been vandalized.

Norfolk's magnanimous public servants received even less glorious treatment. Mayor Hunter Woodis has markers in both Elmwood Cemetery and St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery near the Virginia Zoo. Neither hints at his sacrifice, reading only "Hunter Woodis."

The grave of William Ferguson, whose diligence single-handedly kept the Howard Association running when it was needed most, can hardly be found at Cedar Grove in Norfolk. He rests in a far back corner, with no tribute inscribed, just his name.

Nearby, a single stone memorializes 10 members of one family who fell that summer. Just past that, in a corner of the cemetery walled off from Virginia Beach Boulevard, is an open space, with young trees sprouting from the undulating earth. Records hint that bodies were buried there in mass graves.

Across Princess Anne Road, the Rev. George Armstrong lies in a place he became very familiar with during what he called the "Summer of the Pestilence." Near his stone lies his nephew, Edmund James, and his sister-in-law Hatty, buried next to his wife, Mehetable. His second wife, Lucretia, is also there and his daughter Cornelia, who died in January 1856, perhaps of lingering complications from the fever.

Armstrong's pillar quotes First Corinthians, and mentions nothing about his work in 1855. An old elm tree reaches its branches out over the graves and, in the summertime, shades them from the worst of the sun.

Unlike that summer 150 years ago, the cemetery is quiet and peaceful.

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Acknowledgments

The bulk of the information in this story was based on the following materials: a series of letters and sermons by The Rev. George D. Armstrong; six months of reports in the Richmond Dispatch newspaper; "The Great Pestilence in Virginia" by William S. Forrest; report of the Portsmouth Relief Association; report of the Howard Association of Norfolk; report of the Philadelphia Relief Committee; Norfolk City Directory, 1851.

Much of the information has been compiled by Norfolk resident Donna Bluemink. It is catalogued at www.rootsweb.com/~usgenweb/va/yellow-fever/yftoc.html.

Help also was provided by the Sargeant Memorial Room at Norfolk's Kim Memorial Library and by the Wilson Memorial Room at Portsmouth Public Library.