

The Fever, Chapter 4: Desperation

By LON WAGNER, The Virginian-Pilot
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On Aug. 22, the temperature would push 90 degrees, just a few days after a nor'easter had pounded the cities. The cool of the northeast winds weakened the sick, and now they fell.



Dogs formed packs to scavenge for food.

Capt. Samuel Barron's daughter died. Two of Portsmouth's three policemen died, and the third was down with the fever. Councilman Winchester Watts was at the Naval Hospital and reported delirious. Norfolk's former mayor and his family were sick, as was the police chief.

The current mayor's illness was more than a symbolic hit. Hunter Woodis was only 33. Many city leaders fled with their families, but while Woodis was well, he was Norfolk.

Physicians were too overwhelmed to report to the health board, but the best anyone could tell, a dozen a day were dying in Norfolk. More in Portsmouth. Doctors were treating several hundred cases in each city.

One of the carriers of the Portsmouth Transcript left a note for his customers: "If any of my subscribers wish to take their papers from any one else, they can do so until I return," he wrote. "If I live, I will return, and be as prompt in my duties as ever. If I die, I remain your obedient servant, M.J. Burns."

A correspondent of the Journal of Commerce visited the Transcript office one day and found David D. Fiske, publisher and also Portsmouth's mayor, working alone to print the paper.

"All his hands are gone," the correspondent wrote. "Maupin's, Bilisoli's, and Neville's, are the only groceries open. I advise you by all means not to return here."

All the evidence pointed to a runaway epidemic, but still, the Norfolk and Portsmouth Herald scoffed at the problem: "Among the old residents there has been very little sickness, and no more deaths than ordinary times. With good nursing and attendance, the disease is very little more to be dreaded than bilious fever."

As desperate as the situation was, healthy residents of the cities stood up, stiffened their backs and took on the prevailing pestilence. Norfolk formed a Howard Association, a relief group named after British philanthropist John Howard.

Vivid reports in the press had drawn the nation's sympathy, and donations were arriving daily. Unsolicited, doctors and nurses from up and down the East Coast boarded trains and steamers. With the mayor down and city government abandoned, the Howard Association took charge of assigning doctors and distributing money.

The group moved the Oak Grove hospital to a larger facility at Lamberts Point. There, on the

grounds of Julappi horse track, the sick would be farther from the infected downtown air and breathe the healthful river breeze. With food scarce, the Howard Association opened a provisions store. A restaurant owner reopened and offered soup to the sick and poor. But the group could not do everything needed.

As much as they were afraid of the fever, those who had stayed began to fear starvation, or like the Irishman named Stapleton, death from lack of care. Those fleeing had left behind hundreds of slaves and servants, without food or money, to fend for themselves.

Horses were without oats, and dogs formed packs to scavenge for food. On nearly every downtown block, hungry pigeons gathered.

George Armstrong contacted the Howard Association and immediately got a doctor to see his nephew and a nurse to care for him.

Armstrong was fairly certain how his nephew had come down with the fever. Edmund James had spent several nights sitting with a friend suffering from typhoid fever. Though the Armstrongs didn't know it then, they had since learned that the friend lived in the part of town gripped by the pestilence.

James' symptoms seemed from the start to be severe, and a day after coming home sick, he died.

His was the first death in the Presbyterian congregation, and Armstrong knew it wouldn't be the last. Several other parishioners were now in bed sick.

The fever took on a frenzy, leapfrogging around the city, so ruthless that people began calling it the destroyer. In both cities, bodies piled up. Among them: Capt. George Chambers, who ran the ferry between the two cities for years.

Coffins were in short supply, and some placed orders while a loved one battled to stay alive. Fear of contagion from a corpse meant the dead were buried quickly.

"In many instances they are under ground within an hour and a half after death," wrote a Norfolk resident to the Lynchburg newspaper. "From six to eight pass my boarding house every day to the home of the dead – in two instances I saw one horse with two corpses passing by."

A constant sound on the street was the clatter of the "car of death," a wagon taxied by John Jones, a slave. Jones drove the hearse for O'Brien and Quick, cabinet makers turned undertakers, and he became important and highly visible.

Friends or family would flee from a corpse, so Jones often had to put the body into a coffin, shoulder it into the hearse and drive it to the cemetery. The sight of Jones became oddly comforting, all hours of day and evening, as he rattled by in the death wagon, puffing on a long cigar.

People talked of taking up a collection to buy Jones' freedom, if he lived.

The Howard Association itself became crippled: Within a week of its formation, two of its five founding members fled town with family members sick, the fever attacked two others and the association's president, William Ferguson, was forced to run the operation alone.

Philadelphia set up a relief committee and appointed 50 men, each to his own ward, to collect money. Thomas Webster Jr., chairman of the committee, began writing to the Howard Association several times a day with either donations or notice that a certain physician was on the way.

Dr. William Freeman, who had been living in the West Indies, was one of the first Philadelphia physicians to travel to Norfolk. Henry Myers came in from Richmond and volunteered as a nurse. Dr. Louis Martin y de Castro, of New Orleans by way of Cuba, arrived.

Annie Andrews buoyed spirits in both cities. She was 21 years old, of the New Orleans upper crust and was vacationing with relatives in Syracuse, N.Y., when she heard of the pestilence. She hastily traveled to Norfolk and reported to Woodis in his sickbed. He dispatched her to the Julappi hospital, and she went to work.

President Franklin Pierce opened up the Naval Hospital for victims.

The operators of the steamers Augusta and Curtis Peck offered to shuttle supplies for the afflicted cities free of charge. Dr. William Collins of the Seaboard and Roanoke Railroad did the same and began the effort by buying and shipping in 900 pounds of bacon.

It seemed to some that contributions were flooding Norfolk, the better-known city, and not reaching the other side of the Elizabeth.

Dr. John Trugien, who had diagnosed the first cases in Gosport, worked from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m., seeing not just his patients but those of two doctors down with the fever.

One night, after seeing more than 100 patients, he wrote an appeal to the Richmond Dispatch.

Every moment, he said, he was called on to treat a father, mother, brother, sister or friend.

"But I can go no further," he wrote. "I am completely exhausted, and must have a little rest to enable me to resume the duties of the morrow, if perchance, I am myself spared in health."

He was no alarmist, he said, wasn't prone to exaggeration, but it would sicken anyone to see Portsmouth now. Entire families were down without the ability to get a drop of water to cool fevered lips.

"I know it must require an amount of courage possessed by but a few, to venture thus seemingly into the jaws of death to rescue others. But is there no devoted man who will say I will go?"

"Shall poor stricken Portsmouth be left to her fate?"

