

The Fever, Chapter 8: Silence

By LON WAGNER, The Virginian-Pilot
© July 17, 2005

The pestilence held Norfolk firmly by the throat.

Wails of death echoed down the streets. The council approved the digging of trenches for burials at Potter's Field. When it seemed as though the situation had hit bottom, the fever broke out at an asylum of orphaned children.



Around the doors and windows of nearly every home, George Armstrong saw plague flies hovering.

William Ferguson, head of the Howard Association, wrote to the Baltimore relief group pleading for more aid: "Continue your supplies until you are broke."

VERDAD returned to his reporting and continued assailing the absentee residents. The Howard Association, he had learned, had received letters requesting that the officers look after servants left behind.

"But not a dime do these absentees – many of them rich in this world's goods – send as a contribution to our afflicted and destitute poor," he wrote. He intended to help the association expose them once the epidemic ended.

Meanwhile, at the city jail, VERDAD got an earlier wish. A man named Goslin, accused in a slaying, died of the fever.

The Rev. William Jackson of St. Paul's seemed to shock everyone by remaining healthy, despite ministering to half of the city and helping run the orphan asylum. He and George Armstrong often ran into each other at the cemetery.

It was a mild day, in the mid-70s on Sept. 6, when Armstrong headed to another burial. The carriage he rode in and another followed the hearse, rattling over the cobblestone streets.

The Richmond Dispatch estimated 800 deaths so far in Norfolk. Reports were that 80 people a day were dying, but as Armstrong thought through it, there had to be more.

He had been to the cemetery the day before at 4 in the afternoon and asked the gravedigger how many graves were ordered for the day. "Forty-three," the man said. Across the way, at Potter's Field, Armstrong saw crude boxes piled as high as a man could reach and watched men nearby digging a pit. A supervisor told Armstrong that they had to bury 40. And he knew that for the past week they had buried the dead until 10 at night. Certainly, more than 90 a day were falling, and this didn't take into account those buried at St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery.

Elmwood had opened two years earlier, when plots in Cedar Grove began to sell out, and a small bridge over Smith's Creek linked the two cemeteries. With the epidemic, Elmwood began filling quickly.

When the carriages arrived, the head gravedigger opened the gate. Instead of silently pointing them to the grave or politely whispering to ask the name of the deceased, he demanded, "Who's this?"

He directed them to the family's plot, but no grave had been dug. The hearse couldn't wait, the carriages had other appointments. The men wrestled the coffin from the hearse, sat it on the ground and Armstrong held a short prayer.

Before leaving, he paused to look around.

Usually, in September, the grounds were lush and a quiet befitting a resting place settled under the old cedar trees. Now, men labored in every part of the cemetery, the sound of a shovel crunching into earth rang from all directions, the lawn looked more like a plowed field.

"The city and the cemetery have changed characters," Armstrong thought. "The latter now wears the busy aspect which belongs to the former; and almost the silence of death reigns in the deserted streets."

On his way home that night, Armstrong walked past his house and toward the river to look over the harbor at sunset.

Around the doors and windows of nearly every home, he saw plague flies hovering. The flies had materialized a few days earlier, and although disturbing brought about optimism. During epidemics in other Southern cities, they had signaled the climax of the crisis.

Blacks thought that plague flies ate the "matter which constitutes the immediate cause of the disease."

Plague flies were nearly identical to blow flies, Armstrong thought, the main difference being the texture and color of the wings. He had tried to collect some for a physician in another city to examine. He put them in a vial and corked it, but when he looked again in a few days all that remained was dark dust.

Armstrong walked out onto the drawbridge and squinted. It was a cool, clear evening, and the sun backlit the city's waterfront. The wharves jutted into the water, their names painted in bold white on the sides: Colley's, Campbell's, Butler & Camp's, Ferguson & Milhado's, all the way up to Hardy's at Town Point.

"All appear as usual, saving that their doors and windows are closed," Armstrong noticed, "and there is no living thing to be seen about them."

Many of the names were those of dead or dying entrepreneurs, and Armstrong thought that several would have to be repainted.

During much of the year, vessels would line up and wait at the wharf heads five or six deep.

Armstrong saw two ships in the entire harbor – a fishing smack sunken at the county dock, its mast sticking out of the water, and a ship drawn up for repairs in an abandoned yard.

The only working ship that dared enter the harbor these days was the small steamer the Joseph E. Coffee. Steamer operators from other cities were too frightened to touch in Norfolk, and the Coffee met them in Hampton Roads, loaded their supplies, then shuttled into the inner harbor.

Armstrong had seen it sailing in yesterday, its entire deck piled with the city's main import, empty coffins.

The city's transformation, in just a few weeks, staggered Armstrong. One of the East Coast's finest harbors, saws buzzing and hammers banging a month earlier, was more forsaken than if it were full of submerged rocks.

“The coming of a ship into her harbour today would cause almost as much surprise to the beholder as did the first ship whose hull rippled the surface of her waters to the Indian who then dwelt here.”

Armstrong walked back home, and after a 15-hour day went straight to bed. But he was irritable and nervous. He couldn't get to sleep.