

The Fever, Chapter 9: Hopelessness



Norfolk's Elmwood Cemetery was established two years before the epidemic.
DELORES JOHNSON / THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

By **LON WAGNER**, The Virginian-Pilot
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On Sept. 9, the Richmond Dispatch report was again meager. The fever had all but silenced VERDAD.

“My physician thinks I will be up in a day or two, my attack, in his opinion, being a mild one,” he wrote. “I had selected a young man to continue my correspondence, but he, poor fellow, is down too.”

The papers struggled to find words for the destruction from the pestilence. During the Great Plague of London, perhaps history’s most infamous scourge, one out of five died. Here, one in three were dying. If the population were equal to New York’s, 25,000 a week would be falling.

“The rich, the poor – old and young – white and colored – all have been indiscriminately leveled down by the disease,” a correspondent wrote.

One paper described the burials and compared them to methods used during wartime: “They have dug large pits or trenches, in which coffins are placed in tiers one above the other, and the whole covered with quick lime and dirt!”

The Rev. James Chisholm, known for an unexcitable manner, wrote to a friend from his hospital bed: “As to the details of the woe presented by our present condition, I do believe that it is utterly incompetent to any descriptive power to convey a picture of them.”

And still, no one knew what the enemy looked like.

Many families had friends or relatives lying dead at home, waiting two days or more for coffins.

Richard Williams became the 13th member of his family to die. Norfolk’s delegate-elect to the General Assembly died. Dr. William Collins of the Seaboard and Roanoke Railroad died, and two hours later his brother died.

In one day, the fever killed five doctors.

Dr. John Trugien's mother and sister fled to Baltimore but died there. The Navy chaplain died. Norfolk's acting mayor, N.C. Whitehead, was so sick that he made out his will. James Finch, who had single-handedly kept the Southern Argus running, died, and with that, the last local paper stopped publishing.

President Franklin Pierce returned from the springs to consider the cities' effort to remove everyone to Fort Monroe, but he said the logistics of moving 1,500 troops were too great. He delivered the news, along with a \$325 donation from himself and his Cabinet.

Donations and help from around the country continued to flood in.

A woman sent a gold ring. George Custis offered his property on Smith's Island for a refuge. A slave from Washington County sent 10 cents and a note: "Though a ten cent piece is small, it is every cent I possess in this world, and it may help in buying some nourishment for some of the many orphans who are parentless and crying for relief."

Boston, apparently concerned about its image, gathered \$3,000: "Remember, the merchants of Boston know no North, no South, but believe all are brethren of one family. Although last, we trust she will not be found least of several cities."

By the second week of September, more than 1,500 in Norfolk and Portsmouth had died.

On Sept. 9, at Trinity Church in Washington, the Rev. George D. Cummins summoned fire and brimstone in a sermon on behalf of the two cities. Cummins, former minister of Norfolk's Christ Church, compared the suffering to that in Rome in A.D. 265, to Constantinople in the sixth century and the plague during the Middle Ages.

Such afflictions are so severe, Cummins noted, that God allowed David to choose between seven years of famine and three days of pestilence – and now parishioners had a nearby example. It could break out anywhere, Cummins cautioned those gathered, as it had in the two cities.

"Without warning, the air of heaven, unchanged to any human sense, became loaded with seeds of death," Cummins preached. "The destroying angel was on the wing."

When George Armstrong awoke on the morning of Sept. 12, he felt sad, lower than any day since the pestilence had first appeared.

Nerve pains in his face had broken his sleep for several nights, and he knew that physical ailments often came with depressed spirits. For the past two weeks, he had risen every day wondering, "Whom have I to bury today?"

That morning, he feared he knew the answer. He had become skilled at talking to the sick, looking at their symptoms and figuring how much time they had left. When he last saw Eliza Souter, a cornerstone of the church, he knew she wouldn't last long.

Yet when he heard the news, he couldn't believe it. His wishes had overpowered his intellect. It

was often said that it was a blessing when God took the ripe, but women such as Souter carried a heavy load of the church's work.

After her burial, Armstrong walked by the post office at the Norfolk academy building. When it had first moved from Commerce Street, crowds gathered when the mail was due to arrive. People chatted on the academy's wide porch, or on its steps. Boys chased one another around or played marbles under shade trees, as the adults swapped stories about sick family and friends.

No more.

"One by one, men with sad countenances came," Armstrong noticed, "and, receiving their letters and papers, turned and went away again, one hardly having the heart to speak to another."

Later that night, Armstrong sat down to write a letter to a friend in Richmond. Whitehead, the acting mayor, had recovered, he wrote, but his only daughter had died.

After three solid weeks of walking city streets from sunrise until nearly midnight, of smelling the foul breath of the dying, of burying friends and church members, Armstrong's will was deflated and his body exhausted.

Again, he crawled into bed and couldn't sleep. He was jittery and anxious. He got back up and paced the room.

After a few hours of poor sleep, Armstrong woke up with a dull headache and slight chills.