

The Fever, Chapter 13: Numb

By **LON WAGNER**, The Virginian-Pilot
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The sun rises
to melt away
a frost.

A week later, on Oct. 5, George Armstrong was back at Elmwood Cemetery to bury a friend, the Rev. William Jackson of St. Paul's. Armstrong's mind wandered back over the past two months, and he remembered having run into Jackson dozens of times, at the cemetery or visiting the sick.

Just after the fever had appeared, Jackson had told Armstrong that he had canceled plans to leave the city. "Should this fever spread, as it seems reason to fear that it will, we shall all be needed," Jackson had told him.

Armstrong remembered writing to his friend in Philadelphia defending the clergy's dedication, saying that without a miracle several ministers' graves would prove it. But as he watched Jackson's body being lowered into a grave, Armstrong shuddered. The toll had been greater than he imagined.

Of the seven Protestant ministers who had stayed, four had died.

Armstrong didn't question God, surely he had his own purpose, but the cruelty of the pestilence forced Armstrong to view him differently. At least for the moment.

"By us, and at this time," he thought, "must God be worshipped as He that 'maketh darkness his secret place; his pavilion round about him, dark waters and thick clouds of the sky.'"

After the past two months, the fever had left people staggering and numb, unable or too worn down to describe it to anyone who had not lived it.

A scourge had not wiped out a proportionate number of residents since the Middle Ages, when the Black Death felled one in three.

N.C. Whitehead, Norfolk's acting mayor, responded to the physicians' request to leave town with a lengthy letter. Twenty of 87 visiting doctors had died, along with more than half of the local physicians.

"Had not noble spirits volunteered to the rescue (to die, if need be, like Curtius, for Rome) our people must have sunk beneath the burden of their agony," Whitehead wrote.

"The annals of our civilization furnish no authentic record of a visitation of disease as awfully severe as that which we have just encountered," he continued. "We are now a community of convalescents."

The cities began preparing for the return of their residents from out of town.

Physicians recommended that all stores and homes be opened to allow the sick air to vent. And that no one return before a hard frost.

At Old Point Comfort, a puzzling and prominent death occurred: the wife of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney. She wasn't suspected of having the fever, but her health went quickly downhill and when she died her skin turned a sickly yellow. She was a sister of Francis Scott Key.

Six or eight a day still were dying in Norfolk, but new cases were few.

Armstrong's strength had not completely returned, and Cornelia and Grace were still recovering, so he planned, again, to get them out of town.

The day after Jackson's funeral, the minister and the last two members of his family boarded the Curtis Peck and steamed toward Richmond.

The Armstrongs remained away for a month, and the cities changed character again.

A massive exchange of people began in early October, with the recovered finally able to leave and volunteer physicians and nurses boarding steamers to Richmond, Philadelphia, Baltimore and New York.

Norfolk's board of health set Nov. 1 as the safe date for refugees to return, but many ignored it. By Oct. 9, Norfolk and Portsmouth residents began to check out of New York hotels; steamers headed south from that city were filled.

The Southern Argus published again, and reported three new cases of fever among refugees who had returned too soon.

Fear still plagued residents, and one night someone set Woodis Hospital on fire in two places. It was windy and much of the central city could have burned, but the flames were quickly extinguished.

City streets became busier, and a dozen stores in Norfolk re opened.

On Oct. 14, a new day dawned: The sun rose and had to melt away a heavy frost.

Soon, people scrambled for overcoats for the winter and, finally, tailors became more sought than coffin makers.

On Nov. 1, a large group of residents waited for the steamer Roanoke to pull into the wharf. When it got close, the people let out a cheer – and the prodigal residents on board clapped and cheered back.

Armstrong and his daughters arrived back in the city a few days later, and he noticed at once that it had become re-invigorated.

But when he stepped into the pulpit the following Sunday, he saw that the fever had altered things for years to come.