

The Fever, Chapter 2: Quarantine

By LON WAGNER, The Virginian-Pilot
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George Armstrong walked through Norfolk to catch the ferry across the Elizabeth River. He had gotten word that the Rev. Isaac Handy, the minister of Middle Street Presbyterian in Portsmouth, was down with the fever, and he wanted to pay his friend a visit.

It was a bright, early August day, but, at 80 degrees that morning, milder than usual for the season. Dr. George Upshur had reported the first cases in Norfolk a few days earlier, but most suspected that the victims had some connection to Gosport, the section of Portsmouth where the yellow fever first hit.

Upshur discovered cases in Barry's Row, a crowded Irish tenement built where Church Street dead-ended at the river. Many had criticized him for delaying too long in making the news public, but others had mocked his diagnoses as fiction that would harm the city's commerce. Cynics dubbed it "the Upshur fever."

Armstrong felt upbeat on his way to the wharf. Norfolk did not buzz with its usual doings, but he thought there was enough activity that a visitor to town wouldn't notice anything different.

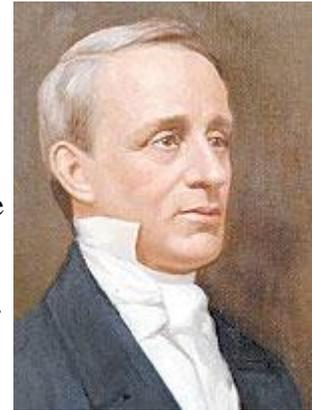
He was optimistic that the fever wouldn't take hold in Norfolk. Since the last major epidemic in 1826, the city had paved and graded more than 80 streets, helping rainwater wash filth down into the river. Plus, as he crossed Main Street, he recalled that that street had been the northern boundary of the fever in the past, and most residents now lived beyond it.

Three people had died in Norfolk, but the health board had reported no deaths yesterday, and one of the city papers was optimistic: "It is sincerely hoped," the Southern Argus wrote, "that in a few days we shall have the happiness to declare every part of Norfolk entirely free from epidemic disease."

Armstrong stepped off the ferry in Portsmouth and after walking just a few feet, his spirits drooped. He covered nearly the entire length of High Street and ran into just one white person. He passed the city market, usually crowded with farmers selling produce, and saw only two carts. There were no shoppers.

On his way back home, he detoured to see other parts of town. He watched a man knock at a house and a woman lean from an upper window to speak with him – afraid that if she got near the man, she might get the fever.

When he did run across people, the only topic was the sickness and death of friends. An undertaker told Armstrong that he had received orders that morning for seven coffins.



In August 1855, the Rev. George Armstrong of Norfolk ventured to Portsmouth to visit a fellow minister who had the fever. COURTESY OF WALTER B. MARTIN JR.

But the thing that struck Armstrong most was an eerie silence. Normally, by 10 a.m., the city swirled with the sounds of horse-cart wheels clattering over cobblestones, hammers pounding on ships, voices shouting over the din.

Today, all Armstrong heard was the crowing of a rooster. Portsmouth was the most forlorn place he had ever seen.

The fever was killing a handful of people each day in Portsmouth, and about a third of the city's 10,000 residents had fled.

Most people of means caught a steamer to Richmond and trains bound for the healthful springs resorts in the Virginia mountains. Poor families packed up what they could carry and trudged to the western fringes of town. Many camped in the woods.

As the days wore on, those who had stayed began to feel like they might be trapped.

New York first declared Portsmouth and Norfolk infected and barred any vessel or person from the two cities.

Within days in early August, Washington, Baltimore and Richmond joined in, then Petersburg and Suffolk. Old Point Comfort forbade steamers from Norfolk to touch there, and the commandant of Fort Monroe enforced the order with armed sentries patrolling the shores.

Mathews County and the Eastern Shore were exceptions, throwing themselves open to refugees. The governor-elect, Henry A. Wise, had even invited those fleeing to stay in his Accomack County home and added outhouses to accommodate more.

But as the options dwindled, fear mounted. The Richmond ban forced the owners of the steamer Augusta, which plied the James River from Norfolk to the capital, to stop operating. Rumors flew that each trip of a certain ship would be its last.

Winchester Watts, president of Portsmouth's common council, wrote to his brother, who had fled to Richmond, that he had never seen such panic as one morning at the railroad wharf.

“Nearly an hour before the departure of the boat the whole wharf was strewn with trunks, carpet bags and crowded with a dense mass of human beings of all ages and conditions.”

Word of how the disease tortured its victims elevated the fright.

An attack began with weariness, restlessness and depression, soon followed by headaches and pain in the back and joints. In the middle of summer, it brought on a high fever, a symptom for which there was no medicine.

The assault on the body often became more grave after three to five days. Extreme weakness set in, the face and eyes flushed red, then yellow when the liver ceased working.

In the worst cases, mucous membranes failed and blood oozed from the ears, nose, mouth or any opening. When the bleeding passed through the stomach, it became the black vomit.

The fever's neurological assault made people babble senselessly, moan and wail loudly and want to tear away anything touching their bodies.

The ferry between Norfolk and Portsmouth soon stopped running, cutting off the cities from each other. The Portsmouth Transcript ceased publication. The first powerful resident came down with the fever, Capt. Samuel Barron, commander of the Navy Yard.

Soon, Barron's sister-in-law, Imogene, and Lizzie, her 14-year-old daughter, were struck. Imogene's youngest son was breast-feeding and had to be taken from his mother.

In Norfolk, people tried to keep the fever at the city's fringes, where it could be managed.

The city had set up a temporary hospital away from the air of the infected district and carted the sick from Barry's Row. Healthy residents were evicted, and volunteers were sent to the Irish tenements to remove bedding and disinfect the rooms.

The row houses were three-story brick buildings, and the foundations sat on a creek that had been filled in. During heavy rains, water rushed to the low land, often draining into the basements, then rising through the floor boards.

The Norfolk Beacon reported that Barry's Row had been so crowded that in one tenement, 16 workers had shared a room. The fever was certain to germinate in places like that, most thought, and respectable homes in better parts of town ought to be safe.

Just to be sure, Norfolk residents quarantined themselves from the tenements: A 24-foot wooden wall was erected around Barry's Row.

Armstrong now faced a decision: Should he stay and comfort the sick, or should he get his wife and girls out of town?

His family had already decided to stick together, so if he stayed, he could be putting them in danger. How bad it would get, he could only guess.

Many thought that with the measures now in place, it would end soon. The Southern Argus wrote that the fever "seems to have spent itself in Barry's Row, and upon some of those hapless residents of those damp, filthy and unventilated tenements."

But soon, the fever breached Main Street.

Armstrong knew that in Savannah, Ga., and in Charleston, S.C. – New Orleans and Philadelphia before – the only guaranteed antidote to the fever had been to escape town.

That was for others to decide. His choice became clear.

“The physician and the Christian pastor are, by their profession, called to minister to the sick, the dying and the afflicted,” he thought. No personal danger, or threat to his family, should influence the decision.

He would stay in Norfolk, and face whatever came his way.