

The Fever, Chapter 3: Exodus



Terror was breeding hostility. People looked for someone to blame.

By **LON WAGNER**, The Virginian-Pilot
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George Armstrong felt at peace with his decision to stay in Norfolk. But as the fever began to spread, he saw that little else was in his control.

His family had just sat down for dinner one night when they heard the fire bell.

Armstrong walked to the front door, saw flames darting into the night sky and knew right away where the fire was. A poor church member lived near the flames, and he wanted to see if she needed help.

When he got there, Armstrong saw the entire upper end of Barry's Row burning. But it was the gathered crowd that made his stomach turn.

More than 3,000 people stood watching. Fire companies had all their engines parked nearby, but only to protect surrounding buildings. They didn't spray a drop of water on Barry's Row.

Armstrong was certain that the fire had been set.

He had heard the rumor that even after the city had removed all residents of Barry's Row and barricaded the streets, that the tenement's owners had rented to more families from Gosport. And those people got sick and were taken away.

True or not, Armstrong saw what was happening: Terror was breeding hostility. People looked for someone to blame for the outbreak. He'd seen more of it.

The Town Council of Weldon, N.C., had passed an ordinance banning anyone who had been in the infected cities in the past 15 days. Whites from Norfolk or Portsmouth would be fined \$100 a day; blacks would receive "nine-and-thirty lashes on his or her bare back."

Armstrong also had heard the story of an Irishman named Stapleton. After he had become ill, the

family who ran his boarding house had panicked and left him in one of the upper rooms.

“With no one to attend him,” Armstrong had heard, “not even to give him a glass of water.”

Most physicians were fairly certain that yellow fever was not contagious, that a person couldn't get it while comforting a victim or tending to a dead body. But rampant fear made residents doubtful.

Stapleton, eventually, dragged himself out of the house. He staggered as far as the front steps of a doctor's office, where he collapsed and died.

By mid-August, Armstrong's optimism that Norfolk would dodge the worst of the fever had vanished. The city's street life now looked like Portsmouth's had a week earlier.

Once the powerful, the well-known, the non-Irish began dying, panic engulfed the cities.

Imogene Barron, whose brother-in-law ran the Navy Yard, died the night before the Barry's Row fire. She was buried by the Rev. William Jackson of St. Paul's Episcopal, across from Armstrong's church. Jackson had planned to leave town for a two-week vacation, but when the fever broke out, he canceled. He had put his wife and children on one of the last steamers out of the city the day before.

Commandant Samuel Barron continued to struggle under the fever. His infant nephew, who was breast-feeding when Imogene became sick, came down with whooping cough.

Mills C. Godwin, a compositor for the Richmond Dispatch, watched from the capital city as the fever consumed his family in Gosport. Godwin first got word that his brother had died. The next day, the paper reported the death of his brother-in-law.

A day later, Godwin learned that the fever had sent his sister to her grave. Then Godwin's cousin fell to the fever, and her 6-year-old son. When he hoped the fever had finished with his family, another telegraph arrived: His father had died.

Before he could make it east to comfort his mother, a final transmission came: The fever had taken her, too.

The Navy Yard remained open, but more than 1,000 workers left. The Dispatch's Portsmouth correspondent reported that the city was desolate:

“I question whether any community has been as badly scourged and afflicted,” he wrote. “The whole surrounding country is overrun – private houses, churches, tents, cabins (and Lord only knows what other kind of shelter) are all crammed.”

From Portsmouth, Councilman Winchester Watts wrote to his brother again: “About 80 new cases yesterday. I can not give you a list of the deaths. I believe we shall all die.”

In Norfolk, Mayor Hunter Woodis personally went into the city's infected alleys and tenements to help stave off the disease. Then the fever assailed him, and the news of his illness crippled civic spirit.

The Petersburg Express reported that in the two cities, the fever had felled 80 people. Those still healthy, if they had any money, fled Norfolk without even locking their houses.

To dodge quarantines, residents would catch a boat to the Eastern Shore in the morning, return that afternoon and transfer to a Baltimore steamer as though they lived on the Shore.

On one trip, the steamer Louisiana hauled 275 adults, plus their 200 children, who slept on the saloon floors, to safety in Baltimore. On the return trip to Norfolk, the ship was empty.

Armstrong saw two things driving the evacuation : one, the fever's devastation of Portsmouth ; the other, the quarantines.

"It has not been any appearance of present danger," he thought of the panic, "so much as the idea of being shut in to grapple with the pestilence, no matter how deadly it might become."

The quarantines infuriated Norfolk and Portsmouth residents – particularly the restrictions by neighboring cities. A writer to the Southern Argus suggested that the infected cities pass their own ordinance:

"That not one pound of beef, or anything else, be allowed to go to Old Point – no, not a pin – and as for the dirty little holes of Suffolk and Weldon, that no citizen of either place should ever be allowed to enter either town without a coat of tar and feathers."

Armstrong agreed that the quarantines were inhumane.

But when Armstrong arrived at his house one night, he faced a more personal trial. His 24-year-old nephew, who lived with his family, had come home complaining of powerful pain in his head and back.

A dark sheen coated the middle of his tongue, and his pulse beat rapidly. His eyes were glassy, and yellow.