

The Fever, Chapter 6: Devastation



Treatments for yellow fever varied depending on which part of the country the attending physician was from. The first step was usually a cathartic to empty the bowels. DELORES JOHNSON PHOTO / THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

By **LON WAGNER**, The Virginian-Pilot
© July 15, 2005

On the first day of September, George Armstrong went to yet another burial, this one of a friend. The Rev. Anthony Dibrell had remained in the city, comforting his parishioners, when he was stricken.

What Armstrong saw at Dibrell's service underscored the city's destruction. So many of Dibrell's congregation had fled, so many were sick or nursing family, that there were barely enough to conduct the normal funeral rites. Dibrell's own son, with Armstrong's help, had to hoist the coffin into the hearse.

The epidemic had entered a phase common to every great calamity, Armstrong thought. People watched friends and family die, and they waited for the next family member to succumb. The city had fallen under a collective spell of bewilderment.

The most important people in town now were doctors, nurses and gravediggers. Treatments varied depending on which part of the country the physician came from, but the first step was usually a cathartic such as mercury chloride to empty the bowels. A few hours later came a dose of castor oil.

If those steps worked, and in many cases they did not, the doctor then gave the patient a dose of mercurous chloride every hour, perhaps with opium, and used mustard poultices on the arms and legs.

THE FEVER



Case study from the files of Dr. J.D. Bryant, courtesy of the Library of Congress

CASE IV.

Mr. J_____ ,
aged 45 years; a native.

Saw the patient in the first instance of attack; had excessive rigors, or rather chills; he trembled sufficiently at intervals to shake the bed; severe pain in head, back, and knees; epigastrium very tender; stomach irritable, with nausea and occasional retching and vomiting; eyes injected, red, and watery; face much flushed; conjunctiva and skin tinged with yellow; pulse 90, somewhat full and round, but soft, and disappears under slight pressure; tongue has a thick yellow coating, deeper in shade in the centre, and fading into almost white at the margins, while the tip and edges of the tongue were of a fiery red; the

mouth and fauces were also remarkably red, and moist, or rather had a glairy, viscid matter adhering to them; bowels constipated; mind wandering; speech at times incoherent; spirits much depressed; anxiety strongly depicted in the countenance; extremities cold, and towards the end of the day somewhat shriveled; a strong, fetid, sickening odour pervaded the body, and diffused itself throughout the chamber.

The patient was accustomed to an excessive use of alcoholic drinks; occasionally became intoxicated. Ordered the mild [26] chloride of mercury and jalapa, see grs. x; if no action within four hours, castor oil, see; mustard pediluvia and sinapisms to extremities; bladder with ice to the head. Called again in five hours; had had one copious evacuation of very dark, almost black, extremely offensive bilious matter; had also thrown off very disagreeable ingesta from the stomach, about one hour after having taken the calomel; had

Even with a physician friend by his side, Dr. John Trugien died. Trugien had treated the first victims of the fever in Gosport. At his funeral service, the gravedigger cried.

Soon, three other doctors died, and a fourth was critical.

Aside from Dibrell, two other Methodist ministers were down with the fever.

Portsmouth Councilman Winchester Watts nearly died, but in early September got back on his feet and wrote to his 12-year-old niece in Richmond: "Our population daily is decreasing. The reverse may be said of the fever. It is slaying our people right and left, and its poisonous effect may be seen in the face of everyone you meet.

"I am afraid that nearly all our people who remain will die."

The teller of the Exchange Bank died, along with the mail carrier in Portsmouth.

The Norfolk and Portsmouth Herald stopped printing. The Norfolk Beacon, which had downplayed the fever, announced its suspension: "Two of our hands are down with the fever, the pressman is sick, foreman intends to leave town. It is impossible to employ compositors for love or money."

The Southern Argus editor was down with the fever and so was the reporter, but its foreman, James Finch, and one compositor kept publishing.

So many people were now ill that Norfolk couldn't remove the sick quickly enough to the Julappi hospital at Lambert's Point. The Howard Association took over the City Hotel on Main Street and turned it into "Woodis Hospital."

Like much of the city, the new hospital was run by volunteers from out of town, with Henry Myers, the nurse from Richmond, organizing the hospital and a doctor from Charleston, S.C., dispensing medicine. A New Orleans man was called in to run the Norfolk Police Department.

Most of the East Coast cities had now lifted the quarantines, but it was too late: Those who remained were either too poor or too sick to leave. If any could, the Sea Bird's owners aimed to profit from the misery. They doubled the fare to Richmond to \$4.

The Philadelphia committee had sent four doctors and seven nurses to Norfolk, five doctors and five nurses to Portsmouth, but Armstrong knew that wasn't enough.

He had visited a house in which there were two families, with every member sick. Armstrong

taken and retained the oil well, but nausea and retching had returned when the action of the cathartics commenced; ordered mustard poultice to the epigastrium, with directions to apply a fly blister, if the former proved ineffectual in allaying the gastric irritation. Called again in the evening; found the fly blister applied, and drawing powerfully; denuded a portion of the surface, and sprinkled it with a quarter of a grain of acetate of morphia; left a similar portion to be applied in the course of the night, if needed; directed acetate of lead, see; opium, gr. j; divide chart. 15, one every hour; renewed mustard baths and sinapisms to extremities.

had looked out the front door, seen a passing physician and called out to him. Come in and write prescriptions for the dying, Armstrong had asked. The doctor had opened his appointment book and waved it.

“I have already so many cases in hand that I cannot conscientiously undertake another,” he had said, walking on.

The bakeries had all shut, and Armstrong couldn't find a loaf of bread anywhere. The city was a sad case: The poor had begun to suffer for food, the sick couldn't obtain the right nourishment for recovery – and the well couldn't procure coffins enough to bury the dead.

The Rev. Tiberius Jones of Free Mason Street Baptist Church returned VERDAD's assault with his own letter to the Dispatch. Jones unveiled the writer as being R.T. Halstead and said he was greatly offended at the personal and unjust attack.

“Not a few editors indiscriminately praise as saints or heroes all who continue in its midst, although in many instances, ignorant of the true motives and circumstances which induce them to do so,” Jones wrote.

“With equal ignorance of motives and circumstances, they cast reproach on all who pursue a different course.”

Jones explained that by the time he could have returned to Norfolk, most of his congregation had left and there would have been little to do other than funerals.

Unfazed, VERDAD worked another slight into a Sunday report, referring to a lack of services with “every deacon of the Free Mason Street Baptist Church having stampeded.”

He didn't stop there. He took on the Custom House collector for evacuating to Hampton and rooted for the fever to spread at the city jail. A man accused of killing another stood a fair chance of avoiding justice, VERDAD explained, because the witnesses against him had died of the fever.

“It would be an act of retributive justice if Goslin, imprisoned there, awaiting his trial for the murder of Murphy, could fall victim to it,” VERDAD wrote.

Without saying so, Armstrong had always wished that those who fled had stuck around, if for nothing other than to suppress the panic. But after the past few days, he had changed his mind.

Had everyone remained, and a proportional number been stricken, he didn't know how the city could have handled it. Six hundred, or so he guessed, were now sick in Norfolk and dozens a day dying.

“In the flight of those that have gone I see most clearly God's good providence,” Armstrong thought.

The panic, he reasoned, must have been God scattering people in order to save them.