

A STORY IN 14 PARTS

THE FEVER



The Virginian-Pilot

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ONE HUNDRED FIFTY YEARS AGO, A KILLER SAILED INTO HAMPTON ROADS.

THE STOWAWAY, A PLAGUE LATER DUBBED “THE DESTROYER,” WOULD CLAIM THOUSANDS OF LIVES, BRINGING NORFOLK AND PORTSMOUTH TO THEIR KNEES.

CHAPTER 1

BY LON WAGNER
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Two men climbed over the ship's railing, shinnied down the side and splashed into the Elizabeth River.

They thrashed around in the water, then swam toward the nearest point of land.

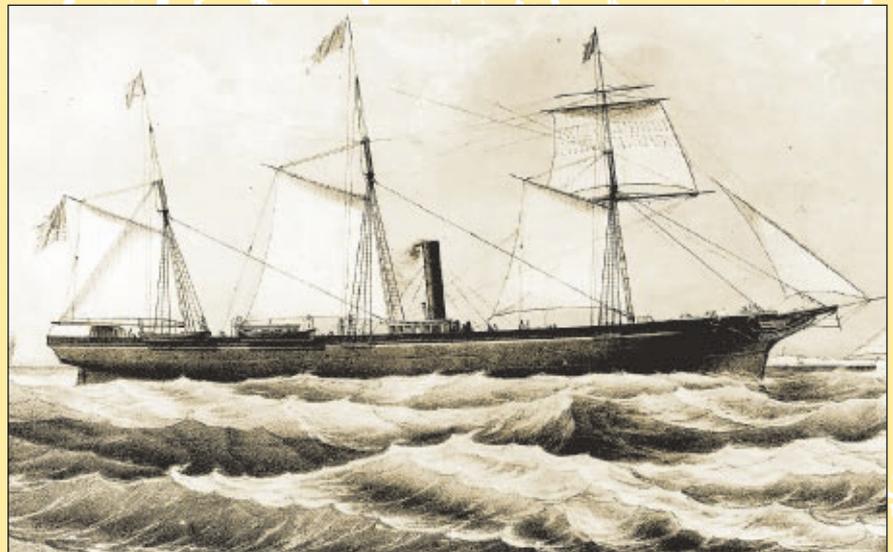
Their ship – the Benjamin Franklin – had steamed in from the West Indies and anchored off Fort Norfolk in June 1855. Within days, crew members would drag a rolled mattress onto the deck, remove a corpse and put it into a coffin. They would throw the mattress overboard, ferry the coffin to the Portsmouth side of the river and bury it – under cover of night.

About the same time, another man's body, dressed like that of a ship's coal-heaver, would wash up at the fort. His hands were as yellow as lemons.

Now, men were jumping overboard. One of them floundered and nearly went under, but both eventually crawled up onto land. They were still gasping for air when a man who had seen the escape approached them.

Why had they risked their lives? he wanted to know.

Better to chance drowning, one



COURTESY OF THE MARINERS' MUSEUM

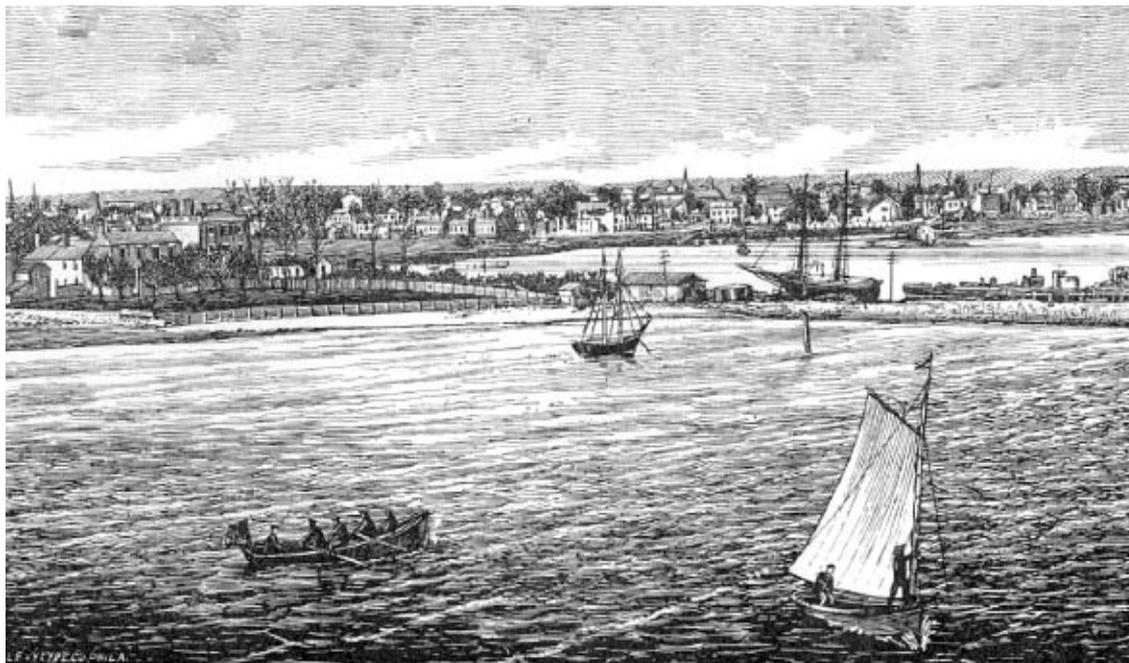
The Benjamin Franklin detoured toward Portsmouth on June 7, 1855, for repairs. The vessel bore cargo that residents of Portsmouth and Norfolk would soon come to fear.

said, than to stay on the ship and face certain death.

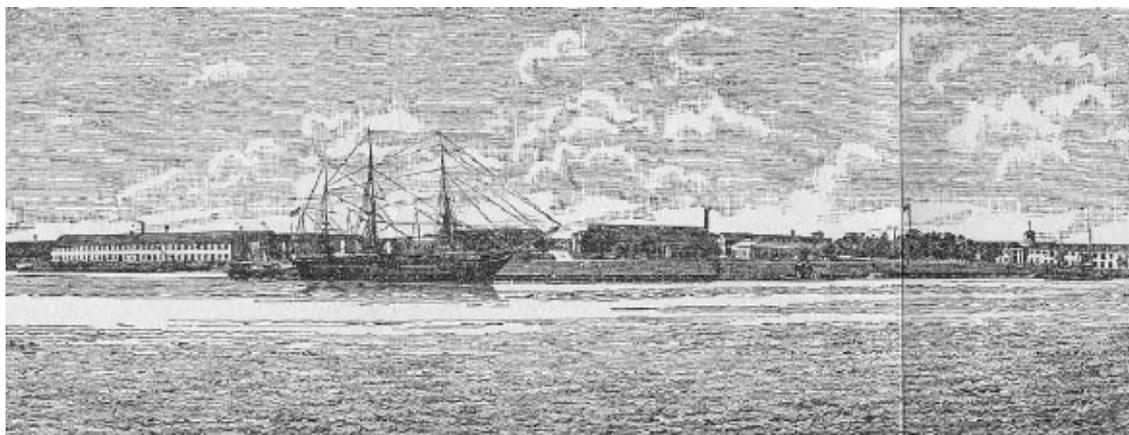
What happened during the next few days would loose a pestilence more malignant than the Great Plague of London. It would send thousands fleeing from Norfolk and Portsmouth, wipe out entire families, force burials

in pits. It would orphan children too young to know their own names.

It started June 7, when the Benjamin Franklin pulled in to Hampton Roads. The ship looked sleek and stunning: 183 feet long; wooden; powered with twin, coal-fired engines; yet also graced with three towering masts. The Franklin was only four years old,



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A VIEW OF BERKLEY:
Norfolk had a working harbor with three dozen commercial wharves along the Elizabeth River.

Norfolk

1850 population*

Whites: 9,068

Free blacks: 957

Slaves: 4,295

Total: 14,320

*by 1855, total estimated at 16,000.

Churches: 10 white, 4 black

Major hotels: 5

Daily newspapers: 5

Banks: 8

Portsmouth

1855 estimated population
10,000 (white and black)

Churches:

7 Protestant, 1 Catholic

Hotels: 3

Daily newspapers: 3

Banks: 3

A VIEW OF GOSPORT:
This area of Portsmouth was home to many Irish immigrants who labored in the shipyards.

but shoddily built.

It had left St. Thomas two weeks earlier en route to New York but had become so leaky that the captain enlisted male passengers to work the pumps. Its boilers were sputtering, and a mast needed reinforcement. The Franklin detoured toward Portsmouth for repairs.

When the port's health officer boarded the Franklin, he knew that yellow fever had raged in the West Indies before the vessel had sailed. The papers had reported on it, and with major outbreaks in other coastal cities the two previous years, the only question for the summer of 1855 was where it would erupt next.

From previous epidemics in the South, people in Norfolk and Portsmouth knew almost everything about the fever. They knew that it came during hot weather, shortly after the arrival of a ship from the tropics, that it broke out first in swampy areas, where water became stale.

They knew that during an outbreak, something poisonous and deadly filled the air – they just didn't know what.

Have there been any deaths on board? the health officer asked the captain.

Two, the captain told him. The coal-heaver fell over from a heart attack, and the man who took his place, not being used to shoveling coal into a hot furnace, died of exhaustion. The Franklin, the captain assured, was entirely free of disease.

The health officer wasn't sure. He ordered the vessel to the quarantine grounds, safely downriver from the cities' populations, near Craney Island. As was practice, a yellow flag flew from a mast to mark the ship's sentence.

Eleven days later, the health officer came on board again. He inspected the ship down to its water tanks. He found no cargo and no ballast, save for some iron cannons in the hold, coal for the boilers and a few barrels of pork.

Again, the Franklin's captain swore that he and the crew were in good health. The ship needed only caulking and minor repairs, no major work down below. He begged to be allowed into the shipyard.

The health officer relented, under one

condition: The ship's hold should not be broken open. The captain promised it would not.

The Franklin raised anchor and steered toward the heart of the cities.

By that summer, Norfolk leaders were talking about the city becoming "The Queen of the Chesapeake."

It had a harbor so calm and naturally deep that, upon looking over it, President Millard Fillmore once had expressed surprise that East Coast trade was dominated by New York. The London correspondent of a New York paper proclaimed that Norfolk should be one of the great ports of the United States.

In spite of itself, Norfolk had been in the doldrums for decades. The city's potential had been strangled by a state legislature dominated by rural slaveholders not keen on costly improvements for urban dwellers. Most local businessmen were not big thinkers and seemed satisfied to wait their turn for greatness. As Norfolk slumbered, Northern cities

locked in their futures by improving and expanding railroad connections.

Finally, though, came signs of improvement. Norfolk had become a city a decade earlier, and its new mayor was youthful and not discouraged by past failures. Norfolk had a working harbor with three dozen commercial wharves arching into the Elizabeth River like a crescent, from Town Point to a drawbridge connected to Portsmouth.

The city's residents occupied the 800-acre peninsula down by the river. There were 10 churches for whites, four for blacks, five major hotels, fire stations in four wards, five daily newspapers and eight banks. The city had Norfolk Military Academy for boys and the Ladies Seminary and Female Institute for girls, a philharmonic and factories churning out iron, shoes, chemicals and barrels.

The increasing use of steam to power ships made for great mobility: Steamers ran daily to Baltimore and over to Hampton and Old Point Comfort; several times a week to the Eastern Shore, Richmond and Washington; and weekly to Philadelphia and New York.

A few years earlier, City Gas Light Co. had first illuminated Freemason Street's lamps, then lit downtown, City Hall, churches, hotels and houses.

Portsmouth lagged its sister city in prosperity and modern-day comforts. It brought in next to no commercial trade, though it was saved somewhat by the nearly 1,500 jobs at the Navy Yard and 300 at Gosport Iron Works. Unlike Norfolk, where streets drained into the river, much of Portsmouth was sunken and swampy – rotting matter puddled in the streets and fermented in the sun.

But Portsmouth, too, had reason for hope. A local businessman had secured financing and resurrected the Seaboard and Roanoke Railroad, an 80-mile line from Weldon, N.C., to Portsmouth.

If anything could hold back the cities, other than festering tensions with Northern states, it would be sickness. Yellow fever had visited Norfolk first in 1795, then nearly every year for the next decade. In 1821, the fever broke out again, after the captain of a ship from Guadeloupe concealed two deaths from the city health officer.

Ships trading with the Caribbean, in fact, had carried the fever as far north as New York and Philadelphia since the late 1600s, but the Northern cities' domination of commerce seemed secure. As an added

measure, the press up north covered in wrenching detail every wave of sickness that hit Southern cities, the implication being that they were unsafe for business.

An epidemic now could derail the twin cities just as they were gaining a foothold.

A few days after the Franklin tied up at Page & Allen's shipyard, Dr. John Trugien was summoned to a house near the wharf.

Trugien was just 28 years old, but his energy and sincerity bought him trust with his



COURTESY OF KIRN LIBRARY SARGEANT MEMORIAL ROOM; INSET COURTESY OF WALTER B. MARTIN JR.

The Rev. George Armstrong, 41, above, preached at First Presbyterian Church in Norfolk and was unusually qualified to assess the budding epidemic.

patients. He had never seen the yellow fever before, but the symptoms were unmistakable.

Two men and a woman living at the house had the fever.

On July 3, a machinist who had come from Richmond looking for a job found work on the Franklin. Two days later, he began feeling restless and depressed, then came aches in his head, back and joints. His face became flushed, his pulse irregular, his eyes glassy.

By July 8, he was dead. Two Navy phy-

sicians, who had seen many cases of the fever, were called in to examine the man's body. One doctor held the man's nostrils shut and pressed down on his chest. Others standing around startled when dark fluid gushed from the man's mouth. The Navy doctors knew what this was: the final, horrific blow of yellow fever – the black vomit. A person could get the fever and survive, but once the black vomit came, death was usually soon at hand.

Portsmouth's street corners buzzed with talk of Trugien's patients and the Richmond worker's death: He had rented in Gosport, just 60 yards from the Navy Yard's front gate and Page & Allen's shipyard.

Though it was Sunday, the Town Council quickly called a meeting for that evening. Residents packed the chambers and listened to the physicians' conclusions, the three concurring that the fever had felled the man.

Others there reported that the Franklin's captain had gone back on his word.

Many workers went down inside the ship, repairing its hull and boilers. One of them broke into its lower hold to get at the base of the mast. More worrisome yet, the Franklin had pumped out its bilge water, a suspected source of diseased air.

The council instructed the town sergeant to immediately send the Ben Franklin back to the quarantine grounds. It wrote a letter to the Franklin's owners in New York, telling them of the captain's deceit.

Page & Allen's shipyard was shut down. A bridge leading from Gosport to Portsmouth was partly destroyed to prevent people from crossing. Gosport was fenced off, and watchmen were stationed at every corner.

People set about trying to clean the city's filthy streets and to remove garbage from yards, but it was too late.

The fever spread like a slow gas leak.

Norfolk residents now talked of little else, as rumors swirled through the city. Some worried that the fever would vault the river. The Rev. George Armstrong wrestled with the question at the end of July when he sat in his study writing.

Armstrong had moved to Norfolk four years earlier with his wife and three daughters – Mary, Cornelia and Grace – to take the pulpit at First Presbyterian Church, just across Church Street from St. Paul's Episcopal.

He was 41 years old, thin-framed, with blond hair and the light complexion of his

Scotch-Irish ancestors. He had quickly gained respect with his calm presence and reasoned sermons, which occasionally tapped the worldly knowledge he had gained at Princeton University.

Among the clergy, he was uniquely qualified to assess the budding epidemic. Before becoming a minister, Armstrong had moved from New Jersey to Lexington, Va., to be a chemistry professor at Washington College.

Armstrong knew that the fever first broke out in a section of Portsmouth wedged between the Navy Yard and a buggy marsh. The tenements there, mostly occupied by Irish laborers, were overcrowded, in need of repair and disgusting. Armstrong heard from a sanitation inspector who had been sent to Gosport that in one tenement, city workers found a dead calf.

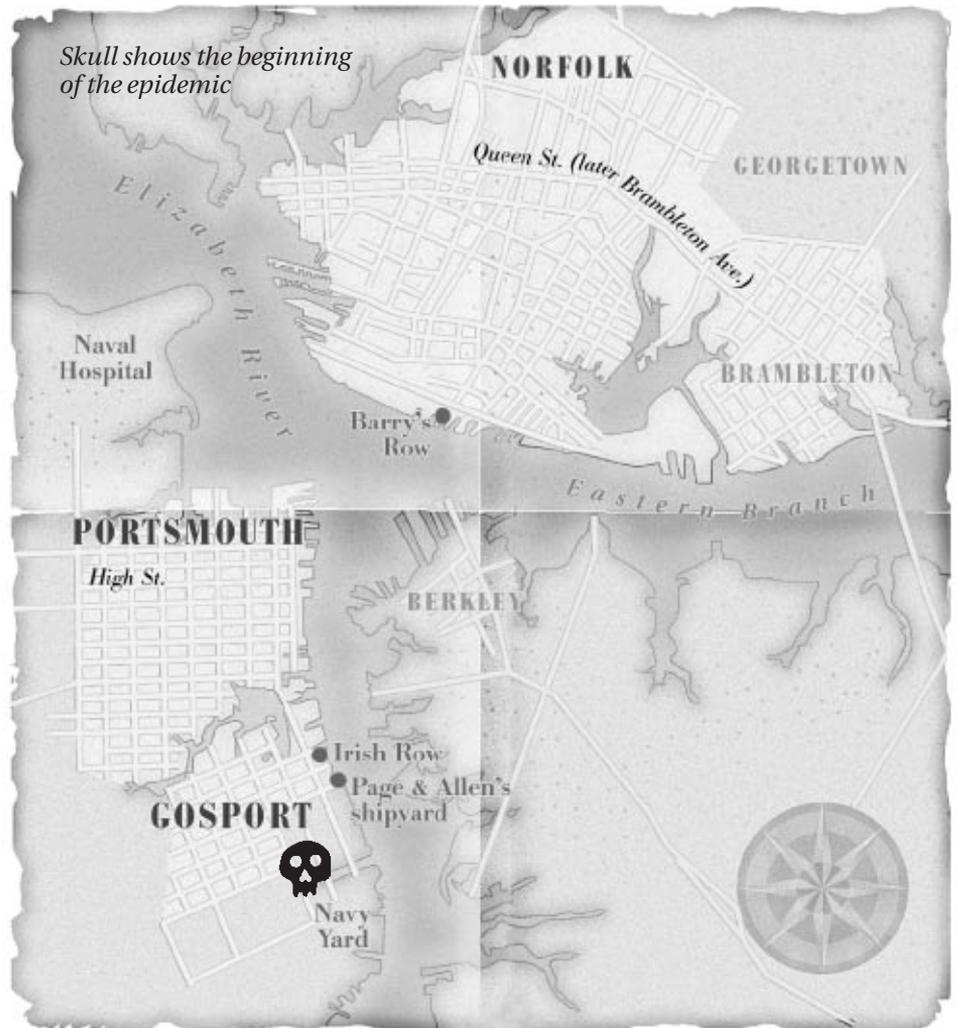
Most, if not all, of the fever cases could still be traced back to the infected district. The sicknesses so far seemed mild and manageable, but he knew it could get worse.

He had heard a theory that the disease threatening Norfolk and stewing in Portsmouth could be a strand of African yellow fever that was climbing up the Eastern seaboard year by year. Two years ago, the fever had ravaged New Orleans, killing 8,000. Last year, it had devastated Savannah, Ga., and more than 1,000 died. Now, it might have settled in here.

Armstrong shuddered at one possibility: It was only July. If this was the more deadly fever and it had three hot months to torment before a hard frost, Armstrong could hardly imagine the havoc.

"God help us," he thought, "for the help of man is vain."

THE FEVER PULLS INTO PORT



XINNING HUANG/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT



The approximate death toll as of July 1855 (one coffin represents 10 victims)

CHAPTER 2

THE FEVER



QUARANTINE

A STORY IN 14 PARTS BY LON WAGNER

THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

ARMSTRONG PORTRAIT COURTESY
OF WALTER B. MARTIN JR.

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.

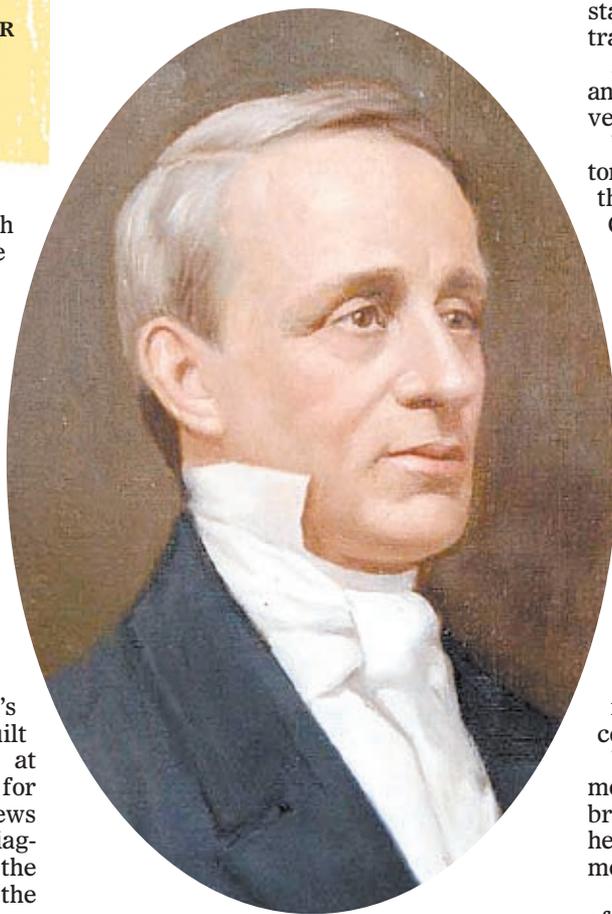
He was optimistic that the fever wouldn't take hold in Norfolk. Since the last major epidemic in 1826, the city had paved and graded more than 80 streets, helping rainwater wash filth down into the river. Plus, as he crossed Main Street, he recalled that that street had been the northern boundary of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



In August 1855, the Rev. George Armstrong of Norfolk ventured to Portsmouth to visit a fellow minister who had the fever.

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.

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 floorboards.

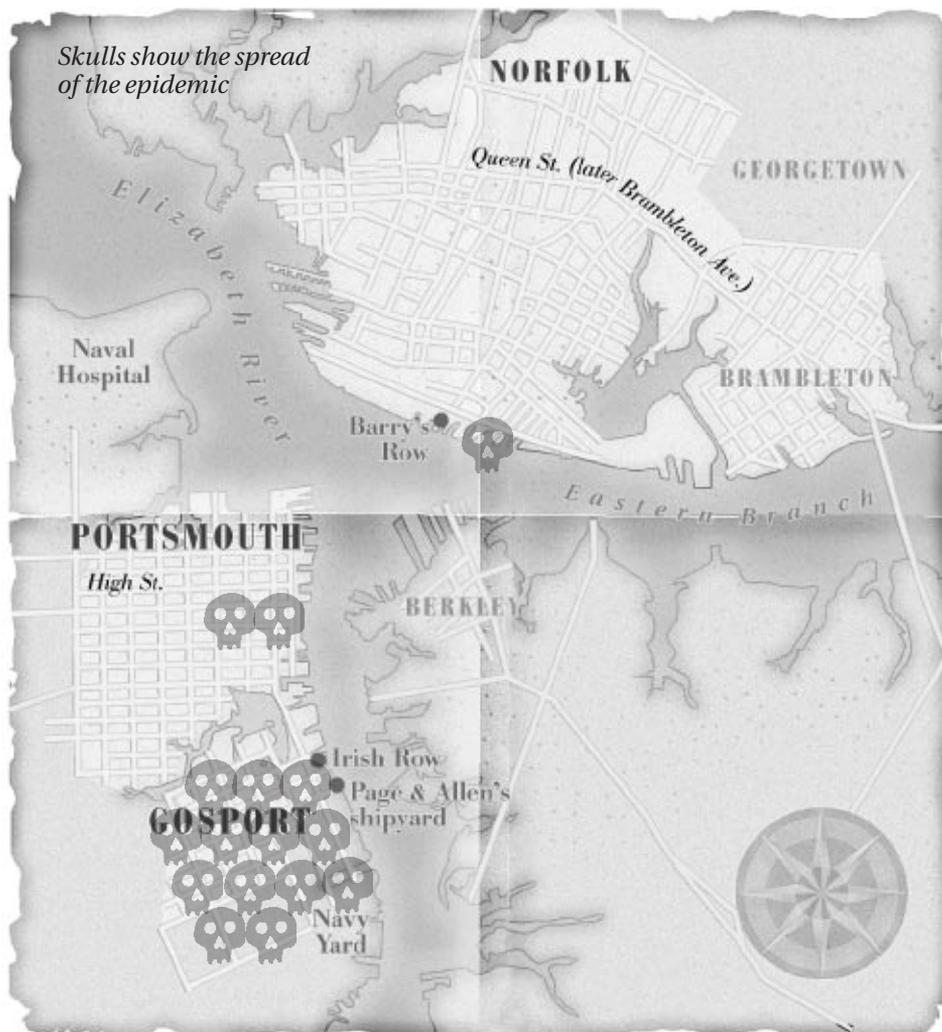
The Norfolk Beacon reported that Barry's Row had been so crowded that in one tenement, 16 workers had shared a room. The fever was certain to germinate in places like that, most thought, and respectable homes in better parts of town ought to be safe.

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.

THE FEVER SPREADS TO BARRY'S ROW



XINNING HUANG/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

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 guar-

anteed 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.



The approximate death toll as of early August 1855: 60 (one coffin represents 10 victims)

CHAPTER 3

THE FEVER

EXODUS

A STORY IN 14 PARTS BY LON WAGNER
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT



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.

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.

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

"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,

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



KIRN LIBRARY SARGEANT MEMORIAL ROOM

When the fever broke out, the Rev. William Jackson of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Norfolk stayed but sent his family away.

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

"I believe we shall all die."

– Winchester Watts,
Portsmouth councilman

that the infected cities pass their own ordinance:

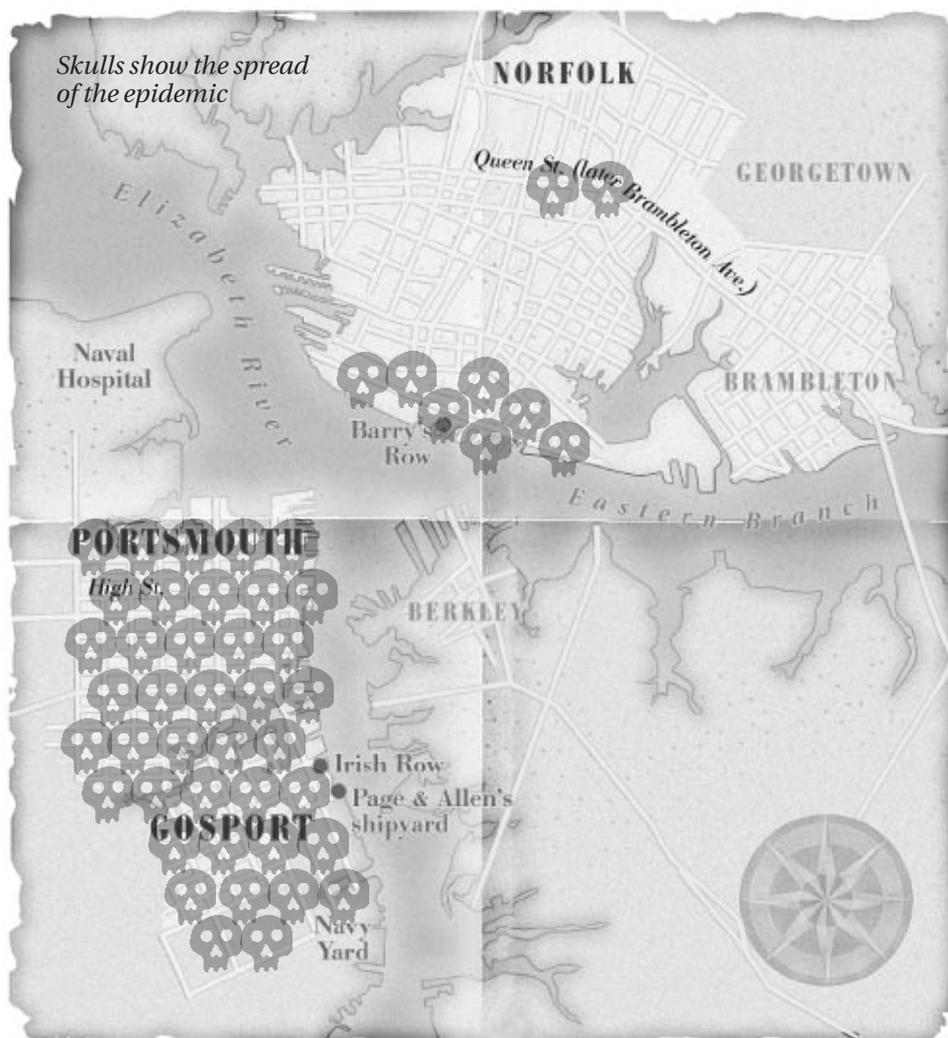
"That not one pound of beef, or anything else, be allowed to go to Old Point – no, not a pin – and as for the dirty little holes of Suffolk and Weldon, that no citizen of either place should ever be allowed to enter either town without a coat of tar and feathers."

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.

THE FEVER TRAVELS OUTSIDE THE TENEMENTS



XINNING HUANG/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT



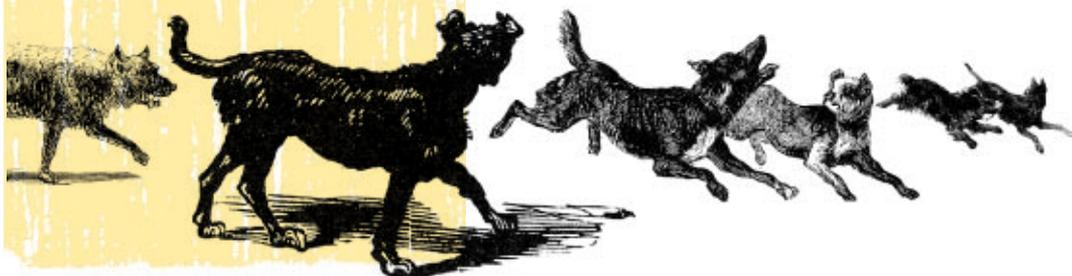
The approximate death toll as of Aug. 16, 1855: 180 (one coffin represents 10 victims)

CHAPTER 4

THE FEVER

DESPERATION

A STORY IN 14 PARTS BY LON WAGNER
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT



“Among the old residents there has been very little sickness, and no more deaths than ordinary times. With good nursing and attendance, the disease is very little more to be dreaded than bilious fever.”

As desperate as the situation was, healthy residents of the cities stood up, stiffened their backs and took on the prevailing pestilence. Norfolk formed a Howard Association, a relief group named after British philanthropist John Howard.

Vivid reports in the press had drawn

Edmund James had spent several nights sitting with a friend suffering from typhoid fever. Though the Armstrongs didn't know it then, they had since learned that the friend lived in the part of town gripped by the pestilence.

James' symptoms seemed from the start to be severe, and a day after coming home sick, he died.

His was the first death in the Presbyterian congregation, and Armstrong knew it wouldn't be the last. Several other parishioners were now in bed sick.

The fever took on a frenzy, leapfrogging around the city, so ruthless that people began calling it the destroyer. In both cities, bodies piled up. Among them: Capt. George Chambers, who ran the ferry between the two cities for years.

Coffins were in short supply, and some placed orders while a loved one battled to stay alive. Fear of contagion from a corpse meant the dead were

buried quickly.

“In many instances they are under ground within an hour and a half after death,” wrote a Norfolk resident to the Lynchburg newspaper. “From six to eight pass my boarding house every day to the home of the dead – in two instances I saw one horse with two corpses passing by.”

A constant sound on the street was the clatter of the “car of death,” a wagon taxed by John Jones, a slave. Jones drove the hearse for O'Brien and Quick, cabinet makers turned undertakers, and he became important and highly visible.

Friends or family would flee from a corpse, so Jones often had to put the body into a coffin, shoulder it into the hearse and drive it to the cemetery. The sight of Jones became oddly comforting, all hours of day and evening, as he rattled by in the death wagon, puffing on a long cigar.

People talked of taking up a collection to buy Jones' freedom, if he lived.

The Howard Association itself became crippled: Within a week of its formation, two of its five founding members fled town with family members sick, the fever attacked two others and the association's president, William Ferguson, was forced to run the operation alone.

Philadelphia set up a relief committee and appointed 50 men, each to his own ward, to collect money. Thomas Webster Jr., chairman of the committee, began writing to the Howard Association several times a day with either donations or notice that a certain physician was on the way.

Dr. William Freeman, who had been living in the West Indies, was one of the first Philadelphia physicians to travel to Norfolk. Henry Myers came in from Richmond and volunteered as a nurse.

*Horses were without oats,
and dogs formed packs
to scavenge for food.*

the nation's sympathy, and donations were arriving daily. Unsolicited, doctors and nurses from up and down the East Coast boarded trains and steamers. With the mayor down and city government abandoned, the Howard Association took charge of assigning doctors and distributing money.

The group moved the Oak Grove hospital to a larger facility at Lamberts Point. There, on the grounds of Julappi horse track, the sick would be farther from the infected downtown air and breathe the healthful river breeze. With food scarce, the Howard Association opened a provisions store. A restaurant owner reopened and offered soup to the sick and poor. But the group could not do everything needed.

As much as they were afraid of the fever, those who had stayed began to fear starvation, or like the Irishman named Stapleton, death from lack of care. Those fleeing had left behind hundreds of slaves and servants, without food or money, to fend for themselves.

Horses were without oats, and dogs formed packs to scavenge for food. On nearly every downtown block, hungry pigeons gathered.

George Armstrong contacted the Howard Association and immediately got a doctor to see his nephew and a nurse to care for him.

Armstrong was fairly certain how his nephew had come down with the fever.

On Aug. 22, the temperature would push 90 degrees, just a few days after a nor'easter had pounded the cities. The cool of the northeast winds weakened the sick, and now they fell.

Capt. Samuel Barron's daughter died. Two of Portsmouth's three policemen died, and the third was down with the fever. Councilman Winchester Watts was at the Naval Hospital and reported delirious. Norfolk's former mayor and his family were sick, as was the police chief.

The current mayor's illness was more than a symbolic hit. Hunter Woodis was only 33. Many city leaders fled with their families, but while Woodis was well, he was Norfolk.

Physicians were too overwhelmed to report to the health board, but the best anyone could tell, a dozen a day were dying in Norfolk. More in Portsmouth. Doctors were treating several hundred cases in each city.

One of the carriers of the Portsmouth Transcript left a note for his customers: “If any of my subscribers wish to take their papers from any one else, they can do so until I return,” he wrote. “If I live, I will return, and be as prompt in my duties as ever. If I die, I remain your obedient servant, M.J. Burns.”

A correspondent of the Journal of Commerce visited the Transcript office one day and found David D. Fiske, publisher and also Portsmouth's mayor, working alone to print the paper.

“All his hands are gone,” the correspondent wrote. “Maupin's, Bilisoli's, and Neville's, are the only groceries open. I advise you by all means not to return here.”

All the evidence pointed to a runaway epidemic, but still, the Norfolk and Portsmouth Herald scoffed at the problem:

THE FEVER WON'T SLOW DOWN



KIRN LIBRARY SARGEANT MEMORIAL ROOM

The daughter and sister-in-law of Capt. Samuel Barron, commander of the Navy Yard in Portsmouth, succumbed to the fever. He himself struggled with it.

Dr. Louis Martin y de Castro, of New Orleans by way of Cuba, arrived.

Annie Andrews buoyed spirits in both cities. She was 21 years old, of the New Orleans upper crust and was vacationing with relatives in Syracuse, N.Y., when she heard of the pestilence. She hastily traveled to Norfolk and reported to Woodis in his sickbed. He dispatched her to the Julappi hospital, and she went to work.

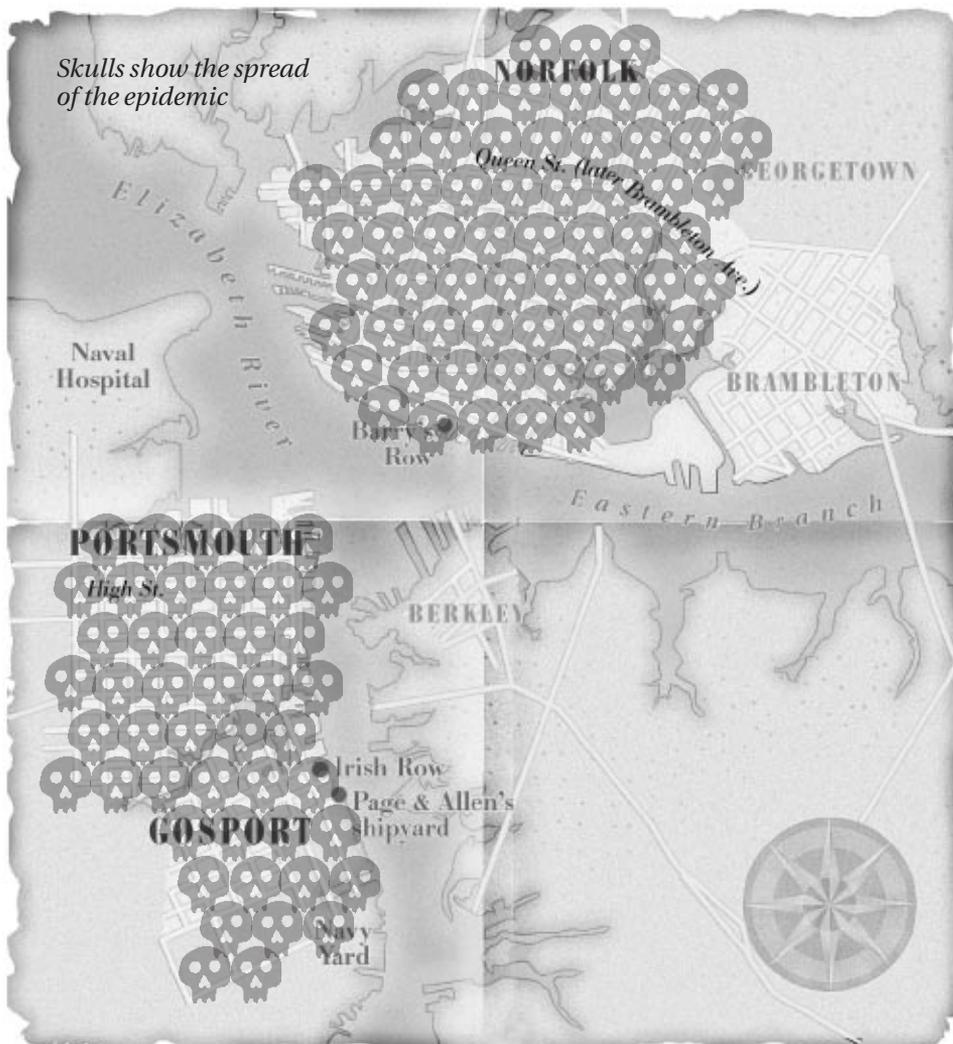
President Franklin Pierce opened up the Naval Hospital for victims.

The operators of the steamers Augusta and Curtis Peck offered to shuttle supplies for the afflicted cities free of charge. Dr. William Collins of the Seaboard and Roanoke Railroad did the same and began the effort by buying and shipping in 900 pounds of bacon.

It seemed to some that contributions were flooding Norfolk, the better-known city, and not reaching the other side of the Elizabeth.

Dr. John Trugien, who had diagnosed the first cases in Gosport, worked from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m., seeing not just his patients but those of two doctors down with the fever.

One night, after seeing more than 100 patients, he wrote an appeal to the Richmond Dispatch.



XINNING HUANG/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

A constant sound on the street was the clatter of the “car of death,” a wagon taxed by John Jones, a slave.



Every moment, he said, he was called on to treat a father, mother, brother, sister or friend.

“But I can go no further,” he wrote. “I am completely exhausted, and must have a little rest to enable me to resume the duties of the morrow, if perchance, I am myself spared in health.”

He was no alarmist, he said, wasn't prone to exaggeration, but it would sicken

anyone to see Portsmouth now. Entire families were down without the ability to get a drop of water to cool fevered lips.

“I know it must require an amount of courage possessed by but a few, to venture thus seemingly into the jaws of death to rescue others. But is there no devoted man who will say I will go?”

“Shall poor stricken Portsmouth be left to her fate?”



The approximate death toll as of late August 1855: 450 (one coffin represents 10 victims)

CHAPTER 5

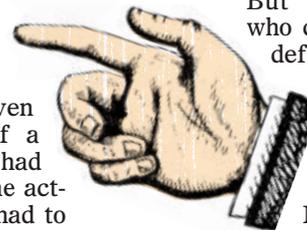
THE FEVER

ACCUSATIONS

A STORY IN 14 PARTS BY LON WAGNER
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT



The Rev. George Armstrong worried about the ugliness in human nature that the yellow fever epidemic could lure to the surface.



his nephew, comforting sick members of his church and burying the dead, so he hadn't had time to read the newspapers. One morning, he walked to the post office, which had been moved away from downtown to the military academy, and opened a letter from an old classmate in Philadelphia.

His friend informed him of widely circulating press reports that the Protestant clergy in Norfolk had deserted their posts. Personally, Armstrong wasn't concerned with the reports – the pestilence had made priorities clear, and he scarcely had time to fret over his reputation.

But there were others who could not take time to defend themselves, and he wanted to set the record straight. He wrote back to his Philadelphia friend. He saluted the Rev. Matthew O'Keefe, the Catholic priest in town,

who had ventured into Barry's Row, Leigh's Row in Portsmouth and other infested Irish tenements.

What of the Protestants? Armstrong listed the 10 churches that he was familiar with, and counted that seven pulpits were staffed – and one minister had traveled to Germany and another had resigned before the fever broke out.

That left VERDAD's primary target, Jones, who Armstrong reported was out of town with his sick wife.

"I will venture to say that in our city there is not one class of the population – not even the physicians or the undertakers – of which so large a proportion have remained at their posts, as of the clergy," Armstrong wrote.

Already, a Portsmouth minister had taken the fever. In recent days, it had attacked two others in Norfolk.

"Unless a miracle preserve us," Armstrong wrote his friend, "when the pestilence should have passed there will be more than one green mound in our cemetery to bear witness to the falsehood of this report."

Armstrong had begun to think that he might be among them. Lately, he'd had an odd feeling, almost a premonition, that he would die before his 42nd birthday. That was Sept. 15, just two weeks away.

group of children walking away from their parents.

The night of his letter, Dr. John Trugien stayed up with a sick friend, then called on patients throughout the next day. The day after, he complained about mild pain and another physician took him to the Naval Hospital.

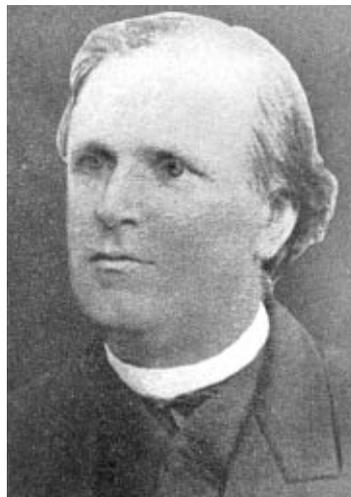
Resentment increased when those who had risked their lives began dying. The most stunning news was Norfolk Mayor Hunter Woodis' death. It added chaos to the expanding epidemic and disheart-

ened those struggling through it. Even someone with the constitution of a young man, with determined spirit, had succumbed. N.C. Whitehead became acting mayor, but he was older, also had to run one of the banks and couldn't devote every minute to the task as Woodis had.

The sacrifice of leaders such as Woodis, physicians such as Trugien and ministers such as Armstrong stood out starkly against the public flight. In a late August story, the Richmond Dispatch's Norfolk correspondent, under the pen name VERDAD, praised those who had stuck around – before his words turned venomous. He spat most of his poison at the minister of Free Mason Street Baptist Church, the Rev. Tiberius G. Jones.

"He left the city shortly before the epidemic broke out, and has kept himself safe away ever since. As a Christian minister he should have returned immediately to minister to the spiritual wants of his congregation, but in place, he wrote, we learn to know whether it would be safe for him to return."

Armstrong had been preoccupied tending to



KIRN LIBRARY SARGEANT MEMORIAL ROOM
The Rev. Matthew O'Keefe, the Catholic priest in Norfolk, ventured into Barry's Row, Leigh's Row in Portsmouth and other infested Irish tenements.

At the Barry's Row fire, George Armstrong had wondered about human nature, what madness the pestilence might bring out. Now, a new divisiveness showed its face.

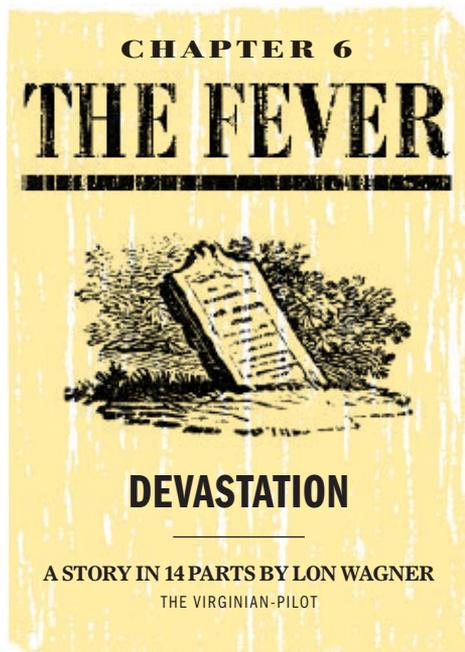
The quarantines, along with the mass exodus, made some of those who had stayed bitter. The owners of the steamer Joseph E. Coffee were rumored to be suing the commandant of Old Point Comfort for preventing the ship from landing.

Many people around town thought that donations from Richmond and Petersburg should be sent back. "We ask not, nor will we receive such sympathy from such narrow-hearted and un-Christian Virginians," the Southern Argus wrote.

By the end of August, 10,000 people had fled Norfolk; only about 6,000 remained. Portsmouth was down to just 3,000 residents from 10,000. A witness saw a family leaving two sick sons behind, another



The approximate death toll at the end of August 1855: 630 (one coffin represents 10 victims)



STAFF PHOTO BY DELORES JOHNSON

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.

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 showed him 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 of 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 became 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.

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 every-one 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 Lamberts 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 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 at Armstrong.

"I have already so many cases in hand that I cannot conscientiously undertake another," the doctor 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.

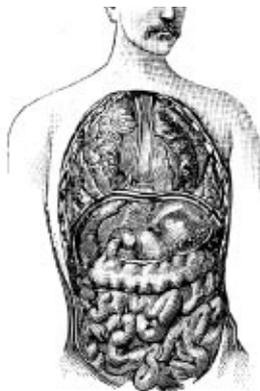
The Rev. Tiberius Jones of Free Mason Street Baptist Church returned VERDAD's assault with his own letter to the Dispatch. Jones unveiled the writer as being R.T. Halstead and said he was greatly offended at the personal and unjust attack.

"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

Continued on page 14



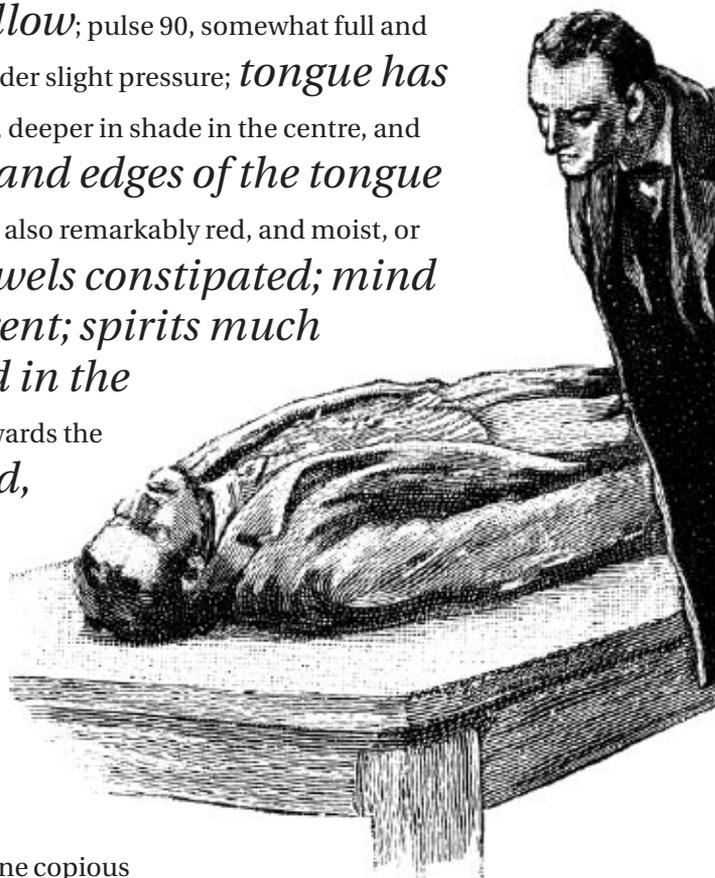
CASE IV. Mr. J _____, aged 45 years; a native.



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 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.



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 stamped."

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.

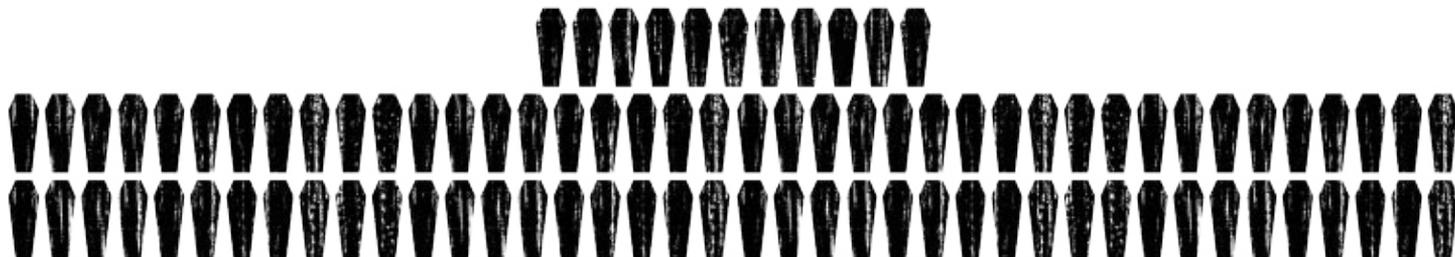
Without saying so, Armstrong had always wished that those who fled had

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.



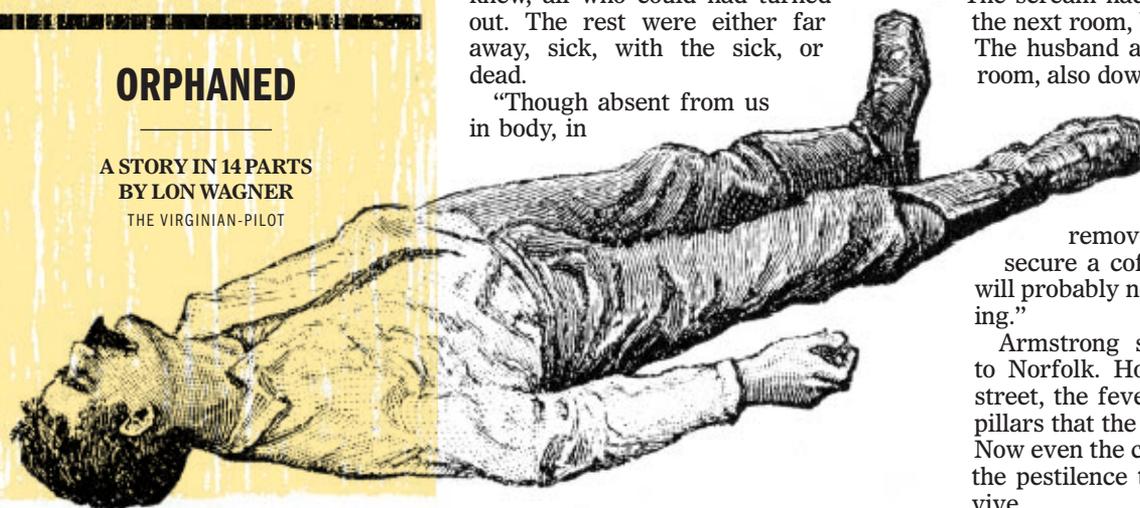
The approximate death toll as of Sept. 1, 1855: 910 (one coffin represents 10 victims)

CHAPTER 7

THE FEVER

ORPHANED

A STORY IN 14 PARTS
BY LON WAGNER
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT



On the first Sunday of September, George Armstrong planned to hold a service, if anyone showed up. But early in the day, he headed out to visit sick parishioners.

His first stop was a Main Street home, where the fever had already killed a widow and two of her children. Her sister had been staying there with the orphaned siblings.

They were all sick the day before when Armstrong had visited. Now, the children had recovered, but Armstrong saw that their aunt was taking her last breaths. "The physical agony of death has passed," Armstrong knew, "and life is going out like a flickering candle in its socket."

A third sister had slipped away from her own sick son and daughter to close the woman's eyes. Armstrong could do only one more thing for her: try to secure a coffin.

He walked on to the next house. This woman had been a strange case, with hardly a fever but with a frayed central nervous system. When he entered the room, she seemed much better. She smiled and reached out an arm. Her voice, he thought, was unearthly, hollow yet sweet.

She spoke of herself as though she was speaking of someone else.

"She expected from the time the fever appeared in Norfolk that she would die of it," she told Armstrong.

"She had wished to live a few years longer for her husband's sake," she added, "but God's will be done."

A New Orleans physician treating her said she would be dead by morning. Armstrong prayed, and moved on.

He walked into his church and looked over those gathered. His was one of the three largest Presbyterian congregations in Virginia, and only 27 had turned out.

But of all the city's churches, only his and one other opened that morning.

The parishioners moved up into the eight front pews, and Armstrong left the pulpit and stood among them. As far as he knew, all who could had turned out. The rest were either far away, sick, with the sick, or dead.

"Though absent from us in body, in

spirit they are with us," Armstrong said, "and their prayer and ours is one – that God would say to this wasting pestilence, 'It is enough.'"

Of this small number, he wondered who would come to God's house next Sunday.

After church, Armstrong went back into the city to comfort the sick.

At his first stop, five had been down when he had visited the day before. He entered and saw that people were in dif-

*The Destroyer now had
a grip on a quarter
of the 5,000 people
who were left in Norfolk.*

ferent rooms now. He approved of the sorting, which kept the frantic wailing and violent thrashing of the sickest from exciting those who were on the mend.

The night before, he was told, one of the sick girls dreamed that a monster was about to seize her. She jumped out of bed, ran downstairs screaming and headed for the front door. One of a nurse's chief tasks, and toughest, was to guard against such outbursts.

Armstrong moved to the next house. Because few houses had a healthy resident to answer the door, no one knocked anymore. He walked in and came face to face with a fierce watchdog. The dog didn't move, didn't growl.

A piercing shout came from upstairs, and Armstrong knew at once why the dog was quiet. In one room, a boy lay dying. In agony, the boy had a ruptured blood ves-

sel, and his pale arm stood out against the blood on his pillow.

Yesterday, Armstrong had had a sensible talk with him, but now the boy babbled and his extremities were cold. The scream had come from his sister, in the next room, being held by her mother. The husband and father was in another room, also down with the fever.

"What can we do for this household?" Armstrong wondered. "I know not, but to assist in having Mr. B removed to the hospital, and to secure a coffin for Eugene. Florence will probably not need hers before morning."

Armstrong saw what had happened to Norfolk. House by house, street by street, the fever had crumbled so many pillars that the city collapsed upon itself. Now even the children were left to battle the pestilence themselves, to try to survive.

The city street inspector had come across three children, with dirty hair and tattered clothes, rolling on the ground on Charlotte Street.

Where is your father? the inspector asked.

"Pa-pa is dead," a child said.

Then where is your mother?

"Ma-ma is dead, too."

Good God, the inspector said, who is taking care of you?

"Mary, the colored woman next door, gives us some bread every day."

With too few coffins, bodies were being wrapped in rugs, bound together and put in the ground. Reports were that some graves were less than 2 feet deep.

Richmond sent down a steamer stacked with 125 coffins, and the commander of the Navy Yard in Portsmouth put every carpenter to work building more. A letter from the commander's office warned Norfolk not to expect many.

"We find it difficult to supply the demand on us from Portsmouth and the hospital."

The Richmond relief committee wrote to say that it had secured Catholic College, and it requested that Norfolk and Portsmouth send their orphans to stay there. The city sent six horses for the physicians, along with 25 bales of hay, 100 bushels of oats and 40 barrels of crackers.

The workers at the Navy Yard in Philadelphia gathered \$2,300, which brought the city's total to nearly \$10,000, and it was sent down along with 100 ounces of quinine and 50 boxes of lemons.

Baltimore shipped four dozen mattresses and pillows, two dozen cots, 12 boxes of candles, four barrels of shoulder bacon, four bags of coffee, two barrels of sugar, six kegs each of lard and butter, two barrels of porter and two of ale,

six dozen kegs of brandy and promised a daily supply of 100 pounds of bread for the hospital.

The Destroyer now had a grip on a quarter of the 5,000 people who were left in Norfolk, including the Catholic priest and the president of the railroad.

One day, the Richmond Dispatch came out with a thin Norfolk report. The pestilence had struck VERDAD's entire family, and he was at home caring for them.

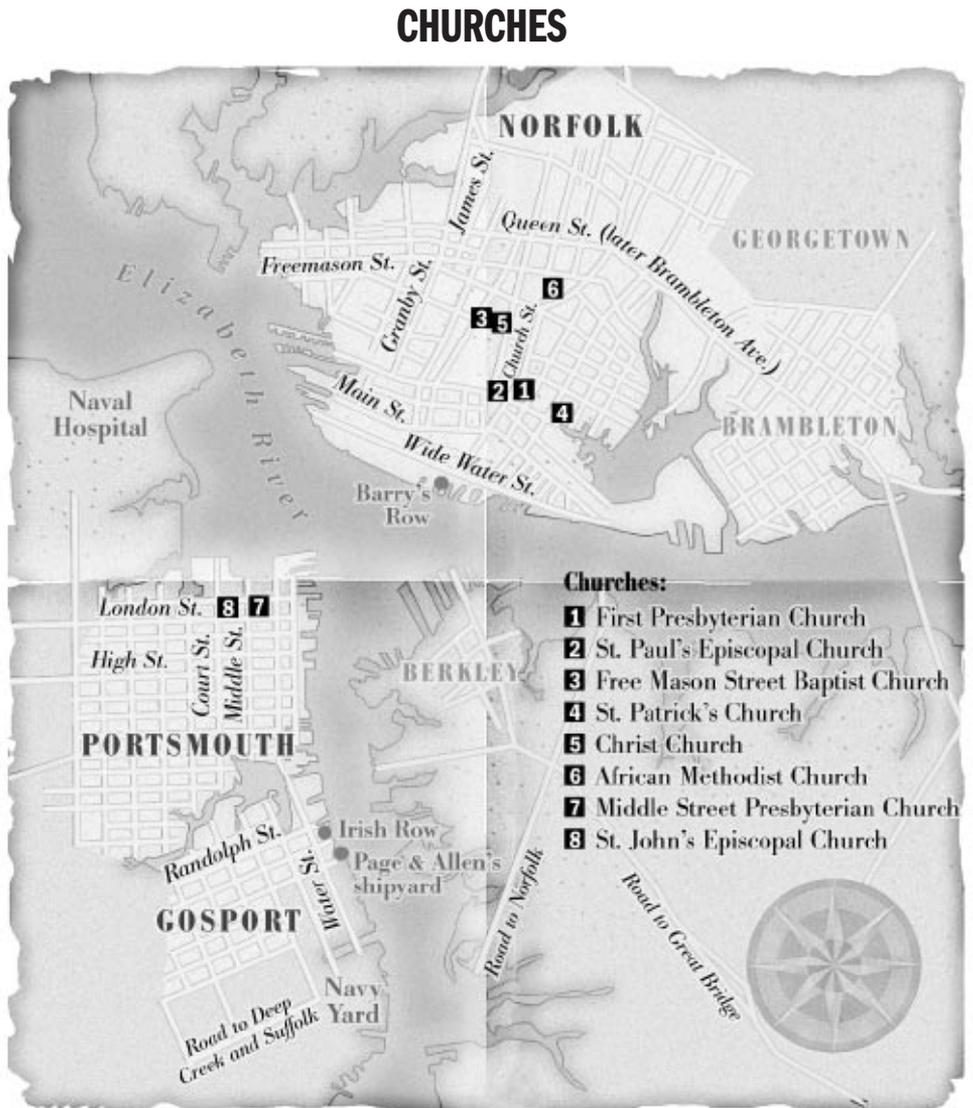
At a meeting in Hampton, people discussed a plan to remove the entire



Now, even the children were left to battle the pestilence themselves, to try to survive.

remaining populace of the infected cities to Old Point Comfort. Others thought a better spot would be Craney Island. The Baltimore relief group donated tents for 4,000 people for the relocation and would send them on a steamer.

Norfolk established martial law in order to confiscate horses for the doctors and considered forcing black women to serve as nurses. Physicians reported 12 daily deaths to the Howard Association, but all order was gone, filing death certificates was not a priority and most thought 40 or 50 a day were dying.



XINNING HUANG/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

One newspaper reported that about 400 people, many of them blacks, had died because of a lack of care.

G.W. Peete of the Portsmouth relief group wrote to a counterpart in Baltimore: "We are so stricken that we know not what to do, save to suffer, and hope in God."

Armstrong made one more stop that Sunday. A woman who had recovered sat by her husband and father. Armstrong saw perspiration beading on the husband's forehead and knew he would soon be dead.

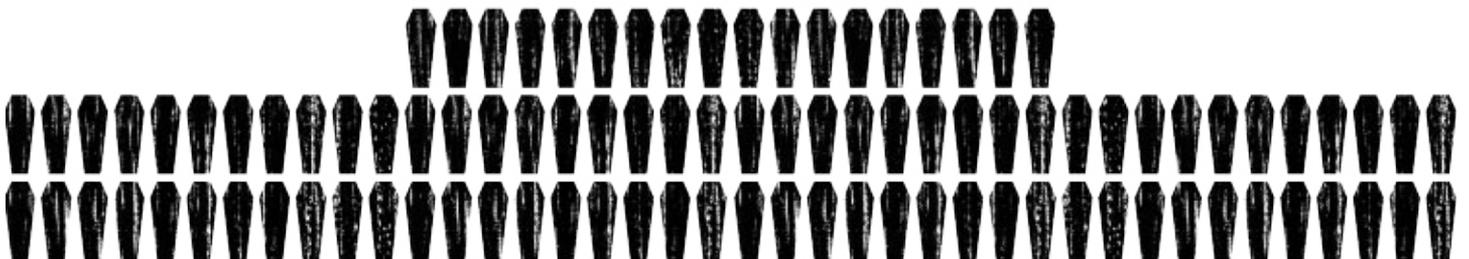
The family, in normal times, spent

many hours visiting the church's elderly and sick. Now they sat, alone, waiting to die. He had heard no question more depressing than what the wife asked him:

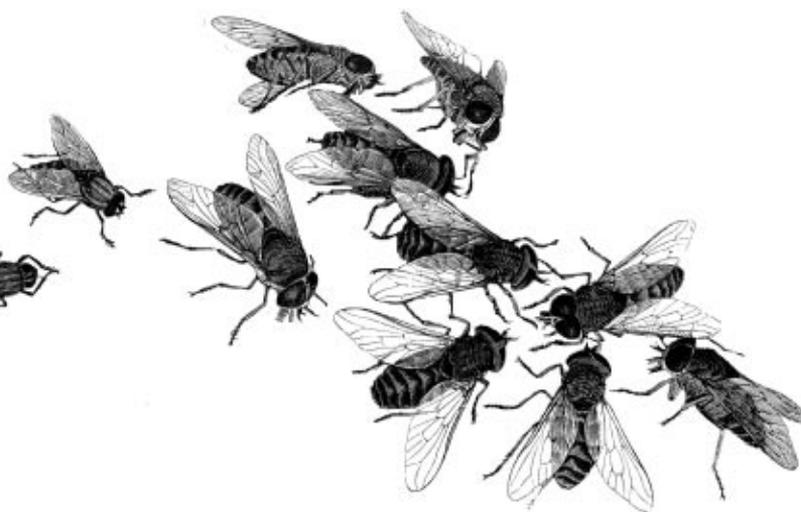
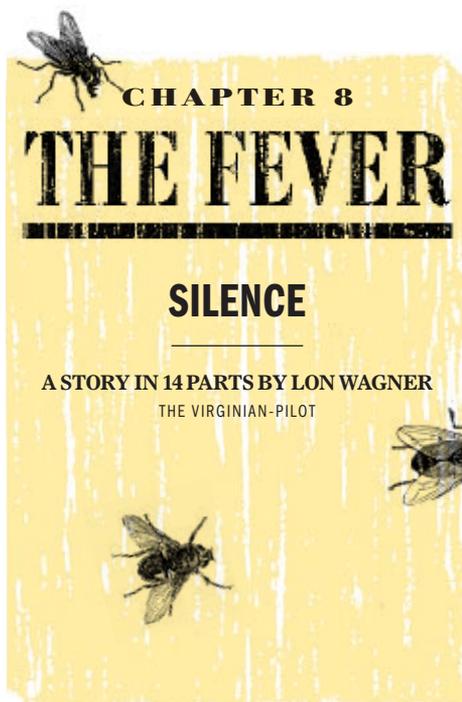
"All our pleasant things are laid to waste," she said. "Can you get someone to help us lay him out?"

Armstrong shut his eyes and quietly prayed: "Wilt thou refrain thyself from these things, O Lord?"

It wouldn't take many more weeks like this, he thought, to leave the city entirely without people.



The approximate death toll as of Sept. 2, 1855: 980 (one coffin represents 10 victims)



Around the doors and windows of nearly every home, George Armstrong saw plague flies hovering.

The pestilence held Norfolk firmly by the throat.

Wails of death echoed down the streets. The council approved the digging of trenches for burials at Potter's Field. When it seemed as though the situation had hit bottom, the fever broke out at an asylum of orphaned children.

William Ferguson, head of the Howard Association, wrote to the Baltimore relief group pleading for more aid: "Continue your supplies until you are broke."

VERDAD returned to his reporting and continued assailing the absentee residents. The Howard Association, he had learned, had received letters requesting that the officers look after servants left behind.

"But not a dime do these absentees – many of them rich in this world's goods – send as a contribution to our afflicted and destitute poor," he wrote. He intended to help the association expose them once the epidemic ended.

Meanwhile, at the city jail, VERDAD got an earlier wish. A man named Goslin, accused in a slaying, died of the fever.

The Rev. William Jackson of St. Paul's seemed to shock everyone by remaining healthy, despite ministering to half of the city and helping run the orphan asylum. He and George Armstrong often ran into each other at the cemetery.

It was a mild day, in the mid-70s on Sept. 6, when Armstrong headed to another burial. The carriage he rode in and another followed the hearse, rattling over the cobblestone streets.

The Richmond Dispatch estimated 800 deaths so far in Norfolk. Reports were that 80 people a day were dying, but as Armstrong thought through it, there had to be more.

He had been to the cemetery the day

before at 4 in the afternoon and asked the gravedigger how many graves were ordered for the day. "Forty-three," the man said. Across the way, at Potter's Field, Armstrong saw crude boxes piled as high as a man could reach and watched men nearby digging a pit. A supervisor told Armstrong that they had to bury 40. And he knew that for the past week they had buried the dead until 10 at night. Certainly, more than 90 a day were falling, and this didn't take into account those buried at St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery.

Elmwood had opened two years earlier, when plots in Cedar Grove began to sell out, and a small bridge over Smith's Creek linked the two cemeteries. With the epidemic, Elmwood began filling quickly.

When the carriages arrived, the head gravedigger opened the gate. Instead of silently pointing them to the grave or politely whispering to ask the name of the deceased, he demanded, "Who's this?"

He directed them to the family's plot, but no grave had been dug. The hearse couldn't wait, the carriages had other appointments. The men wrestled the coffin from the hearse, sat it on the ground and Armstrong held a short prayer.

Before leaving, he paused to look around.

Usually, in September, the grounds

were lush and a quiet befitting a resting place settled under the old cedar trees. Now, men labored in every part of the cemetery, the sound of a shovel crunching into earth rang from all directions, the lawn looked more like a plowed field.

"The city and the cemetery have changed characters," Armstrong thought. "The latter now wears the busy aspect which belongs to the former; and almost the silence of death reigns in the deserted streets."

On his way home that night, Armstrong walked past his house and toward the river to look over the harbor at sunset.

Around the doors and windows of nearly every home, he saw plague flies hovering. The flies had materialized a few days earlier, and although disturbing brought about optimism. During epidemics in other Southern cities, they had signaled the climax of the crisis.

Blacks thought that plague flies ate the "matter which constitutes the immediate cause of the disease."

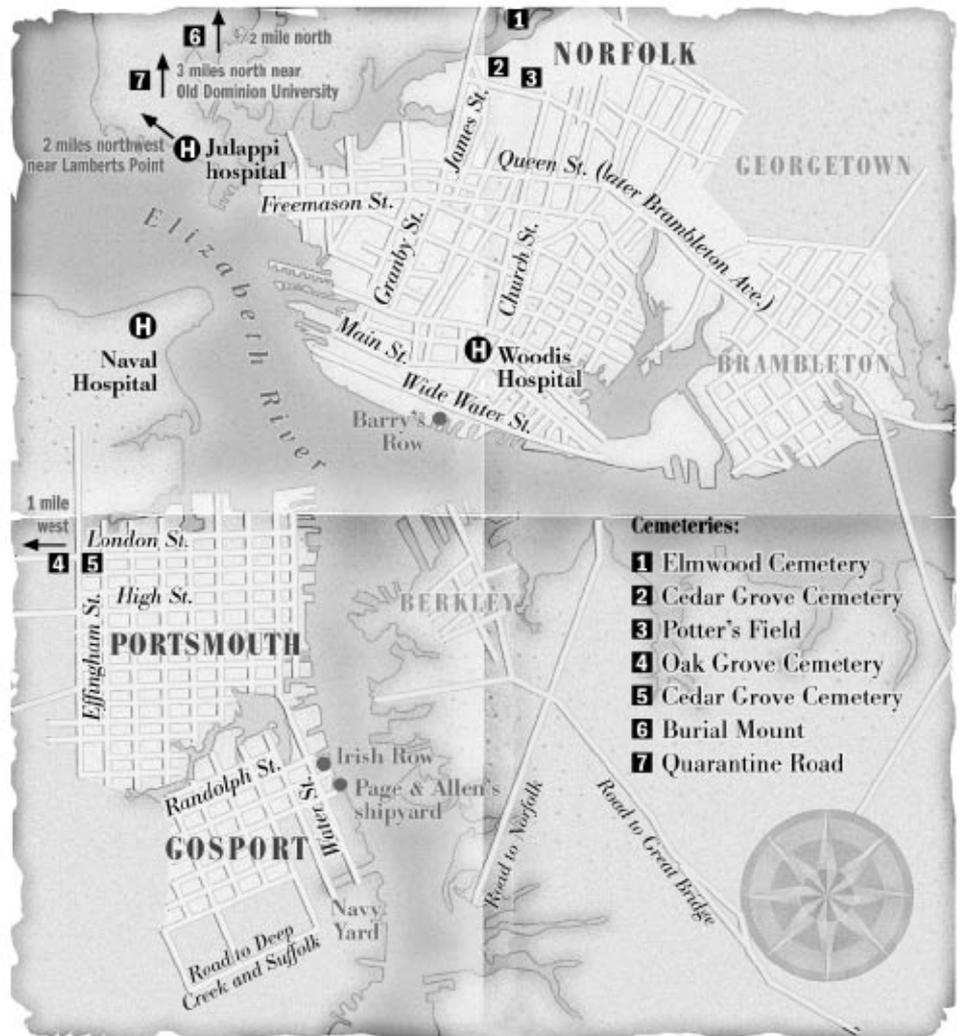
Plague flies were nearly identical to blowflies, Armstrong thought, the main difference being the texture and color of the wings. He had tried to collect some for a physician in another city to examine. He put them in a vial and corked it, but when he looked again in a few days all that remained was dark dust.

Armstrong walked out onto the drawbridge and squinted. It was a cool, clear evening, and the sun backlit the city's waterfront. The wharves jutted into the water, their names painted in bold white on the sides: Colley's, Campbell's, Butler & Camp's, Ferguson & Milhado's, all the way up to Hardy's at Town Point.

"All appear as usual, saving that their



CEMETERIES



XINNING HUANG/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

“The city and the cemetery have changed characters,” Armstrong thought.

“The latter now wears the busy aspect which belongs to the former; and almost the silence of death reigns in the deserted streets.”

doors and windows are closed,” Armstrong noticed, “and there is no living thing to be seen about them.”

Many of the names were those of dead or dying entrepreneurs, and Armstrong thought that several would have to be repainted.

During much of the year, vessels would line up and wait at the wharf heads five or six deep. Armstrong saw two ships in the entire harbor – a fishing smack sunken at the county dock, its mast sticking out of the water, and a ship drawn up for repairs in an abandoned yard.

The only working ship that dared enter the harbor these days was the small steamer the Joseph E. Coffee. Steamer operators from other cities were too frightened to touch in Norfolk, and the Coffee met them in Hampton Roads, loaded their supplies, then shuttled into the inner harbor.

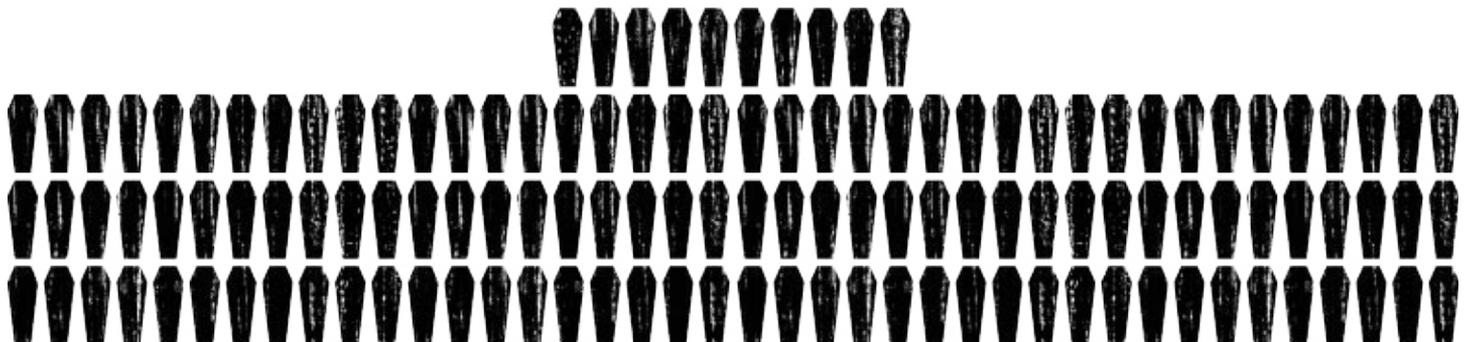
Armstrong had seen it sailing in yesterday, its entire deck piled with the city’s main import, empty coffins.

The city’s transformation, in just a few weeks, staggered Armstrong. One of the East Coast’s finest harbors, saws buzzing and hammers banging a month earlier, was more forsaken than if it were full of submerged rocks.

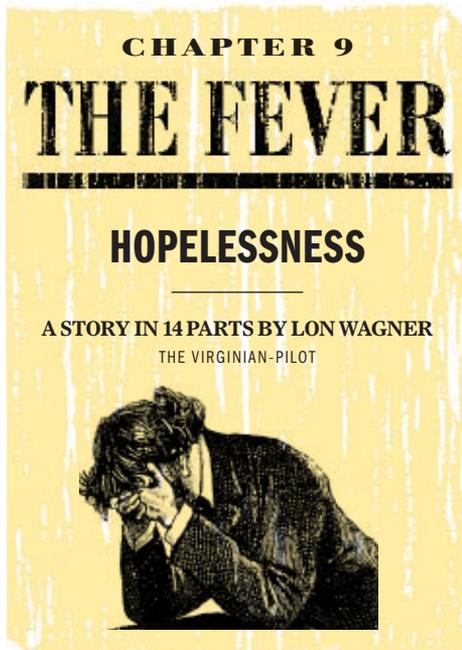
“The coming of a ship into her harbour today would cause almost as much

surprise to the beholder as did the first ship whose hull rippled the surface of her waters to the Indian who then dwelt here.”

Armstrong walked back home, and after a 15-hour day went straight to bed. But he was irritable and nervous. He couldn’t get to sleep.



The death toll as of Sept. 6, 1855: 1,300 (one coffin represents 10 victims)



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."

A slave from Washington County sent 10 cents

and a note:

"... it may help in buying some nourishment for some of the many orphans ..."

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



DELORES JOHNSON/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Norfolk's Elmwood Cemetery was established two years before the epidemic.



COURTESY OF KIRN LIBRARY SARGEANT MEMORIAL ROOM

The Rev. James Chisholm, minister of St. John's Church in Portsmouth, suffered through his wife's death in February 1855. Friends urged him to leave Portsmouth when the epidemic took hold, but he remained in town to comfort parishioners – until the fever struck him, too.

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.

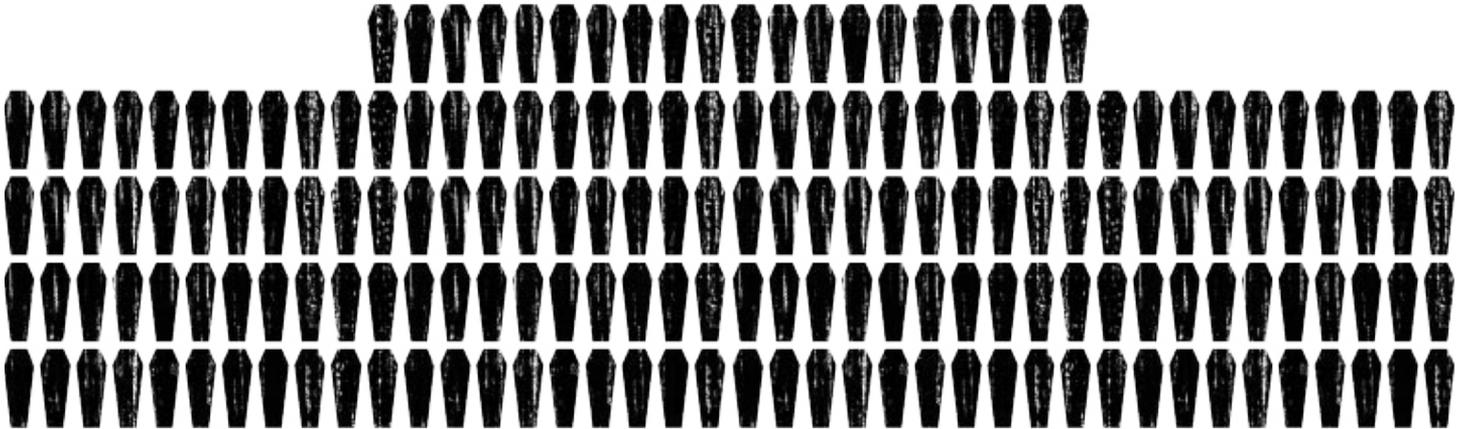
"One by one, men with sad countenances came," Armstrong noticed, "and, receiving their letters and papers, turned and went away again, one hardly having the heart to speak to another."

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.



The death toll as of Sept. 12, 1855: 1,800 (one coffin represents 10 victims)

CHAPTER 10

THE FEVER



STRICKEN

A STORY IN 14 PARTS BY LON WAGNER
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

George Armstrong discounted any worries about his symptoms, figuring his lack of rest was the cause. He ate breakfast and went out to visit the sick. He followed one body to the cemetery to offer a final prayer, but he could do no more.

He returned to his house at 10 a.m. and went to bed.

As much as he didn't want to admit it, Armstrong had the fever.

His anxiousness had been the first sign. His premonition about his birthday weighed on him, he couldn't push it aside or rationalize it. He would turn 42 in two days.

Armstrong went downhill until that Saturday, his birthday, when he found himself in a struggle for his life.

He would awake with that terrible irritability. He knew from the nurses that his life depended on being able to lie still and keep his clothes and sheets on, but every minute the restlessness became worse.

Every minute seemed like an hour.

After five minutes, he ached to strip off every bit of clothing, every sheet, even his own skin if he could. He reasoned with himself that as a Christian minister, as a husband and father, lives depended on his recovery. You must lie still, he scolded himself. Logic failed him.

"I would rather die than lie still," he thought.

He grabbed a chip of ice, sucked on it and collapsed on the bed. Two minutes later, he was awake again.

His fractured mind raced through the sick he had visited for the past few weeks and, finally, he understood what the victims had endured.

The nervousness was so severe that Armstrong had even seen a man in a stupor, just before death, thrashing and wailing. He recalled the physician who had said that he had never felt as powerless in treating any disease.

"In some of the forms," the doctor had told Armstrong, "it laughs at the skill of the physician."

Anything that irritated Armstrong's stomach also increased his jitters. He took doses of castor oil, followed by

and rain slapped against Armstrong's house. The dampness, most thought, would be bad for the sick.

With the cooler days, people assumed the fever was finally retreating. By the third week of September, deaths in each city were down to about two dozen a day.

In other visits of the pestilence, a hard frost normally had ended the siege.

Dr. John Schoolfield of the Portsmouth sanitary committee warned that the fever was not on the wane, it had just run out of victims.

N.C. Whitehead, Norfolk's acting mayor, wrote to the Richmond Dispatch that the Howard Association had received a total of \$100,000, but it was spending \$2,500 a day. The disease, Whitehead said, was raging with equal violence as before, though most refused to go to hospitals.

"The suffering and misery in private houses is beyond description," he wrote. "Norfolk is the most complete wreck you ever saw, or could imagine. Two thousand or 2,500 of the people have been swept off."

"The very stamina and base of our society, the mechanics, merchants, physicians, lawyers, ministers, are all gone. And still they fall."

William Ferguson, the president of the Howard Association, had been seized. The health officer who had inspected the Benjamin Franklin came down with the fever. Dr. George Upshur died, but courteous to the end, first sent a message asking his fellow physicians and Masonic lodge members if 2 p.m. would suit for his funeral.

The Dispatch editors had their own "melancholy news."

Richard T. Halstead had died. VERDAD was no more. He left a wife and three young children.

One morning, the steamer Augusta idled in Hampton Roads, but the Joseph E. Coffee never showed up for its rendezvous. The Coffee's engineer had the fever, the young man who had tended bar and sorted mail had died, the captain's daughter had died and others in his family were sick.

Mistakes in burying were common, the Dispatch wrote, and it was often difficult to find where a dead relative rested.

"The plan of burying in pits still continues," the paper reported. "Eight coffins are put down side by side, then dirt is thrown in and leveled off; after which another tier is placed at right angles with the first. There have been as many as four tiers."

Bank officers, those who were left, faced a problem with checks, the



The fever had attacked Grace Armstrong, the 5-year-old daughter, at the same time as her father.

enemas of oil and warm water. Mustard baths and orange-leaf tea relieved his burning stomach.

Armstrong battled the fever his entire birthday, the cycle of sweats, chills and nausea beginning again every 10 minutes, taunting him like a character in a Greek myth. His mind tortured him, too: He couldn't slough off the idea that he wouldn't survive the day.

As the fever tormented him indoors, a cool wind whipped from the northeast

*Armstrong battled the fever his entire birthday,
the cycle of sweats, chills and nausea beginning again every
10 minutes, taunting him like a character in a Greek myth.*

Dispatch wrote: "In numerous instances, the maker, the endorser or both are dead."

It was dark now, in Armstrong's bedroom, other than a lamp burning on the mantel. Its light flickered onto a clock that Armstrong had put there to help him mark time.

The fever had taunted him for three days, seeming to fade, then circling back and inflicting pain time and again.

Now, worn out, thinking he might never be released from the destroyer's grasp, Armstrong looked over at the clock again. Its hands had passed midnight. He had made it through his birthday.

A few days later, he was able to sit up. He felt feeble, far from recovered and still susceptible to relapse. Armstrong would be no help to his parishioners in this condition, and he and his family sat around making plans to leave

the city.

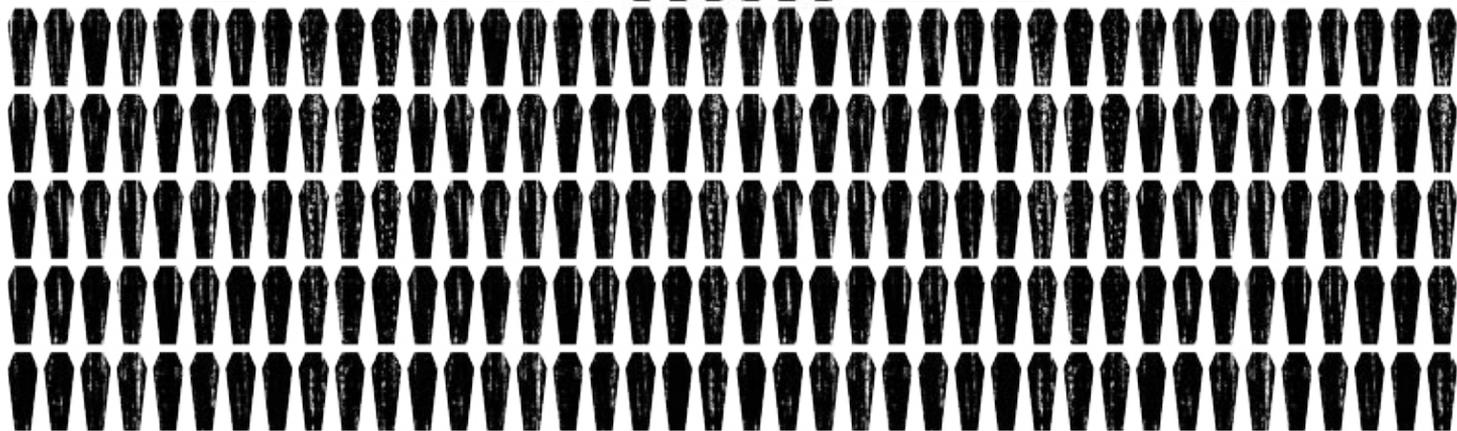
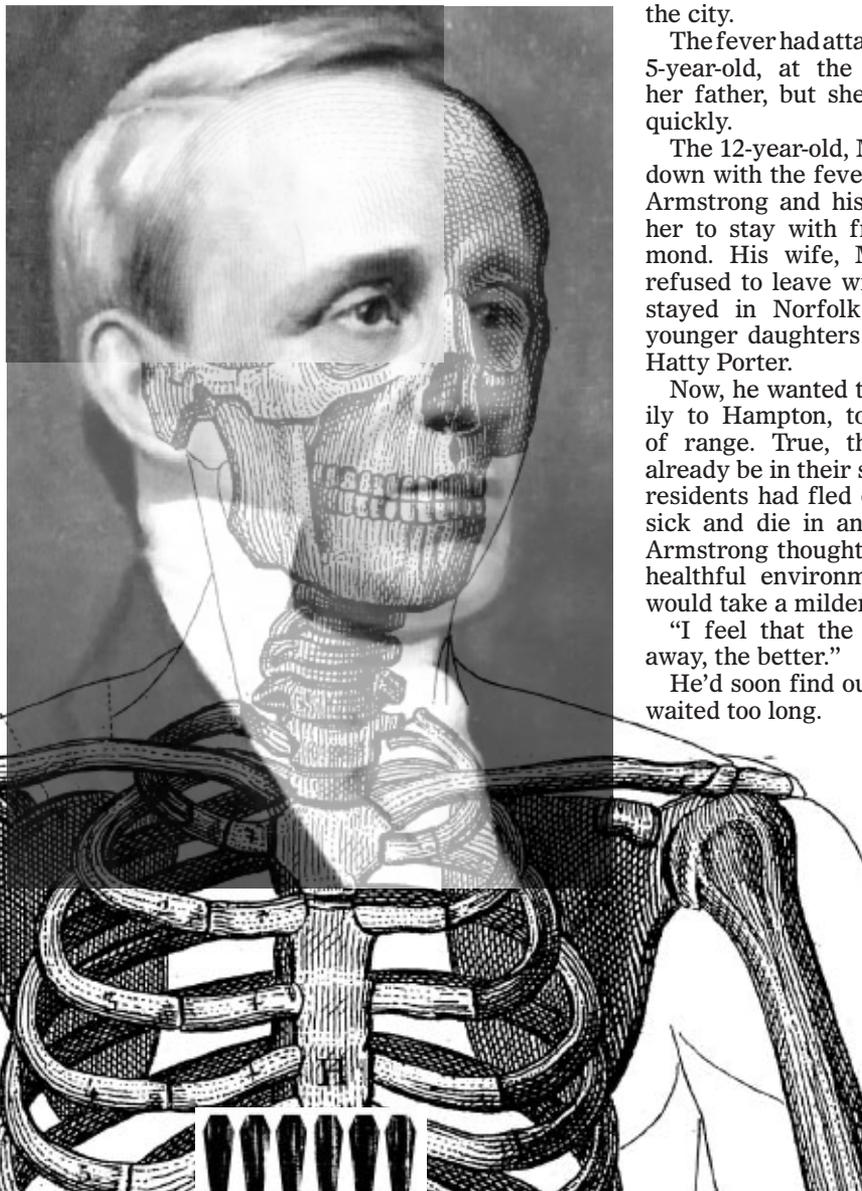
The fever had attacked Grace, the 5-year-old, at the same time as her father, but she bounced back quickly.

The 12-year-old, Mary, had come down with the fever and survived. Armstrong and his wife had sent her to stay with friends in Richmond. His wife, Mehetable, had stayed to leave without him, and stayed in Norfolk with the two younger daughters and her sister, Hatty Porter.

Now, he wanted to take the family to Hampton, to get them out of range. True, the poison may already be in their systems – many residents had fled only to become sick and die in another city. But Armstrong thought that in a more healthful environment, the fever would take a milder form.

"I feel that the sooner we get away, the better."

He'd soon find out that they had waited too long.



The death toll as of late September 1855: 2,060 (one coffin represents 10 victims)

CHAPTER 11

THE FEVER



ANGUISH

A STORY IN 14 PARTS BY LON WAGNER
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

The Armstrongs were at home, packing for their trip to Hampton, when a letter arrived from Richmond.

The fever had come back on Mary and, as the letter was being written, she was throwing up the black vomit. George Armstrong thought that her case sounded fatal, not because of the vomit; in the past month, he had seen people get that and recover.

But most people could not survive a second attack. Mary had a shattered constitution, he knew, and would be too weak to fight the fever off again. His wife, Mehetable, couldn't concede as easily.

"The strong love of a mother's heart made her cling to the idea that, if she could but reach her child, and nurse her with her own hands, as she had through the first attack, she might yet live."

The Armstrongs changed their plans. Mehetable would set out for Richmond early the next morning, and her husband would go with Hatty, Cornelia and Grace to Hampton for a few days.

During the first week of autumn, to the surprise of many, the fever raged with wicked malignancy. On Sept. 22, five doctors died. Portsmouth's former mayor, Heskiah Stoakes, was down because of fatigue. Since July, Stoakes had hammered together more than 19,000 board

feet of coffins.

Norfolk's postmaster died. Benjamin Quick of O'Brien & Quick undertakers died.

Even without newspapers, the worst news residents had heard since Hunter Woodis' death spread fast. William B. Ferguson, president of the Norfolk Howard Association, was gone. The city, the Richmond Dispatch wrote, was "in a perfect stupor."

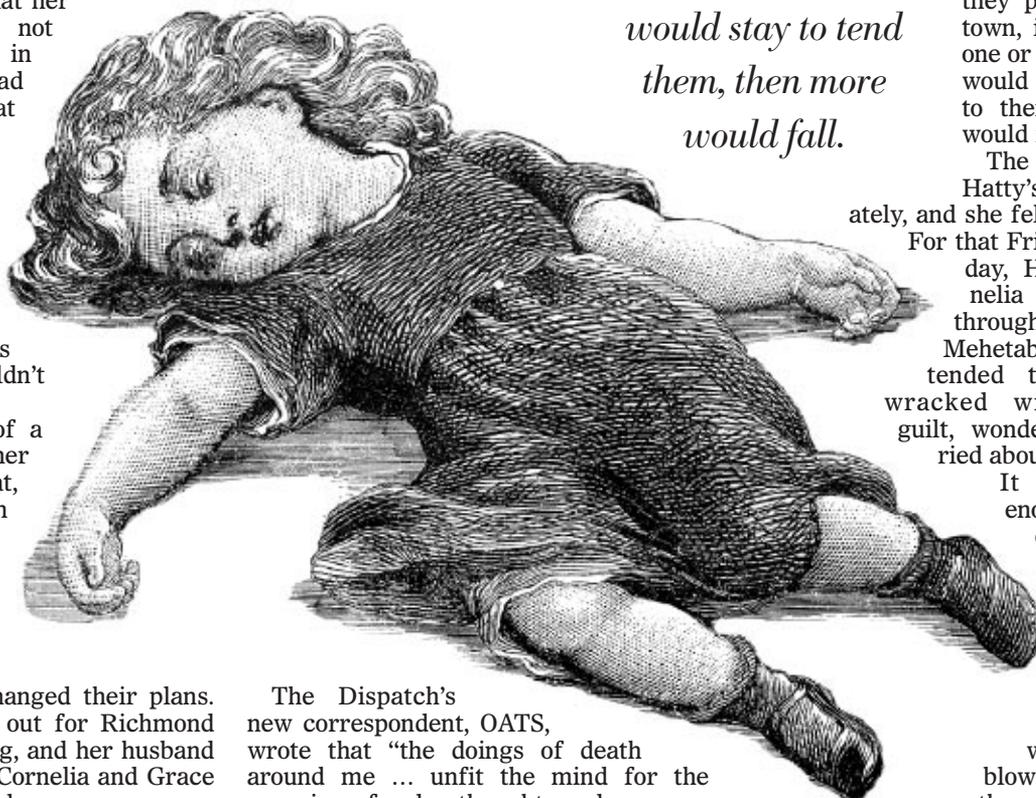
"His name will be remembered by old and young, rich and poor," the paper wrote. "The little ones, bereaved by the monster, will talk of his deeds of generosity and love and mercy for long years to come."

In remembrance of another downed hero, a Seaboard and Roanoke train ran its route shrouded in black cloth for its late president, Dr. William Collins.

Few were on the streets of either city, except for doctors, their couriers, nurses and ministers. As best anyone could tell, Portsmouth's population was down to 2,200 - 2,000 of whom were either battling the fever or recovering.

Those who were healthy were emotionally wrecked by what they had seen.

*As a family would
plan to leave town,
the fever would strike
one or two, the others
would stay to tend
them, then more
would fall.*



The Dispatch's new correspondent, OATS, wrote that "the doings of death around me ... unfit the mind for the exercise of calm thought, and unnerve the hand that would picture in appropriate language the scenes of woe, suffering and bereavement."

In New York churches that Sunday, hundreds turned out in black dresses.

"The fashionable stores up town," a correspondent wrote, "which deal exclu-

sively in crapes and other 'weeds of woe,' it is said have done a large business the few weeks past."

A few hours after reading the letter about Mary, George Armstrong startled awake about midnight. He heard the wind picking up, felt the atmosphere change.

His nervous system was still frayed, and he couldn't get back to sleep. He worried that the fever was not done with his family.

About 3 a.m., Armstrong heard a door down the hallway open. It came from the room where Cornelia, his 8-year-old, was sleeping with her Aunt Hatty.

Even before rising from bed, Armstrong seemed to know what was coming. Cornelia had all the symptoms of the fever. By 10 a.m., both Cornelia and Hatty were back in bed.

The family changed plans again; Mehetable Armstrong would remain in Norfolk and nurse her daughter and sister, and they would put Mary's fate in God's hands.

George Armstrong had seen the fever drag down so many families like this. As they planned to flee town, it would strike one or two, the others would stay to tend to them, then more would fall.

The fever seized Hatty's mind immediately, and she fell into a stupor. For that Friday and Saturday, Hatty and Cornelia tried to fight through the fever as Mehetable Armstrong tended to them and, wracked with motherly guilt, wondered and worried about Mary.

It was chilly enough that Sunday morning for George Armstrong to light the fireplaces throughout the house. Yet again, winds had blown in from the northeast, the temperature peaked early at 66

then dropped.

On Sabbath days, children normally were seen dressed spryly and walking to church, but today only a few scurried on errands for sick parents, sent to the charity store for supplies.

No churches in either Portsmouth or Norfolk opened for service. Armstrong stayed at home, mired in his own Old Testament nightmare.

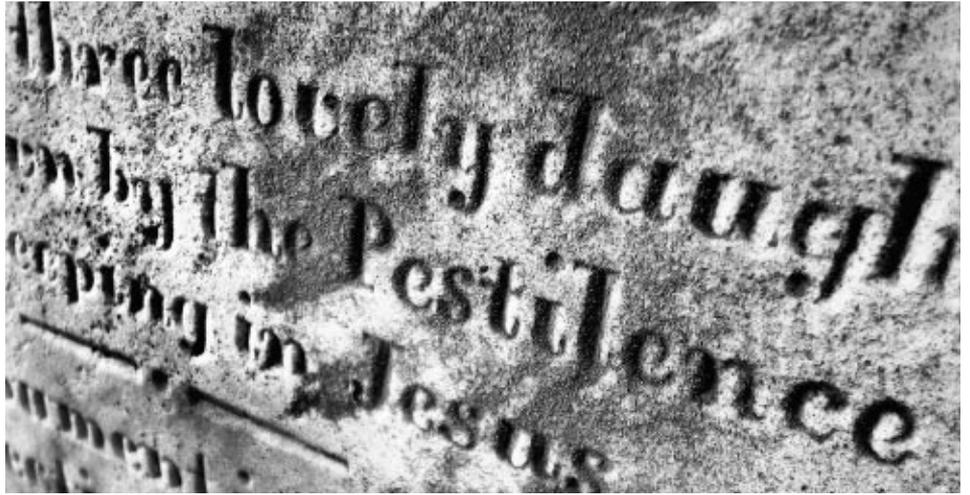
With two in the house sick and no one to supervise her, Grace had played all day Saturday, worn herself out and now the fever assailed her again. She and Cornelia were so weak that Armstrong was nearly resolved that they would succumb.

Then came news of Mary. A messenger arrived at the Armstrong house: Mary had died three days earlier.

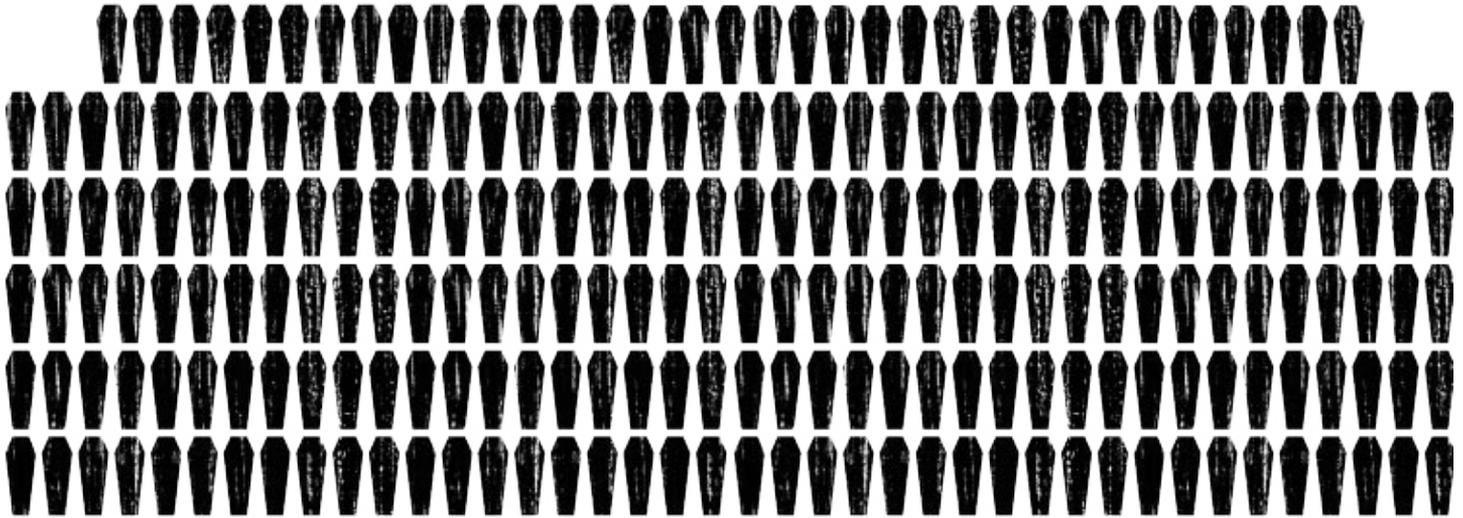
Within hours, Hatty died.

Armstrong thought it must be the darkest day of his life, his eldest daughter dead, his other two fighting for their lives.

Then, it darkened more.



DELORES JOHNSON/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT



The death toll as of late September 1855: 2,350 (one coffin represents 10 victims)



*The fever continued
to take its toll on those who
had tempted fate by staying
to care for others.*

Mehetable Armstrong had been her husband's strength throughout the epidemic. When the fever invaded Mary's system the first time, her mother had held her, fed her and encouraged her through it.

Often, George Armstrong thought, the wife and mother of a family outshined the husband with her fortitude.

Now she was face to face with the fever.

George Armstrong saw that his earlier devotion to the sick bought him respect and goodwill now that he most needed it. Dr. William Freeman, the first volunteer from Philadelphia, and Dr. William Moore, the Armstrongs' family physician, attended to Armstrong's wife and daughters.

"Give and it shall be given unto you," Armstrong thought.

He knew that his wife was ill, but her case did not seem fatal.

As the Armstrong family suffered, the cities showed early signs that they had punched through the worst of the epidemic. David Fiske, Portsmouth's mayor, planned to restart the Transcript at the end of the month.

Even with this optimistic event came a caveat: His only compositor would be his son, Charles, who had survived an attack.

Bob Butt turned up in downtown Portsmouth for the first time in weeks.

Butt, a slave, and his crew of 10 gravediggers had buried many of the city's dead, and it was a good omen to see him not at work.

Volunteer physicians met and reported that some were now idle, and based on previous yellow fever outbreaks they expected an abatement of the epidemic in October. They petitioned the mayor to leave on Oct. 1.

Still, the cities were shrouded with images of death and sickness – buildings empty as though people fled from an invading army, the recovered looking frail and battered, ambling the streets.

The fever continued to take its toll on those who had tempted fate by staying to care for others.

Dr. Henry Selden had already buried a child, then he and two other children came down with the fever. The Rev. William Jackson, minister of St. Paul's Episcopal, across the street from Armstrong's church, had spent too much time visiting in the infected district and became ill. The Rev. William Jones of the African Methodist Church on Bute Street and his daughter died.

Cornelia and Grace seemed to be recovering, but Armstrong had already lost his nephew, a daughter and his sister-in-law, and his wife was in peril. On Monday, one of the physicians caring for Mehetable Armstrong began showing symptoms – Moore left to crawl into his own sickbed.

That evening, Mehetable Armstrong got the black vomit.

Freeman came by the next morning.

His next gesture flattered George Armstrong, and perhaps Freeman couldn't have made the offer earlier in the epidemic, but the physician said he would stay in the Armstrong home. They tended to her that Tuesday throughout the night and the next day, and the following night Freeman stayed at the house again.

Armstrong thought that



FILE PHOTO BY JIM WALKER

Slave Bob Butt dug the graves for many Portsmouth residents during the 1855 yellow fever outbreak. Tom Sledge, left, portrayed Butt during the 1998 Historic Cedar Grove Cemetery History Walk.

Freeman's dedication would be futile. He had cared for so many of the sick that he had seen the fever assume different forms with different victims.

But never had he seen anyone more than 25 years old survive the black vomit, and Mehetable Armstrong was 31.

On Wednesday morning, George Armstrong brought Cornelia and Grace to their mother's bedside. She gave them mementos of herself and asked them a favor: In the future, when they spoke and thought of her, please don't picture

her like this.

The girls left, and Armstrong sat by his wife's bed.

"It will be pleasant to meet again with your mother," he said, "and our dear little ones."

She said nothing for a moment, then agreed.

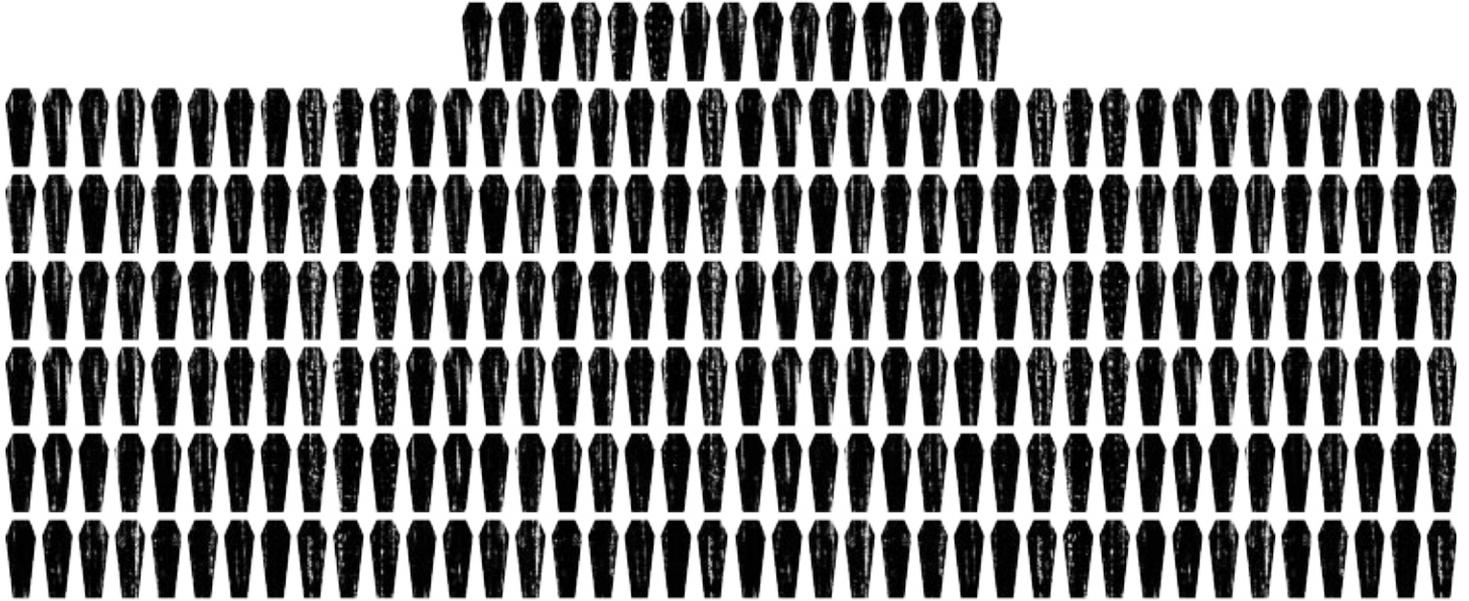
"A pleasanter prospect than that," she said, "as it now appears to me, is that I shall soon see Jesus and love him as I ought."

During the past six or seven weeks, George Armstrong had felt as though he

stood in some netherworld, offering little more than a string of "God speed you's" to one after another of his church members, friends and family.

In that time, his definition of a miracle had changed, and now he saw one. His wife was spared the physical suffering of most victims, and he knew that God must be with her.

She died the next morning. Armstrong located a coffin and that evening he again rode to Elmwood Cemetery. He stood and prayed as his wife was lowered into the earth.



The approximate death toll as of Sept. 27, 1855: 2,550 (one coffin represents 10 victims)

CHAPTER 13

THE FEVER



NUMB

A STORY IN 14 PARTS BY LON WAGNER
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

estant 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.

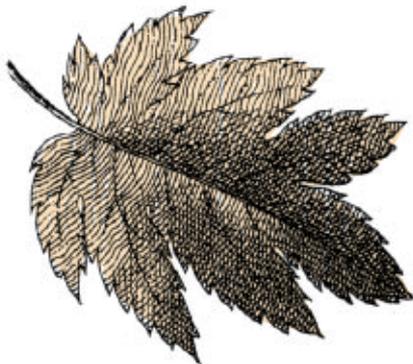
Fear still plagued residents, and one night someone set Woodis Hospital on fire in two places. It was windy and much of the central city could have burned, but

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.

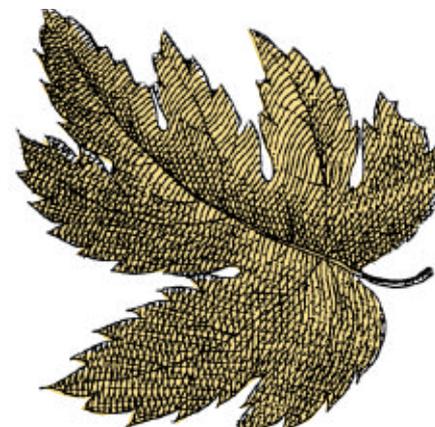
Just after the fever had appeared, Jackson had told Armstrong that he had canceled plans to leave the city. "Should this fever spread, as it seems reason to fear that it will, we shall all be needed," Jackson had told him.

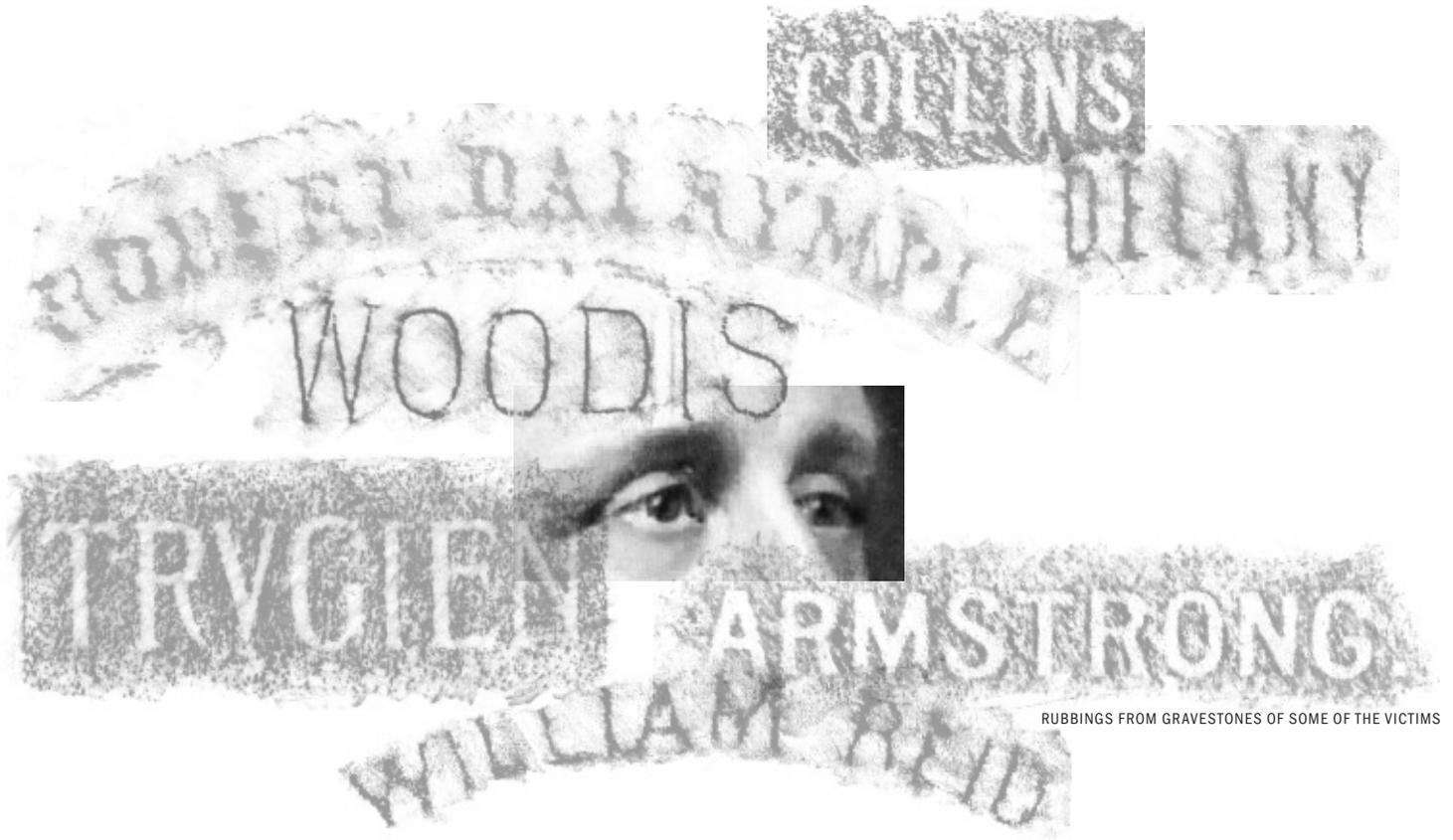
Armstrong remembered writing to his friend in Philadelphia defending the clergy's dedication, saying that without a miracle several ministers' graves would prove it. But as he watched Jackson's body being lowered into a grave, Armstrong shuddered. The toll had been greater than he imagined.

Of the seven Prot-



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





RUBBINGS FROM GRAVESTONES OF SOME OF THE VICTIMS

the flames were quickly extinguished.

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

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

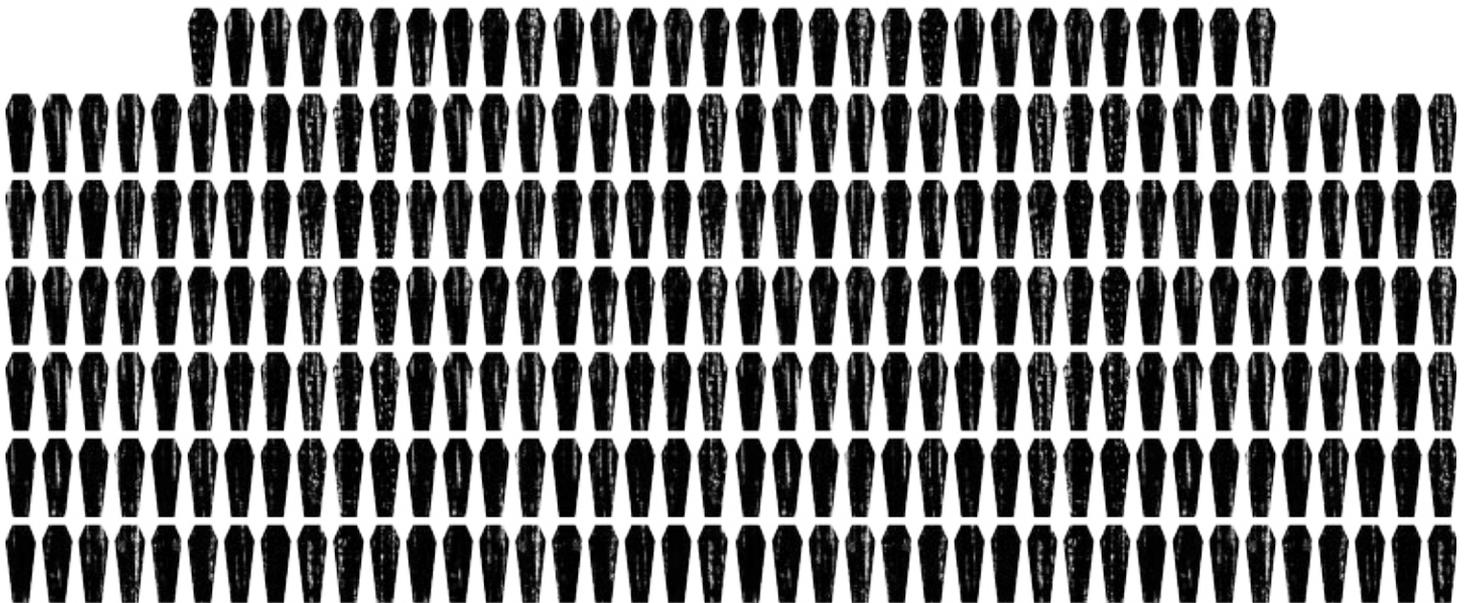
Soon, people scrambled for overcoats for the winter and, finally, tailors became

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.



The approximate death toll as of early November 1855: 2,700 (one coffin represents 10 victims)

CHAPTER 14

THE FEVER



EPILOGUE

SCARRED CITIES
STRUGGLE
FOR YEARS AS
SCIENCE TACKLES
EPIDEMIC'S CAUSE

A STORY IN 14 PARTS BY LON WAGNER
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

On Nov. 11, George Armstrong stepped into the First Presbyterian pulpit for the first time in two months. Scanning the faces of those in the pews, for a moment, he couldn't speak, couldn't shake off the sadness of the scene.

Throughout the pestilence's grip on the city, he had been too busy or too sick to think about its lasting devastation. Now that stared back at him.

Only half of the families were there, many with gaping holes. Only three families were not clad in black. The fever had knocked church membership back a decade.

Throughout the sanctuary, in vacant seats, he pictured the faces of the people who had sat there Sunday after Sunday – and would never again fill those seats.

His eyes shifted to another part of the church, where more than 60 children sat. They were dressed neatly, ranging in age from 2 to 14, orphans of the epidemic.

"Some of them, when found," he remembered, "were in the house alone



DELORES JOHNSON/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

In Norfolk, a small granite marker on Hampton Boulevard marks the site of a mass grave. Neither Norfolk nor Portsmouth ever built memorials to honor those who gave their lives helping yellow fever victims in the summer of 1855.

with the dead body of their last remaining parent; and they, poor little things, so young that they did not know their own names."

The best salve he could muster was to remind those gathered that the church on earth was never more than a recruiting station, that God had found their relatives worthy of heaven sooner than others.

When he thought of Norfolk's condition, he remembered when he had lived in Lexington and a brush fire had leapt from its confines and scorched mountainsides. A few months later, even after trees and shrubs had begun to green again, desolation had tinged the forest. Trees entirely consumed, mounds of ashes in their place, others with blackened trunks, new leaves seared at the fringes.

"I know not how better to describe our city at the present time," he thought, "than by saying that it forcibly recalls to my mind one of these burnt forests."

After the epidemic, city leaders set out to find its origin. They wanted to confirm that the Benjamin Franklin had imported it – an outbreak known to have a local source would prove that the two cities were unhealthy.

A few of those who persevered through that summer nearly hit upon the cause of yellow fever. Armstrong was among them, as close as any to saving thousands of lives in the next half-century.

Armstrong, and others, focused on the "plague fly" that had appeared toward the end of August and swarmed Portsmouth streets so much that people had to cover their faces to walk.

Armstrong theorized that the insect was a native of countries where yellow fever was indigenous and "that this insect, having been brought here, perhaps in the hold of the Ben Franklin ... has produced its eggs in vast numbers."

In truth, plague flies were likely the blowflies that emerge in decaying flesh. They had appeared in both cities when the weather was hot and bodies waiting for coffins were decomposing in homes.

Yellow fever did come in the hold of the Franklin, but in the form of the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito that lived in the tropics and also in southeastern Virginia.

Mosquitoes were breeding in the Franklin's hold or the open barrels on deck that stored drinking water. Because the Franklin carried both infected mosquitoes and sick crew, it arrived in Hampton Roads a ready-made, floating epidemic.

The mosquitoes infected with yellow fever bit people who then became hosts for the virus. When other mosquitoes bit those people, those insects became infected. As more mosquitoes and people became infected, the epidemic fed itself.

After previous epidemics, Norfolk had attempted to make itself less hospitable to disease by filling in creeks with trees,

logs, torn-down barns and wrecked ships. The wood had decayed, swelled in the sun at low tide, rotted and offered infinite breeding beds.

The Southern Argus called the city's filling of a creek in order to build City Hall – now MacArthur Memorial – “one of the most bungling improvements, in a sanitary point of view, that young America in the wantonness of his youth and folly, ever perpetuated.” The large marsh had drained several smaller feeders, which when cut off became fetid swamps.

The city's streets may have been paved, but many of the houses then sat too low and detritus drained onto the lots.

The two cities were like a fermenting petri dish.

After the first frost that year, the residents who had fled returned to the city. But few were sure how much of a rebirth there would be. If the fever returned again the following summer, many thought residents would flee, never to return. And the cities would go bankrupt.

The Argus took an optimistic view, sarcastically denouncing another paper's doomful prognosis.

“Will there be no carriages, gigs, harness, soap and candles, smith's work, furniture, wanted by those who have heretofore been in the habit of purchasing such articles of manufacture in this market?”

The Argus knew that the cities' past trade hinged on two things – the Dismal Swamp Canal and the Seaboard and Roanoke Railroad – “and we don't know that they are particularly liable to the fever.”

Of course, their operators were. And from the looks of it, much of the city's leadership and entrepreneurial backbone had vanished with the fever.

In cold numbers of deaths, order had so greatly broken down that hardly anyone knew. The Howard Association had an idea – it had employed 25 extra grave-diggers during the fever, and they had buried 2,300 people. That didn't count hastily buried bodies, servants or slaves who had interred their own or those who died out of town.

In Portsmouth, officially, another 900 had been buried. Some estimated that as few as 8,000 remained in the cities, which would mean that more than one out of three died – one of the deadliest epidemics in history.

It was hard to calculate what the pestilence had cost the cities.

How much does it stifle a city's future to lose its young mayor, a man known for being accepting to all parts of the population at a time when many were not? How much is progress slowed by the removal of ambitious business owners? How many jobs might those bold thinkers



Walter Reed

bacteriology.

Yellow fever became a problem for the Army during the Spanish-American War, when the disease felled thousands of soldiers in Cuba. In May 1900, Reed, a major, was appointed president of a board “to study infectious diseases in Cuba paying particular attention to yellow fever.” Other members were doctors James Carroll, Jesse Lazear and Aristides Agramonte. This board eventually proved the transmission by mosquitoes and disproved the common thinking that yellow fever could be transmitted by clothing and bedding soiled by the body fluids of yellow fever sufferers. Their work with the disease was largely responsible for stemming the mortality rates from yellow fever during the building of the Panama Canal in the early 1900s, something that had confounded the French attempt to build in that region only 30 years earlier.



James Carroll



Aristides Agramonte



Jesse Lazear

have created in five, 10 or 25 years?

How many lives would Dr. John Tru-gien have saved during his next 40 or 50 years in practice? When the doctors with bedside seats to the fever died, were ideas about its cause lost with them?

In the 1930s, a live-virus vaccine was developed that is still in use today.

Norfolk and Portsmouth changed little during the second half of the 19th century and reminders of the epidemic could be seen frequently.

In early 1856, firemen led a solemn procession in tribute to the dead through Norfolk's streets. The city's orphans walked in the parade, escorted by the Howard Association and its honorary member, John Jones.

DISCOVERY OF THE CAUSE

Walter Reed (Sept. 13, 1851-Nov. 23, 1902) was a U.S. Army surgeon who led the team that proved the theory supported by the Cuban scientist Dr. Carlos Finlay that yellow fever is transmitted by mosquitoes rather than direct contact.

Soon after graduation from the University of Virginia, Reed became a medical officer in a time of great advances in medicine due to widespread acceptance of Louis Pasteur's germ theory of disease as well as the methods of studying bacteria developed by Robert Koch. Reed worked closely with George Miller Sternberg, the Army surgeon general, who was one of the founders of

Jones, the hearse driver, turned down those who wanted to buy his freedom, because Virginia law would have required him to then leave the state.

That same year, the steamer that had brought the epidemic to the cities was sold to the Venezuelan government. What became of the Benjamin Franklin after that is not known.

In January 1859, a march through the streets again reminded Norfolk of the pestilence.

The bodies of the Philadelphians – 15 physicians, nurses and druggists – were disinterred. A column of 50 men, including the male orphans, escorted the coffins to the steamer that would finally carry the martyrs home.

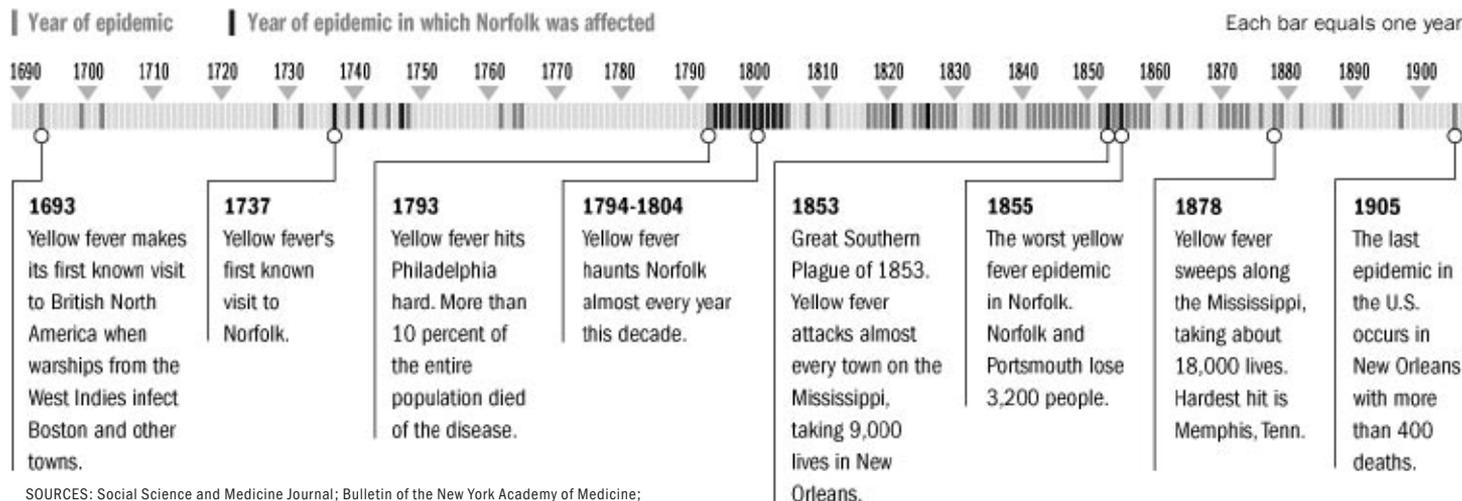
The Civil War came to Norfolk seven years after the 1855 epidemic, with the Northern Army patrolling the city until 1870. The stranglehold of the Union's

YELLOW FEVER IN THE UNITED STATES

From the first known epidemic in 1693 to the last large invasion in 1905, yellow fever haunted the country for more than 200 years, claiming at least 100,000 lives and causing numerous economic losses.

200 YEARS OF FEAR

A look at major yellow fever epidemics in the country:



SOURCES: Social Science and Medicine Journal; Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine; "The Handbook of Texas"; "Scourge of the South"; "The Epidemic of 1878"

occupation, along with decades of reconstruction following, makes an assessment of the fever's long-term damage difficult.

Because of the epidemic and the war, so many wives had been widowed that the city had a problem with homeless women. Many found work only as prostitutes and in saloons. One was Mollie Hogwood, an orphan of the epidemic, who worked downtown and owned more diamonds than any woman "of her class" in the city.

For several decades, downtown Norfolk wallowed in sin, with more than 240 bars, gambling parlors, variety theaters and brothels. A New York publication argued that Norfolk was "the wickedest city in the United States."

Yellow fever continued to terrorize coastal cities for several decades, and its cause was only discovered after it became a military necessity. During the Spanish-American War of 1898, fewer than 1,000 American soldiers and sailors died in combat. But more than 5,000 died of disease, and yellow fever was the most dreaded of those to sweep through the camps.

If the United States was ever to occupy Cuba, a cause and a cure for the fever would have to be found. Two years later, Dr. James Carroll and Dr. Jesse Lazear – U.S. Army colleagues of Dr. Walter Reed – allowed themselves to be bitten by an *Aedes aegypti* mosquito that had fed on several yellow fever patients. Another colleague participating in the research, Dr. Aristides Agramonte, was thought to be immune because of a mild case of yellow fever when he was a boy.



GRAPHIC BY XINNING HUANG WITH DAVID GULLIVER/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

The researchers thought Reed too old to survive the fever, so he went back to Washington. Lazear was infected and died. Carroll became gravely ill. When he recovered, Reed wrote him: "Hip! Hip! Hurrah! God be praised for the news from Cuba today."

The risk the men took led to proof of the cause of yellow fever, along with pioneering the use of human subjects in controlled medical studies. Carroll later became embittered with Reed, feeling slighted that the media and public gave Reed alone credit for the discovery.

in to kill the larvae in any water that could not be drained.

The public's fascination with the disease and the research to combat it continued into the 1900s. A play called "Yellow Jack" launched on Broadway and was followed by a movie.

In the 1930s, a live-virus vaccine was developed that is still in use today. But yellow fever staged a powerful resurgence in South America and Africa in the 1980s and flares up every year.

The World Health Organization estimates that yellow fever causes 200,000 illnesses and 30,000 deaths every year.

The revelation led to new battles with mosquitoes in the South, and in 1905, 50 years after the fever, the Norfolk health commission held a special meeting to rally the city to clean itself up. Standing water had to be cleared, residents were told. Abandoned cisterns had become breeding hotbeds and would have to be covered.

An expert recommended that crude petroleum should be poured



COURTESY OF WALTER B. MARTIN JR.

in unvaccinated populations. Yellow fever deaths recently have occurred in Venezuela, Liberia and Guinea.

The fever would be unlikely to take hold again in the United States, with modern improvements such as window screens and air conditioning keeping mosquitoes out of homes.

The *Aedes aegypti* was driven out of southeastern Virginia in the 1980s when the *Aedes albopictus* (Asian tiger) mosquito took over its puddles, tires and breeding containers. Those mosquitoes transmit dengue viruses in Asia and carry Eastern equine encephalitis (EEE) in this country. They were accidentally imported from Southeast Asia in a cargo ship full of tires.

In the past decade, the United States has had only four yellow fever cases, all imported. The last death came in 2002, when a Texas man went fishing, unvaccinated, in the Rio Negro in South America.



Armstrong, shown left and at center in the photograph above, led the church for four decades and retired in 1891.

But mosquitoes and epidemics continue to threaten the world's population. The journal *Nature* published a study in March saying that malaria is likely twice as commonplace as thought. Then there's Avian flu, SARS, West Nile and EEE. And none of the old-world scourges have ever really vanished: Earlier this year in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the plague broke out, killing more than 50 people.

Ships still come into Hampton Roads hauling cargos from around the world, and bilge water swimming with organisms.

After the 1855 epidemic, George Armstrong lived a long life and played a significant role in the young country's

history.

What he saw that summer colored his perspective of life, his views on human nature and showed him the power of God's wrath. He detailed his observations in a series of a dozen letters to a friend, William Maxwell, secretary of the Virginia Historical Society. Even in the midst of the epidemic, Armstrong and Maxwell knew its devastation was fantastic, of historic proportions.

In the preface, Armstrong wrote: "There are scenes in nature which the painter ... will never undertake to transfer to canvas. So there are incidents in the history of the pestilence which no one, it seems to me, who has tried the capacities, or rather, I would say, the incapacities, of human language, will ever undertake to put upon record."

To Armstrong and others of his day, seeing the downtown harbor empty of ships would have been as eerie as the sky without jets in the days after Sept. 11, 2001.

Armstrong also saw good come from the pestilence, in the doctor and nurse volunteers, the donations and the notes

attached.

Before the onslaught, a practical person such as himself might not have understood the importance of a letter, but afterward he did. The people of Norfolk and Portsmouth encountered the danger of a battlefield with little of its glory, and it had cheered them to know that others, living happier times, had not forgotten them.

He considered the outpouring a sign of the country's strength, and a warning to politicians at the state legislature, in Congress and even ministers who treated the union as "a thing of naught."

"Every kind word spoken, every dollar sent us, from the North, the South, the East, the West, is a witness at once for the existence and might of this slumbering power," he wrote to a friend.

"I have faith to believe that, for his own wise purposes, God means to keep us one people."

Ironically, a few years later, Armstrong's opinions about slavery and the Union landed him in trouble with the federal government. By today's standards, his views seem unacceptable and it's difficult to say what caused him to turn from outrage at whippings in Weldon, N.C., to writing a book titled "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery."

Maybe he had become indoctrinated to Southern norms after moving from New Jersey to Virginia at age 19. More likely, some who knew him suggested, he recoiled against Northern ways being forced upon Southerners and his Irish blood meant he wouldn't back down from an argument.

When Norfolk fell under Northern hands in 1862, Maj. Gen. Benjamin Franklin Butler took over the city's churches and had Armstrong arrested. Butler sentenced him to hard labor at Fort Hatteras. He remained there, in solitary confinement, writing letters to his new wife for six months.

After the war, Armstrong again took over First Presbyterian and, with a vision for the future, established a string of churches for the city's suburbs.

He started what became Second Presbyterian in 1872; he sent two elders to Berkley and they started what became Armstrong Memorial Presbyterian; a few years later, he built a church in the Brambleton section of town; then one in Huntersville, which later moved to Park Place and became Knox Presbyterian.

After leading the church for four decades, Armstrong retired in 1891.

Neither Norfolk nor Portsmouth ever built memorials to honor Armstrong or Winchester Watts or any of those who gave their lives helping others during the summer of 1855.

In Norfolk, a small plaque at a lot on Hampton Boulevard marks the site of a mass grave. Beginning at Old Dominion



DELORES JOHNSON PHOTOS/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Above: Some black victims of the fever are buried in the oldest part of West Point Cemetery, which is annexed to Elmwood Cemetery in Norfolk.

Right: Donna Bluemink, shown in Elmwood Cemetery, has done extensive research on the yellow fever outbreak that ravaged Norfolk and Portsmouth in the summer of 1855.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The bulk of the information in this story was based on the following materials: a series of letters and sermons by the Rev. George D. Armstrong; six months of reports in the Richmond Dispatch newspaper; "The Great Pestilence in Virginia" by William S. Forrest; report of the Portsmouth Relief Association; report of the Howard Association of Norfolk; report of the Philadelphia Relief Committee; Norfolk City Directory, 1851.

Much of the information has been compiled by Norfolk resident Donna Bluemink. It is catalogued at www.rootsweb.com/~usgenweb/va/yellow-fever/yftoc.html.

Help also was provided by the Sargeant Memorial Room at Norfolk's Kirm Memorial Library and by the Wilson Memorial Room at Portsmouth Public Library.

University, Quarantine Road follows the path to the state's first quarantine house set up for crew of ships thought to be carrying the disease.

The only proper monument to any of those who risked their lives is a memorial at Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia, which people there paid for and erected themselves.

Dr. William Collins rests in Portsmouth's Cedar Grove Cemetery, just at the edge of downtown, where a monument bought by the Seaboard and Roanoke Railroad pays tribute to him: The bottom of the statue is engraved with a locomotive with a broken rod.

Dr. John Trugien, whose long hours ground down his body's ability to fight through the fever, is buried in Portsmouth's Oak Grove Cemetery. A big urn that is part of his marker has been vandalized.

Norfolk's magnanimous public servants received even less glorious treatment. Mayor Hunter Woodis has markers in both Elmwood Cemetery and St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery near the Virginia Zoo. Neither hints at his sacrifice, reading only "Hunter Woodis."

The grave of William Ferguson, whose diligence single-handedly kept the Howard Association running when it was needed most, can hardly be found at Cedar Grove in Norfolk. He rests in a far back corner, with no tribute inscribed, just his name.

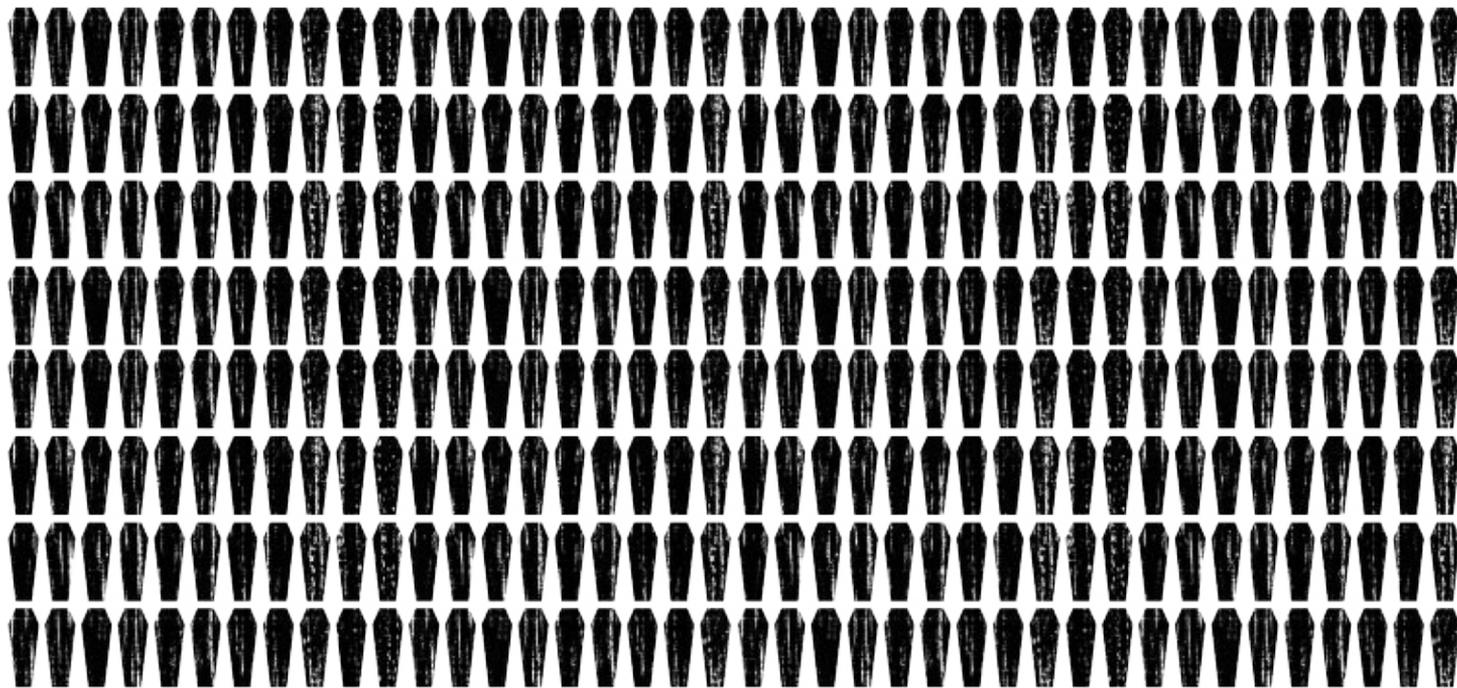
Nearby, a single stone memorializes 10 members of one family who fell that summer. Just past that, in a corner of the cemetery walled off from Virginia Beach Boulevard, is an open space, with young trees sprouting from the undulating earth. Records hint that bodies were buried there in mass graves.

Across Princess Anne Road, the Rev. George Armstrong lies in a place he became very familiar with during what he called the "Summer of the Pestilence." Near his stone lies his nephew, Edmund James, and his sister-in-law Hatty, buried next to his wife, Mehetable. His second wife, Lucretia, is also there and his daughter Cornelia, who died in January 1856, perhaps of lingering complications from the fever.

Armstrong's pillar quotes First Corinthians, and mentions nothing about his work in 1855. An old elm tree reaches its branches out over the graves and, in the summertime, shades them from the worst of the sun.

Unlike that summer 150 years ago, the cemetery is quiet and peaceful.

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Approximately 3,200 people died during the yellow fever epidemic of 1855 (one coffin represents 10 victims).

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