

The Fever, Chapter 10: Stricken

By **LON WAGNER**, The Virginian-Pilot
© July 19, 2005

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.

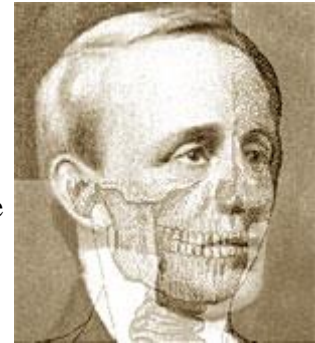
He grabbed a chip of ice, sucked on it and collapsed on the bed. Two minutes later, he was awake again.

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



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oil, followed by 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 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 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 refused 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.