

The Fever, Chapter 1: A Killer Sails into Port



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. COURTESY OF THE MARINERS' MUSEUM

By **LON WAGNER**, The Virginian-Pilot
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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.

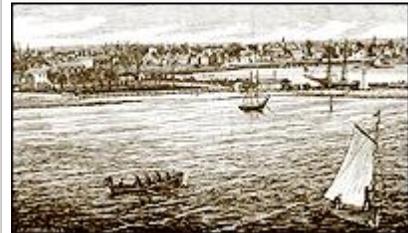
About the same time, another man's body, dressed like that of a ship's coal-heaver, would wash up at the fort. His hands were as yellow as lemons.

Now, men were jumping overboard.

THE FEVER



Tales of two cities



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

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 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, 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



A view of Gosport: This area of Portsmouth was home to many Irish immigrants who labored in the shipyards.

Illustrations courtesy of Kim Library Sargeant Memorial Room.

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 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 physicians, 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.”