

The Fever, Chapter 5: Accusations

By LON WAGNER, The Virginian-Pilot
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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 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 disheartened 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 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.