

# Edgar Allan Poe

National Historic Site  
Philadelphia

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## THE DEATH OF EDGAR ALLAN POE OCTOBER 7, 1849 IN THE CITY OF BALTIMORE



illustration by Gustave Doré

### An Unsolved Mystery



"The Raven"  
illustration by Gustave Doré

"...there is no telling what may happen to a man all alone as I am -  
I may get sick or worse...." E. A. Poe "The Lighthouse"

No one subject on Edgar Allan Poe ignites as much controversy as his untimely death at the age of forty. Shrouded in mystery, Poe's uncertain whereabouts and physical condition

during his final days leave us with more puzzling questions than definite answers. Still, the topic is intriguing and lends to the mystique that is POE.

### What We Know



On a planned trip from Richmond, Virginia to New York City, Poe traveled by steamer and stopped in Baltimore on September 28, 1849. Poe was well known by many people in Baltimore. However, over the next few days, details about his actions and whereabouts remain uncertain.

On October 3, 1849, Poe was found inside or near Gunner's Hall tavern by a printer, Joseph Walker, who sent a note for J.E. Snodgrass (a Poe acquaintance), asking for assistance. He described Poe as appearing in "great distress".

October 3rd was an election day and Gunner's Hall was being used as a polling place.

Snodgrass noted that the clothes Poe wore looked disheveled and out of place "... he had evidently been robbed of his [own] clothing or cheated in an exchange..."

Within Gunner's Hall, Poe was met by Snodgrass and his uncle, Henry Herring. They both presumed Poe was in a drunken state. They agreed that he should be sent to Washington College Hospital.

At the hospital, Poe was brought to a room reserved for patients who were ill due to intoxication.

Over the next few days, Poe lapsed in and out of consciousness. According to Dr. John J. Moran, attending physician who questioned Poe about his condition, Poe's answers were incoherent and unsatisfactory. Poe's cousin, Neilson Poe tried to visit him but was kept from doing so by Moran due to the alleged "excitable" condition of Edgar.

Moran later noted, in a letter to Maria Clemm (Poe's mother-in-law), that during a period of consciousness Poe held "...vacant converse with spectral and imaginary objects on the walls. His face was pale and his whole person drenched in perspiration."

Before sunrise, on Sunday October 7, 1849, Poe died quietly. 



Corner of Calvert and Baltimore streets,  
near Gunner's Hall



Washington College Hospital

## Theories

It all seems too simple. On a trip north from Richmond, Poe stopped in Baltimore, possibly met with some friends and engaged in a fatal bout of drinking. It may be logical to assume that alcohol played a role in Poe's death given that it intermittently surfaced as a negative influence during his adult life. But, how does this explain him wearing somebody else's old clothes or accounts that Poe

appeared ill and may have sought medical attention before leaving Richmond? Neither does it give any clue or explanation as to what circumstances led up to him being found in such an unfortunate state. This and more has led to the unending development of theories and speculation on what brought about the great author's premature death. Here are just some of those theories:



illustration by Gustave Doré

- weakened physical condition due to an infectious disease.

abducted, forced to drink alcohol, and used as a repeat voter. (a fraudulent 19th Century practice known as "cooping").

- meningitis

- suffered from diabetes.

- beaten and robbed.

- lesions on the brain.

a heart condition.

- rabies

- hypoglycemia

- epilepsy

- brain hemorrhage

- toxic blood disorder

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## In the End...

*"Lo! Death has reared himself a throne."*

*E. A. Poe "The City in the Sea"*



*"The Raven"*

illustration by Gustave Doré

...we are left with too few facts to know for certain the true cause of Edgar Allan Poe's untimely death. Some believe modern technology and scientific breakthroughs will give us more definite clues. More than likely, they will just add to our

speculations. For now, Poe's death will have to remain a mystery. However, within this mystery lies one certainty. On that fatal day of October 7, 1849, the world lost one of its greatest literary geniuses.

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## For Further Reading

*The following books are among the many available about the intriguing life of Edgar Allan Poe:*

Meyers, Jeffrey.  
*Edgar Allan Poe, His Life and Legacy*  
New York, 1992

Quinn, Arthur Hobson.  
*Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*  
New York, 1941

Robbins, Miller.  
*Edgar Allan Poe, The Creation of a Reputation.*  
Reprinted by Eastern Acorn Press, 1983.

Silverman, Kenneth.  
*Edgar Allan Poe, Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance.*  
New York, 1991.

Thomas, Dwight.  
*The Poe Log*  
New York, 1987.



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