This biography traces the last few days of Poe’s life, in 1849. He had just parted from Elmira Shelton, to whom he was recently engaged. Shelton lived in Richmond, Virginia, and Poe set out from there for Baltimore, Maryland, eventually planning to go to New York City. He never reached it.

**Poe’s Final Days**

from *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance*  
**Kenneth Silverman**

In the early morning of September 27, a Thursday, Poe began the first leg of his return to the North, setting out from Richmond for Baltimore on the 4 A.M. steamer, with a trunk containing some clothing, books, and manuscripts.

No reliable evidence exists about what happened to or within Poe between that time and October 3, a week later, when a printer named Joseph Walker saw him at Gunner’s Hall, a Baltimore tavern, strangely dressed and semiconscious.

It was Election Day for members of Congress, and like other local watering holes the tavern served as a polling place. Poe seemed to Walker “rather the worse for wear” and “in great distress.” Apparently flooded with drink, he may also have been ill from exposure. Winds and soaking rains the day before had sent Baltimoreans prematurely hunting up overcoats and seeking charcoal fires for warmth. . . . Poe managed to tell Walker that he knew Joseph Evans Snodgrass, the Baltimore editor and physician with whom he had often corresponded while living in Philadelphia. As it happened, Walker had worked as a typesetter for Snodgrass’s *Saturday Visitor*. He sent Snodgrass a dire note, warning that Poe needed “immediate assistance.”

When Snodgrass arrived at Gunner’s Hall, he found Poe sitting in an armchair, surrounded by onlookers. Poe had a look of “vacant stupidity.” He wore neither vest nor tie, his dingy trousers fit badly, his shirt was crumpled, his cheap hat soiled. Snodgrass thought he must be wearing castoff clothing, having been robbed or cheated of his own. He ordered a room for Poe at the tavern, where he might stay comfortably until his relatives in Baltimore could be notified. Just then, however, one of them arrived—Henry Herring, Poe’s uncle by marriage, who somehow had also learned of his condition. A lumber dealer now nearly sixty years old, he had wed Muddy’s sister, and spent time with Poe during his early days in Baltimore and later when both families lived in Philadelphia. But he refused now to take over his care, saying that on former occasions, when drunk, Poe had been abusive and ungrateful. Instead, he suggested sending Poe to a hospital. A carriage was called for. Poe had to be carried into it, Snodgrass said – insensible, muttering.

Through the chilly wet streets Poe was driven to the hospital of Washington Medical College, set on the highest ground of Baltimore. An imposing five-story building with vaulted gothic windows, it afforded both public wards and private rooms, advertised as being spacious, well ventilated, and directed by an experienced medical staff. Admitted at five in the afternoon, Poe was given a private room, reportedly in a section reserved for cases involving drunkenness. He was attended by the resident physician, Dr. John J. Moran, who apparently had living quarters in the hospital together with his wife. Moran had received his medical degree from the University of Maryland four years earlier and was now only about twenty-six years old. But he knew the identity of his patient—a “great man,” he wrote of Poe, to whose “rarely gifted mind are we indebted for many of the brightest
thoughts that adorn our literature.” He as well as the medical students, nurses, and other physicians—all considered Poe, he said, “an object of unusual regard.”

According to Moran and his wife, Poe reached the hospital in a stupor, unaware of who or what had brought him there. He remained thus “unconscious” until three o’clock the next morning, when he developed a tremor of the limbs and what Moran called “a busy, but not violent or active delirium.” His face was pale and he was drenched in sweat. He talked constantly, Moran said, addressing “spectral and imaginary objects on the walls.” Apparently during Poe’s delirium, his cousin Neilson Poe came to the hospital, having been contacted by Dr. Moran. A lawyer and journalist involved in Whig politics, Neilson was just Poe’s age. In happier circumstances Poe would not have welcomed the visit. Not only had Neilson offered Virginia and Muddy a home apart from him; his cousin also, he believed, envied his literary reputation. Years before he had remarked that he considered “the little dog,” as he called Neilson, the “bitterest enemy I have in the world.” The physicians anyway thought it inadvisable for Neilson to see Poe at the moment, when “very excitable.” Neilson sent some changes of linen and called again the next day, to find Poe’s condition improved.

Poe being quieted, Moran began questioning him about his family and about where he lived, but found his answers mostly incoherent. Poe did not know what had become of his trunk or when he had left Richmond, but said he had a wife there, as Moran soon learned was untrue. He said that his “degradation,” as Moran characterized it, made him feel like sinking into the ground. Trying to rouse Poe’s spirits, Moran told him he wished to contribute in every way to his comfort, and hoped Poe would soon be enjoying the company of his friends . . .

Then Poe seemed to doze, and Moran left him briefly. On returning he found Poe violently delirious, resisting the efforts of two nurses to keep him in bed. From Moran’s description, Poe seems to have raved a full day or more, through Saturday evening, October 6, when he began repeatedly calling out someone’s name. It may have been that of a Baltimore family named Reynolds or, more likely, the name of his uncle-in-law Henry Herring. Moran later said that he sent for the Herring family, but that only one of Herring’s two daughters came to the hospital. Poe continued deliriously calling the name until three o’clock on Sunday morning. Then his condition changed. Feeble from his exertions he seemed to rest a short time and then, Moran reported, “quietly moving his head he said ‘Lord help my poor Soul’ and expired!”

The cause of Poe’s death remains in doubt. Moran’s account of his profuse perspiration, trembling, and hallucinations indicates delirium tremens, mania à potu. Many others who had known Poe, including the professionally trained Dr. Snodgrass, also attributed his death to a lethal amount of alcohol. Moran later vigorously disputed this explanation, however, and some Baltimore newspapers gave the cause of death as “congestion of the brain” or “cerebral inflammation.” Although the terms were sometimes used euphemistically in public announcements of deaths from disgraceful causes, such as alcoholism, they may in this case have come from the hospital staff itself. According to Moran, one of its senior physicians diagnosed Poe’s condition as encephalitis, a brain inflammation, brought on by “exposure.” This explanation is consistent with the prematurely wintry weather at the time, with Snodgrass’s account of Poe’s partly clad condition, and with Elmira Shelton’s recollection that on leaving Richmond Poe already had a fever. Both explanations may have been correct: Poe may have become too drunk to care about protecting himself against the wind and rain.