



Toasting Mr. Poe

The mysterious death and even more mysterious ritual that brings throngs to the poet's grave

BY BRUCE GOLDFARB

One hundred years after Edgar Allan Poe died in Baltimore, he inspired a tribute ceremony worthy of one of his macabre tales. And for 50 years since, every January 19 (the anniversary of Poe's birth), an eccentric Baltimore happening honors the troubled genius.

Early in the morning of that day, a cloaked stranger appears and places a half-empty bottle of cognac and three long-stem roses at Poe's grave. Even now no one knows the identity of the "Poe Toaster."

For Poe, Baltimore was a place of happy beginnings as well as the site of his tragic end. Although he's lauded now as the inventor of the

modern detective story, when Poe lived here in the 1830s, he was just beginning to gain fame. He shared a small house at 203 Amity Street, now the Poe House and Museum (see page 28), with his aunt Maria Clemm, his cousin Virginia and three other relatives.

Eventually, at the age of 27, Poe married 13-year-old Virginia. Her death at only 25 inspired grief-soaked poems like "Annabel Lee" and "For Annie."

Poe lived in many cities over the years, including Boston, New York, Richmond and Philadelphia. His apparently unscheduled, certainly unfortunate stop in Baltimore led him to become enshrined in city folklore.

On Oct. 3, 1849, Poe was found semi-conscious in a gutter of Lombard Street east of downtown. Disheveled and delirious, he wore another man's clothing. A passer-by took Poe into a tavern, where a carriage was called to transport him to nearby Washington College Hospital just north of Fells Point, later Church Home Hospital. Because Poe was supposed to be en route from Richmond to New York by steamship, it's unclear why he was on the streets of Baltimore. He drifted in and out of consciousness for nearly four days, then died early on the morning of October 7.

Several theories attempt to explain Poe's death—alcohol or drug intoxication, rabies, mercury poisoning, syphilis or cholera. But the medical records of Poe's hospital stay vanished long ago. Philip A. Mackowiak, M.D., chief of medicine at the Baltimore VA Medical Center and author of *Post-Mortem: Solving History's Great Medical Mysteries*, says, "The mystery persists because there are no definitive answers."

In 1995, Mackowiak led a conference of medical experts who examined the evidence regarding Poe's last days. Mackowiak has his own ideas about the alcoholic writer's death, saying that what's known appears "perfectly consistent with delirium tremens (DT)."

Poe was laid to rest in the family plot at Westminster Burying Grounds beside his grandfather, Revolutionary War hero General David Poe. But in 1875, his grave was relocated closer to the cemetery gates and marked by a large monument near Fayette and Green Streets in downtown.

The Poe Toaster's graveside visits began in 1949, a century after Poe's death, as a personal tribute to the brilliant poet. Jeff Jerome, curator of the Poe House and Museum, believes that the original Poe Toaster died several years ago, but notes left at the grave indicate that the tradition is continued by his sons.


Jerome and a small group of friends spend the night of January 18 every year in Westminster Hall, which is adjacent to the cemetery. Although Jerome is frequently quoted and therefore suspected, "I've always had people with me."

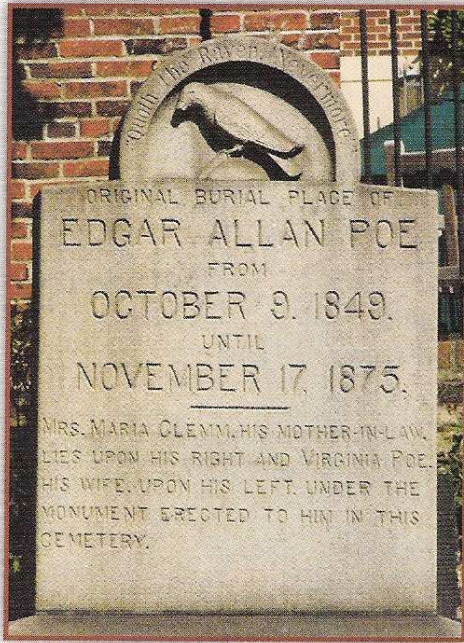
"It isn't Jeff Jerome," insists Jeff Savoye, the secretary/treasurer of the E. A. Poe Society of Baltimore. Savoye reports that he and Jerome have seen the Poe Toaster on more than one occasion. Lu Ann Marshall, tour director at Westminster and a member of the Poe Society, says, "If it were one of us, I would know."

What is known: the Poe Toaster is tall and slender, wears a hat and a black cape and carries a walking stick. "His face was covered by a black scarf," says Savoye. "You can't see what he looks like, but I could tell he had gray or light-colored hair." In recent years, the night watch has morphed into a barely contained circus.

Jerome worries now that the crowds outside Westminster Cemetery on the night of January 18 have become so large the Poe Toaster may be accosted or deterred from visiting Poe's grave. "I remember the good old days when we left the front gate unlocked, and all we saw was the occasional rat running down the street," he says. "Now we have hordes of people on the verge of climbing the walls. I'd be annoyed if I had to run a gauntlet."

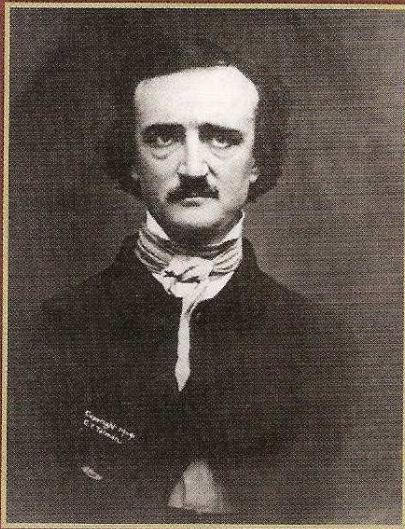
Savoye is also concerned that the growing popularity of the Poe Toaster's tribute may lead to its demise. "It would be a shame if he was exposed or he couldn't do it anymore. People around the world hear about it, and it's great publicity for Edgar Allan Poe and the city of Baltimore."

Despite the raising of barriers at the cemetery and crowds that grow larger and rowdier each year, the Poe Toaster still manages to enter and leave the cemetery without being observed. 



At left, the elaborate monument erected more than 25 years after Poe's death; above, the simpler gravestone that marks his first resting place

LEFT, BRUCE GOLDFARB; RIGHT, CENTER, WESTMINSTER HALL; RIGHT, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



POE'S BICENTENNIAL

Special events scheduled to mark the 200th anniversary of Poe's birth include a birthday celebration on two weekends—January 17 and 18 and January 31 and February 1. Actor John Astin of *The Addams Family* television show delivers a Poe tribute, and theater troupes perform two of his horror stories and a Poe comedy (who knew such a thing existed!). The comedic story *Some Words With a Mummy* (1845) tells of an Egyptian mummy that is brought back to life only to spar with the scientists that resurrected him. The other performances include more familiar Poe stories *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *Hop Frog* that include manic monologues and life-sized puppets.

On January 19th not only is the Poe Toaster expected to pay his respects before dawn, but later at 10 a.m. the Edgar Allan Poe Birthday Festival begins. The festival at Westminster Hall and Burying Grounds includes a Poe look-alike contest, tours of the catacombs, readings of *The Raven* and *Annabel Lee* and an evening ghost hunt.

For more information on Poe events throughout 2009, go to www.nevermore2009.com, or call 410-396-7932.