

## THE PITTSBURGH FIRE OF APRIL 10, 1845

CHARLES F. C. ARENSBERG

**I**N EARLY April, 1845, at the forks of the Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers the wind each day blew a gale from morning until nightfall. There had been no rain for two weeks. The town of Pittsburgh, vigorous and young, carried on its activities with no thought of impending disaster. Someone indeed may have reflected that the wind was alarmingly high, the town built mostly of wood, that there were only two water mains in the lower town, a six-inch main on Third Street, and an eight-inch main on Liberty, and that the reservoir on Quarry Hill was dangerously low. It may have been some consolation to know that there were many volunteer fire companies in the town—those curious outlets for pioneer exuberance that combined fire-fighting with quarreling among themselves: the Allegheny, the Niagara, the Neptune, the Duquesne, the Vigilant and the Union, and over in Allegheny Town the Washington, the William Penn, the Union Hose, and Uncle Sam. Much of the fire hose, however, had been condemned months before, and in any event there was not water enough for all the engines to pump at the same time.

One reason for the inadequate water supply was that the town had grown out of hand. No other place in all America had its natural advantages. In the beginning three great rivers laid broad highways from its door through regions where there were no other roads. The hills along the rivers abounded in coal and iron, and there was an inexhaustible supply of lumber crowding the hills in every direction. Thus coal, iron, wood and water were at its doorstep.

As the town grew, roads had been built through the wilderness. The Pennsylvania Turnpike stretched over the mountains to Philadelphia through Harrisburg, and another great highway connected the town with Harrisburg through the Juniata Valley with its rich deposits of iron ore.

The Pennsylvania canal system had been in operation since 1834.

From Hollidaysburg on the eastern part of the canal the Portage Railroad crossed the mountains hauling sections of canal boats up incline planes to join again the canal at Johnstown and then to Pittsburgh. A canal had been constructed from Beaver to Erie which had just been completed in 1844, and the Cross Cut Canal connected the Beaver River and the Lake Erie Canal with the canal system of Ohio.

The Pennsylvania Canal crossed the Allegheny River on a wooden aqueduct and ended in a great basin between Penn and Liberty Avenues just below the present Pennsylvania Station around which were clustered warehouses and depots, hotels and dwellings for the crews of eight hundred or nine hundred men needed to handle the traffic on the hundreds of canal boats that came and went each day.

Later the wooden aqueduct over which the canal ran was to be replaced by a suspension bridge—the earliest one, it is said, in the world.

Even greater than on the canal was the traffic on the rivers. Hundreds of boats thronged the wharves. The keel boats and the barges of an earlier day had been replaced by the steamboat, and it was not unusual for one hundred packets to lie along the Monongahela wharf where great warehouses lined the cobbled slope of the river, from Try Street to the Point.

Along the rivers, beyond the wharves, in what is now known as the Triangle, and up the slopes of Herron's and Grant's Hills, lay the foundries, factories, the shops of the growing town, the churches, the public buildings and houses of the citizens.

While we think of Pittsburgh as a small place, as it indeed was, it was not as primitive as one might imagine. There was a water system, inadequate as it was. There was a gas works that supplied the town with gas. There was a public school system, and Baldwin says in his *Story of a City* that there were thirty-three private schools, all of which are listed in the directory of 1841 under the title "Select Private Schools and Seminaries." Many of the schools must have been very small. For example, Harriet Preble's School had eight pupils, just enough for the teacher and pupils each to assume the name of one of the Muses. Another school, as we are told in an interesting letter from Miss May Beale, was run by four Sisters of Mercy whom Bishop O'Conner of the Catholic Diocese had brought from Ireland. There was the Edgeworth Ladies' Seminary at Braddock's Field with one hundred pupils, and

down the river was Sewickley Academy which advertised itself in the Pittsburgh papers as a "classical and commercial boarding school for boys on the Ohio road fourteen miles from Pittsburgh, Reverend J. S. Travelli, principal. Boarding, tuition, washing, fuel, lights, etc., \$65.00, one-half payable in advance, the balance at end of session." And then there was the Western University of Pennsylvania with its imposing building on Third and Cherry, destined to be destroyed by the fire. The University was presided over by Heman Dyer who was, Mrs. Starrett says, a "lineal and direct descendant of the famous Mary Dyer who was hanged on Boston Common for maintaining her religious opinions." Dr. Dyer had been brought to Pittsburgh by Dr. Upfold of Trinity Church to head a classical school for boys. When Dr. Bruce resigned, he became the principal of the Western University. He founded a law school under Judge Lowrie and organized many groups of people to discuss various problems, one of which included Henry Baldwin and Grier, both later justices of the Supreme Court of the United States, and Lowrie, who became Chief Justice of Pennsylvania.

There were theaters, too, which, however, were in disrepute. The popular taste which frowned upon the stage welcomed the phrenologist, the scientific lecture, and the museum. Indeed, for the night of April 10 a lecture was advertised which was never given. Professor A. Gray of Marietta College, Ohio, was to give the first of six lectures on the science of geology at University Hall at seven and a half o'clock. The course of lectures admitting a gentleman and lady cost one dollar. A single season ticket was seventy-five cents and a single lecture twenty-five cents. The Mozart Society gave concerts from time to time, and the Pittsburgh Academy of Music gave instruction in music to its pupils. Henry Kleber who kept a music store had a promising pupil named Stephen C. Foster. Only the year before Foster's first song, "Open thy Lattice, Love," had been published. Blythe, who was to wait nearly a hundred years for recognition, still claimed Pittsburgh as his home. And there were the business men, the lawyers, the bankers and the solid citizens.

This was Pittsburgh on the morning of April 10, 1845. About noon a fire broke out at the corner of Second Avenue and Ferry Street. The earliest surviving account of the fire written on Friday, the 11th, does not say how the fire started, but the next day the legendary figure of the

woman emerges who is said to have kindled an open fire to heat water to wash clothes. Bruce's ice house was near, and the whirling wind blew straw into the fire which in turn ignited the ice house and the adjoining frame buildings. The fire spread rapidly across the street and destroyed the cotton factory of Colonel James Wood and his dwelling next door. Across the pathway of the fire in that direction stood the Third Presbyterian Church at the corner of Ferry and Third Street. It was an imposing building with great pillars and a steeple 163 feet high, with a massive wooden cornice about breast-high around its roof. Firemen on the roof strove to put out the embers which were falling, but soon the cornice burst into flame, and it was only by chopping it down and toppling it into the street that the church was saved and with it the portion of the city west of Ferry Street. The Bank of Pittsburgh was thought to be fireproof, and the cashier, as the fire approached, locked the books and valuables in the vault and fled. The heat, however, melted the zinc roof and the interior of the building was completely consumed. The fire spread toward Diamond Alley burning the office of the *Daily Chronicle*, the engine house of the Vigilant Fire Company, the bookstore and bindery of Luke Loomis, but stopped at the Weyman Tobacco Manufactory on the corner of Smithfield Street. In the other direction the fire spread toward the Monongahela destroying the Holmes warehouse, crossing Market and First Street and spreading to the river. By this time the fire had extended to Wood Street, a width of five squares, and the great warehouses on Water Street were soon ablaze. Frantic efforts were made to move the bales and boxes from the warehouses to the wharf, but they soon caught fire from the flying sparks. The steamboats lining the wharf saved themselves by dropping down the river to Saw Mill Run.

The Monongahela House burst into flame, and the guests fled for their lives. On Third Avenue the Dravo House, Merchants Hotel, Baptist Church and the Western University of Pennsylvania were aflame. The fire in the direction of Fourth and Ross Street was stopped only when brick buildings were blown up with gunpowder. The fire continued to spread along the banks of the Monongahela River to Kensington or Pipetown as it was called, injuring the gas works and destroying the Dowlas Iron Works, where it burned itself out.

About seven the wind fell and the fire was under control. Fifty-six

acres and nearly a thousand buildings had been burned, and twelve thousand people made homeless. One-third of the area of the city was in ashes and two-thirds of its wealth had been destroyed. The courthouse and the other undamaged public buildings, the warehouses and private homes in Pittsburgh and in Allegheny were thrown open to the homeless people.

William Brackenridge was a lodger at the Monongahela House at the time. He walked down to the river over the cobbles between the warehouses and the steamboat landing which was covered with merchandise and commodities about to be shipped or just unloaded. The wind was blowing a perfect gale as it had done for two weeks, rising in the morning, increasing until noon, and then going down with the sun. It was feared that the flames would reach Market Street, and the owners of the warehouses were piling their goods along the river. The air was filled with burning pieces of wood, and a piece of flaming shingle as large as his hand fell at his feet, and he crushed it out. The wind was so violent that it was difficult to stand up, and the wooden houses were so dry that they would burst into flame, says he, "as quick as a flash of powder." About two o'clock it seemed that the fire broke out suddenly in many places.

It was time for Brackenridge to go, and he took his carpet bag and hastened up Smithfield Street to the Allegheny River "struggling with difficulty against the wind and the dust." It was about three o'clock when he reached what they called the "Second Bank" in Allegheny City, the higher ground along the river, and as he looked back, all of Pittsburgh seemed one sheet of flame. He saw the cupola of the University catch fire and topple over in a few minutes. By this time the Monongahela House was the center of the fire and the Smithfield bridge across the Monongahela was burning. Brackenridge likened the power of the flame to a blow torch driving a sheet of flame three hundred yards wide. The zinc roofs melted and ran down the spouts. The sheet iron roof of the Market House set fire to the sheathing below. About six o'clock, he said, the wind began to lull, and by seven it was all over. The next morning after he passed through the street, the smoking ruins looked like the ruins of some ancient city, he said, long since destroyed.

Thomas Mellon, who afterwards became a judge and who was the father of the future Secretary of the Treasury, walked up Third Street

to Smithfield among people running in all directions, wild with excitement, with cinders and burning shingles falling everywhere. People in the houses along Smithfield Street were throwing china and crockery ware out of the upper stories and carrying beds and bedding down stairs. His own new house on the hill was perfectly safe, as there was no other building in the neighborhood except the courthouse. Brick yards were on one side and open lots on the other. He went up on the roof of the courthouse and saw what he called a "great and appalling sight." "It was about four o'clock and the fire had progressed from Ferry Street consuming everything between Fourth Street and the river and was then approaching Smithfield Street, surging like a vast flood, devouring dwellings, warehouses and churches and our great old stone University building with all its contents." He saw it approach the Monongahela House, and the flames soon shot into the sky from the entire area of the building, and directly the wooden covered Monongahela Bridge was on fire, "one span speedily falling into the river after another like a straw rope on fire."

Stephen Foster's family had moved from Lawrenceville to the East Park or Common in Allegheny, as his niece, Evelyn Foster Morneweck, tells me in a very interesting letter. Stephen's mother while the fire was raging, wrote her daughter, Ann Eliza Buchanan, in Philadelphia. While she was writing, Stephen and his brother, Morrison, came in with blackened faces and hands only taking time out enough to snatch a few mouthfuls of food and to change to dry clothes, to dash out and across the bridge to help the firemen again. Mrs. Foster wrote, too, of the bride of one of her boys' friends who lived on Penn Street, saying: "They have moved her to a house farther out towards Lawrenceville, but she stands in the empty rooms wringing her hands and weeping. Not a stick of furniture around her, not a bed, not a chair, not a knife or fork, nothing was saved from her beautiful home." Mrs. Morneweck tells me that this letter from her grandmother, Stephen Foster's mother, is now owned by one of Mrs. Foster's great, great grandsons, John L. B. Barde, who lives near Philadelphia.

Only two people were killed: Samuel Kingston, a lawyer, who went into his burning house to rescue a "painted" piano, and a woman who has been identified as Mrs. Maglone. At any rate, Mrs. Maglone disappeared and was advertised for the next day as not having been heard

of since Thursday, the day of the fire, at three o'clock in the afternoon. The advertisement said that she "had on a cross barred flannel dress, a hood bonnet and was last seen in Scotch Hill Market House." It was assumed that some bones found in the cellar of a burned warehouse nearby were hers.

Dr. David Alter came down the Allegheny River from Freeport to see the views, and as Baldwin says in his *Story of a City*, he "took a fragment of flint glass from the ruins of Bakewell's glass house and ground a prism from it, and it was this prism that led to his discovery of spectrum analysis." Harriet Gaul and Ruby Eisaman in their life of Brashear tell about another curious person, Squire Wampler, who drove his team from McKeesport and crossed the river on the ferry since the bridge had burned down. He too poked about in the ruins of the Bakewell & Pears glass house, and he too picked up a piece of flint glass among the ashes. He made a telescope of his piece of flint glass combining it with another piece of French plate glass he had. This was the first telescope on this side of the Alleghenies. With the telescope he toured the river towns, charging five cents for a sight of the heavens. At Brownsville, Brashear, a lad of nine, looked through the lens and saw Saturn and its rings, and the sight made him long to be an astronomer, and he became, during his long life, the greatest lens maker in the world.

The first news of the disaster at Pittsburgh reached Harrisburg on the 12th of April from travelers who had left Pittsburgh at one o'clock on the 10th. Their account of it was somewhat exaggerated. They said that burned papers and cinders fell as far as Greensburg, nearly thirty miles away.

The select and common councils of Pittsburgh met the next day, and the Honorable Cornelius Darragh was directed to proceed at once to Harrisburg and ask for relief from the legislature which was still in session. He went accompanied by Wilson McCandless. The two of them reached Harrisburg on the 13th. Darragh and McCandless had been classmates at the Western University of Pennsylvania in the class of 1826 and Darragh became attorney general of Pennsylvania, a state senator, and a member of Congress. McCandless later was made the United States District Judge for the Western District of Pennsylvania and in 1852 came within one vote of being nominated as President of the

United States instead of Franklin Pierce who became President.

The legislature promptly appropriated fifty thousand dollars for the relief of the sufferers to be distributed under the direction of the mayor and the select and common councils and remitted state and county taxes upon personal property and real estate on which buildings had been destroyed by the fire.

Relief flowed into Pittsburgh not only from Harrisburg but from all over the country and from Europe, mostly in money, but much in food and clothing. The Honorable James Buchanan from Lancaster County, soon to become President of the United States, sent \$500. Edwin M. Stanton of Steubenville sent \$25, and later made Pittsburgh his home, and still later became Lincoln's great Secretary of War. President Polk sent \$100 and ex-President John Quincy Adams, then nearly eighty, sent \$50 from Washington. The Rothschild brothers sent money from France, and the total contributions from this and other countries reached nearly \$200,000. There were also gifts in kind. Wheeling, Virginia, sent 100 pounds of flour and 3,000 pounds of bacon. Meadville sent 58 bushels of potatoes and one bedstead. J. Murdoch of Squirrel Hill sent 18 bushels of potatoes, 15 bags of flour and 12 pieces of bacon, and from Monongahela City came 8 barrels of flour, 13 barrels of potatoes, a box of sundries, 6 chairs, a table, 3½ boxes of window glass, 2 pieces of bacon, a bookcase and a bedstead. Foster in his book on the *Great Fire at Pittsburgh* published a list of the losses, and it is interesting to read the names of so many whose descendants are here today. The funds on hand were eventually distributed by giving 50% of their loss to those whose losses did not exceed \$100. Thirty per cent was given to those whose losses ranged from \$100 to \$500 and 25% to those whose losses ranged from \$500 to \$2,000. What was left was distributed among those whose losses exceeded \$2,000. The total claims made were \$794,000 over and above insurance, and the total loss including that covered by insurance may have reached \$5,000,000. Final distribution of the relief funds was made about the middle of July succeeding the fire.

Pittsburgh did not perish. As Dr. Dyer said of the Western University: "Nothing was really burned but the building. The University is still here." The work of rebuilding started at once, and many of the merchants opened their shops among the ruins. The *Gazette and Adver-*

*tiser* the next day came out with a full account of the "Awful Conflagration! Most Dreadful Calamity! Pittsburgh in Ruins!" It made, however, one untactful remark: "With two or three exceptions every merchant belonging to the Third Presbyterian Church was burned out." This had an amusing sequel for we find in the issue of April 14 the following: "We are very greatly surprised to hear that a remark made in our paper on Saturday morning to the effect that nearly all of the merchants belonging to the Third Presbyterian Church had been burned out has been twisted into a reflection by us on them. We protest against such an unjust imputation. Such a thought never occurred to us."

The Exchange Hotel advertised a few days later: "Let travelers come. They will be provided for. It is said the price of food and so forth is raised enormously. There is no truth in this. If there is any advance, it is but a slight one."

P. A. Westervelt advertised that he "has the pleasure to inform his customers and the public generally that he has pitched his tent on the ruins of the Old Venetian Blind Factory, where he has a few finished blinds saved from the conflagration and is prepared with stock to furnish blinds to order."

In three months new buildings had been completed or were in the process of erection, and Pittsburgh swept on. It is a curious fact that the devastating fires which have swept American cities and which at the time were thought to spell ruin have, as it turned out, resulted in a more rapid growth and a greater prosperity; and Pittsburgh was no exception.