FOOTNOTES TO WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY

The Archives of this Society contain five diaries written by Robert McKnight. At the time the following entry was written he was a budding young lawyer. Thirteen years later on November 26, 1858, at a reorganization meeting he was chosen temporary vice president of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. The day before had been celebrated on a large scale in Pittsburgh as the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the city (see first article in this issue).

CONFLAGRATION!!!!!!*

Thursday, April 10th, 1845

A memorable and ill starred day. Go office and attended to business. Wrote letter and at 12 Noon heard alarm bells ring for fire. Followed the crowd down 2nd Street to corner of Ferry, where an icehouse and shed were burning. A pretty strong wind was blowing from the West and some alarm existed as to the spread of the flames. I mounted an engine and laboured with might and main, but unfortunately the supply of water failed and engine ceased to play. The fire had meanwhile crossed Ferry and 2nd both. Capt. Wood’s large cotton factory was in flames,—while the destroying element raged toward Market Street. I left, went around to Mr. Denny’s house. All the male members of the family being absent, but Will—I took my station on the roof with a man and 2 boys, with buckets of water, watching for sparks, which were flying thickly, the wind blowing a gale. Roof of 3rd Pres. church on fire but with difficulty extinguished. The conflagration now spread to the Monongahela 4 squares broad and soon crossed Market Street, the flames hissing and leaping from house to house and square to square. Chas. about 2 o’clock ran to me and told me I was wanted to assist at the warehouse of Wood, Edwards and McKnight, whither I ran, carried out desk, and rolled out kegs of nails; out of 2500, they saved some 50 besides a heavy stock of iron. We were soon driven from the house by the roof burning in and were forced to leave. I then ran to the store where Father was just removing in

* The heading is Mr. McKnight’s.
carts the last of his goods. I helped to load them and came down with them to the stables which were filled. Ate, and drank something. Paid a visit to my office and found Magraw removing the books by filling bed tickings with them. Got the settee down with a man to assist and carried it around to Wood St. on both sides of which the fire was now raging. With difficulty procured another man, and ran and dropped load alternately from heat and fatigue. Drays, cars, furniture, horses, and men were running in all directions. Finally reached 5th and Market where I left the men and got a cart at home into which I put the books and took them to our house.

Went again uptown and found our office in flames,—most everything being removed. By this time the fire had reached Diamond Alley and the whole city south of that, including the whole South Ward was on fire. Pittsburgh Bank, University, Monongahela House, churches, Philo Hall, other public buildings were burned. And worst of all so rapid was the spread of the devouring element, that little or nothing could be removed from the houses—large stocks of sugar, cotton, coffee, iron, china, furniture and dry goods were destroyed. Much that was removed was consumed on the streets and quay. The Monongahela bridge was destroyed in the short space of 15 minutes. The city is in fact a desolation, the progress of the fire being only stayed at the extreme limit by want of material to fasten upon. Some lives lost. Some men are loser to the amount of 1 and 200,000 dollars. Whole amount, 10 or 15 millions. Wandered around at night. Brought W. Wilson (burned out) to our house to sleep and went to bed at 11.

Cousin Sarah Ann Hogg was brought to bed of her 1st child, a daughter today.