

THE GREAT FIRE OF PITTSBURGH IN 1845  
or  
How a Great American City Turned Disaster into Victory  
DONALD E. COOK, JR.

IN 1793 the volunteer Pittsburgh Fire Company was started; its pride and joy was a hand engine carefully packed over the mountains from Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup> All following fire brigades, which were volunteer, were nothing more than young men's clubs. In 1804 the borough, as a partial deterrent to fire, provided for four public wells. By 1815 three fire companies existed (Eagle, Vigilant, Neptune), their very names suggesting their fierce rivalry and social aspects.<sup>2</sup> Even though they were social clubs, they were conscientious in their duty. But since they never had an adequate number of fire buckets and seldom took care of their engines, they were of little value.

The first waterworks were built in 1828 in the basin on Grant Street between Diamond and Fifth (now the Frick Building). Water was pumped to it by an 84-horsepower steam engine from the Allegheny River, where Duquesne Way met Cecil Alley. One large water main then ran down Fifth Avenue; the nearer homes and mills were supplied directly from the basin by a network of smaller pipes.<sup>3</sup>

In 1844 when the city enlarged its water system by building a larger reservoir on Bedford Avenue, the old basin was abandoned. The city, virtually surrounded by water, woefully lacked it for fire-protection; the ten existing fire companies in Pittsburgh and Allegheny in 1845 had to depend on public reservoirs. Pittsburgh still had the four wells of earlier times, and the Grant's Hill reservoir of 1827-28 had been replaced by the more modern one on "Stone Quarry Hill" in 1844.<sup>4</sup> But the water system and its lines were not adequate for the

---

Donald Cook, as his article on the conflagration of 1845 goes to press, is at Fort Benning, Georgia. He is a graduate of Fox Chapel High School, Westminster College and most recently the Officers Training School. Much of his research for this paper was done in our Historical Society Library.—Editor

1 Leland D. Baldwin, *Pittsburgh, The Story of a City* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1937), 109.

2 *Ibid.*, 156.

3 Mrs. Marcellin C. Adams, "Pittsburgh's Great Fire of 1845," *THE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL MAGAZINE*, Volume 25 (1942), 55.

4 John Newton Boucher, ed., *A Century and a Half of Pittsburgh and Her People* (The Lewis Publishing Company, 1908), 395.

temperamental pumpers of the fire companies, and there was not enough hose to reach from the rivers to the center portions of the city. The engines had to be hand-pumped to force the water from the power-pumped water system.

Pittsburghers were aware of this lack but were not concerned. After all, there was water, and no previous fires had been too large to handle.

In April 1845, there were only two water mains in the "down-town" section, a six-inch main on Third Street and an eight-inch line on Liberty Avenue. The new reservoir on Quarry Hill "was dangerously low."<sup>5</sup> The Allegheny, Niagara, Neptune, Duquesne, Vigilant, and Union fire companies were in sad shape; most of their hose had been condemned, and there was not enough water for the use of all at one time.

The Pennsylvania Canal crossed the Allegheny on a wooden aqueduct and emptied into a great basin between Penn and Liberty Avenues just below the present Pennsylvania Station. This basin was crowded with warehouses, and with shacks and hotels for the eight or nine hundred men working on the canal handling the hundreds of boats which docked each day. The wooden aqueduct had just recently been replaced by a suspension bridge built by John Roebling, a bridge held by two seven-inch thick cables. Some people claim this was the earliest iron-cable suspension bridge in the world.

The Monongahela wharf was constantly lined with hundreds of steamboats, keelboats, and others. Water Street, which really was only the cobbled slope of the river, was lined with warehouses from Try Street to the Point.

In the area of today's Triangle and on the slopes of Herron's and Grant's Hills were foundries, factories, shops, churches, public buildings, and private homes. In addition to the water system there were a gasworks supplying the whole town, a public school system and thirty-three private schools. Plays, concerts, and other amusements abounded as Pittsburgh's taste favored intellectual pursuits. The Western University of Pennsylvania had an "imposing building on Third and Cherry, . . ." <sup>6</sup> Professor A. Gray of Marietta College was to lecture on geology at University Hall at 7:30 P.M. the evening of April 10.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Charles C. Arensberg, "The Pittsburgh Fire of April 10, 1845," *THE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL MAGAZINE*, Volume 28 (March-June 1945), 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Thursday, April 10, 1845, dawned bright, clear, and cloudless; a high wind was blowing.<sup>8</sup> It was the same type of morning that the people had experienced for weeks. The city had been suffering from a long drought. Paul Coyle in the April 10, 1932, *Pittsburgh Press* says, "It had not rained in the district for six weeks."<sup>9</sup> The weather had also been a bit chilly according to many reports, but this Thursday was warm, prelude to a pleasant day — except for the wind. Indeed the winds for several days had arisen to near gale proportions while crossing the Point. The winds started around 7:00 A.M. and steadily increased until they reached their peak around noon; they then howled at this intensity until about 6:00 P.M. when they would abate.<sup>10</sup>

In mid-morning of April 10 the winds began their increased proportions, but around 11:30 or noon they subsided somewhat. During the lull, sometime between 11:45 and 12:10 a small fire broke out on the southeast corner of Second and Ferry Streets.

Before describing the fire, we must take into consideration the many conflicting "facts," and weighing their values, take a middle-ground position and recognize the average as probably being nearest the truth. It would seem, based on readings, that there are some out-and-out myths contained in the story of the Great Fire — but old myths are not easily changed. And the story would not be as personal or colorful without them.

The majority of the writings, even those written within a few hours time, were based on a half-dozen immediate eyewitness recordings; but since the first-hand accounts were written in a state of shock and psychological distress, no matter how factual and truthful, they would also contain human errors. The great fire became mixed with emotionally-blinded sense impressions, erroneous facts and was obscured with half-truths; the people who spread them were innocently ignorant of doing so.

The authors of the prime sources put their first reactions into their writings. Often, since they had not surveyed the whole area, they were unaware of the full extent of the damages, and when they had seen the whole they were apt to react with horrified conclusions.

---

8 Baldwin, *op. cit.*, 228. (There is some disagreement here — all accounts agree on a high wind, but some say south and west, some say north and west.)

9 Many facts, even contemporary accounts, are exaggerated; this seems to be, as most sources say it had not rained for two weeks.

10 Again differing accounts. Several sources state the wind usually quieted shortly before noon to provide a lull before again increasing about 2:00 in the afternoon. Facts of the fire would tend to support the latter.

People of other cities and in later years could write only what they could already read or hear about the fire.

It is not actually known who started the fire, how it started, or where it actually began. A woman, planning to use a vacant lot to do some washing, became careless and left her fire for a moment. The warm temperature had called her outside; she lit her fire to boil water and then stepped inside to get her wash. In that short interval the winds returned and blew some hot embers or burning straw against an adjoining wooden building, which has been claimed to be an ice shed or barn belonging either to Colonel Diehl or Mr. Bruce. This small building burst into flames, ignited the house of Colonel Diehl, which in turn ignited the closest frame structures along the south side of Second Street (today's Boulevard of the Allies).

According to J. Heron Foster's book, the Great Fire started on the southeast corner of Second and Ferry Streets in an icehouse owned by Colonel William Diehl.<sup>11</sup> Other accounts state that it started in an old shed<sup>12</sup> or in a barn.<sup>13</sup> One account even claims the fire to have started in Bruce's icehouse on the same corner.<sup>14</sup>

A woman, whose origin and name are lost to history, started a fire in an open lot; her purpose and status as to position in the community are also lost. But she allegedly was an Irish washerwoman, reported to be in the employ of Colonel Diehl, Mr. Bruce, or Colonel Woods.<sup>15</sup>

Samuel Young, editor of the Connoquenessing *Valley News*, wrote his autobiography in 1890; he records a brief history of Pittsburgh. In Chapter IV he describes his marriage and editorship of the *American Eagle* while working in a Pipetown mill. He was also writing a book — *Tom Hanson, A Tale of Fort Duquesne* — at the time. He cites the fire thus:

Matters moved along nicely until noon on the 10th of April, 1845. At the hour of 12 M. we had seated ourself at the dinner table, when "clang" went the bell on the old *Neptune* engine house. Being a member of that company we did not wait a second call, but flew like the wind, and with others reached the engine house and the machine was soon under way to the fire. Running down Ferry Street, we discovered that Diehl's ice house, adjoining the Third Presbyterian Church was wrapped in flames, and the big church had also caught.<sup>16</sup>

11 J. Heron Foster, *A Full Account of the Great Fire at Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh: J. W. Cook, 1845), 3.

12 Sarah H. Killikelly, *The History of Pittsburgh, Its Rise and Progress* (Pittsburgh: B. C. & Gordon Montgomery Co., 1906), 186.

13 Clarence E. Macartney, *Right Here in Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh: Gibson Press, 1937), 53.

14 Arensberg, *op. cit.*, 13.

15 No where does any account actually say she was working for any of them, but it is implied so, usually for Colonel Diehl.

16 Samuel Young, *The History of My Life* (Pittsburgh: Herald Printing Company, 1890), 15.

This is the only source that claims the shed and church to be adjoining.

Another eyewitness who wrote his story later on was William G. Johnston:

At noon on the tenth day of April, 1845, I was standing in the doorway of Johnston & Stockton's bookstore when the cry of "Fire!" was sounded, and a stream of people was soon seen running toward Second Street. The day was warm, just such an one as occasionally is sandwiched between the rough days which in general mark our spring, and one which we always hail with delight. It was noticed, too, about the hour referred to, that a brisk wind had sprung up, and great clouds of dust swept the street.<sup>17</sup>

When he arrived at the icehouse he seems to have had a different opinion than some, as he says, "I found the roof burning, and can bear witness that a few buckets of water would easily have extinguished the flames, but none was thrown."<sup>18</sup>

Thomas Mellon, who was one of the more fortunate and did not lose much, says, ". . . I was busy between watching my cases on the trial list in court and superintending the building of a dwelling at the corner of Wylie and Fifth Avenues close by the Courthouse."<sup>19</sup> Several hours later people rushed in saying the city was on fire; he then climbed to the courthouse roof to watch. By 5:00 P.M. he says, everything was destroyed.

Robert McKnight, then a twenty-five year old attorney, wrote in his diary, covering the years 1839-1846, the following:

Thursday April 10th

*Great Fire!!!! Conflagration!!!!*

Wrote letters and at 12 M. heard alarm bells ring for fire. Followed the crowd down Second 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.<sup>20</sup>

At least one person felt he did know all about the fire — how it started and why, and the causes for it. The Mayor of Allegheny appointed April 24 as a "season of fasting, humiliation and prayer" for the city of Pittsburgh; the Reverend E. P. Swift of the First Presbyterian Church of Allegheny gave a fiery sermon that day. He said the people should be careful to remember that all the natural advantages of the area were God-given in method, time, and place and

17 William G. Johnston, *Life and Reminiscences from Birth to Manhood* (Pittsburgh: The Knickerbocker Press, New York, 1901), 179.

18 *Ibid.*, 180.

19 Thomas Mellon, *Thomas Mellon and His Times* (Pittsburgh: Wm. G. Johnston & Co., Printers and Stationers, 1885), 311. Research shows that William Johnston (note 17) went into the printing business after the fire; it is probable he is Mellon's printer.

20 Robert McKnight, diary in files of Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

that Pittsburgh was His chosen place, the representative model of all American cities. God was being forgotten and forsaken — most of the destroyed buildings were not consecrated to God and lacked any “In the year of our Lord” inscriptions; little of the profit from the lost goods would have gone to Him; and the cities contained too much sin, evil, and corruption. Because He was being ignored, God had visited Pittsburgh to show people there and elsewhere that He was Almighty and that it was He who had guarded the city. But man had forsaken Him for business, prosperity, and profit. “Doubtless He has been greatly displeased with our unthankfulness for His mercies, our abuse of His goodness, our hardness of heart and love of the world?”<sup>21</sup> The Reverend Mr. Swift then said the city was full of evil and that the worst sin was the neglect of the Sabbath, and that this lesson should once again prove God’s wrath, through the visible agent of fire as used before in Biblical times. The “great invisible, efficient agent” would teach people better habits.<sup>22</sup>

On April 27, 1845, James H. McClelland wrote to his sister in Ireland; he told her the accepted exaggerations of the day. Said he,

The fire was one of the most wonderful and destructive, if not the very worst, that ever happened in the records of cities. The weather had been exceedingly dry for two weeks, and when the fire broke out the wind was blowing strong, and it increased to a gale. Pieces of burnt wood were carried 15 miles, and pieces of partly consumed books and papers had been picked up at a distance of 30 miles from the city.<sup>23</sup>

Thirteen-year-old John R. Banks, a student at the Western University of Pennsylvania, wrote to his father, a missionary in Trinidad, and included a rough map of the city showing the burned area. The letter, which was quite thorough, listed the burnt buildings, the extent of the fire, property and personal damages suffered by his uncles, and how the fire spread.

A dreadful calamity has befallen the city. Twenty squares of the city have been entirely destroyed by fire and from 1000 to 1200 houses destroyed. The fire originated in a frame building over an ice house belonging to William Diehl near the corner of Second and Ferry.<sup>24</sup>

The city’s fire bell, in the tower of the Third Presbyterian Church which was only a block up Ferry Street, sounded the alarm almost immediately.

---

21 E. P. Swift, *The Calamity of Pittsburgh* (Allegheny, Pa.; Kennedy & Brother, 1845), 18.

22 *Ibid.*, 6.

23 James H. McClelland, personal letter to sister, April 27, 1845.

24 John R. Banks, personal letter to his father, the Rev. Joseph Banks, April 12, 1845.

At this time there were six volunteer fire companies in Pittsburgh (Eagle, Allegheny, Vigilant, Duquesne, Neptune, Niagara) and four in Allegheny (Uncle Sam, Washington, William Penn, Union Hose Company).<sup>25</sup> Most of these were involved in fighting the fire; the Vigilant lost its engine house and most of its equipment, and the Neptune was lost trying to save the Third Presbyterian Church. All of the Pittsburgh companies lost a considerable part of their hose.

Even with the dryness of the buildings and the intense winds, several observers felt the fire could have been put out while still confined to Second Street, especially since it was still localized and at least two fire companies were on hand. It is obvious that the general populace felt that it would be checked because not for another two hours did any real concern for safety exist. But the drought had lowered the water supply so that the pumpers drew only a sticky, wet mud. Hasty attempts at dousing roofs by hand or spreading salt-covered blankets did no good either.

From Diehl's the flames leaped the street to attack the Globe Cotton Factory, which was destroyed and in turn set off the houses on both sides and across Ferry towards the Point. The winds turned the flames away from the Point, though, and the Third Presbyterian Church caught fire. By superhuman efforts this structure was saved when its wooden cornice was removed and allowed to burn into the street below; because of its size and high walls, the church made a barrier to the fire and the wind swerved the flames around it to the east. This resulted in the saving of the western and extreme northern portions of the city. With the winds blowing at gale strength and the fire large enough to radiate intense heat, brick and stone buildings also fell before it, and metal and glass melted, the heat creating a huge updraft along its entire front. This suction and the "natural" wind pushed the flames along at an ever-increasing rate and fanned the fire so that it spread north, west and south at the same time.

From two o'clock until four o'clock the fire raged at its height, destroying everything in its path. Nothing could be done to stop it. By 5:00 P.M. it was licking at the fringes of Kensington, or Pipetown, and had destroyed nearly one-third of the city, including most of that day's most notable landmarks and the only bridge across the Monongahela River. By then the winds had died down and efforts to contain the fire on the fringe areas were successful; moreover, since all the central area had been burnt and the wind was constantly changing direction so that it blew back into the burnt area as much as on to un-

---

<sup>25</sup> Frank C. Harper, *Pittsburgh Press*, April 10, 1930.

touched areas, the fire began to die. It was, however, still intense enough to continue burning; the only place left for it to go was across the Pennsylvania Canal to Pipetown. This it did, and in a crazy haphazard way it proceeded to destroy the entire industrial suburb, finally burning itself out at the end of Pipetown about 9:00 P.M. Pipetown was virtually ruined, but because of the fire's erratic course, several structures along the canal escaped, as did certain isolated brick structures. Even though it was "out," fires burned all night throughout the district and buildings collapsed for some time after.

William G. Johnston, reporting years later, said the wind had sprung up about when the fire started; other eyewitnesses said it had been blowing all morning and then stopped, not resuming until a half-hour after the fire began.<sup>26</sup>

The reservoir, in the general vicinity of today's Court House, was very low. Even with the dryness of the fuel, many felt if water had been available the flames could have been quenched.

Mr. Johnston, who was one of those who felt even a little water could have doused the fire, ran to the Eagle Fire Company on Fourth Street; he met it on its way to the scene. According to him the engine was ready almost immediately and the pumping began; the firemen were standing so they "were almost able to touch the burning roof" but only a "sickly stream of muddy water" came out.<sup>27</sup>

The now-raging flames were driven north and east, and the people saw that the best they could do was to try to remove the goods from within the fire's path.

By this time the Eagle engine was on hand and had failed; the people knew then they were in for trouble, especially when the two largest buildings in the way, the factory and the church, both caught fire. Wood's factory fell, as did the brick house next to it, despite the firemen's efforts. Then the church caught; the Eagle managed to save it.<sup>28</sup> The church had a 163-foot-tall steeple with a wooden cornice around the roof, and was supported by massive pillars.<sup>29</sup> When the cornice burst into flames the crowd groaned, for all their efforts to douse it by hand had seemingly failed; if the church was lost nothing could prevent the fire from licking its way on up Ferry to Liberty and Penn. It was then that people in nearby buildings started to cover the

<sup>26</sup> Killikelly, *op. cit.*, 186.

<sup>27</sup> Johnston, *op. cit.*, 181.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Dawson, Ed., *Our Firemen* (Pittsburgh: City of Pittsburgh, 1889), 24. All reports to the contrary, the Niagara Company also claims to have saved the church, 44.

<sup>29</sup> Arensberg, *op. cit.*, 13.



roofs with salted blankets, with the hope that the salt would draw moisture;<sup>30</sup> this too failed.

The harassed firemen worked feverishly to save the church; each time they beat out one smouldering spot several others would ignite. After considerable effort they cut the burning wood cornice off and let it fall with billowing smoke and flying sparks into the flaming debris in the street. The stone walls held and the fire was forced to go around the church; the wind buffeted the flames back toward the Point, changed again and quickly reeled the opposite way. Because the Third Presbyterian Church was so large an edifice, and because the wind was from the west, the flames had only one way to go — eastward. The Point, the northern portions of the city, and west of Ferry Street survived.

With the church past the crisis, the stone and brick buildings adjoining it went up in smoke,<sup>31</sup> and the fire proceeded back uptown, racing up Second and Third.<sup>32</sup> "The conflagration now spread to the Monongahela four squares broad and soon crossed Market Street, the flames hissing and leaping from house to house and square to square."<sup>33</sup> A Dr. Dimmit's house on Chancery Lane disappeared as the flames rebounded from the Third Presbyterian Church. Being a full-fledged holocaust now, the fire roared relentlessly in a solid but ever widening front, and tossed burning embers into the wind which landed blocks away to start numerous isolated fire-spots. Because of the wind, now at gale force,

It was but a few moments until the stores on Market Street were aflame, and thence to Smithfield, and on, far on to Pipetown. In a short time it seemed as if the whole city must go, as already fully one half of it was on fire, with no means of checking its rapid progress.<sup>34</sup>

Firemen saw they were helpless, so moved off to try to do whatever they could to try to save the northwestern section, where the wind was not blowing yet; some firebreaks were made by dynamiting rows of obviously doomed frame structures. This also was useless, as the fire's intense fury and the swirling wind either pushed through or jumped over them. Sometimes a frame house was spared but its brick or stone neighbor was felled; buildings of all materials were held

<sup>30</sup> Johnston, *op. cit.*, 181.

<sup>31</sup> Niles' *National Register*, April 19, 1845 (Baltimore).

<sup>32</sup> Some confusion in terms may exist; east of Ferry Street is towards the Point — this is downtown. Uptown is the part of the city between Market Street and the Court House on Grant's Hill.

<sup>33</sup> McKnight, *op. cit.*, diary.

<sup>34</sup> Young, *op. cit.*, 16.

in equal disdain though, as a rule.

It progressed diagonally from the church across the square bounded by Ferry, Third, Market, and Second Streets on the north, and equally as fast up the entire square bounded by Ferry, Second, Market, and Front Streets on the south. The April 11 issue of the *Daily Gazette and Advertiser* says the fire crossed Market at Front Street and began to rage "with an awful fury." That was at 2:00 P.M. and the wind had reached its peak. This was on the southern edge of the fire though, as it approached the warehouses along the Monongahela; in the northern blocks it was worse. The flames did not cross Third until halfway up the block between Market and Wood Streets; it swept across Third past the New Post Office Building and continued diagonally on to Fourth, across Fourth to Diamond Alley, up Diamond past Wood Street to the corner of Diamond and Smithfield.<sup>35</sup> From there it ate diagonally back down across Fourth and Cherry Alley to about the corner of Third and Grant.<sup>36</sup> The Diamond-Smithfield point marked the fire's greatest width; not including Pipetown, the fire was five blocks wide by eight blocks long.<sup>37</sup> This portion of the fire crossed Ross and Try Streets to Pipetown and finally burned itself out on the slopes of Boyd's Hill.<sup>38</sup>

The Bank of Pittsburgh, an imposing stone building with all modern metal trim, located on Fourth Street between Market and Wood, was supposed to be the only fireproof building in the city. As the fire approached, the cashier locked all the cash, books, and papers in the vault and joined the huge throng outside who had gathered to see if it would withstand the fiery onslaught. The building was gutted but left standing as the intense heat melted the zinc roof and trim and destroyed the interior; the vault was unharmed. As the Bank was melting away the people lost whatever hope they might have had left, and the job of evacuation began in earnest. Goods and furniture had been removed prior to this, but the speed of the fire and the unconcern at first had nullified most efforts. Now the streets were not only crowded with debris and people, but also jammed with carts, furniture, boxes, and piles of belongings. Much was safely moved, but most was lost, burnt, stolen, or looted.

From the Bank it went on to Diamond, destroying the *Daily Chronicle* offices, the Vigilant Fire Company, and Luke Loomis' book-

<sup>35</sup> Foster, *op. cit.*, 6.

<sup>36</sup> Baldwin, *op. cit.*, 228.

<sup>37</sup> *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Friday, April 18, 1845.

<sup>38</sup> Baldwin, *op. cit.*, 228.

store and bindery, finally stopping at the Weyman Tobacco Manufactory on the corner of Smithfield and Diamond.<sup>39</sup>

On the southern front, the fire burned halfway back on the block between Second and Front Streets, and crossed down to Front by way of Chancery Lane (a small alley between Ferry and Market). It then ran down Market to Front, across that street to Water Street and to the very bank of the river, destroying most of the large iron- and zinc-roofed brick warehouses.<sup>40</sup> Goods were hastily removed to the wharves, but sparks ignited them and forced the multitude of steamers, packets, keelboats, and ferries to back off and drop down river to Saw Mill Run.<sup>41</sup>

The fire swept into the suburb of Pipetown (also known as Kensington) by way of Second and Third Streets, burning itself out in the latter case but jumping the canal in the former. As the flames leaped the Pennsylvania Canal they had to dip down into the basin, cross the water, and roll up the other bank. This caused the fire to lick out at the taller buildings, usually brick factories, but bypassing most of the frame ones along the canal itself. By this time it was 7:00 P.M. and the wind had died, so no additional buildings burned unless directly in front of the fire's path.<sup>42</sup>

The fire jumped over the Jones and Quigg steelworks on the city side, went into the basin and burned the lock-tender's house, went up the other side past several frame houses, Tomlinson's workshop, Parry and Scott's foundry, the Gas Works, and Phillips' glassworks, but destroyed the Miller and Co. glassworks and everything up the road from the hill to the river as far as the Dallas Iron Works.<sup>43</sup> This iron mill was the last destroyed property, as the fire ate itself out around 9:00 that evening. Although it was "out" in the city by 7:00 and in Pipetown by 9:00 walls fell and flames crackled all night.

James Parton, years after, called Pittsburgh "Hell with the lid off."<sup>44</sup> That description would have fitted April 10, 1845, better. Twenty blocks of the most valuable part of the city, covering fifty-six acres, were destroyed; most of the damage had occurred between two and four o'clock in the afternoon. Between one thousand and twelve hundred houses and warehouses were damaged<sup>45</sup> and 982 buildings

39 Arensberg, *op. cit.*, 14.

40 *Ibid.*

41 Foster, *op. cit.*, 6.

42 *Ibid.*

43 Killikelly, *op. cit.*, 187.

44 *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 21, January 1868, p. 21, as cited in Johnston, *op. cit.*, 183.

45 Killikelly, *op. cit.*, 187.

were destroyed.<sup>46</sup> Damage estimates varying from \$.9 million for personal losses to \$3.5 million for property damage are given. More careful evaluations some time later placed the figure at between five and eight million dollars.<sup>47</sup>

The only building left in the city area was a wood frame house on the corner of Fourth and Ross; it had been saved by blowing up surrounding brick homes.<sup>48</sup> The city's pride and joy, and one of America's foremost hotels, the Monongahela House, was completely burned; other landmarks in the area to go were the Dravo House, the Merchants' Hotel, the Baptist Church, and the handsome Western University of Pennsylvania.<sup>49</sup> The fire was stopped at Fourth and Ross only by using gunpowder to demolish a row of brick homes, after similar attempts had failed. The burnt area extended west to east from Ferry to Market to Wood to Smithfield to Cherry to Grant to Ross to Pipetown, and from north to south it crossed Diamond, Fourth, Third, Second, Front, Water, and the wharf. Damage in the twenty squares, according to Mr. Johnston, was appraised at about fifteen million dollars.<sup>50</sup> "Iron and glass were melted as thoroughly as when passed through furnaces, and the debris in general of buildings and their contents was ashes," is the way William Johnston recalls the scene.

More than two thousand families were left homeless, some 1011 of which, totaling twelve thousand<sup>51</sup> persons, asked for aid. It was immediate in coming.<sup>52</sup> The burnt area comprised one-third of the city and represented two-thirds of its wealth.<sup>53</sup> The Neptune fire engine was one of the fire's victims, as was the gasworks — which left the city without light.<sup>54</sup> The Court House, which had been built in an apple orchard on Grant's Hill in 1842, other undamaged public buildings, warehouses, and private homes were all opened to the homeless.

One paper said that millions of dollars would not repair the losses. William Brackenridge, of Natrona Heights, had been in the city and

46 T. J. Chapman, *Old Pittsburgh Days* (Pittsburgh: J. R. Weldin & Co., 1900), 195; George Thornton Fleming, *History of Pittsburgh and Environs* (New York: The American Historical Society, Inc., 1922), Volume II, 81.

47 Fleming, *op. cit.*, 81.

48 Foster, *op. cit.*, 6.

49 Arensberg, *op. cit.*, 14.

50 Johnston, *op. cit.*, 183.

51 Baldwin, *op. cit.*, 229; Macartney, *op. cit.*, 54.

52 Killikelly, *op. cit.*, 188.

53 Baldwin, *op. cit.*, 229; Arensberg, *op. cit.*, 14.

54 *Pittsburgh Daily Gazette and Advertiser*, Friday, April 11, 1845.

wrote of his impressions in the April 14, 1845, issue of the *National Intelligencer*. He was forced to flee the Monongahela House. "The dust, the smoke, and heat were suffocating."<sup>55</sup> He walked around the area while the fire was still raging, and reported that the people emptied the warehouses as a precaution, not really thinking they were in danger. He also noted that the air was full of burning debris which was carried away to as yet unburnt sections; the wind "blew so violently that it was difficult to stand up."<sup>56</sup> Window-glass and zinc roofs melted while sheet-iron roofings got so hot they set fire to the sheathing below. Brackenridge said, the people still had faith, though, and viewed the catastrophe as a set-back rather than a loss; they were optimistic and full of the "bold indomitable spirit of enterprise."<sup>57</sup> He said that in comparison this fire was ten times as great as New York's great fire.

Another letter, signed "C.," appeared in the Cincinnati *Gazette*, dated from the Exchange Hotel, Pittsburgh, June 12. The author had been horrified to see the results of the fire were more than he had judged; he "had no just conception. No description can reach the reality."<sup>58</sup> Streets were still blocked by rubbish and travel was difficult — but the populace was busy repairing the city "with an energy and industry that cannot be too highly commended. Already there are four or five hundred buildings up and in progress . . ."<sup>59</sup> These buildings were elegant and spacious, built of better materials, and improved upon the architectural style.

It was felt by some that Pittsburgh's fire might have been set by an incendiary, and cries of "incendiaries" and "human agency" filled the air.<sup>60</sup>

The Mayor of Allegheny, William B. Foster, lived in East Park Common; his sons, Stephen and Morrison, volunteered their services and were fighting the blaze even as their mother wrote about it in a letter to her daughter in Philadelphia.<sup>61</sup> The elder son, Stephen Collins, soon became famous as one of America's foremost composers.

John Banks, a university student, in writing to his father, said, "The loss is estimated at ten million dollars—" and that "It has broken all the Insurance Offices in town but one. If you stand on Water

<sup>55</sup> Foster, *op. cit.*, 7.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Henry Mann, Ed., *Our Police* (City of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1889), 77.

<sup>61</sup> Arensberg, *op. cit.*, 16.

Street and look up towards the city you see nothing but chimneys and walls.”<sup>62</sup>

Robert McKnight wrote in his diary, under April 11, of his walk through the burnt-out section, where he “witnessed the sad spectacle of the fairest portion of the city ‘a heap of ruins laid.’ ”

Samuel Young, in his autobiography, said, “It was a sad day for Pittsburgh. All its best business houses in ruins, hundreds of dwellings wiped out, presented a sad and sickening sight. But there was energy left.”<sup>63</sup>

About himself, “The burning of the Pipetown mill threw us out of employment and we began to cast about for some means of earning a livelihood. It struck us that we might do something by publishing a book and thus realize some money.”<sup>64</sup> Mr. Young went on to write *The Smoky City, a Tale of Crime*, in addition to *Tom Hanson*; a few months later he moved to Franklin, Pennsylvania, and became the associate editor of the *Conneautville Courier*, while also writing for the *Clarion Banner*.

The Council appointed a committee to survey the damage and make a report. Of the 982 buildings, valued at \$1.5 million, that they reported destroyed, the following are the most important: Firemen’s Insurance Office, Penn Insurance Office, Fire and Navigation Insurance Office, Mayor’s Office, Merchants and Board of Trade Reading Rooms, Philo Hall, Bank of Pittsburgh, *Chronicle* Office, Merchants’ Hotel, Eagle Hotel, Monongahela House, American Hotel, Smithfield Hotel, Associate Presbyterian Church, Baptist Church, Western University, African Methodist Church, Scotch Hill Market House, Custom House, and the Monongahela Bridge at Smithfield Street.<sup>65</sup> The burned-out business firms broke down into commission, forwarding, and wholesale grocery houses, six druggists and chemists, five dry goods, four hardware merchants, two queens ware, two bookstores, two paper warehouses, five boot and shoe shops, three livery stables, two fire works, and numerous minor ones.<sup>66</sup> This does not mention the Gas Works, the Globe Cotton Mill, or any of the many other factories and foundries both in Pittsburgh and in Pipetown.

Even so, not all businesses were lost; most of the dry goods, hardware, and other large establishments escaped. Some firms did lose everything, and many were prostrated. But they were not dead or help-

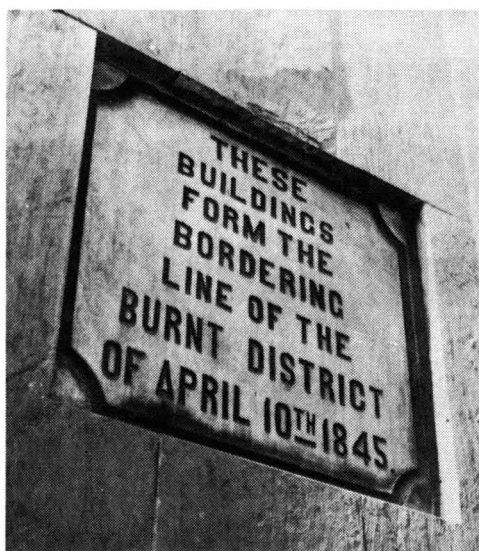
<sup>62</sup> John R. Banks, personal letter to his father, the Rev. Joseph Banks.

<sup>63</sup> Young, *op. cit.*, 16.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Killikelly, *op. cit.*, 188.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*



A marker on the Smithfield-Diamond Building,  
415 Smithfield Street, Pittsburgh.





less; many who were hard hit could afford their losses and made a rebound. The people and press of Pittsburgh had to fight to stop the rumors spreading that she was completely devastated; they told the world Pittsburgh was wounded, and then asked outsiders to invest in the city so that she could rebuild. Investment was forthcoming and she was aided in rebuilding.<sup>67</sup>

Between 975 and 1115 buildings of all types were destroyed, including the Bank of Pittsburgh, Monongahela House, Western University of Pennsylvania, Scotch Hill Market House, and the Smithfield Street Bridge. Between twenty and twenty-six blocks of the city, covering around fifty-six acres and extending for over a mile, were consumed; their value ranged from \$1½ to \$3½ million. Another 150 buildings were damaged heavily. Total personal losses were valued between \$.9 and \$6 million; estimates for the combined destruction, property, and personal damages ran from \$2.4 million, in the first estimate, to \$50 million in estimates made years later. Most sources feel a reliable figure would be between \$10 and \$20 million. Only part of this was covered by insurance, and most of that was with local companies. The majority of the Pittsburgh insurance agencies were utterly ruined, though some did pay off part of their claims, and a few managed to struggle on for another year or two. Only one was still in business in 1848, however.<sup>68</sup> The heaviest single loss was suffered by Messrs. Lyon, Shorb, and Crossan, owners of the Monongahela House;<sup>69</sup> its value was stated at \$200,000. Their loss was \$60,000.<sup>70</sup>

Many of the real estate owners had to rely on themselves to rebuild as insurance companies, especially fire insurance, did not as yet spread outside of their local areas. Since many policies were held by outside companies, the local agencies lost heavily. It was then the national custom for each community to have its own insurance houses, and to deal exclusively with them. In a mutual relationship, agencies did not often try to do business outside their own locales, and clients seldom sought policies from companies elsewhere. Among other reasons, it was thought "unethical" and bad business practice. Previous disasters had shown the danger in these practices, but had not changed matters, even though local insurance firms often would fold. Banks usually were not strong enough to offer real aid in times of calamity.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Erasmus Wilson, Ed., *Standard History of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania* (Chicago: H. R. Cornell & Company, 1898), 915.

<sup>69</sup> *History of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania* (Chicago: A. Warner & Co., Publishers, 1889), Volume I, 582.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

One direct result of the Pittsburgh fire was to change this self-made death warrant; clients began to seek policies with several firms, located in various cities, and insurance companies, to protect themselves, learned to spread their accounts and to deal in a wider area.<sup>71</sup>

The Penn, Firemen's, Mutual, Naval, and Fire companies paid a total of \$79,800 and went bankrupt; the total insurance was \$870,000.<sup>72</sup> Soon after the fire the Navigation and Fire Insurance Company announced in the papers that it had paid \$200,000 in claims and was still in good shape; this company still maintained, that since it was a domestic fire, the city should patronize it instead of companies from elsewhere than Pittsburgh.<sup>73</sup> The Firemen's and Mutual companies reorganized and were soon doing a good business.<sup>74</sup>

In 1846 State Senator Dorsey introduced a bill to allow companies from other states to do business in Pennsylvania, replacing an old state law that excluded outside companies from doing business in the state. This original ordinance had provided Philadelphia with a monopoly on the state's insurance.<sup>75</sup> From the enactment of the law to the time of the fire, the Pittsburgh companies had grown, at least in the immediate vicinity; they violently opposed the new bill. But by 1848 the only Pittsburgh company still on its feet was the Navigation and Fire Insurance Company; all the other operating agencies were Philadelphia-based, and the largest one, the Pennsylvania Insurance Company, had been in town since its establishment immediately after the fire.<sup>76</sup> Soon other agencies from outside the area appeared.

The fire consumed about one-third of the city, the old section containing most of the oldest and wealthiest homes, most of the industry, and most of the landmarks, representing around two-thirds of the wealth of Pittsburgh.

This terrible loss staggered Pittsburghers, whose first reaction was one of despair; this reaction was spread by the press to other cities. But the natives quickly realized things were not hopeless and soon set about with courage, hope, and energy to rebuild their city into a better place. Thus the natives, at least, went from one view to the other in a few days. The first view of despair is expressed by a quotation found in Foster's *A Full Account of the Great Fire*:

---

71 *History of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania* (A. Warner & Co.), *op. cit.*, 581.

72 Killikelly, *op. cit.*, 189.

73 Wilson, *op. cit.*, 915.

74 *Ibid.*

75 *Ibid.*

76 *Ibid.*

It is impossible for any one, although a spectator of the dreadful scene of destruction which presented to the eyes of our citizens on the memorable tenth of April, to give more than a faint idea of the terrible, overwhelming calamity which then befell our city, destroying in a few hours the labor of many years, and blasting suddenly the cherished hopes of hundreds — we may say thousands — of our citizens, who, but that morning were contented in the possession of comfortable homes and busy workshops. The blow was so sudden and unexpected as to unnerve the most self possessed, . . .<sup>77</sup>

Meetings were held on Friday and Saturday to reorganize the city and to draft a letter requesting aid of the State Legislature. The following Monday Governor Shunk read the letter to the Legislature; a bill was quickly drafted and passed unanimously. Pittsburgh received fifty thousand dollars from the state and was refunded all taxes paid that year and was further exempted from taxes for the next three years. Aid, in money and kind, came streaming in from all over the world. Total contributions from groups and individuals came to several hundred thousand dollars.

Johnston and Stockton resumed at once; their establishment had been on the very edge of the fire and had been spared. They bought all the other stores on Market Street near their own firm and set up business. Mr. Johnston says the Denny estate also bought property in the neighborhood and within a year had rebuilt an entire row on Third Street and moved in.<sup>78</sup>

These words of one native son aptly expressed the situation after the fire:

The general trade and business of this country is improving slowly but soundly and safely. The unparalleled calamity which has befallen our city has brought great demand for all kinds of labor, at sometimes better prices than had been going — and I hope to be able to make a new start in any old business of building. Although I have suffered heavily and grievously, I think that I am not broken in either body or spirit, and I hope to rise again.<sup>79</sup>

An observer, distant in both miles and time, in 1898 remarked that the fire “proved in the end, as in all such cases, a real benefit to the city, although it meant the ruin of individuals.”<sup>80A</sup> New businessmen replaced old, and as the initial shock wore off, capital flowed in and “the city entered upon a remarkable era of development, despite the depressing effects of the tariff of 1846 upon this great manufacturing center.”<sup>80B</sup>

At that time in history, the Mexican War was claiming most of

<sup>77</sup> Foster, *op. cit.*, 3.

<sup>78</sup> Johnston, *op. cit.*, 185.

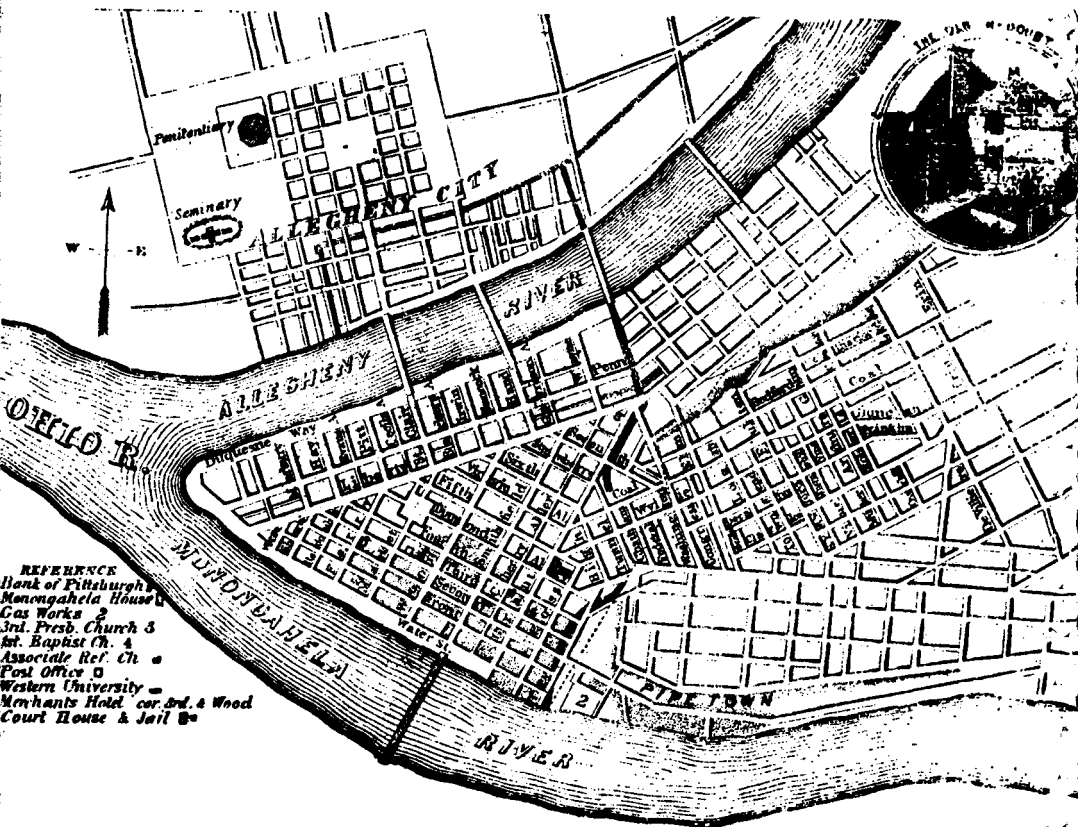
<sup>79</sup> James H. McClelland, personal letter to his sister in Ireland, dated April 27, 1845.

<sup>80A</sup> and <sup>80B</sup> Wilson, *op. cit.*, 717.

the headlines across the country; Pittsburgh papers were no exceptions. The city had sent several volunteer companies to the war and everyone was following the war happenings.

Thus the *Pittsburgh Morning Post* of Friday, April 11, carried only one column and a paragraph of a second about the fire, starting out: "It is our painful duty to record one of the most terrible fires

from J. Heron Foster, *A Full Account of the Great Fire at Pittsburgh*



R.E. McGowan, del.

Engr. by W. G. Gibson

*Map of Pittsburgh & Vicinity*

Designating the portion destroyed by fire. April 10, 1815.

that ever devastated any city on this continent — a great portion of our busy and populous town is in ruins." It went on to say how the wind was "blowing stiffly from the north-west, though it frequently veered to other points, . . ."

The next day, Saturday, the *Post* had three columns of all the losses, listed by types of buildings — business, home, etc. Under "Information Wanted" was the following: "Of Mrs. Maglone, who has not been heard of since Thursday, three o'clock P.M. She had on a crossbarred flannel dress, a hood bonnet, and was last seen at Scotch Hill market house."

On Monday the paper carried the official correspondence between the city and state officials. Thursday, April 17, saw the relief amounts listed, a letter of sympathy from the Presbytery of Ohio, and a quotation on the fire from the *Baltimore Sun*.

Pittsburgh's *Daily Gazette and Advertiser* of Friday allowed the same amount, again on the second page. Still the distant war was more newsworthy. On Saturday, though, the entire seven columns of the second page were filled with a map, a ward-by-ward listing of persons suffering losses, buildings destroyed, and reports on council meetings and the Mayor's recommendations. On Monday the paper again showed a map, in addition to letters from Mayor Darragh and Governor Shunk, and a list of aid from the nation's sympathizers. On Wednesday the paper said relief from Harrisburg was coming; a quotation from the *Milwaukee Courier* of April 6 about a big fire in that city was also printed. Later, on Thursday, April 17, the *Gazette* acknowledged that Harrisburg was giving fifty thousand dollars in relief and quoted the *Philadelphia U. S. Gazette* concerning Pittsburgh's conflagration. In this edition the Mutual Insurance Company asked for twenty per cent of its premium notes to help pay the sufferers.

The Pittsburgh *Morning Chronicle* was burned out, and advertised in the *Daily Gazette and Advertiser* until it could resume business on Tuesday, April 15, when it moved its office from N. 85 Fourth Street to the corner of Third and Market. But it was not until the following Thursday, a week after the fire, that the *Chronicle* even mentioned the fire.

With all the damage done, and the confusion that existed for those nine long hours, it seems amazing that the death toll was almost non-existent. The final count showed that only two persons died in the fire. Samuel Kingston, Esq., a lawyer, went back into the house on

Second Street opposite Scotch Hill Market to try to save a piano; he was blinded by smoke and stumbled into the cellar where he became trapped and died. His remains were found early in May.<sup>81</sup> The second person was a woman referred to both as Mrs. Malone and Mrs. Maglone, who was never seen after 3:00 P.M. on April 10. She was reported last at the Scotch Hill Market House, and a woman's bones found on April 22 in the cellar of a store belonging to Arthurs on the corner of Second and Grant, were believed to be hers.<sup>82</sup> It is even more amazing when one stops to wonder whatever became of the washerwoman who started the fire and of the others on earlier lists. Apparently locating them took time. A later story, in 1870, also claims only two people were killed, but that the woman was a Mrs. Brooks.<sup>83</sup>

When councils met the next day, Friday, April 11, it was decided that Mayor Darragh would leave for Harrisburg to talk to the Legislature about state relief. Wilson McCandless, who in 1852 was only one vote away from being nominated President instead of Franklin Pierce, accompanied the Mayor.<sup>84</sup> A Town Meeting was held Saturday, April 12; the letter of aid to the Legislature was written. On Monday, April 14, Governor Francis R. Shunk delivered a stirring message to the combined Legislature telling it of the dreadful calamity and asking for immediate relief; his address was based on the letter, written by Morgan Robertson (President of the Common Council) and George W. Jackson (President of the Select Council).<sup>85</sup> Thomas Williams' draft of the memorial to the Legislature was adopted; it was also resolved that committees be formed to distribute all donations, aids, money, and goods that arrived in Pittsburgh, with the Court House as the central clearinghouse.<sup>86</sup> A Mr. Cooper then introduced the bill for Pittsburgh's relief which was passed unanimously and immediately signed by the Governor. The Legislature

promptly appropriated fifty thousand dollars for the relief of the sufferers to be distributed under the direction of the mayor and 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.<sup>87</sup>

What this meant was that the city was to get fifty thousand dollars in moneys, complete state and county tax refunds for those

---

81 Foster, *op. cit.*, 48.

82 *Ibid.*

83 The Pittsburgh *Leader*, April 10, 1870.

84 Arensberg, *op. cit.*, 17.

85 Foster, *op. cit.*, 19.

86 The Pittsburgh *Gazette*, Friday, April 18, 1845.

87 Arensberg, *op. cit.*, 18.

properties destroyed, and tax exemption for the whole city for the years 1846-47-48. The refunds were to be made only for destroyed properties in the First and Second Wards and in Kensington.<sup>88</sup> The release from the mercantile tax was a great aid to business. In the next three months nearly two hundred new buildings were erected in the burnt district.<sup>89</sup>

A total of eight hundred thousand dollars in aid was received,<sup>90</sup> including "state" contributions, personal gifts and gifts of clothing, food, supplies, and materials. Monetary gifts from state collections amounted to \$198,873.40, and broke down like this: Pennsylvania, \$109,889.66; New Hampshire, \$329; Massachusetts, \$16,741; Delaware, \$1322.29; Washington, D. C., \$2872.15; Ohio, \$10,081.28; Michigan, \$100; Kentucky, \$5773.17; Tennessee, \$1259.35; Missouri, \$3883.03; Alabama, \$1652.30; Mississippi, \$1291.76; Georgia, \$470; Louisiana, \$7167.44. Europe sent \$651.28.<sup>91</sup>

James Buchanan of Lancaster County, who was soon to become President, sent five hundred dollars; Edwin M. Stanton, of Steubenville, Ohio, soon to make Pittsburgh his home and later to become Lincoln's Secretary of War, gave twenty-five dollars. President Polk contributed one hundred dollars, and eighty-year-old ex-President John Quincy Adams gave fifty dollars. The Rothschild brothers of France also sent money.<sup>92</sup> Other notables to send money were John Jacob Astor and James Lennox. On August 13 the *U. S. S. Constitution* was in Canton, China; Captain Percival told his crew of the Pittsburgh disaster and every man in the crew offered aid. *Old Ironsides* sent \$1950 to the suffering city from halfway round the world.<sup>93</sup>

There were also numerous gifts in kind sent. The city of Wheeling, West Virginia, sent one hundred pounds of flour and three hundred pounds of bacon; Meadville sent fifty-eight bushels of potatoes and one bedstead. J. Murdoch of Squirrel Hill gave eighteen bushels of potatoes, fifteen bags of flour, and twelve pieces of bacon; Monongahela City contributed eight barrels of flour, thirteen barrels of potatoes, and numerous furnishings.<sup>94</sup>

The funds on hand were distributed in a graduated percentage,

88 Wilson, *op. cit.*, 914.

89 Chapman, *op. cit.*, 196.

90 *Ibid.*

91 Killikelly, *op. cit.*, 188.

92 Arensberg, *op. cit.*, 18.

93 Ira Nelson Hollis, *The Frigate "Constitution"* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931), 232.

94 Arensberg, *op. cit.*, 18.

with persons losing under one hundred dollars getting fifty per cent of their loss back. Persons losing one hundred to five hundred dollars received thirty per cent, and for losses of five hundred to two thousand dollars a person got twenty-five per cent. Whatever was left over was given to anyone losing over two thousand dollars. Total claims over and above insurance were \$794,000; including what was insured, the total loss came to nearly five million dollars.<sup>95</sup> The final distribution of relief funds took place about the middle of the following July.

The tax exemption also had a somewhat serious drawback. The public schools were closed for quite some time, not because any had been burned, but because no taxes were collected and they could not be operated.<sup>96</sup>

#### THE FIRE — AS RETOLD LATER

Through the years following the fire several traditions have developed. One of them is to ring the old fire bell every April 10. This bell today rests in front of the building of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on Bigelow Boulevard in Oakland. It was brought to its present spot from the tower of the old City Hall on Smithfield Street.

William Coventry Wall, a well-known Pittsburgh artist, an eyewitness to the disaster, painted two oils of the fire. Thus we have the first recreation — in vivid pictorial form — almost immediately. The first was done on April 12 and was called "Pittsburgh after the Fire of 1845, from Birmingham." It shows the ruins as seen from the south bank of the Monongahela and shows the steeple of the Third Presbyterian Church and the dome of the old Court House. The second, "Pittsburgh after the Fire of 1845, from Boyd's Hill," shows the area as seen from the present site of Duquesne University. It was painted on April 13 and shows the Pennsylvania Canal in the foreground. The originals and copies were given to the Carnegie Institute by a descendant, Miss Mary O'Hara Darlington; they are on view to the general public even today. At the time they inspired James Queen to do two black-and-white lithographs; they also were the basis for two large colored lithographs which appeared in the *Iron City and Pittsburgh Weekly Chronicle*.<sup>97</sup>

The Pennsylvania Room of Carnegie Library has on hand a "Story of the Big Fire" — as told to Mrs. Frank (Lida) East by her

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> THE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL MAGAZINE, Volume 34, 225.

<sup>97</sup> "The Artist Reports on the Fire of 1845" (Pittsburgh: *The Carnegie Magazine*, March 1945), Volume 18:10, 300.



mother, and retold by Mrs. East to Miss Sarah Taylor and written down by Miss Wilma Owens. Mrs. East was very prominent in city, church and social affairs, serving as president of the Pittsburgh Female College Association, and as founder of the Norcross Club. As she retells the past she deals with her family, primarily her grandfather, Simeon Bulford. He had been, among other things, the president of the Allegheny School Board. Mrs. East relates how he had a furniture factory on First Street which was destroyed, and how he and the family tried to salvage their goods. Their attempts to save their home on Second by covering the roof with wet rugs was as unsuccessful as the attempts to save the factory. His loss was about four thousand dollars. The family had to flee to Scotch Hill.

The Pittsburgh *Leader* of April 10, 1870, gave several pages to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fire. In one of the best accounts anywhere, it retold the whole story — the spread of the fire, damages, buildings destroyed, personal damages, and gave a clear map of the burnt area. It noted that the people were happy that April, for spring and renewed trade were on hand, and the wharves were busy, “. . . for the business and wealth of Pittsburgh then tended to concentrate around the steamboat traveling, . . .” The *Leader* also doubted the facts of origin, saying, “The story that it began in the ice-house of Colonel Diehl, though we find it seriously asserted in the *Gazette* of April 14, 1845, is incorrect and indeed was concocted as a sort of ghastly joke upon the old colonel.” However, it does not say how the fire did start. According to this article only four buildings remained in the First or West Ward, none in the Second or South Ward, and only a few along the suburb side of the Pennsylvania Canal in Pipe-town. It claimed that Samuel Kingston, Esq., and Mrs. Brooks had died in their own homes.<sup>98</sup> This paper also reported an interesting change of heart: the State Legislature soon repented for its hasty impulse of giving fifty thousand dollars and tried to get it back. But the city generously accepted the gift anyway and used thirty thousand dollars. When the state then tried to get the remaining sum, the city promptly used some more of it. A few years later part of the sum was given to the city of Louisville when it suffered a bad fire.

A paper dated April 10, 1883, also carried a lengthy story. The masthead for this issue is lost, but it probably is the *Commercial Gazette*.<sup>99</sup> This story said there was ten million dollars worth of

<sup>98</sup> It had previously been claimed that Kingston died elsewhere.

<sup>99</sup> Style and certain references in the paper lead to this conclusion.

damages and only \$870,000 covered by insurance. The great worth of this paper, though, is not in its routine "repeat performance" but in its several interesting side comments. It claims that in 1843 a group of boys on Scotch Hill and from Pipetown, who were not old enough to join a fire department, had formed their own Clipper Engine Company. A fireman identified only as "L.D." tells how the Clipper was an old obsolete engine. Bill Phillips, owner of a glasshouse in Pipetown, paid the repair expenses and gave them a shed to house it. But even when repaired, its pumps were not good. The day of the Great Fire found the boys on the way to the scene. Alas, they were waylaid and the engine was taken away to Wickersham's wire factory at the corner of Market and Front. Because their warnings about the pumps were ignored, the Clipper burst. The boys pulled it back to safety and later sold it to another juvenile fire group, the Good Will Fire Company.

Another statement of the *Commercial Gazette* is probably true and would explain the spread of the fire. Much of the produce stored on the wharf burned only because of a freak accident. Across from Wickersham's was a liquor store; several men had been lowering a keg to the ground by pulley when the fire across the way forced them to flee, leaving the keg dangling in the air. The rope burned through and the huge barrel fell into the hay below, bursting into flames. Kegs, which were stored all about, began exploding with violence and the burning liquor gushed down the street gutter to the wharf, entering cellars and catching everything in its way. Even with the wind, the fire had spread more slowly southward than to the east or north, but about 2:00 or 2:30 P.M. it suddenly rushed down Water Street and consumed everything. Thus the burning liquor story is probably true and the reason for the sudden southward shift.

One fact which conflicts with other reports is the claim given to the William Penn Company of Allegheny for saving the Third Presbyterian Church — almost all say the Eagle saved it, and at least one claims the Neptune did.

This unknown paper also reported that William J. Howard suggested blowing up all the houses on Wood Street to stop the fire, with his own at First and Wood the first to go. But adjacent owners objected to the idea (and saw their buildings burn anyway).

Another dramatic development occurred when some bags of gunpowder were left in the doorway of Park & Sons on Front Street. They were being loaded for removal but the approaching flames sent

everyone off. A drayman, Chris Robinson, dumped his load of goods, put the powder in his wagon, and tried to reach the canal. At one time a canvas bag caught fire and he put it out with his hand. His path took him right through the fire at Ross Street; he drove through to Fourth and went out Fifth to Suke's Run where he dumped the powder. When he returned, his original load and his own home had been fired.

As for origin, the unknown paper stated a woman was washing clothes and had a wood fire under her kettle, and that another woman was baking outside and had raked some hot cinders. A cinder caught on the straw roof of Diehl's icehouse — "a two-story hole in the ground" — and started the fire. Conroy's grocery across the corner was fired by the burning straw; some girls working in the Globe Cotton Factory watched all this through open windows. Although they were told to close the windows and to go back to work, they kept watching; finally some sparks blew in a window and within seconds the hanging cotton near the window had burst into flames. In minutes the whole inside was an inferno and the factory was destroyed.

A mile up the Monongahela shore past Pipetown stood a large old tree — all by itself. Sparks landed on it; it was burned and left a charred gaunt stump, "a fitting monument marking the uttermost limit of the great fire of April 10, 1845."

An account written in 1908 stated that an Irish woman started the fire; William Seaman of Leetsdale remembered it well. He had been working at the Millanger Planing Mill in lower St. Clair Township near the 1908 location of the Castle Shannon incline. He was the last person to cross the Smithfield Street Bridge before it collapsed. According to this article two other bridges were blown up to prevent the fire from using them as entry routes to Birmingham on the South Side. (Nowhere else, in paper, story, or old maps, is there any evidence of any other bridge besides the Smithfield one; that is why it was called the Monongahela Bridge.) This story also listed the gasworks as being destroyed; and that the fire was at its peak between three and four o'clock.<sup>100</sup>

According to the Pittsburgh *Dispatch* of July 25, 1916, a three-week long drought preceded the fire, which began at noon near the Third Presbyterian Church, and spread to an adjoining stable, which in turn ignited the two-story frame buildings nearby. The story centered around the fact that City Controller E. S. Morrow had been given a painting showing the fire's results as seen from Coal Hill

<sup>100</sup> G. F. Muller, "The Great Fire of April 10, 1845 — Sixty-three Years Ago," *The Pittsburgh Gazette Times*, Sunday, April 5, 1908.

(Mt. Washington). The painting, historically, graphically, and proportionally correct, had been lying around in a locked safe for years. It showed the whole city and the burned area and was a masterpiece. Mr. Morrow received it from Mr. H. A. Neeb, whose father had gotten it from an unknown artist and locked it in his safe and forgotten about it for years. (Today the Neeb Print is a famous part of the Fire relics.)

In 1925 The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania was planning to commemorate the Great Fire of 1845 by placing a tablet on the southeast corner of Second and Ferry<sup>101</sup> — the starting place of the calamity.

In April 1936, the *Press* again had an anniversary story. But this time it was different, for this was 1936, and only a short month before a disaster of much greater magnitude had stricken the city and completely paralyzed it. This recent catastrophe hit the entire city, which now included both old Allegheny and Birmingham, and caused damages hundreds of times greater than the fire of 1845; the city was now reeling from the great St. Patrick's Day Flood. But, as in 1845, Pittsburgh was fighting back and would go forward again. The *Press* pointed out that the tradition was so strong, and the fire memory was so great, that even only a few days after the city's worst calamity, it could stop and remember a distant one back before most of the people living then could remember. Even after the Flood, Allegheny County Fire Marshal Thomas L. Pfarr followed "a 24-year custom of commemorating the anniversary of the Big Fire of April 10, 1845." He rang out 1-8-4-5 in chimes on the old fire bell in front of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania building. The *Press* commented that "Not only in time of year but also in direction of damage did the 1845 fire and the 1936 flood compare." Both also stopped at almost the exact spot at their upper ends on Smithfield Street.

The Great Fire of Pittsburgh of 1845 has a strong tradition behind it; nearly every year the anniversary is remembered in some way by local press, T.V., or radio. But as the years wear on and people's memories grow dimmer, the Great Fire is losing some of its aura and is talked about and written about less and less. It is not automatically re-created every April 10 as it used to be, and chances are that if you mention it to a Pittsburgher today he will not have the

<sup>101</sup> The tablet was actually put up later, and at 411 Smithfield Street, between Fourth and Diamond, to mark the farthest extent of the fire. It goes largely unnoticed today.

slightest idea of what you are talking. The Great Fire has become one of those past events that are put away as a relic of a bygone era, as a piece of not very important history. For the people in Pittsburgh that bright warm Thursday in 1845, however, the fire was a very real thing, and one they never forgot.