

SEA OF FIRE

The Day Seattle's Waterfront Business District Turned into a Smoke-Shrouded Inferno

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An overheated cast-iron glue pot gave rise in 1889 to the biggest fire any Northwest city ever experienced. The pot being heated by John E. Back, a newly arrived Swedish immigrant, bubbled over and quickly ignited the turpentine-soaked wood shavings on the basement floor of Victor Clairmont's small carpenter shop. In no time the fire engulfed the dilapidated wooden two-story Pontius Block building at First Avenue and Madison Street.

The business district in the frontier town of Seattle was a mass of crooked, narrow streets lined almost exclusively with old, wooden buildings made tinder-dry by a particularly hot, nearly rainless summer. The city was "protected" by a collection of volunteer fire departments with little political coordination or fire safety planning. Their equipment consisted of three engines, three hose carts, and a hook and ladder cart. Only two engines and one cart were horse drawn. Ironically, fire chief Josiah Collins was in San Francisco at a fire safety seminar, completely oblivious to the dramatic events that would soon cost him his job.

The flames were first seen from steamers lying along Seattle's waterfront. Their captains sounded the alarm at a quarter to three on the afternoon of June 6, 1889. Soon Engine Company No. 1 was attaching two 2 1/2-inch lines to a hydrant at the corner of Front and Columbia Streets, two blocks south of the fire, while Engine Company No. 2 dropped a hose under a dock of nearby Elliott Bay and took up position at the rear of the building.

With great confidence in the skill of their volunteer fire department, which had won a good number of firefighting contests throughout the Northwest, the gathering crowd let out a cheer as the firemen fearlessly raised their hoses to the flames. The fire seemed controllable, with the flames just beginning to erupt through the north end of the building. In fact, just a few months earlier the Arlington Hotel fire was "in-the-red," with flames shooting from a third story window and roof, when the fire department arrived on the scene. In that situation the firemen proved their skill by putting down the blaze without much trouble.

There were, however, two problems with the Pontius Building fire that quickly chilled the onlookers' confidence. The tide was out and the less-than-adequate hydrants were soon nearly devoid of water. Before long the water pressure was so reduced that a stream from the fire hydrant could barely reach ten feet. One local wag noted that the fire had its way that fateful day because "a horse could have done better" than the feeble streams of water slowly trickling from the firefighters' limp hoses.

The hydrants, though distributed throughout the business district, were nonetheless few in number and defective. There was a static downtown water pressure of over 120 pounds supplied by eight-inch cast-iron water pipes connected to a 4.28-million-gallon reservoir 312 feet directly above Seattle on Beacon Hill, but this system could only supply three or four good streams of water, and these were further reduced by the small inlets to the hydrants.

With the loss of water pressure, telegrams asking for assistance were immediately sent to Tacoma and Port Townsend, as well as Portland and Victoria. Given the distances involved, the calls for assistance were fanciful at best.

As the flames rapidly spread, Seattle's mayor, Robert Moran, quickly took control of the situation and organized the onlookers into teams to start carrying the merchandise from nearby buildings to the relative safety of the docks on Elliott Bay. Unfortunately, this later proved to be a wasted effort.

Despite the best efforts of an enthusiastic bucket brigade, the flames were soon assaulting the nearby wooden Denny Block building, which contained a well-stocked liquor store and several saloons. The volatile contents only encouraged the fire's rapid progress, with nearby basements and hallways serving as efficient flues to scatter the flames.

The inferno quickly moved southward down Front Street and soon crossed First Street to the Frye Opera House at the corner of Front and Marion. The firefighters expected the four-story brick opera house to serve as an effective barrier to the fire, but its mansard roof (a roof with two slopes on each of the four sides, the lower slope steeper than the upper one) soon ignited, and the building was completely gutted within minutes. Shortly, the large Colman Block building, a two-story framed building extending from Marion to Columbia streets, burst into flames as well. Burning brands soon set fire to buildings below Columbia Street and in the rear of the Union Block building.

Blowing up buildings with dynamite between Marion and Columbia Streets proved unsuccessful in stopping the conflagration. The two small streams of water available were making little impression on the growing fire, and the valiant firemen were further demoralized by the absence of Josiah Collins just when they most needed his leadership.

To the west the advancing flames had enveloped the Commercial Mill and numerous warehouses on Colman's Wharf facing Marion Street. To the north, the Kenyon Block building was overwhelmed by the fire so suddenly that its occupants had to literally flee for their lives. The heat from the Kenyon Block quickly ignited the Maddox and Griffith Blocks, on the northeast corner of Front and Madison Streets.

Eastward the flames created an unbroken wave of fire three blocks wide, sweeping both north and south and extending from Second Street to the water's edge. As the afternoon wore on, shifting winds grew stronger, causing the fire to spread even faster and creating more havoc for the volunteer firefighters and bucket brigades. In only 20 minutes the unrelenting flames had engulfed the entire block of James Street.

At four o'clock flames were erupting through the tops of buildings, with firebrands shooting across streets and quickly consuming Seattle's central business district. To further complicate the situation, the streets were filled with dry, highly flammable sawdust.

By half past four the inferno, spreading south at the rate of a football field per hour, had crossed Columbia Street and consumed Seattle's densest business district south of Yesler Way. Roaring flames shot hundreds of feet into the air as the sun created a macabre purple haze surrounding the huge columns of thick smoke. Even the store merchandise, which had been hurriedly piled in the streets for protection, soon ignited.

The heat became so intense that respiration was almost impossible for those close to the fire. The sound of unrestrained destruction became overwhelming as collapsing buildings and screaming steam whistles combined with the general chaos preceding the roaring flames. It was soon evident that the only productive course of action on the southern periphery of the fire was for the volunteer firefighters and the stunned citizenry to do their best to save valuables from the rapidly advancing flames.

By five o'clock the fire had spread even farther south, reaching two hardware stores on Front Street that contained an estimated 20 to 50 tons of cartridges. The resulting barrage of bullets accompanied by exploding oil, paint, and alcohol drums stopped even the most daredevil firefighters for almost an hour.

At half past six, 12 city blocks and 6 wharves were a mass of ashes. The fire had crossed Cherry Street, and soon the flames grew near the Occidental Hotel and the new Yesler-Leary Building (constructed of stone, iron and brick) at the corner of Front and Yesler. The heat was so intense that both buildings, which firefighters had expected to act as a firebreak, soon started burning from their respective interiors. By now the flames had also spread westward to the planking under the docks and wharves, consuming every pier and wharf from University Street to Lane Street 12 blocks south, as well as all the merchandise Mayor Moran's volunteers had laboriously loaded on them.

The most insidious threat posed by the fire centered on the area between Yesler Way and King Street, in what is now called Seattle's Pioneer Square district. Over 150 hotels, as well as houses of ill repute and rooming houses, had been haphazardly built on pilings to keep their ground floors above Elliott Bay's highest tides. The fire rapidly spread under the pilings and then exploded upward with such velocity that hundreds of startled residents barely escaped with their lives much less their worldly belongings. In fact, the heat was so intense that the frail buildings began collapsing even before the fire reached them.

The northern reaches of the conflagration were finally contained at University Street around 8:30 that night. One of the local newspapers recounted these events, noting that,

While the bucket brigade was engaged in saving...[a] house (which caught fire 50 or 60 times), the firemen threw the burning sidewalk on the west side of the street over the cliff. The planking in the roadway was ripped up and there was no more food for the flames....

Volunteer bucket brigades had saved both the Boston Block and Colonial buildings, even though each caught fire on numerous occasions. Although the courthouse smoked from the heat of the

nearby fire, it never burned. The palatial Yesler Mansion and the Catholic Church were also courageously saved from almost certain destruction. And, thankfully, a very tired 200-man bucket brigade had prevented the flames from encroaching into the hillside's vulnerable wooden residential district.

At 9:30 an inlet of Elliott Bay at the south end of town was the only barrier that stopped the southward advancing flames. The fire had engulfed everything else in its path, destroying every building to its foundation.

That evening, Canadian fire chief Thomas Deasy had arrived from Victoria and positioned his men along the waterfront with a steamer and a hose car. The steamship *Fleetwood* brought another steam engine from Olympia, and around midnight a train arrived from Portland with a third steam engine and apparatus. It was too little too late. Volunteers from other cities provided valuable service, but in the end they could do little to stop the fire.

The Great Seattle Fire provided a spectacle throughout the Puget Sound basin as people from over 50 miles away watched the billowing smoke darken the mid-afternoon sun and the red glare reflect through the night like a glimmering aurora borealis. The fire eventually burned itself out, except for the bunkers containing over 300 tons of coal that burned for several more days. The hazy dawn found many exhausted and bewildered Seattle residents gazing in disbelief at the devastated remains of their city.

Although not a single life was lost, the conflagration razed 66 blocks of tinder-dry real estate valued at \$15 million.

The next morning Seattle's *Post-Intelligencer* editorialized that

the very heart and center of the city...is this morning a glowing heap of ashes. But a single business building, the Boston Block, is left standing. Every bank, every wholesale house, every hotel, every newspaper office and nearly every store has been swept out of existence...."

Even the firemen's prized fire station burned to the ground. The only immediate positive note was that the inferno had efficiently rid Seattle of an estimated one million rats.

The Seattle fire was big news around the world. Approximately \$120,000 in relief funds arrived on the back of news reports of the little frontier town valiantly trying to rebuild itself. Longer term benefits of the fire included placing Seattle on the map and, with the influx of people during the rebuilding effort, increasing the city's population from approximately 23,000 hardy souls of various descriptions to over 43,000 in the official census the following year. This made Seattle the largest city in Washington, strengthening its appeal as a candidate for the hotly contested terminus of the Great Northern railroad.

In the aftermath of the conflagration, the fire department came into its own as a professional operation. The firefighters employed a temporary frame and canvas structure on University Street until a new firehouse could be constructed. Following Chief Collins's resignation, J. F. McDonald was elected acting chief, and in August the city council finally authorized the establishment of a full-time, paid fire department.

During his limited tenure McDonald installed a complete Gamewell fire alarm telegraph system and purchased two Ahrens 700-gallons-per-minute steamers and a double 80-gallon Champion chemical engine. Additionally, to better protect the wharves and piers, the city fathers approved the construction of a \$35,000 fireboat, the *Snoqualmie*, which by 1891 was berthed at the foot of Madison Street with Hose Company No. 5.

On October 21 the city council appointed Gardner Kellogg the first official fire chief of the new professional Seattle Fire Department. His first task was to complete construction of six new firehouses in the year following the fire.

The fire also helped settle a major debate regarding Seattle's water system. Originally, Seattle's water was provided by a number of privately owned and operated water systems, of which the politically well-connected Spring Hill Water System was the largest. Public versus private water was now being hotly debated. A more dependable and cleaner gravity-fed water system bringing water in from the Cedar River, south of the city limits, was proposed by those citizens lobbying for public ownership of the growing city's water supply.

In the end, because of the hydrants' failure to supply the needed water to fight the fire, Seattle's citizenry opted to establish a publicly owned and operated water system. And a more fireproof brick, iron and stone downtown business district was built over the city's ruins. The streets were made wider and straighter, and the city began attracting the spirited new citizens it would need in order to develop into the Northwest's premier city. All things considered, the Great Seattle Fire of 1889 was a blessing in disguise for the little frontier town on the shore of Elliott Bay.

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