

"The Great Westminster Fire"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

Most of our local communities have experienced the tragedy of at least one large fire which destroyed a significant number of buildings. On April 9, 1883 Westminster suffered a devastating fire that consumed a number of structures at the west end of town. The history of the fire was chronicled by J. Leland Jordan, former editor of this paper, in his April 23, 1943 "Time Flies" column:

"The fireman, from his slumbers waking.

At once his quiet home forsaking,

Regardless of both health and life,

Rushes to the deadly strife,

While still the cry of wild despair

Is wafted on the midnight air,

FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!"

"This old poem and the appeal being made by the Westminster Fire Department for funds, brings to mind Westminster's great fire of sixty years ago. It also revives in us memories of how our Westminster volunteer firemen have, at the risk of "health and life" saved property valued at hundreds of thousands of dollars. Through all the years they have never refused a call-through rain, hail, sleet, snow, in sunshine and storm, at all hours of the day and night-they have been alert and ready. With the exception of the two paid engineers, not one man has ever been compensated for his services. And oddly enough, our volunteers pay to belong to the organization.

But now along with our story.

The alarm of fire is always an exciting incident, but the alarm coupled with the thought that there is no water, gives one an uneasy feeling. In the days before Westminster had a public water system, the chance of curbing a fire of any proportion, was slim, and all citizens rushed to the assistance of the volunteers.

On the night of April 9, 1883, at about 11:30, the alarm sounded from the old bell tower atop the Firemen's Building (where the Mather store now stands), and the firemen hastened to the scene of the blaze-Jacob Thompson's livery stable on John street. Their only equipment was the Halloway chemical engine, a hook and ladder wagon, and a quantity of extra buckets. By the time they arrived at the scene, the wooden structure was ablaze from one end to the other, and in a short time, was spreading to the furniture establishment of Main and Geiselman and the dwelling of Mrs. Mary Leister. The wind coming in strong from the southeast sent sparks and flames to all adjoining buildings.

It must be remembered that Westminster did not have a water supply, and the only available water was from public and private wells.

William L. Seabrook, president of the Fire Department, seeing that the fire was out of control, consulted with his chief then telegraphed to the Baltimore Fire Department for help.

Buildings destroyed other than those properties mentioned, were the dwellings of Joseph Bankard, Thomas Babylon, Charles Stout, Mrs. Malehorn, Jacob Thompson, Israel Zieber, and S. V. Bankard. Grace

Lutheran Church and parsonage were a total loss: John Saylor's bakery and home, G. W. Weimert's green grocery; Thomas Erb's butcher shop and residence; M. C. Strasberger's grocery and provision store, F. K. Herr and Bros. coach factory, and the Zieber Building occupied by J. M. Wells, paper hanger; Bixler and Senft, shoe merchants, and Joseph Allgire's billiard parlor. Many other properties were scorched and otherwise damaged. The estimated loss was in excess of \$135,000. (Picture today the area of destruction, John street to Carroll, including the Lutheran church property.)

It was supposed that the fire was of incendiary origin, and four colored men were accused of the crime. They were taken before Justice G. W. Crapster and held in the jail. Following the hearing, extreme excitement prevailed in town, and after the inquest, it was necessary to deputize twenty-two men to guard the jail against possible lynching of the four accused.

Earlier in the evening, the four colored men had requested Thompson for permission to play cards in the stable, but he had refused. As soon as Thompson was out of sight, they went to another part of the building where carriages were stored. They immediately occupied one and started their game. A dispute soon followed, and according to the local press, a candle which was used for the light was upset, and the men fled the building.

It so happened that Robert Thompson and Aaron Shaeffer were sleeping in the second floor of the building and were evidently trapped, as the remains of one was found the next day, and parts of clothing of the other identified. Funeral services for both were conducted from the Montour House, with interment in the Westminster Cemetery. All local business was suspended on the day of the funeral from 1 to 3:30 P.M.

A summary of the loss; 2 lives, 29 horses, 2 cows, 16 houses, 1 church, 17 families homeless, 13 business houses burned out, 2 large manufacturers' establishments burned, 8 stables and a dozen or more small buildings.

At about 3:40 A.M. a special train from Baltimore arrived with chemical engines, a steamer and hose carriage and a large number of firemen, as well as a unit of the Salvage Corps. By this time the conflagration was spent and the Baltimore firemen could offer no assistance. They praised the local Volunteers for confining the fire to the small area.

In closing, permit us to remind you once more that the Westminster Fire Department is in need of funds to carry on their work.

Give! and give liberally!!"

The Historical Society's collection contains several photographs taken shortly after the fire was extinguished. The images provide graphic evidence of the devastation wrought by the Great Westminster Fire of 1883.

Photo Caption: Two men stand near the ruins of John Saylor's Bakery and residence on the corner of Carroll and W. Main streets. His property and a number of others were destroyed in the Great Westminster Fire of April 9, 1883. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.