

"Mount Airy Fire in 1914"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

Despite the Herculean efforts of our local volunteer fire departments, destructive fires have ravaged parts of nearly every Carroll County community. Mount Airy suffered devastating fires on February 24, 1903 and on March 25, 1914. A description of the second fire appeared in this newspaper:

"Fanned by a stiff breeze from the southwest, a fire which started in the boiler-room of the Farmers' Milling and Grain Co., shortly before noon Tuesday practically wiped out the business district, and for a long time threatened to spread to the residential section of Mt. Airy, one of Carroll County's most thriving towns. Ten buildings, including the First National Bank of Mount Airy, two mills and a large ice plant, were destroyed. Several other buildings nearby were partly burned. The damage will reach \$100,000, partly covered by insurance. The origin of the blaze is a mystery.

The buildings destroyed, were:

Farmers' Milling and Grain Company.

Storage warehouse

E. M. Molesworth, lumber and coal yard.

Watkins & Banks, general merchandise.

Robert L. Runkle hardware and cutlery.

C. L. Skagg, green grocery

Home of William W. Baker, president of the

milling concern.

First National Bank of Mt. Airy.

Runkle & Wagner, ice plant.

Several outbuildings on the place of C. Arnold

Fleming quarter of a mile away.

The buildings partly destroyed were:

The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad station, side

facing mill charred.

Mount Airy Lumber and Grain Company, office

burned.

E. M. Molesworth & Sons, furniture dealers,

front and cornice damaged.

Office of the Piedmont-Mount Airy Company,

roof and side burned.

The offices of Dr. W. D. Hopkins, dentist; E. M. Molesworth and the home of William O. Banks, were in the buildings destroyed. Persons living within two city blocks from the blaze, fearing that the flames would spread, moved the majority of their household furniture of their homes. In fighting the flames at the Mount Airy-Piedmont Company, Norman Woods, a salesman, was slightly burned about the face and right hand.

It was a few minutes before noon when Robert Runkles, proprietor of a hardware store but a few houses away from the mill, walked out of his store and, glancing towards the milling concern, noticed flames licking their way through the roof directly over the boiler-room.

None of the men employed in the place had as yet discovered the fire. Hurrying to the plant, Mr. Runkles notified George Davis, engineer and fireman, of the blaze.

Davis sounded the alarm and in a few minutes the half dozen or more men employed in the mill had formed a bucket brigade and began to fight the flames, but their efforts to check it were unavailing. In

less than ten minutes after the fire was discovered the entire mill, which is of frame construction, was a seething furnace.

Carried by the stiff breeze, the fire jumped across a two-foot opening between the mill proper and the storage plant and in a short time this building was also ablaze. Mount Airy has no water lines for fire fighting and the only water available was that carried from a nearby pond in buckets.

In the storehouse was thousands of bushels of wheat and corn and these helped to feed the flames and make the fire burn more briskly.

The flames were carried across the railroad tracks, setting fire to the side of the railroad station, directly opposite the mill, but by heroic effort the station was saved from destruction.

When it was seen that the fire was getting beyond control Mayor Frank J. Leatherwood telephoned to Frederick, the nearest place for assistance. The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad also rushed two of its largest engines to the scene.

The B. & O. had a watering tank about three miles down the road from Mt. Airy, known as Tank No. 4. Both engines were kept running to and from this tank, filling their tenders, which have a capacity of 5,000 gallons.

As the engines returned from the tank a line of hose was run from the Frederick engine into the large water tenders and in this way the fire was fought. For three hours the Baltimore and Ohio engines were kept going up and down the tracks.

Officials of the First National Bank of Mount Airy, of which Milton G. Urner, is president, realized that the building was doomed. They at once set to work removing the valuable papers and money, which had been stored in the large vault and by the time the flames reached this building everything that could be removed had been carried to places of safety far up on the hillside.

The flames had also leaped across the roadway and set fire to the office of the Mt. Airy Grain and Lumber Company, and in a few minutes this frame structure, which was one-story high, went down to the ground.

Sparks set fire to the home of W. W. Baker, almost a quarter of a mile distant, and also the outbuildings of C. Arnold Fleming Plumbing Company, about the same distance away. All these buildings which were of frame construction, fell easy prey to the flames.

Just at a time when it appeared as if the residential section was doomed a sudden shift in the wind carried the flames to the buildings of the B. M. Molesworth lumber and coal yard and the plant of the Wagner & Runkles Ice Company, to the westward of the Farmers' Milling and Grain Company.

In two large sheds in the lumber place was stored many thousands of feet of dried lumber and they went up fast. Up to this time these buildings had practically escaped the fire and it was thought they would be saved. But when the fire struck them it was but the work of a few minutes. They, with all their contents, were nothing but a charred and smoldering mass.

The beautiful residence of Miss Belle Runkle was the only large dwelling damaged. The house is directly across from the First National Bank, which was destroyed. Miss Runkle conducts a large millinery establishment on the first floor of the residence. An apartment in the house is occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Henry Clary. All the effects from the shop and the house were carried to the nearby lawns.

According to Mayor Frank J. Leatherwood, a movement will be started immediately by the merchants and business men of the town to have the burned buildings rebuilt at once.

This is the second great fire that has visited Mount Airy. Many of the stores in the business section were wiped out by flames on January 30,[sic] 1903. The damages was estimated at \$75,000.

There are between 900 and 1,000 inhabitants of Mount Airy. It is 30 miles out on the main line of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad.

it is about eighteen miles from Frederick and is the center for the farmers in that section."

Like other local communities, Mount Airy rebuilt after the 1914 fire. Unfortunately, the community suffered another fire in 1926 which led to the formation of a volunteer fire department shortly thereafter. The new company purchased an American La France pumper for \$8,325 which remained in service until 1958.

Photo caption: Main St. in Mount Airy was ravaged by fires in 1903, 1914 and 1926. Historical Society of Carroll County post card collection.