

"The Great Westminster Fire of 1883"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

Westminster residents had long apprehended a fear of fire because the city lacked a water system. Tragedy struck on April 9, 1883 when Jacob Thompson's livery stable on W. Main Street, caught fire. The editor of the American Sentinel newspaper appealed to the public and city officials in an article in the April 14th issue of his paper:

"OUR WARNING

The oft-repeated prediction concerning Westminster's danger, has been fearfully realized. Not only have the buildings fronting Main Street, that for years have induced the most serious apprehension, been swept away, but in addition four large brick structures, one of them the handsome church of the Lutheran congregation, all embraced now in one common ruin. The loss of property is a fearful calamity, but time, energy, and the indulgence of noble men will repair it. It is the irreparable loss—the burning to death of the two young men—that adds to this destruction its worst features.

It may be said that this is not the time for reference to what might have been or rather to what might not have been, but when we remember how in that horrible night—the most calamitous in our by no means uneventful history—when well after well and cistern after cistern in rapid succession ceased to yield the only element with which to quench the destroying flame, it adds a more than painful regret to the defeated efforts of many of our people to introduce water into our streets. Though less able now—a sad contemplation—than then it is still in our power. We have had a warning which it will be madness not to heed. Bad as this is, it is not as bad as it might be, and would have been, but for the Providential change of the wind, which had it continued as at first, and been but a little stronger the flames would have inevitably have swept the whole Western End of our city. In the presence of such a fire, our Chemical Engine is simply powerless, nothing but an exhaustless supply of water can cope with the fiery element, when it has once gained a headway. And it is a narrow policy to hold back on account of an expense, because we are not likely to have repetition of the event of the last week. Accidents of this kind appear to run in a sort of series. Note for example the great fire at Chicago of '71, succeeded by the almost as disastrous one of '73.

Another lesson we may learn is the danger of allowing stables and frame fire-traps in the heart of our city. Had the buildings fronting on Main Street, been of brick, it would have been impossible for the fire to spread as it did. We are about to enter on a season of rebuilding. Should not our city fathers pass at once, before any contracts are entered into, an ordinance forbidding the erection of frame dwellings, or of out-houses and stables within a given distance of one another?

We regret to state that no small part of the loss suffered by our people during the fire on Monday night and Tuesday morning was occasioned from a cause other than fire. It is a sad fact that instead of helping to save to the owners the goods, wares, and household effects from the flames a good many people saved it for themselves. With some of those burned out loss from the fire would have been comparatively small. It has since been found that it had been better, at least no worse, had they left some of their property in the burned buildings. Worse still, some of our residents who ape respectability are said to be among those who took advantage of this, to them, magnificent opportunity. We would advise these individuals to disgorge—quietly if they can—but disgorge nevertheless, for steps for their

return will be organized by the Committee who today at their meeting in Odd Fellows' Hall intend by their action to meet all the wants of the case.

In splendid contrast with the conduct of the ghouls who come to the fire to feed on what the flames had failed to devour was that of our citizens without regard to sex who by every possible effort assisted in checking the flames and in saving the goods of the sufferers. It is a source of great satisfaction to know that Westminster—though it may have some people at large who should be with Dorsey and his gang—has a host of noble men and women willing to make sacrifices and who can always be counted upon in honorable emergencies. From the moment of the first announcement of the fire until long after all danger of further spread of the flames had passed they remained on the ground relieving as far then as was possible the wants of the homeless.

To the Fire Department belongs the credit of saving several buildings entire, notably the frame dwelling of Mrs. Yingling and the brick dwelling of Oliver Groff both on Carroll street. Mrs. Yingling and her two daughters because of their efforts in endeavoring to save their homes should be enrolled as honorary members of the Department."

Another newspaper article described the loss of life and property. Jacob Thompson and Aaron Schaeffer, who had been sleeping on the second floor of the stable where the fire began, perished in the fire as did a number of horses and cattle. Sixteen houses, the Lutheran Church on Carroll St., two manufactories and eight stables were destroyed. Seventeen families and thirteen businesses were left homeless. Total fire damage was \$135,000 some of which was covered by insurance. Fortunately, the city heeded the warning and eventually installed water lines and fire hydrants which greatly reduced the danger of fire. Over the years, they have proved invaluable in protecting lives and property.

Photo Caption: A visitor stands beside the ruins of the Israel Zieber residence at the corner of W. Main and Bond Streets in Westminster following the April 9, 1883 fire. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.