

"April 1924 Fires"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

Fire has traditionally been the most serious catastrophic threat faced by residents of our local communities. Since in the early nineteenth century, volunteer fire departments have been the first line of defense against fire. The members of the Westminster Fire Department battled two serious fires in April 1924; the stories were front page news in the local press. The Westminster Democratic Advocate reported on the April 12th blaze at the Farmer's Fertilizer and Feed Company warehouse on Liberty St.:

"FIRE CAUSES A LOSS OF \$15,000

Farmer's Fertilizer & Feed Company's Warehouse and Stock Pray [sic] to Flames---Origin Unknown. Started in Oil Shed.

A threatening fire started Saturday morning about 12:10 O'clock in the Farmer's Fertilizer and Feed Company's Warehouse which kept our fire company about two hours fighting to extinguish the blaze, causing a loss of about \$12,000, which is partly covered by insurance. The fire was discovered in a storage roof among some barrels of oil, which is in the rear of the main building by Mr. George Wertz, the third track operator of the Western Maryland Railroad, who starts to work at midnight. Mr. Wertz noticed the fire as he turned the corner and hurried to the building in hopes of extinguishing the blaze, but on finding the fire was on the inside and too far gone to cope with it, turned in the alarm. An explosion of a coal oil tank in the building, caused the fire to spread rapidly. The company arrived promptly and Chief Shaeffer seeing that the fire was a dangerous one ordered five lines of hose run, which spouted that many streams of water which drowned out the blaze. The fire worked its way under the tin roof which made a stubborn fight. The flames lit up the town and caused a large crowd to assemble and watch the fire fighters work. The building was badly damaged by fire on the inside the elevator and cupola on the building was burned considerable. The heaviest loss was caused by water, which soaked the tons of feed stored therein. It is said that 10 carloads of feed were recently stored away for their spring business. About 8:30 the fire broke out again but was soon extinguished by the fire company. The warehouse is opposite of the railroad station, and adjoins the American Sentinel, Farmers Supply Company and Englar & Sponseller's warehouse, whose buildings are large and built of wood and fear was entertained that the fire might get such a start that it would ignite these buildings. The firemen worked like Trojans and succeeded in keeping the fire in the roof. The feed was washed from the building and was forced down the gutters in a stream by the water. Fireman Samuel Helm slipped from a ladder striking his head on the concrete road. He was carried away partly dazed, but soon recovered and was back at his work again. He suffered a bad laceration to the back of his head."

A week later the men were called to Asbestos to fight a rag warehouse fire at the Congoleum Company complex and the story was reported in the April 25th issue of the Democratic Advocate:

"FIRE IN 4000 TONS OF RAGS.

FLAMES RAGE IN RAG STORAGE HOUSE AT CONGOLEUM PLANT ASBESTOS, FOR HOURS-WESTMINSTER FIREMEN DO GOOD WORK-ORIGIN OF FIRE UNKNOWN-LOSS \$2500.

Fire originated in the rag house at the Congoleum Company, at Asbestos about midnight Sunday and burned fiercely for about 5 hours before being brought under control. At 2:30 the Westminster Fire Company was called out to combat the flames. The fire company with the assistance of the plant men fought hard until 6:30 when the fire was brought under control. Reisterstown Fire Company was called about 5 a. m. and arrived in a short time. While the men at the plant pulled the sheathing from around the building the two fire companies with four streams of water completely extinguished the fire by 10 o'clock. Tons of water was poured in on the burning bails or rags. The building is built of all steel and is about 200 feet in length and contained 4,000 tons of rags, estimated to be about 225 carloads. The fire trucks were placed on a bridge across the Falls with the suckers placed in about 5 feet of water. The two machines were pumping 1200 gallons of water a minute. The Congoleum Company has fire plugs and a sprinkling system throughout the entire plant which was used. The fire was discovered by the night watchman who gave the alarm and summoned the employees in this city and around Finksburg. The loss has not been estimated but it will run up into several thousands of dollars, which is partly covered by insurance."

During this time period local fire fighters also responded to several routine residential fires. The two larger fires, however, tested the skill and equipment of the volunteers and became a part of the department's long history of saving lives and property.

Photo caption: Members of the Westminster Fire Department posed in front of their E. Main St. building in c1925. The fire fighters battled two commercial fires in April 1924. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.