

Fire of 1890

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Whitehall looking East from the RR Tunnel (lower right) – Ruins of the Opera House (center).

Whitehall was once again ravaged by a fire on Friday, September 19, 1890. Here are the headlines and the account as it appeared in the Montague Observer on Thursday, September 25, 1890.

Again Devastated - Furious Flames Once More Lap Up the Best Business Portion of Whitehall – A Sad Blow But They'll Rally From It.

Last Friday morning an alarm of fire was sounded, but as there had been so many small fires of late but few citizens turned out at first.

The blaze had evidently started from the smoldering embers of the fire in Mears' ice house, which occurred a few days before. From that it was communicated to the barn adjoining. It then crossed the street and caught the barn in the rear of the European hotel. This blazed fearfully in the big wind, and all efforts to rescue a valuable stallion belonging to John Esmond proved futile and the animal was burned. A barrel hoop, a ring of fire, was swept by the wind against the rear of the Norris wooden building and the casings of the European hotel began to burn.

The engines were slow to get to work and the streams were back of the fire. If a stream could have been played on the rear of the above buildings, and against the fire, there is little doubt but that the disastrous conflagration that followed might have been avoided. Suddenly these buildings burst into a mass of roaring flames. The fire jumped across the street to the skating rink and the building occupied by the Reed's. These were soon alive with flames and the fire was roaring in the railway tunnel.

John Reed was seriously burned about the face and hands, and other members of the family received injuries in escaping the dreaded element.

It now became evident that a general conflagration would rage and all thought that the Whitehall Manufacturing Co.'s buildings and the Staples & Covell mill would be soon in the track of the flames.

Help was telegraphed for to Muskegon and met with a quick response of men and engine, the run being made in twenty minutes and good service being rendered.

The iron clad buildings of C. H. Laville, G. C. Funk, Finn's blacksmith and Hanisch' harness shops next caught, and that noble structure, the opera house burst forth into a sea of fire.

The fire on the south side of Colby street was checked at the building occupied by C. A. Nelson's saloon, and the hard work of cashier Lasley and others saved the bank building, thus checking the progress of the flames in a direction that would certainly have wiped out the whole town.

From the opera house the fire spread along the north side of Colby street, and in a north-easterly direction along the bluff overlooking the river laying everything low in its wake.

French's store and the Knights of Honor lodge rooms, the postoffice and the Masonic hall. Widoe's clothing store and Thurston's studio, L. T. Covell's store, Dr. Lamb's office, Covell's drug store, Dr. Johnston's dental rooms, the old Redfern store, Ellis' barber shop, Mangold's jewelry store, Johnston & Williams' office, the Forum office, M. B. Covell's office, and other interests in the Covell brick block, one after another fell before the lapping tongues of the fire demon.

Then Redfern's big house, the engine house and a number of residences, including three big barns belonging to Staples & Covell and the Whitehall Manufacturing Co., the Novelty factory and other buildings furnished food for the flames. The Mears hotel was saved by hard work.

Among the residences burned were: C. W. Redfern's, M. B. Covell's, M. Struther's, C. W. McKenzie's Chas. Ocobock's, Mrs. Roger's, John Hardy's, John Newstram's, Aug. Wadstrom's, Patrick Stanton's, Mrs. Stewart's, John Wadstrom's, M. Rosenquist's, Mrs. Curtin's, M. B. Covell's, Peter Erickson's, August Julen's, four houses and a barn belonging to E. M. Ruggles and many small structures. It was a sad sight to see the houseless families wandering about with wild features not knowing whither to see refuge.

All night and all the next day, the flames were fought, and confined to the slabs and sawdust of the Staples & Covell dock, and it was not until Wednesday that people breathed free again.

The loss is fully \$125,000 and the insurance will aggregate about \$50,000. The insurance adjusters were promptly on the field, and have been making very satisfactory settlements. In all probably Mr. Covell will rebuild, but it is yet too early to say what will be done in that line. There is a disposition to look at the bright side, and no doubt the depressing effects of this second great holocaust for Whitehall will soon be overcome.

CINDERS

A remarkable thing about the fire is that out of twelve safes that went through it, not one had the contents damaged much except the postoffice safe and that was an old fashioned concern with a big keyhole.

The Montague engine's piston broke in a few minutes after it started. It had a good station and might have kept the fire from crossing Colby St. had it not been for this accident.

Dan Kelley worked the throttle on Muskegon's "Pioneer", and she did good work, but shut down several times for repairs.

Besides the horse, one of Harwood's "tuffens" burned and roasted chickens is a common thing here and there over the burned district.

Green's brick building dropped out of existence in the twinkling of an eye.

The railway company went to work at once with a force of men and cleared out the ruins of the tunnel. It is now temporarily bridged over. It has been suggested, and it is to be hoped that an effort will be made to procure a right of way around Lake street across to the track near Staples & Covell's mill. The tunnel could then be filled up and a better arrangement all around would be the result.

The business of one side of a street was never moved across to the other in shorter order. The row of vacant Mears stores came in handy, and but for the damaged fronts are all right.

Chief Staples did all he could with the Whitehall department, and accepted the suggestions of that veteran fire fighter Mac. Walker who happened to be in town.

Once again the town rebuilt and soon after the fire threat diminished with the demise of the lumbering industry.