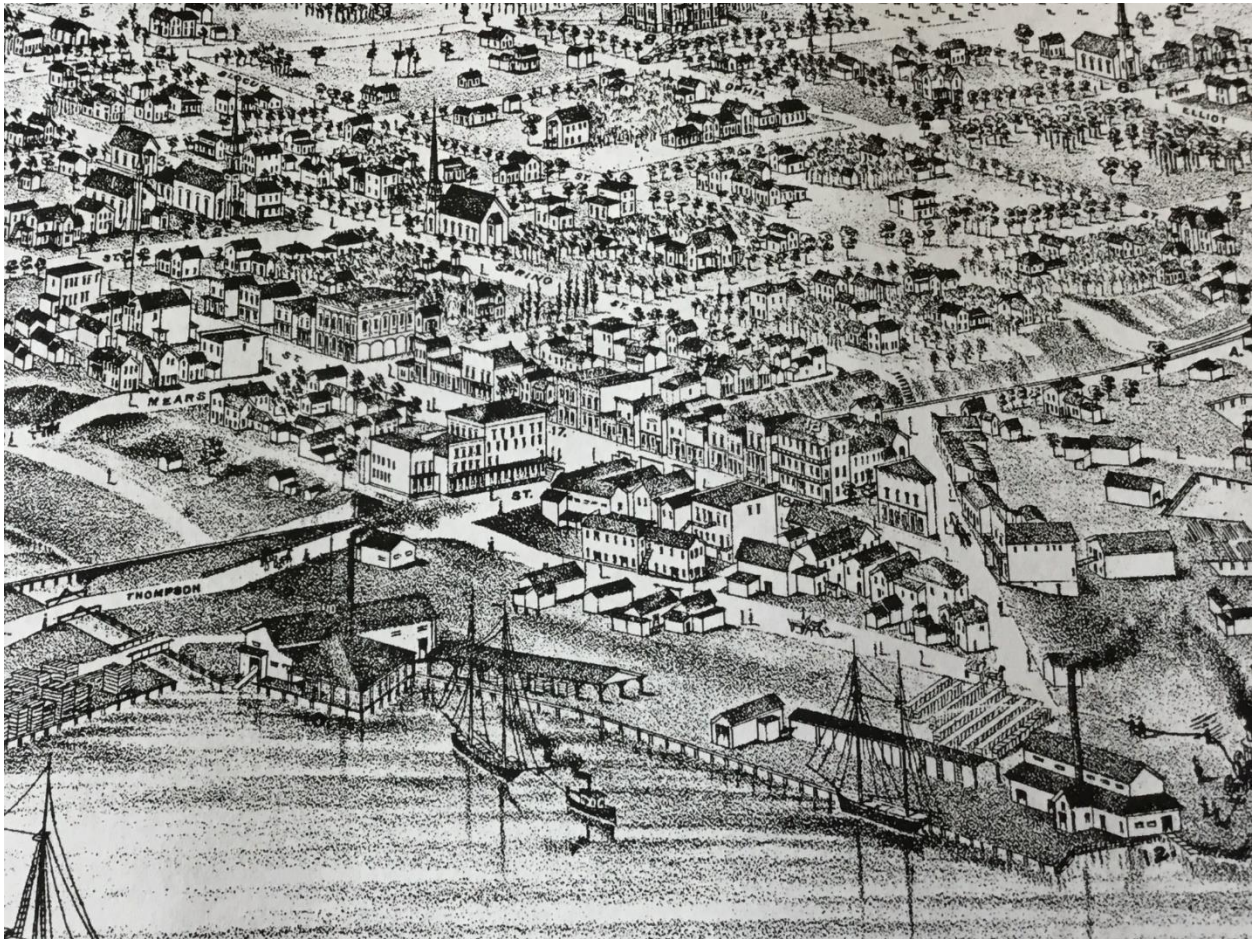


## Great Fire of 1881

By Barbara Bedau Brow  
White Lake Area Historical Society



*Bird's Eye View of Whitehall in 1880*

Like all other lumbering towns, early Whitehall lived in constant fear of fire. Sawdust streets, wooden walks, lack of adequate water supply and hot dry summer days combined to make fire an ever-present threat.

Like Muskegon, Whitehall was visited by two substantial fires. The first took place July 30, 1881.

The following information appeared in a book entitled "History of Muskegon County Michigan, with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Some of Its Prominent Men and Pioneers", printed by H. R. Page & Co. of Chicago in 1882.

Like all wooden built and lumbering towns, Whitehall, which had hitherto escaped a great fire, had its day of wrath on the night of Saturday, 30<sup>th</sup> of July. About 2 p.m. , the night watchman at Linderman's single mill observed flames in the direction of Sturtevant's livery stable and promptly sounded the alarm. Quickly the citizens with terror dumb, rallied to the conflict, with all the force at their command.

The Montague boys with Charley Dodge at their head, soon put in an appearance and for eleven hours fought the fire. They took the side near the lake, being stationed back of Slocum's block, and did a good service in checking the fire in a block of old buildings at the foot of Colby St. They secured and richly deserved a vote of thanks for their efforts.

The Whitehall engine was stationed at Staples & Covell's mill dock, under the leadership of Chief H. E. Staples, assisted by Engineer F. A. Hinman. The fire burned fiercely away all the wooden buildings on both sides of Colby St., including Slocum's brick block up to Covell's brick block on the north, and Baker's brick drug store on the south, a space of about five acres in the heart of the village being completely swept out of existence. The loss was \$150,000, the insurance about \$54,000, which was being mainly in the hands of H. D. Johnston, insurance agent, was, as usual, rapidly and satisfactorily adjusted.

The origin of the fire is a mystery; it was thought to have commenced in Sturtevant's livery or in Hinman & McElroy's furniture store. But the fire was first seen in the rear of Wynne's variety store in the same block. Sturtevant's loss was very heavy as he was not insured, and he lost eleven fine horses, besides many carriages, etc., out of the best equipped livery stable in the county.

The furniture store, Wynne's variety store, M. B. Covell's large store, the meat market, Slocum's block, with Phelan's clothing store, Johnston's office, and the Mears House were lost.

The flames consumed the wooden railway tunnel across Colby Street and down Thompson Street, and attacked the Foster's block, the busiest hive of industry in town, forming a lofty pyramid of fire. In this block were K. F. Morse's hardware store, the post office, with Hon. C. C. Thompson's real estate office, and we may mention that by his vigilance everything was saved belonging to the post office.

In the same block were Riley's barber shop, Ruggles' drug store, Phelan's clothing store, a vacant store and restaurant. In the second store were Elsworth's law office, that of Squire Reed, Cunningham's dental rooms, Dr. Adams' office, and the apartments of the Foster family; on the third story was the opera hall.

The next to succumb was Mr. Tripp's house, and Covell's barn, and Klett's harness shop.

In the meantime destruction was proceeding on the west side, and also the south, consuming the Cosmopolitan Hotel, B. O'Connell's two buildings, L. Bratz's clothing store, Seabold's boot and shoe building, M. Bragenham's saloon, Hanson's grocery, Johnson's livery, M. Bjornstad's saloon, N. F. Strong's photograph gallery, Lovell's restaurant, over which Mr. Strong resided; Castenholtz & Co.'s meat market, also Dickerson's wagon shop.

The Boom Co's tug P. Dalton did good service.

The next night the railroad depot was burned, which was one thing which Whitehall could spare, as it was the worst looking depot in the world. The company have since used the old shed near the former depot, which is some degrees worse than the one which was burned.

Like Chicago and Muskegon, Whitehall quickly began rebuilding – from Thompson Street to the East.