



Current Articles 2001 – April

The Great Fire of Toronto

Last month I recalled disastrous fires in England and the Colonies. But what about Canada ? St. John's, Newfoundland was practically destroyed in 1816 and two fires in 1845 in Quebec City destroyed most of the homes in the St. Roch suburb and 1300 homes in the St. John suburb. In 1852, 10,000 persons in Montreal were left homeless as a result of an uncontrolled fire. In 1866 Quebec City had another major fire destroying 2100 homes.

But have you heard of the Great Fire of Toronto ? The fire started on April 19, 1904 and was first discovered in a building at 58-60 Wellington St. W. Strong winds were too much for the hand pumped water and the fire spread rapidly.

Initially the fire department responded with 3 engines, 7 hose wagons, 1 aerial truck, 1 hook and ladder, the water tower and the salvage wagon. Within an hour of the discovery of the fire a general alarm was turned in. The fire soon crossed Wellington and preceded to spread to Bay St. and to Yonge. To the south it spread to Front Street and further to the rail lines bordering the Esplanade West. The fire continued through the night and was not brought under control until early the next morning, As the fire spread along Front St., one of Toronto's finest hotels, The Queen's Hotel was endangered. To prevent the fire from entering the hotel, the staff soaked blankets in water and then, opening the upper half of the windows facing the blaze, they hung out the wet blankets, then closed the windows to hold the blankets in place over the outside of the windows. Water was poured on the blankets as they dried out and thus the fire was prevented from entering.

A telegram was sent to Buffalo and within a half an hour a special train was arranged to carry two engines, two hose reels and thirty firemen. At the same time additional hoses and equipment along with 12 men were transported from Hamilton by train.

The fire destroyed 98 commercial buildings, housing 220 businesses, mostly 4 stories in height and none over 6 stories. These buildings represented about 1/3 of all the similar commercial buildings in Toronto at that time. The fire left between five and six thousand people jobless. The loss in 1904 dollars was estimated to be \$10,000,000

Fire insurance premiums in 1903 for all of Canada were approximately 11 million dollars - which was very close to the actual loss of the Toronto fire alone. Within days of the fire, the Toronto Board of Fire Underwriters added one dollar per hundred dollars of insurance to risks in congested areas and fifty cents per hundred to less hazardous districts.

Shortly after the fire, some interesting ads in appeared in the local papers: 4, 000 men's shirts - some wet, some soiled and others with only the faintest smell of smoke. Regular value 50c to \$1.25. Tuesday special. 39c. Or another read: Laces, laces, a wagon load of laces some burnt, some soiled, all water soaked Regular 3c, 4c, 5c, up to 10c a yard. Now special 1 c!

The above information and much more was given to me by Mr. R.J. (Dick) Tatton. I first met Dick when he was the Loss Prevention Representative for the Insurance Corporation of Ireland. Dick later worked with me at Dalton until his retirement. Dick now lives in British Columbia. Dick authored the book -The Great Toronto Fire, and made a large model of the fire which he donated to the Toronto Fire Museum when he moved to British Columbia.

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