

Baltimore; the book of the fire.

Baltimore THE BOOK OF THE FIRE

A Word Picture And a Series of Illustrations Showing the Progress of the Great Conflagration and its Disastrous Results

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Baltimore

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OUR ILLUSTRATIONS

WE ARE fortunate in being able to present the most remarkable set of Photographic Views taken during the fire. Views of the ruins are common enough, and we give as many of such as is necessary to give a general idea of the havoc wrought, but the value of our collection lies in the fact that our operator, Mr. J. E. Henry, was at the scene of the fire as early as the first fire engine, and thus, beginning with the first stream of water thrown upon the Hurst building, we are enabled to trace the spread and course of the fire until its final extinction.

Pictures taken "before and after" have their place in a record of the great conflagration, but views of the fire itself are scarcer, and have more value.

The Story of the Fire

Baltimore, February 7–8, 1904.

Few persons seem to realize the fact that the great fire in Chicago occurred a generation ago. Yet thirty-three years have gone by since that startling event. In 1871 many men now active in business were not born; most of those now the leaders in commercial enterprise had not yet entered their teens. The fire which swept over Baltimore on Sunday and Monday, February 7 and 8, 1904, is therefore the greatest conflagration seen in this generation and in the opening years of the twentieth century. As such it has excited the world's wonder and interest. The wonder arises from the fact that, viewing the situation and its conditions, a fire so widespread and destructive was little to be expected. When a city is new and has been built at haphazard, with few or no restrictions as to materials and surrounding safeguards, the surprise would be if no chance conflagration should try the builders' work, whether it be of hay and stubble, or of something more enduring, and should sweep away all that is found unworthy. But Baltimore is one of the older cities, and noted for caution rather than needless venturesomeness; its warehouses were strongly built; the building in which the fire originated was of solid construction and only a few years old, as were most of the buildings within several surrounding blocks—many of them indeed boasted themselves fire-proof. Then insurance companies have become, of late years, extremely cautious and exacting, demanding of owners and occupants of buildings all kinds of safeguards before they will accept their property as a risk. Fire departments, too, have increased in efficiency, and Baltimore has boasted of the completeness of her equipment. Yet on a quiet Sunday morning, in the sixth city of the Union, a still alarm brings the necessary apparatus to one of the business thoroughfares to quench a seemingly ordinary fire. Inside of fifteen minutes the whole fire department of the city is called out; in less than an hour it is evident that the city's resources are insufficient; neighboring cities make a prompt and generous response to calls for help, yet it is thirty hours before it can be said that the fire is, not out, but under control. Meantime seventy-

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three squares, containing some 2,500 separate buildings, most of them filled with valuable merchandise, have been swept away, and the city is poorer by untold millions. It is a world-wide advertisement for Baltimore—time only can answer the question, “does such advertising pay”?

The Beginning

The fire had its origin in the dry goods jobbing house of John E. Hurst & Co., a six-story brick building with frontage on Hopkins Place, German Street and South Liberty Street. The cause of the fire has not been ascertained. Its presence was made known by an automatic fire alarm which indicated a fire in the basement. This was about 9:45 in the morning of Sunday, February 7th. The fire department quickly responded with an engine and truck, and the Salvage Corps was promptly on the spot. Dense smoke was seen to issue from the basement and lower windows, and the men set instantly to work, while, realizing the seriousness of the situation, a general alarm was turned in. Suddenly there was an explosion, the roof of the building seemed to lift and flames burst from it and from the windows on all sides. In a minute the fire had leaped German Street, and the tall National Exchange Bank building on the corner opposite was in a blaze. A strong but variable wind was blowing from the South and West and on its wings the flames blew rapidly toward Baltimore Street, one short block away, and across to the east side of Hopkins Place. Suddenly a tremendous explosion of gunpowder stored in one of the warehouses shook the whole neighborhood. The glass in all the surrounding buildings was shattered to atoms, and the flames had ready access to every interior to which their forked tongues could reach. Already the walls of the Hurst building had succumbed, other buildings were crumbling to ruins, burying beneath them Engine No. 15 and a ladder truck, and inflicting injuries more or less serious on several firemen. Fire Chief Horton was struck early in the day by a live wire and disabled from further service. By this time church services were ended, and crowds of well-dressed people were added to the crowds already collected, all willing to help, all ready with suggestions, but all totally helpless to do more than gaze and wonder at the awful and bewildering spectacle as the mad flames

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shot outward from both sides of the narrow thoroughfares and met in midair, and swirled skyward in columns that seemed mountains high, and belched forth live coals like a very volcano.

Every few minutes some building, which had been burning furiously, would collapse, leaving in its place only a cloud of smoke and dust, and hope would be renewed that now the conflagration's dread course would be stayed, but another building and another would show first a wreath of curling smoke at a window or beneath the eaves, then burst into flames at every opening, and become in a moment another fiery furnace seven times heated. Blocks away to windward the heat was disagreeably felt, while to the north and east a continuous shower of blazing embers was borne through the air for miles, carrying danger and destruction.

The Battle

At the request of Mayor McLane, Ex-chief McAfee had assumed charge of the fire-fighters and all that energy, skill and daring could do to stay the progress of the conflagration was done, but without visible effect. From Washington, Philadelphia, Trenton, New York, Chester, Wilmington, Altoona, Annapolis, Atlantic City, Alexandria, as well as from Sparrow's Point, Highlandtown and Roland Park, prompt help in the shape of apparatus and men had come, and their resources, added to the full force of the city department, with an unlimited water supply upon which to draw, would seem to be more than sufficient for the most trying emergency, but by this time the spectators, while cheered somewhat by the presence and co-operation of these willing allies, had come to feel that the city's salvation or destruction depended more upon some merciful interposition of Providence than on any merely human efforts.

Surely and steadily the fire made progress toward the south and southwest. Always there was the hope that when it reached an intersecting street it would fail to leap the chasm, but, as if moved by a fiendish intelligence, long fingers of flame would reach across and

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tap at the window panes opposite. There would be a jingle of falling glass and in a minute another structure had become at once a victim and a new destructive factor. Resort was had to dynamite, and here and there a building in the path of the flames was blown down in the hope that those beyond it would escape, but even these heroic remedies proved of no avail.

All day, all night, and again all day the unequal contest waged. For it was in the nature of a battle. The flames did not sweep rapidly forward, as a prairie fire sweeps all before it, but gave battle now here, now there, to some solid, stubborn structure that seemed determined not to ignite. First, they would assail it with a shower of live coals which would rest on cornice and window sills, while the wind sought to fan the heated woodwork into flame; then they would leap across the street in a fierce frontal attack. If defeated there, an ally would be sought in some less substantial building adjoining this seeming fire-proof structure, and finally the flank attacks would prevail, the besieged would yield, and with the aid of this new trophy and fresh recruit a new line of advance would be marked.

There were busy scenes, as excited business men, whose offices or stores lay in the track of the flames, hurried in and out carrying their papers and valuables to places of greater security. Much was saved in this way, though in some cases the event proved that the original place of deposit was the safer place. A cordon, first of police, then of militia and regulars, kept the immense crowd of spectators beyond the danger line, and perfect order was maintained all through the trying scenes.

The Crisis

It was hoped at first that the conflagration could be confined to the district west of Charles Street, but toward evening that hope had to be abandoned; for the flames, defying dynamite discharges and the streams from a hundred hose-pipes, forced every barrier and invaded the section in which such gigantic office buildings as the Union Trust, the Calvert, the Equitable, the Continental and the Maryland Trust, sky-scrapers all, and of

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the most approved fire-proof construction, had but recently been erected. Surely these would prove true to their reputation and stay the progress of the hitherto victorious fire. It was curious to see how the flames seemed to select these proud towers as the objects of their attack. Leaping over more modest structures and in some cases hardly scorching them, they directed their darts at these cliff-like obstacles, and won triumph after triumph; for, once the windows were broken by the fierce heat, the sky-scrapers were only so many funnels which seemed to suck in the surrounding flames and carry them roaring up into the heavens. It is calculated that the sixteen-story Continental building was completely gutted inside of half an hour. In the surrounding darkness the sky effects produced were magnificent, but awful. None of these buildings fell; their frames stand like giant skeletons, their charred and twisted ribs unclothed of flesh, an unsightly spectacle.

Now was a critical hour for Baltimore as a municipality. Its City Hall, its magnificent Court House, and the Postoffice, built on adjoining lots on Fayette Street, were in immediate proximity to several of these tall edifices—the *Herald* and the *Law* building shadowing the Court House on the west, and the *Calvert* and *Equitable* buildings on the south. While the flames were raging and tearing through these the public offices were in imminent danger. But the officials and employees, as well as the firemen, fought the flames with all the resources at their command, and when at last a fortunate change of wind carried the flames in another direction, it was found that the City Hall and Post Office were still intact, while the damage to the Court House was, in view of the general situation, inconsiderable.

One by one the newspaper offices were invaded, the editors and reporters driven from their desks and the printers from the presses. The *Herald*, the *News*, the *American*, the *Sun*, the *German Correspondent* were in turn rendered homeless. One by one the banks and safety deposit buildings were enveloped and many of them hopelessly wrecked; one by one the storage warehouses near the wharves gave up their walls and their precious contents to the devouring element; the one downtown church in the path of the flames, the “Church of the Messiah,” was struck and stripped; the Maryland Institute, full of rich

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memories for all Baltimoreans, and of articles of present educational and art value, went up in smoke.

At Last

So far the conflagration had confined itself to the purely business section, but now it was heading east to a neighborhood thickly inhabited by the poorer class of citizens. These were naturally much alarmed as the ever encroaching flames seemed to threaten their homes and their little belongings. There was hasty packing and moving, and in the public squares of the east end, families huddled together and shivered with cold and fear through the long and terrible night. Fortunately there were few dwellings in the path of the fire, west of Jones Falls, and it was recognized that here, if anywhere, the fire might be halted. There were wild rumors that all East Baltimore street was in a blaze, that the fire was sweeping down Broadway, that Canton was doomed, all of which served to agitate the public mind; but though many small fires were kindled by the flying embers, these were speedily put under by the help of the willing hands of neighbors alert for just such accidents. To the South, the Basin presented a natural barrier to the spread of the flames in that direction, and the main efforts of the firemen were combined at Jones Falls to resist the spread of the conflagration eastward. So thoroughly was everything in the vicinity drenched and so solid a stream was presented to the advancing fire that at last it halted, and late on Monday afternoon it was possible to issue a bulletin assuring the citizens that the dread conflagration had been stayed. Wonderful to relate, though there had been many hairbreadth escapes, not a single life was lost. *Laus Deo!*

To walk through the burnt district in the days following the fire was to traverse a desolate waste, in which the traveler looked around bewildered for some sign whereby to steer his course. The streets were obliterated; of most of the buildings scarce a trace remained; only here and there some shell of a building remained as a landmark by which the owners of other property could take their bearings and by careful measurement ascertain the spot on which their own buildings once stood. But sad as was the aspect, not a minute was lost

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in repining. With splendid courage and alacrity the citizens rose to the situation. "Arise and build" was the watchword of the hour. Plans for widening, straightening and beautifying the city were discussed and the details almost determined before the ashes of the fire had cooled. It was felt that being in it for so many millions it was worth while to spend a few millions more to secure greater traffic facilities, insure greater safety, and create a more beautiful Baltimore. The conflagration had followed, as near as may be, the lines upon which the city was originally laid out in 1730. If those first fathers, who surveyed the land in hope and confidence that here would spring up a great commercial metropolis, should wake from their long sleep a year or two hence it will be to look upon a new Baltimore, clean, strong and beautiful, very different from, but grander than their most daring dreams.

Map Showing Fire Area

The Hurst Building on fire. View on German Street, looking east. Sunday, 11:05 a. m.

Twenty minutes later, just after explosion. Hurst Building down

View from Maryland Trust Building, 1:30 p. m. Sharp, Hanover, German and Baltimore Streets on fire

The Guggenheimer & Weil Building, corner of Lombard and Liberty Streets, on fire. Lloyd-Jackson Building on right. Time, 4:25 p. m.

Water Front. Bowley's Wharf and eastward. Gambrill's Flour and State Tobacco Warehouses. Monday, 10 a. m.

Boston Wharf to Norfolk Wharf. Cotton Warehouse at Union Docks on fire. Monday, 10:40 a. m.

Foot of West Falls Avenue, where fire was stayed. Fire Boat at work. 11:30 a. m.

Gay and Baltimore Streets, where fire was stayed on north-east side.

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Rear of O'Neill Building, where fire was stayed, on North Charles Street

General View from roof of Equitable Building, looking south-east

Ruins, showing rear corner of Hurst Building and adjoining buildings

Ruins of Guggenheimer & Weil Building

Safe Deposit & Trust Co. Building on South Street which escaped, while all around it was destroyed

Detectives from New York, Philadelphia, Washington, York, Pa., and Baltimore

From Fayette Street, looking east. Union Trust Building on left. Calvert, Equitable, Continental & Maryland Trust Buildings on sight

Birdseye View of Marsh Market district from Baltimore Street

Ruins of the Maryland Institute

The New Custom House. Ruins of the Corn and Flour Exchange

Interior View of Public Store House, showing stone pillars crumbled by heat

Ruins of Church of the Messiah, Gay and Fayette Streets

Light and Pratt Streets. Tangled wires. (Positively the last appearance)

Looking up Baltimore Street. Ruins of *Sun* and *American* offices on left

Guarding treasure. Ruins of Hennegan, Bates & Co.'s Jewelry Store

Marine Bank, South Gay Street. Getting valuables from vault

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Ruins of Hopkins Place Savings Bank

District-Chief Burkhardt turning in General Alarm

City Hall. Interior of Fire Alarm Office

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