

# TERRIBLE CONFLAGRATION!

Portland Visited by the Fell Destroyer - Over Two Blocks Entirely Consumed

By Jim Fairchild

So read the headlines of the December 23, 1872 issue of the *Morning Oregonian* in the wake of what was up until then, the worst fire in Portland's history.

In 1872, Ulysses Grant was President, the James Gang was robbing banks in the central Midwest and Portland was a much different city than it is today. The city proper stretched from Burnside on the north to Harrison on the south and from the Willamette River on the east to 7th Avenue on the west. The Willamette Riverfront was a hub of commercial activity. Wharves and buildings lined the river in the area now occupied by Waterfront Park. The levee on the west bank had not yet been constructed so the area was considerably lower and flooded frequently. Consequently, waterfront buildings were constructed on pilings approximately one story in height. Offices and storerooms occupied the upper stories in order to keep merchandise dry during high water.

Building and sanitation codes of the day were relaxed by modern standards. Construction was haphazard. Most of the buildings in this area were of light frame construction. Fire alarms and sprinklers would not make their appearance in Portland for many years. Trash accumulated under the buildings between the pilings. Some merchants used this area to store surplus goods. A lumberyard at the foot of Alder Street blocked the entire street with a large inventory of fir planks.

The city had yet to organize a professional fire department. Instead, fire protection was provided by companies of volunteers including Willamette Engine Company #1, Vigilance Hook and Ladder Company #1, Multnomah Engine Company #2, Columbia Engine Company #3, and Protection Engine Company #4. Although the city provided some funds for apparatus and firehouses, each volunteer company independently trained and equipped its members. Each company had its own command structure, its own apparatus and its own approach to fire suppression. A Chief Engineer and Assistant Engineer were elected by a vote of the combined volunteer membership. These officers served as incident commanders on larger scenes.



Hose Cart - Circa 1872

Portland's hydrants were not pressurized. Hydrants of the day were connected to cisterns located under the streets. Water was supplied to the cisterns by water lines and pumped out by steam engines or hand pumps when needed for fire suppression.

So it was in the very early morning hours of Sunday, December 22, 1872, when a fire was discovered at the back of a Chinese laundry on the river side of Front Avenue between SW Morrison and SW Alder Streets. Given the hour and the lack of regular police patrols, the fire was well established by the time it was discovered. Once discovered, an alarm was raised and fire bells across the city were rung to summon the volunteers.

The initial response was somewhat delayed by the early hour and lack of modern communication technology but the fire was still contained a single structure when the first company arrived on scene. This was not to remain the situation for long. As additional companies arrived, a weather front moved through the area bringing a stiff breeze from the south. This caused the fire to extend to other buildings to the north. The trash and other flammable material located under the buildings, between the pilings soon caught fire. The wind whipped the flames beneath the buildings and created an updraft that tore through structures above. Soon, the fire was entirely out of control and spreading fast.

Within thirty minutes of the initial alarm, fire had extended to all the buildings on the river side of Front Avenue between Morrison and Alder. Flying embers and heat quickly caused the fire to jump Front Avenue and within the hour, all the buildings on both sides of Front Avenue were fully involved.

Upon realizing that the fire was out of control and spreading fast, a general panic arose among the citizens. It had been just over one month since 65 acres of downtown Boston were completely destroyed by one of the worst urban conflagrations in American history and now it looked like Portland might suffer a similar fate. The streets filled with thousands of men, women and children running in all directions. Some were running toward the fire to get a better view or to render what assistance they could. Some ran away from the fire. Others had lost their senses and were running aimlessly screaming, praying and generally placing themselves at great risk.

Frantic business owners and residents for blocks around the fire began to throw their goods and possessions into the street in a misguided attempt to save them. Before long, the chaos in the streets was made worse by the addition of teams and wagons of all descriptions, commissioned to transport merchandise and possessions out of the burning and threatened areas. The curses of the teamsters and the sound of the horses contributed to the growing cacophony and confusion. This chaotic scene impeded the firefighting efforts by limiting the mobility of the fire companies.

At one point, Firefighters on First Avenue were briefly diverted from their work to come to the aid of a young boy who was being attacked by a crazed man with an ax for "some slight provocation." Had it not been for the intervention of this crew, the boy would have likely been killed. The *Morning Oregonian* concluded that had it not been for the intervention of other citizens the man himself might have been killed by the Firefighters who were "thoroughly incensed."

In order to regain control of the streets and to prevent looting and theft of goods thrown into the streets, Mayor Wasserman authorized the militia to patrol the city. Militia Companies were activated and placed under the command of the Police Chief. They included the Washington Guards, the Emmet Guards and the Portland Artillery. The Mayor also issued a decree that the Portland Police should deputize a sufficient number of special officers to ensure the security of the city.

By 10:00am, most of the buildings between the river, Morrison Street, Washington Street and First Avenue were on fire. In an attempt to fight the fire from the river side, a donkey engine with two hose lines was loaded onboard the steam ship *Oneonta* but the heat was so great that the ship itself was at risk of burning. It was withdrawn after having little effect.

Heat and smoke were also causing problems for the land based companies. Firefighters ran hose lines through buildings on the west side of First Avenue in order to find some shelter from the heat and intense smoke. Firefighters taking a stand along Alder Street wrapped themselves in water soaked blankets so they could approach the flames. The four-inch main feeding the cisterns along First Avenue was unable to deliver enough flow to keep up with demand and the cisterns began to run dry leaving the Firefighters with no alternative other than to abandon their positions and fall back to the next cistern which held water.

Shortly after 10:00am, the fire reached Woodard's Drug Store in which was stored a large quantity of coal oil and other explosive chemicals. Several Firefighters were on ladders attempting to get a hose line in through a window on the second story of this building when a tremendous explosion blew out the north exterior wall and a portion of the roof. Five Firefighters were seriously injured. The *Morning Oregonian* speculated that two of the men were so seriously injured that they would probably die. A search of later issues of the newspaper did not reveal the fate of these Firefighters.

By 11:30am, the fire was still out of control and spreading. Merchandise and personal belongings moved by citizens from buildings into the street caught fire as did the large stockpile of fir planks stored in Alder Street. It is likely that the efforts of Firefighters could have prevented the flames from spreading north of Alder had the street not been used as an extension of the lumberyard. Once this lumber ignited, it burned with such intensity that the Firefighters were forced back and the fire extended to the block between Alder and Washington Streets.

All available Firefighters were committed to the emergency. By late morning, they had been working continuously and without respite for over eight hours. Many were so fatigued and affected by smoke inhalation that they were unable to perform their duties effectively. To provide additional manpower, Portland police, assisted by gangs of thugs, rounded up, at gunpoint, as many Chinese men as they could find and forced them to work the pumps. The *Morning Oregonian* justified this action by noting that none of the "Johns," a pejorative for Chinese men, held at gunpoint complained to the authorities about the treatment they received.

Shortly before noon, telegrams were sent to surrounding communities requesting that all available fire personnel and apparatus be sent to Portland. Vancouver Engine Company #1 chartered the steamship *Vancouver* and arrived by 1:30pm. They provided very effective and timely support. Columbia Hook and Ladder #1, Cataract Hose #1 and Fountain Hose #2 arrived from Oregon City on the steamship *E. N. Cooke* by 2:05pm. And the up valley train that arrived in Portland at 4:00pm brought Capital #1 and Tiger #2 from Salem and Crescent #1 from Albany.

Fortunately for the city and exhausted Firefighters, the wind died down and a heavy rain began to fall around noon. This rain reduced the heat and slowed the spread of the fire sufficiently that the companies were able to stop its progress and bring it under control by 2:15pm. Later that evening, the area was blanketed by heavy snowfall.

In addition to the Firefighters injured in the explosion at Woodard's Drug Store, there were several other casualties. Newly elected First Assistant Engineer James Gallagher and Firefighter R. Holman were very seriously injured at the corner of First Avenue and Alder Street when the Carter Building partially collapsed and they were trapped under a wall. The newspaper speculated that Gallagher would not survive his injuries. His fate was not discovered in a search of later editions of the newspaper. Firefighters Love and Johny Moore received head injuries resulting from falling bricks.

Nozzelman E.J. Porter was seriously injured when a flight of stairs under which he was standing collapsed.

The *Morning Oregonian*, had this to say about the Portland volunteer Firefighters, “Other cities may boast of having more experienced firemen, but none can claim superiority over the department of this city in the essential elements of courage, presence of mind, and willingness to do freely all that is possible for human beings to do.” “They have proved themselves worthy of the title of firemen in the truest sense of the word.” This being a time when health insurance was very uncommon, Mayor Wasserman proposed and the Common Council passed a resolution calling for the Committee on Fire and Water to make the expenditures necessary to provide for the care and needs of the injured Firefighters.

Losses from the fire were substantial. The contemporary accounts do not agree on how many buildings were involved. Depending on which account is accurate, between fifteen and twenty-five buildings completely destroyed and many more were damaged. Scores of businesses and residents were displaced. The final cost of the loss was given as \$413,665, or approximately \$7,500,000 in today’s dollars.

The cause of the fire was attributed to a Chinese laundryman boiling pitch and allowing coals from the fire to fall through the floor onto a pile of wood located below the building. The probable cause of the fire was arson directed against the Chinese owned business. In 1872, Portland had a large and active Chinese community. Discrimination against all Asian people was rampant and severe. In the days following the fire, many of the city’s Chinese residents were assaulted and harassed.

As a result of the fire, several actions were initiated that would have long term implications for Portland and its citizens. One of the most significant of these addressed the water delivery system for the city. In 1872, city water was supplied by the Portland Water Company, an independent vendor. By February of 1873, a recommendation had been formalized for the City to purchase the assets of this vendor including its water rights, pumping facilities, reservoirs and distribution system. This eventually led to the establishment of the Portland Water Bureau, although it would be many years before the bureau was formally organized.

Other initiatives that originated as the result of the fire led to the installation of electronic fire alarm boxes on city streets; the establishment of an additional volunteer fire company, Tiger #5; the acquisition of three new steam fire engines and other apparatus; fire protection and building codes were enhanced; and it was required that streets ending at the river be kept open to river access and free of goods. A citizen initiative to convert the burned area to a public levee was not acted upon but it foresaw the creation of Waterfront Park.

Unfortunately, none of these initiatives was sufficient to protect the city from an even more catastrophic fire less than one year later.