

## Wilmington's Terrible Fire, February 23, 1886

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Here's a historical gem that fellow fire department historian has passed along. Bill Gibson transcribed this Wilmington *Morning Star* account of a dockside conflagration way back in the day. It started as a fire aboard a steamship, spread to the wharves and sheds on shore, and then along a number of streets. The Hope Steam Fire Engine Company from Florence, SC, responded as mutual aid. They took three hours to travel by train. Goldsboro also sent a fire company to assist.

How big was the Wilmington Fire Department at the time? Two years earlier, the Sanborn Map Company recorded a volunteer department with 200 men, three second-class steam engines, one horse hook & ladder truck, two hand hook & ladder & bucket companies, one independent hose company, and 2,600 feet of hose. The below account is also available via [this web document](#). Enjoy!

The Morning Star – Wilmington, NC - Vol. XXXVII No. 129 - February 23, 1886

### A TERRIBLE FIRE

A Large Portion of the Business Part of the City Laid in Ruins – Two Steamers and a Schooner Burned – Railroad Freight Depots in Ruins – Many Valuable Residences Swept Away – Scenes and Incidents of the Great Fire.

The city was visited Sunday afternoon last by the most disastrous conflagration, probably, ever known in its history. It has inflicted immense loss upon business men and others, and laid waste large portions of its busiest and most thickly settled thoroughfares. It is a calamity from which we fear our fair city will be long in recovering; but it should be consolation to know that beyond the distress and suffering that must necessarily ensure to many, there has been no loss of life and no serious personal injury to any one.

The fire began about 2 o'clock on the steamer Bladen which had just arrived from Fayetteville, having on board a cargo of cotton and naval stores. The boat was within a hundred and fifty yards of the foot of Chesnut street when the fire was first discovered in bales of cotton on the lower deck near the boiler. The steamer was at once headed for the shore, but before she reached the nearest wharf – that of the New York (Clyde) Steamship company – the flames had enveloped the whole forward part of the boat, had reached the upper deck, and driven the seven passengers back to the stern of the vessel. Fortunately, several boats were sent to the assistance of the burning steamer from vessels across the river, and the passengers were assisted into these and safely landed. The passengers on the Bladen were Miss Erambert and Mrs. Hunley and child of Fayetteville, Mr. A. J. Harmon of Bladen, Mr. Robert Lee of Wilmington, Mr. Dodson, a commercial traveler, and two other gentleman whose names could not be learned. They all made a narrow escape and lost all their baggage.

Meantime, the blazing steamer had set fire to a lighter filled with wood that was alongside, and to the wharves and sheds of the Clyde Steamship Company. The wind was blowing almost a gale from the southwest, and the flames spread with great rapidity – sweeping up the wharves, and to the yards, warehouses and offices on Water street. Oil, tar, rosin and spirits turpentine in yards adjacent were ready fuel for the devouring flames, and in a very short time the whole river front from Chesnut to Mulberry was ablaze, and the stores and offices on the west side of Water street for the same distance, were enveloped. The firemen fought manfully and determinedly, but their efforts were futile; nothing could stay the progress of the flames, which leaped and roared like a demon, sending aloft showers of sparks and burning brands, that the high winds carried and hurled on the roofs of buildings squares away from the raging conflagration. To add to the difficulties that the firemen had to contend with, a dense black smoke filled the streets to the leeward of the fire, rendering it almost impossible for any effective work to be done in that quarter.

The fire pressed steadily onward along the river front, burning wharves and sheds and quantities of naval stores and other merchandise. The schooner Lillie Holmes, lying at the wharf beyond the steamship wharf was soon wrapped in flames and consumed; the men escaped, but saved nothing of their effects. And the steamer River Queen with cargo, just from Fayetteville, suffered a like fate.

On Water street the fire spared the building on the west side occupied by Messrs. Smith & Gilchrist, but swept away the stores and offices of Messrs. Kerchner & Calder Bros. S. P. Shotter & Co., and A. H. Green, and on the east side from the store of Mr. M. J. Heyer, (which was badly damaged) including a dozen other brick stores and tenements to Mulberry. The flames then crossed that street to the large warehouses and offices of Messrs. Worth & Worth and Paterson, Downing & Co., which rapidly succumbed. Sweeping onward, the flames next attacked and

devoured on the west side of Water street the premises of Messrs. Alex Sprunt & Son, Mr. J. A. Fore's saw mills, the Champion Cotton Compress, and the two large freight warehouses of the Wilmington, Columbia & Augusta and Wilmington & Weldon Railroads, with about a dozen box cars laden with miscellaneous freight. After attacking the large brick building occupied by Messrs. Worth & Worth and Paterson, Downing & Co., the fire crossed to the east side of Water street, and swept away everything from the corner of Mulberry to the railroad, including the large merchant mills of Mr. J. G. Boney and Mr. C. B. Wright and the block of brick stores extending from Mulberry to Walnut streets.

During the progress of the fire on Water street, the high winds carried burning brands far and wide, setting fire to many buildings squares away, even so far as Fifth and Hanover streets, where a square and a half of wooden houses occupied by colored people were burned. Before the fire had crossed Mulberry street on Water, burning brands also set fire to the residence of Hon. Geo Davis, on Second between Walnut and Red Cross streets. This house burned slowly, but there were no means available to save it until it was too late.

The First Methodist church, on Front street at the corner of Walnut, caught fire in the large wooden belfry on top from sparks borne by the winds from the burning merchant mill of Mr. C. B. Wright, and soon the whole interior of the large edifice was in flames.

Soon after the whole square, consisting of residences, bounded by Second and Front on the east and west and Walnut and Red Cross on the south and north, were burning, until nothing was left unconsumed on the square but the Methodist parsonage, in rear of the church on the corner of Walnut and Second streets.

All the buildings on the west side of Front street from Walnut to Red Cross were also burned, including the offices of the Atlantic Coast Line, in the large building on the corner of Front and Red Cross streets.

After burning the square on the west side of Second, the fire crossed Red Cross street and destroyed the residence of the late Henry Nutt. This was the last building burned; the further progress of the flames being stayed by the wide gap caused by the railroad excavation just beyond in a northeasterly direction.

The scenes in and around the burning district were heart-rending. Many of the residents of the burned buildings and those adjacent removed their furniture and household goods, only to see them burned in the streets, others were removed to places of safety; but by far the larger part of the sufferers were unable to save anything of either furniture or clothing.

Early during the progress of the fire it was seen that the Fire Department of the city was unable to cope with it, and the Mayor attempted to open communication with Goldsboro for assistance, but all the poles and wires of the Western Union Company were burned down along Water street, and also the wires of the Wilmington & Weldon Railroad Company, and it was impossible to do so. Mr. Clem Brown, manager of the Western Union, however, succeeded after awhile in making connection with the wires beyond the burned district, and soon opened communication with Goldsboro, and also with Florence, S. C. The call for assistance was readily responded to from both these places, and the fire company from Florence with their apparatus soon arrived and assisted in extinguishing the flames.

Toward nightfall the Wilmington Light Infantry were requested by the Mayor to assemble at the company's armory, and as special policemen, post sentinels in and around the burned district for the protection of property exposed on the streets. The company turned out with thirty five muskets, which number was swelled during the night to forty-five. Under the command of Capt. W. C. Jones, the company performed efficient service, in several instances driving off pilferers and stopping disturbances among knots of drunken men, gathered on the streets. They were relieved at seven o'clock Monday morning.

Many of the firemen were also on duty throughout the night, extinguishing the burning debris and preventing other fires. They worked heartily and faithfully throughout the progress of the fire, and although their efforts seemed to be ineffectual, they really prevented a more disastrous conflagration. They fought the flames in front and ear unflinching and on the fire's flanks, all along the line, with the grim determination of veterans. Their water supply was inadequate. They were cut off from the river, except in the rear of the fire, and had to rely elsewhere entirely on the Water Works, and although these were working to their full capacity, the great drain upon it from steamers and every hose that could be attached to fireplugs, greatly weakened the force of the streams.

It is impossible to correctly estimate the losses at this writing. Roughly stated it may approximate one million dollars. [page 2 article ends, page 1 article continues] A TERRIBLE FIRE A Large Portion of the Business Part of the City Laid in Ruins – Two Steamers and a Schooner Burned – Railroad Freight Depots in Ruins – Many Valuable Residences Swept Away – Scenes and Incidents of the Great Fire. [CONTINUED FROM SECOND PAGE.]

The fire in "Brooklyn" began on the roof of St. Barnabas school house, corner Fifth and Hanover streets and erected by St. Marks' (colored) Episcopal church. It caught from burning cinders carried by the winds from the fire raging on Water street. Being a wooden building it was quickly destroyed, but not before the flames had spread to other houses, nearly all occupied by colored people. The store of Mr. M. Rathjen, corner of Sixth and Swann streets was burned, the proprietor saving but little of its contents, and the colored Methodist Church on the corner of Seventh and Bladen streets. Several other buildings were burned on this street; and in all eighteen or nineteen houses in that section of the city were destroyed, the inmates losing the greater part if not all of their household goods.

The following is a partial list of the sufferers by the fire – so far as we have been able to ascertain them. ON SECOND STREET.

Mrs. S. R. Bunting, dwelling; no insurance. Furniture saved.

Hon. Geo. Davis, dwelling; insured. Furniture saved.

Col. E. R. Brink, dwelling and furniture; part of the latter saved. Insured.

Brick dwelling house belonging to the estate of the late Henry Nutt, occupied by Mrs. W. L. Parsley, H. Emerson, and Dr. J. H. Durham. Partly insured. ON RED CROSS STREET.

Two brick dwellings belonging to Mr. Sol. Bear; one occupied by Mr. Wm. Aldridge and the other by Mr. Bear. Insured.

Two frame houses owned by the Messrs. Chadbourn and occupied by Mr. S. P. McNair and Mrs. Winston. Insured. ON FRONT STREET.

Large brick dwelling occupied by Mr. Smith, recently from Burgaw, who saved nothing.

Mrs. B. Flanner's residence. Insured.

Frame house owned by Mr. J. Alves Walker. Insured. The occupants saved part of their furniture. Frame dwelling owned by Mr. P. Donlan; insured.

Front Street Methodist church; partly insured.

Frame house opposite the church, belonging to Mr. D. L. Gore and occupied by two families; insured.

Brick dwelling belonging to Mr. James Madden; insured.

Frame house occupied by Mrs. Pridgen, whose furniture was partly insured.

Brick building, offices of the Atlantic Coast Line; no insurance. ON WATER STREET.

Messrs. S. P. Shotton & Co., naval stores; found safe and books all right and were fully insured.

Messrs. Smith & Gilchrist, grocers and commission merchants, loss small, fully insured. Building owned by Kerchner & Calder Bros.

Mr. C. B. Wright; merchant mill a total loss; insured for \$10,000 on mill and \$6,000 on stock.

Mr. A. W. Watson; loss \$1,500; no insurance.

Mr. H. W. Bryant, grocer. Loss \$8,000; insurance \$1,000.

Mr. Owen Fennell, 36 bales of cotton burned; fully insured.

M. J. Heyer, grocer and commission merchant, damaged principally by water. Loss about \$10,000; fully insured. Building owned by J. C. Heyer; insured.

Messrs. Worth & Worth, commission merchants and grocers; loss \$75,000; fully insured.

Mr. C. H. Wessell, grocer; loss \$3,000; insurance \$1,500.

Mrs. Bryson (Mariners' Hotel); loss \$6,000; insurance \$2,000.

Mr. John G. Oldenbittel, loss on buildings \$3,000; insurance \$1,200.

Martin O'Brien, three brick stores and stock a total loss -- \$7,000, One wooden building, insured.

Champion Compress Company \$50,000 loss; insurance \$27,000. Three thousand bales of cotton burned; insured.

New York Steamship Co.'s wharf and sheds, owned by Kerchner & Calder Bros., insured.

The officers of the Atlantic Coast Line estimate that company's total loss at \$30,000. They have purchased the residence of Mr. Wm. Calder, corner of Front and mulberry streets, which will at once be fitted up for the company's headquarters.

The Southern Bell Telephone company lose \$300; American Bell Company, \$700.

No estimates of losses were obtained from Messrs. Paterson, Downing & Co., Alex. Sprunt & Son, and Kerchner & Calder Bros., which were large, but fully insured. Messrs. Sprunt & Son's loss was stated by other parties at \$120,000.

The steamer Bladen was insured for \$5,000 and valued at \$7,000.

The steamer River Queen was insured for \$1,000.

The schooner Lillie Holmes was burned to the water's edge. She was valued at \$80,000 and uninsured.

The insurance companies doing business in the city furnish the following list of their liabilities:

With Northrop & Hodges:

J. M. Forshee, \$1,000 on mdse; heirs of Henry Nutt, 800 on frame store; heirs of Henry Nutt, 400 on shed and office; Robt Robinson, 1,800 on frame bulding; Samuel Beal, Sen, 990 on mdse; J G Oldenbittel 200 on frame building ; Champion Compress 2,000 on building; Sol Bear, 2,300 on furniture; Charles Wessell, 1,500 on dock; Bladen Steamboat Co., 2,000 on steamer; W H Sprunt; 200 on horses and harness; James Sprunt, 175 on horses and buggies; Alex Sprunt & Son, 1,500 on wharf structure; M Bear & Bros, 400 on frame building; N Giles & Co, 1,000 on rice in the W & W R R warehouse; estate of John McRae, 1,000 on saw mill building; all in the Phoenix, of Hartford.

Samuel Bear, Sen, \$636 on mdse; Worth & Worth, 4,080 on cotton; all in London and Lancashire, of Liverpool, Eng.

M J Heyer, \$1,000 on stock; D G Worth and estate of N G Daniel, 1,500 on frame sheds; Champion Compress Co, 2,500 on building and machinery; N Giles & Co, 2,500 on rice in W W R R warehouse; Sol Bear, 3,500 on dwelling house; Hall & Pearsall, 387 on cotton; all in the Home, of New York.

Champion Compress Co, \$5,000 on building and machinery; Alex Sprunt & Son, 2,500 on building and office furniture; Front Street M E Church, \$3,000 on building and furniture; all in Royal Insurance Company, of Liverpool.

Front Street M E Church, \$1,800 on pipe organ; Hall & Pearsall, 2,193 on cotton; all in Georgia Home, of Columbus, Ga.

Worth & Worth, \$4,000 on merchandise; Champion Compress Co, 5,000 on building and machinery; all in Lancashire, of Manchester.

Champion Compress Co, \$5,000 on building and machinery; Worth & Worth 4,185 on cotton; George Davis, 3,000 on dwelling; Kerchner & Calder Bros, 2,500 on building; John C Heyer, 2,000 on building; all in New York Underwriters Agency.

Worth & Worth, \$5,400 on merchandise; John R Turrentine \$1,500 on merchandise; Mary A Winton, 1,200 on furniture; all in Germania, of New York.

Bladen Steamboat Co, \$2,000 on steamer; Charles Wessel, 1,500 on building; J. G. Oldenbittel, 5,000 on frame building; Champion Compress Co, 5,000 on building and machinery; J W Taylor, Agent 1,500 on saw mill machinery; all in Western Assurance Co, of Toronto, Conn.

Hall & Pearsall, \$1,032 on cotton; Hall & Pearsall 1.72 on cotton; all in Norwich Union, of Norwich, England.

With Jno W Gordon & Smith:

Jno C Heyer, \$2,000 on building; M J Heyer 2,000 on stock; E R Brink, 8,750 on dwelling and furniture; Hall & Pearsall, 4,750 on cotton; P Donlan, 1,600 on dwelling and furniture; Mrs S A Flanner, 8,000 on dwelling and furniture; C B Wright, 2,500 on building; Kerchner & Calder Bros, 3,000 on sheds; F A Newbury, 500 on building; Alex Sprunt & Son, 4,000 on brick building and sheds; M Rathjen, 1,200 on building; J W Taylor, 1,000 on machinery; all in Liverpool & London & Globe.

Paterson, Downing & Co, \$8,000 on naval stores; C S Love & Co, 2,000 on naval stores, Worth & Worth, 2,000 on naval stores; Christine Oldham, 500 on furniture; T B Henderson, 1,000 on merchandise; Hall & Pearsall, 344 on cotton; S P Shotter & Co, 6,500 on naval stores; all in Hamburg Bremen, of Hamburg.

Hall & Pearsall, \$86 on cotton; estate of John McRae, 1,000 on mill; C B Wright, 8,000 on stock; S P Shotter & Co, 600 on office furniture; all in Phoenix Assurance of London.

E K Pridgen, \$280 on furniture; Hall & Pearsall, 869 on cotton; Louis J Poisson, 150 on furniture; all in the Rochester German, of Rochester, N Y.

M Rathjen, \$900 on stock and furniture; James I Metts, 900 on furniture; Hall & Pearsall, 129 on cotton; all in the Virginia fire and Marine, of Richmond.

J W Taylor, \$750 on machinery, in Alabama of Mobile, and 750 on machinery in the Citizen of Mobile.

With Atkinson & Manning: Pembroke Jones, \$5625 on cotton ties; M J Heyer, 2,500 on stock; Mrs A M Parsley, 1,500 on building; Worth & Worth, 13,200 on building and stock; D G Worth and estate of N G Daniel, 10,950 on building; Hall & Pearsall, 28,800 on cotton; George L Arp, 2,000 on guano; J G Oldenbittel, 500 on building; Samuel Bear, Sr, 4,325 on dwelling and furniture; C B Wright, 5,500 on building and stock; Mrs C R Gause, 300 furniture; Bagley, Stewart & Bagley, 1,000 on steamer River Queen; St Barnabas School House, 1,500; H R Kuhl, 1,000 on dwelling house; Thomas Rivera, 300 on dwelling.

These amounts are divided between the following companies:

Queen, North British & Mercantile, Hartford, Phoenix, aEtna, Commercial, Union, Fire Association, City of London, Hibernia and North Carolina Home.

With DeRosset & Northrop;

Worth & Worth, \$12,500 on mdse; Smith & Gilchrist, 1,000 on mdse; Bladen Steamboat Co, 1,500 on steamer; M J Heyer, 1,000 on stock; C B Wright 2,500 on building; Champion Compress Co, 2,500 on building, machinery and all in North America of Philadelphia; J M Forshee, 1,000 on stock, in Springfield Fire and Marine, of Springfield, Mass.

With M S Willard:

Owen Fennell, \$8,000 on cotton; E Lilly, 1,600 on cotton; A H Greene, 2,500 on cotton; D L Gore, 1,000 on cotton; Kerchner & Calder Bros, 1,000 on frame warehouse; W I Gore, Son & Co, 1,000 on mdse; Smith & Gilchrist, 50 on cotton seed; heirs of H Nutt, \$1,800 on brick stores; M J Heyer, 2,500 on stock; Alex Sprunt & son, 1,500 on spirit barrels, & c; James Madden, 2,200 on brick building; G J Boney, 6,000 on machinery and 2,000 on stock; Mrs E H Newkirk, 1,500 on brick building, occupied by G J Boney; C B Wright, 300 on hay; heirs of H Nutt 4,300

on brick dwelling; Mrs. Emily Gerhardt, 350 on furniture; Alex Sprunt & Son, floating insurance. These amounts were divided as follows: \$8,000 in Continental; 10,250 in Fire Insurance Association; 1,800 in German American; 4,950 in Sun; 5,195 in Northern; aggregating 30,195.

With Wm L Smith & Co:

Delia Bryson, \$2,000 on brick hotel; M J Heyer, 1,000 on stock; H W Bryant, 1,000 on stock; all in Scottish Union & National.

Kerchner & Calder Bros, \$2,500 on brick building; Bladen Steamboat Company, 1,000 on steamboat; J H Durham, 800 on furniture; J A Walker, 2,100 on dwelling; all in Connecticut fire.

Worth & Worth, \$8,000 on naval stores; J C Stevenson, 500 floating policy; C B Wright, 2,500 on mill building; all in Crescent Insurance Company.

In the Germania Mutual Fire Insurance Company, Louis J Poisson, agent:

M J Heyer, furniture, etc, \$500; Kerchner & Calder Bros, mdse, 500; L C Kerchner, building 2,000; M J O'Brien, 700; E J Pennypacker, compress, 1,000; Geo L Arp, 1,000.

HOPE STEAM FIRE ENGINE CO.

The Hope Steam Fire Engine Company of Florence which so gallantly came to our rescue at the fire Sunday evening, returned home yesterday afternoon at 2 o'clock. The company did gallant service while with us. They were on duty all night at the railroad warehouses, extinguishing the flames and preventing the fire from spreading. The company was commanded by Captain J. Jellico, and has thirty-five members. They responded promptly to the appeal for aid and in twenty minutes after receiving the dispatch from May Hall were at the depot in Florence with their engine, and three hours afterwards were in Wilmington ready for work. PUBLIC MEETING.

A public meeting was held at the rooms of the Produce Exchange at 12:30 o'clock yesterday.

On motion Mayor Hall was called to the chair, and J I. Macks, Esq., was requested to act as Secretary.

On motion of F. H. Darby, Esq., a committee of five was appointed to draft suitable resolutions expressive of the sense of the meeting.

Cols. J. W. Atkinson, W. L. DeRosset, Messrs. F. H. Darby, Sameul Bear, Jr., and J. D. Bellamy were appointed on said committee.

On motion, the Mayor was requested to close the bar rooms of the city for the next twenty-four hours.

The special committee, through Col. J. W. Atkinson, offered the following preamble and resolutions:

A fearful disaster has befallen our city by the fire which rendered homeless so many of our citizens, and destroyed vast amounts of property; and it seems right that some action shall be taken promptly to alleviate the distress that must ensue in this calamity; therefore be it

Resolved, That a committee of fifteen be appointed by the chair to solicit subscriptions for the relief of the destitute and to collect and turn over the same to a special committee of five to be likewise appointed, who shall be fully authorized to distribute the same according to their best judgment.

Resolved, That the thanks of the entire community be extended to the Fire Departments of Florence, S. C., and Goldsboro, N. C. for their prompt response to the request for assistance which was sent by our Mayor to the authorities of these towns, and that the Mayor and authorities of our city be requested to tender to the fire companies of the same towns reimbursement of their expenses incurred in coming to our relief.

Resolved, That we desire to express our high appreciation of the efficient and unselfish services rendered by our own gallant firemen.

Resolved, That we appreciate the valuable services of the Wilmington Light Infantry Company, acting as special guard and police, and recognize the good results of their presence in maintaining order and quiet among the large number of people assembled on the streets during

the entire night.

The resolutions were unanimously adopted and the following committees appointed:

On Subscriptions – Messrs. J. W. Atkinson, F. Rheinstein, H. C. McQueen, Geo., W. Kidder, H #ollers, J. D. Munds, F. H. Mitchell, Samuel Bear, Jr. H. A. Bagg, A. H. Green, J. H. Currie, B. F. Hall, D. G. Worth, F. W. Kerchner, R M. McIntire.

On Distribution – Donald Mc Rae, G. W. Williams, Roger Moore, Clayton Giles, W. I. Gore.

On motion, the committee having in charge certain funds raised on a previous occasion for the relief of the cyclone sufferers, and which had not been expended, were requested to turn over the same to this committee on subscriptions.

On motion, the Secretary was requested to furnish the press of the city with the proceedings of the meeting and that copies of the resolutions be sent to the cities of Florence and Goldsboro.

About \$1,000 was subscribed at the meeting, in addition to four hundred dollars in the hands of the Merchants committee.

On motion the meeting adjourned.

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Name: (real name  
preferred)  
E-mail: (optional)  
Web Site: (optional)

Remember personal info?  
Yes  
No

Comment:

/ [Textile](#)

Comment moderation is enabled on this site. This means that your comment will not be visible on this site until it has been approved by an editor.

To prevent spam we require you to answer this silly question

**What are the FIRST TWO LETTERS of the word 'fire'?**

[\(Register your username / Log in\)](#)

Notify: Yes, send me email when someone replies.

Hide email: Yes, hide my email address.

**Small print:** All html tags except <b> and <i> will be removed from your comment. You can make links by just typing the url or mail-address.