

The 1815 Fire in Petersburg Article

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The City of Petersburg has endured numerous, devastating fires over its history. The 1784 town charter allowed the city to purchase fire-fighting equipment, which was indicative of recurrent fires during the 18th century. In 1788, the oldest fire company in Petersburg, the Old Street Fire Company, was formed. This was very timely, for on August 25, 1799, Robert Bolling's tobacco warehouse burned, consuming 280 hogsheads of tobacco. Since the early 19th century, the city and its citizens have endured fires in 1808, 1815, 1819, 1826, 1841, 1889, and 1910 that damaged properties and killed or injured many. However, the most destructive fire in Petersburg history occurred on the night of July 16, 1815.

"In one awful night the whole scene was destroyed; a fire, the most fierce and desolate which has ever afflicted a town in Virginia, has involved the larger portion of our citizens in distress, and reduced many of them to beggary." This horrific fire began in a small stable between Bollingbrook and Back Streets on the night of July 16, 1815. The fire consumed 76 houses on Bollingbrook Street, 29 houses on Old Street, 24 on Market Square, 22 on Sycamore Street, 21 on Back Street (now East Bank Street), and 2 on Bank Street.

Approximately two-thirds of the town's structures were destroyed. Among the major buildings consumed in the conflagration were the Farmer's Bank (rebuilt in 1817 as a brick structure, located at 19 Bollingbrook Street), Eagle Tavern, the Virginia Inn, the Columbian Hotel that was under construction on the north side of Bollingbrook Street, and the Back Street Theater built in 1796 (Edgar Allen Poe's parents performed there). All told, the fire destroyed 350 buildings, at a loss of approximately \$3 million. Examples of the losses include a Mr. Myers, who died in the fire. He worked for Thomas Wallace, a tanner. (This was not the Thomas Wallace, whose home on S. Market Street was where President Lincoln and Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant met on April 3, 1865.) The estate of apothecarist and druggist Ashley Adams suffered extensive losses. Mr. Adams was born in Coventry,

England and died c. 1804 in Petersburg. His heirs lost two dwellings, a shop, two lumber houses, and a tavern for a total loss of \$4324.

After this disastrous fire, a committee of leading citizens was formed to solicit relief. This group consisted of Mayor George Jones (the original owner of the Mcilwaine House near the Farmer's Market), William Haxall (a leader of the Newmarket race track just east of Petersburg), John Fitzhugh May (who had the honor of reading the Declaration of Independence at a Petersburg Independence Day celebration), Robert Bolling (one of the original 1784 Petersburg Common Councilmen), and William Prentis (who opened the city's first printing press in 1786), among others. Within two weeks of the fire, reconstruction in the city was fully underway. A Petersburg resident wrote in 1826 that 20 years before there were less than 100 brick buildings in town. The fire transformed the structure of homes in the city. Due to the massive destruction of this fire, roughly 300 brick buildings were built over the following two years. These included the Charles O'Hara (Trapezium) House at 244 North Market Street, which is still extant.

E.P. Fordham (who's he?) wrote, "The new part, which already contains 300 handsome houses, would shame most of the country towns in England." In 1817, two years after the fire, William Tell Harris (who toured the United States from 1817 to 1819) wrote,

"This town, which has recently suffered very severely by fire, shows no marks of its misfortune; bustle and activity are everywhere seen."

Petersburg has continued to focus on its ability to prevent and fight fires since the 1815 fire. Prior to the Civil War there were four fire companies in town. During the war, many of the volunteer firemen became soldiers, and consequently Confederate soldiers fought fires in the city. Ten years after the end of the Civil War, Petersburg established its first paid fire department. The volunteer firemen in the city for the previous 87 years undoubtedly saved millions of dollars in potential property damage and casualties. The well-known "Iron Front" fire in 1889, resulted in approximately \$750,000 in damages to structures in the city's downtown business district. Petersburg continues to suffer from property damage, deaths, and injuries from fires, but the July 16, 1815 fire is unmistakably the worst fire in the history of the Cockade City.