

THE COURT HOUSE BURNED

St. Thomas Loses a Fine Old Building by Fire,

BUILT FIFTY YEARS AGO

An Incendiary Supposed to Have Applied the Torch – Fire Discovered at Midnight – The Jail and Jailer's Residence Saved – Loss and Insurance

St. Thomas, Ont., July 2 – This city was visited by a terrible conflagration this morning, early. The court house buildings, comprising the county buildings, the jail, and all the county officials' offices were totally destroyed by fire. The blaze started at 12.15 a.m. and was first discovered by Mrs. Robt. McLachlan, who lives opposite the large structure. She ran to the telephone immediately, but was unable to raise the central, and the firemen were not notified until about twenty minutes later, the alarm being given by someone on a wheel who passed the fire. It is claimed by the night telephone manager that the switchboard was in trouble. The delay gave the fire a great start. It started in the south-east corner, and was very hard to reach, the ladders being too short, and the force a little weak. The flames spread rapidly, and it was only a few minutes before the whole block of buildings was a mass of flames. The large dome and flagstaff fell a mass of flames, and carried the roof with it. The law library, which is valued at several thousand dollars was totally destroyed by fire and water. The governor's residence, which is attached to the back part of the jail, was not seriously damaged. The rear part of the jail, in which the prisoners slept, is built of solid stone, and at the time of writing (2:30 a.m.) it is believed will be saved. Governor Moore says he thinks the fire is of incendiary origin, as there has been no one up in the part where the blaze started for a month. The buildings are nearly half a century old, and have been the scene of many an important and sensational trial. The loss is in the vicinity of \$50,000. Exact amount of insurance not obtainable to-night.

Later Particulars

St. Thomas, July 2 – (Special.) – The most disastrous fire that has occurred here in many years – brief particulars of which appeared exclusively in this morning's Free Press – was discovered shortly after 12 o'clock by Mrs. R. McLachlin, who resides a short distance from the scene. She hastily gave the alarm and when your correspondent arrived upon the scene a few seconds later a cloud of smoke could be seen issuing from the cupola of the court house. As the city has no fire alarm system, the nearest telephone in the building was at once brought into play in order to send in an alarm to the fire brigade, but owing to the effect of the trolley cars on the telephone system, it was impossible to send in an alarm and a young man was sent a distance of about eight blocks to summon the brigade. All this time the fire was making rapid headway, owing to the very inflammable nature of the interior, and when the brigade arrived, twenty minutes after the fire was discovered, the roof fell in. The firemen lost no time in bringing out four streams to play on the massive pile, but it was quite apparent to all the building was doomed to destruction. During this time Jailer N. W. Moore, whose residence lies west of the jail, which is in the rear, but adjoining the main building, had been around, and together with the turnkeys were getting everything in readiness to liberate the prisoners confined in the jail or take them to a place of safety providing such was deemed necessary. But the firemen were equal to the occasion, owing to the

stillness of the air preventing the fire from spreading to the jail. The ground floor, although badly damaged could be repaired with little expense, but of the upper stories nothing remains but the blackened walls. The law library, which was situated on the second floor, was badly damaged by being thrown from the windows, but the majority of the volumes were saved. The court room, where many heart rendering scenes have occurred, and where many of the foremost legal lights of the Dominion have pleaded and given vent to their eloquence, is one mass of charred timber and twisted iron. The cause of the conflagration will it is thought, forever remain a mystery, although many theories have been advanced. Governor Moore is of the opinion the fire was of incendiary origin. The building was a massive square structure of cut stone and brick, four stories high, with a dome and was erected upwards of fifty years ago, when Elgin was separated from Middlesex. The front was composed of solid cut stone; also the rear corners from ground to roof. It was undoubtedly the finest building in the city. The loss is estimated at \$15,000, which is fully covered by insurance. The officials having offices in the building have for years been complaining of its sanitary condition, and upon several occasions the County Council have wrestled with the question of the erection of a new building, but would eventually defer action, but it is thought that they will now erect a handsome new structure in keeping with the county.

THE LOSS AND INSURANCE

St. Thomas, July 2 – The fire at the court house last night was checked about 3 o'clock this morning after burning three hours. The damage done is thought not to be as serious as at first anticipated, as the lower story of the building and the stone walls were saved. The court house and offices are insured for \$14,000- \$2,000 in each – Lancashire, Commercial Union, Phoenix, of England; Western, British America, Norwich Union and London, Liverpool & Glasgow. There is also \$2,500 on the law library in the Lancashire. The loss will exceed the insurance.

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