

FIRE DAMAGES THE YORK COUNTY COURTHOUSE

The Yorkville Enquirer on November 23, 1892 carried a series of articles on a major fire on Monday, November 21 that heavily damaged the York County Courthouse and threatened the rest of the downtown area. Information in the newspaper is summarized here.

A fire raged on Monday morning from 9 to 12, and at many times it looked as if the entire business section of Yorkville would be lost. The fire originated in a defective stove flue in the office of C. E. Spencer, Esq., a frame building just to the rear of the courthouse. Mr. J. S. Brice happened to be passing by and noticed the smoke. He rushed inside but could find no water, so he gave the alarm. Soon fire engulfed the building. With the courthouse just 15 feet to the east, the Hunter & Oates dry goods store almost touching on the west, and the county commissioner's office to the south, there was a danger of the fire quickly spreading to many buildings. As the fire raged, telegrams were sent to Rock Hill and Chester for additional fire fighters. Special trains were dispatched to both cities. The roofs of the courthouse and the Hunter & Oates building soon began to smoke. Throngs of people arrived to help remove books and public records from the courthouse and goods from the Hunter & Oates building. Many women of Yorkville were among those helping.

Opposite the Hunter & Oates building are the law offices of W. B. McCaw and Finley & Brice, both frame buildings. Next are the Bratton Building and the rest of downtown, now in danger of the spreading fire. Dozens of men climbed to the roofs of these buildings, covering them with wet blankets. About 1,000 buckets of water were carried to the roof of the Bratton Building.

It had been thought that the courthouse, made of brick, was a fireproof building. However, the boxing along the eaves began smoking. Even the iron roof of the courthouse could not prevent the second floor from catching fire. Fire soon took hold of the Hunter & Oates building, and the walls caved in. By noon, the courthouse had burned to the level of the floor of the second level. At this time, the Three C's train arrived from Rock Hill. The steamer brought on the train was put to use and streams of water were played on the courthouse. Chester's fire brigade also arrived. Their hand-cranked engine could not find sufficient water to be of use. The Rock Hill engine continued until two cisterns of water were exhausted.

The Rock Hill fire brigade proved pivotal in controlling the fire. The telegram was sent to Rock Hill just before 11 and a freight train sent to Rock Hill. It made the trip in 21 minutes and the crews and equipment were ready to be loaded as soon as it arrived. As the train was able to build up a head of steam while being loaded, it made the trip back to York in 15 minutes. The article lists the firemen who came from Rock Hill. Included was the Rock Hill Colored Fire

Department of 14 men. The Chester fire brigade, which arrived in Yorkville about 12:10, included their Colored Fire Department of 35 men.

The Hunter & Oates building is totally destroyed, with an estimated loss of \$7,000 for the building and \$12,000 in stock. The damage to the courthouse is estimated at between \$12,000 and \$15,000. The lower floor is still intact. The Spencer office and county commissioner's office are both destroyed. The law offices of McCaw, Finley & Brice, and Hart & Hart all suffered damage, but not severe.

On December 7, 1892, the Enquirer reported on decisions of the County Board on how to repair the courthouse. They initially let a contract for \$10,000 to place a temporary roof and tear down the remaining walls of the upper story. However, they then decided to not proceed and to leave the decisions in the hands of the incoming County Board, which was scheduled to take office in January 1893. The contractor, Mr. Cody, is already at work tearing down the damaged sections of the brick walls, which have stood for 60 years.

Following is the list of the Colored Fire Brigade from Rock Hill which traveled to Yorkville to fight the fire: Henry Adams, Dick King, Tom Mills, Horace Clinton, R. B. Edwards, Wm. Rawlinson, George Pickett, George Campbell, Will Caldwell, Wm. Groin, Jack Knox, John Smith, George Watts, and Bill McKnight.

Information on this article compiled and written by Paul M. Gettys - 2020