

A major fire ravaged Rock Hill's main street in 1898

The north side of Rock Hill's main street lay in ashes after an early Sunday morning fire that burned for 4½ hours on April 3, 1898. Drunken loafers in a barber shop were blamed for the disaster.

Merchants built back, and two years later, fire almost destroyed the entire business district.

In 1898, five of the town's largest buildings and several smaller shops went up in flames. All of the buildings were brick and only 11 years old.

Roddey's Hall was a two-story brick structure with O'Neal's general merchandise store on the first level and an opera house on the upper level. Next door, Andrew J. Evans' drug store burned along with J.H. Milling's grocery. The



offices of The Rock Hill Messenger also went up in flames.

Capt. W.L. Roddey, besides losing his opera house, lost a building he rented to J.B. Johnson and Co., druggist, and the offices of dentists Simpson and Son, and Dr. Wallace Fennell's medical office.

A. Friedheim and Bro., a general merchandise store with the Masonic Hall on the upper floor, was lost. The fire was stopped by an

alleyway after destroying A.E. Smith's building.

The A.E. Smith building housed about 10,000 military cartridges and a large quantity of fireworks. All of the bullets and fireworks went off, waking the town. It was a blessing that the bullets and fireworks exploded before the firefighters and onlookers arrived on the scene.

Later, there was an explosion at the Johnson drug store, which blew out the windows and left a number of people cut by flying glass. Then, at Friedheim's, the last store to go, the fire set off a goodly amount of gun powder, causing the whole building to collapse.

It was obvious that the Rock Hill Fire Department would not be able

to contain the fire without assistance. Firefighters telegraphed to Chester and Charlotte for help. Charlotte sent a fire engine by train, but it was too late.

Across the street a number of stores were damaged by the explosions and the heat.

The heroes of the day were Herbert M. Davis and Manlius Owens, young firemen who wrestled water hoses to the top of the A.E. Smith building, but were thwarted by low water pressure from the fire department's steam engine. The steam engine was named "Marian Jones" for the fire chief's daughter. There were no water mains or hydrants.

The total financial loss totaled about \$175,000, with approxi-

mately \$110,000 in insurance.

It was not Rock Hill's first major fire. In 1878, 20 Main Street buildings had burned. In 1883, one-half of the west side of Main was lost. In 1887 half the town's businesses were lost and the post office was torn down in order to prevent the fire from reaching the town library.

In the 1887 fire, all losses were covered, but the insurance rates had risen as a result. In 1898 not everyone carried adequate replacement insurance. The Rock Hill Messenger carried no insurance and ceased publication.

Spectators carried out much of the merchandise from the burning stores. Left in the street, much of the rescued goods were stolen.

Capt. W. Lyle Roddey decided

not to rebuild the opera house. The old one was not a money maker, largely because traveling entertainers came infrequently. Also, Roddey was expected to offer the auditorium free for numerous charitable causes. The space would have been much more profitable if it had been used for offices or shops.

The first merchant house to rebuild was Friedheim's Store, now the oldest building in downtown and recently remodeled and occupied by First Union.

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