

DEVOURING ELEMENT

The Wildfires of 1870

In August of 1870, a conflagration that would become known as 'The Great Fire', swept the Ottawa Valley, from Lanark County's northern Ramsay Township, southeast along the Ottawa River, through Carleton County, and then back across Lanark County through the Townships of Montague, North Elmsley and North Burgess. In the valley, no fire like it had been seen before nor experienced since, no natural disaster ever took so many lives before or since, and none caused as much property damage until the 'The Great Ice Storm' of 1998.



Prologue to Disaster

When it wrecked havoc on surrounding farms, and threatened the town of Perth itself, the 'Great Fire', although the largest, was not the first, and not the only, forest fire burning close to the town that hot dry summer. Nearly two weeks before the 'Great Fire' began its rampage, the *Perth Courier* was reporting,

Fires in the woods and swamps in this neighborhood continue to rage with violence and damaging results. At night, the sky is illuminated on all sides by their blaze, while in day-time the horizon is obscured by the smoke".¹

¹ *Perth Courier*, August 5, 1870.

The summer of 1870 had been one of unparalleled drought. In the first week of June the local newspaper observed that,

*For the past week the weather has been, for the season of the year, unusually dry and hot, the thermometer standing in the vicinity of 85 and 90 degrees in the shade, when the heat was at its highest, [and] there has been scarcely any rain since the snow disappeared, and none at all for some weeks.*²

By mid-June there were the first reports of forest fires to the north. “*Immense fires are raging in the woods on the Upper Ottawa, and already immense quantities of timber have been destroyed*”.³ Three weeks later, despite scattered showers, the drought was as bad as ever,

*The weather still continues exceedingly dry, although not so excessively hot as that of a week ago. On Thursday of last week this part of the country was favoured with a gentle shower ... but owing to the extreme dryness of the ground, the want of rain is again felt to be as great as ever.*⁴

On July 15th, the *Courier* reported eight days of fire in the Saguenay district of Quebec where “*the distress and poverty consequent upon this fire is very great*”; and went on to note that, locally, “*the weather has been very dry, with high winds*”, despite the “*heaviest shower of the season, accompanied by hail and fearfully vivid lightning ... greedily swallowed up by the parched earth*”.

By the beginning of August, perhaps the result of that lightning storm, or any number of other causes, the forest west of town was in flames, raging “*with violence and damaging results. The atmosphere is filled with smoke so that respiration itself is difficult and the health of the community seriously endangered*”.⁵ Not much further away,

*Fires are raging round us in every direction. In the vicinity of White Lake and the township of Bagot ... The beaver meadows are all burnt up ... On Thursday last [04 August] a man of the name of Heron, with his family and all his effects, was driven from his clearance, and compelled to take refuge on a neighboring hill in the woods, completely surrounded by flames. They are in a perilous position.*⁶

That same week a major fire swept through the Westmeath area of Renfrew county, completely consuming the hamlets of Forester’s Falls and Beachburg, as the relentless sun in a cloudless sky pushed temperatures to 100 degree Fahrenheit (38 Celsius).

² *Perth Courier*, June 3, 1870.

³ *Perth Courier*, June 17, 1870

⁴ *Perth Courier*, July 8, 1870

⁵ *Perth Courier*, August 12, 1870

⁶ *Ibid.*

*Since our last [edition July 29th] we have experienced some of the hottest weather of the season, the thermometer indicating, during the first days of the week, somewhere in vicinity of between 95 and 100 degrees.*⁷

More than three months without rain, combined with record high temperatures and moisture sucking winds, had reduced Lanark County's cedar swamps, hardwood underbrush, beaver meadows, cropland and hayfields to the driest of tinder. "If rain does not come soon," the *Courier* editor warned, "a great loss of property and even of life may arise, and the whole country far and near be materially injured by these raging burnings".⁸

The Tinderbox

In 1870 the process of settlement in the townships surrounding Perth, and across the Ottawa Valley, had been underway for 50 years, and the rural population was approaching the highest level it would see until a resurgence in the late 20th century. The average farm, however, was still less than half cleared.

Technology of the day limited the acreage that could be cultivated. The agricultural census of 1861 shows that most farms amounted to only 20 to 40 acres under crop, with a few additional acres of pasture. Those travelling the concession roads and byways of the countryside passed through a landscape where farms stood as isolated islands surrounded by a vast ocean of forest.



Period Farmstead

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

On those farmsteads families lived in homes built of wood, surrounded by wooden barns and outbuildings, enclosed by fences of wood. With rare exceptions, that wood was white cedar. The house and barn were built of cedar logs, or perhaps sawn cedar lumber, with cedar shingle roofs, and split cedar rails formed the fences. Around the edges of the cleared land, and in fields across the farm, were piles of bush, ready for burning as land clearance advanced with the passing seasons. Stacked in woodsheds adjoining the houses, or in piles nearby, were 50 or more cords of firewood curing in anticipation of another cold Canadian winter; a part of those piles being cedar kindling.

In 1870 all heat and light came from a living flame. Transition from the open fireplace to an iron wood stove was underway, but while fireplaces spit spark and embers, even stoves presented dangers. If the stovepipes and chimney were not kept clean, creosote build-up ignited in flames. Even a well-maintained chimney could throw sparks onto a wood shingle roof or adjoining building and burn them to the ground in minutes. At the same time candles were being replaced by kerosene lamps, but if a lamp were knocked over and broken, the result was almost always an uncontrollable blaze. According to research by historian Terence M. Currie, in the 1860s the town of Perth lost an average of two houses a year from its total of only about 400, and fires destroyed 10 times as many dwellings in the 1870s as they do today.⁹

A few of the most prosperous farmers had replaced their log cabins or frame houses with more fire-resistant stone, and sometimes brick, homes. Even these, however, had wooden porches, summer kitchens and woodsheds, and were roofed with highly inflammable cedar shingles. Where farmstead houses and barns stood isolated near the center of cleared crop land, they appeared reasonably safe from outbreaks of fire in the surrounding woods, but in 1870, even the crops were parched and dry.



More dangerous still, cedar rail fences connected those buildings to the edge of the woods. When the fires of August came, flames raced down those fences like a fuse, igniting, in an instant, the long-seasoned timber of the buildings in explosions of flame.

Quoting the Merrickville *Chronicle* of August 12th, the *Courier* reported that fires were threatening farms in Lanark County's Montague Township and, further east, in neighboring Marlborough Township, Carleton County, and Oxford Township, Grenville County.

... immense and most destructive fires are raging in the woods in almost every direction. In Montague, Marlborough and Oxford Townships a very large amount of valuable timber has been totally destroyed, while houses and barns and standing crops have been seriously threatened in many instances. We hear that a considerable quantity of hay, in

⁹ *The Ottawa Valley's Great Fire of 1870*, by Terence M. Currie (2009) ISBN 978-1-894439-48-0.

*stacks, was consumed in the rear of Montague. In Oxford alone, the fire has swept over not less than 1,800 acres of land, and the end is not yet certain.*¹⁰

By August 15th major fires were burning ever closer to Perth, with the *Courier* reporting outbreaks in Bathurst, Drummond and South Sherbrooke Townships.

A very destructive fire has been raging on the third line of Bathurst during the last two or three days ... and has only been kept from proving as destructive as those near Westport by the most active and uninterrupted labor of the farmers in the locality. This fire, on Wednesday night last [17 August], had got down nearly as far as Glen Tay.

We learn that the barns and all other buildings except the dwelling house, of Mr. John Rossiter, of South Sherbrooke, were burned to the ground on Wednesday afternoon last. Mr. Rossiter lost everything that was in the outbuildings, including his crops, and everything else about the premises. This calamity will go hard with Mr. Rossiter, he being a poor man, who can ill afford to be thus deprived of the whole of his year's crop besides the other property that was destroyed.

*We also learn that the barn, dwelling house, hay-stacks, &c. of Mr. James Cunningham, of Drummond, on Wednesday last caught fire several times, but through the active agency of the neighbors, the property was saved. However, the utmost vigilance has yet to be kept up, as there is no safety until rain comes to quench the fires.*¹¹

The *Courier* concluded its reporting on fires in the neighboring townships with a note that it had also learned,

*Fires are also raging along the line of the Canada Central Railway, and much damage is being done by burning ties, fencing and other materials [and that] great fires are burning fiercely at various places between Perth and Ottawa [and of] many other disastrous fires, burning down barns, dwellings &c., but we cannot learn any certain facts concerning them, and do not, therefore, mention them just now.*¹²

The reason the *Courier* could not “learn any certain facts” was because “the telegraphy poles, in many places, have been burned, thus breaking off communications [between Ottawa and Perth] by telegraph”. Where the telegraph lines had not been burned, they had been toppled by high winds. Readers were assured, however, that, “a sufficient staff of repairers left this morning [19 August] at daylight to find out where the break was located, and put the line again in working order”.¹³ When the telegraph lines were repaired over the weekend of 20-21st August, the *Perth Courier* and its readers learned, for the first time, that the wildfires in southwestern Lanark County were but part of an unfolding disaster. A massively larger fire was roaring towards them from the northeast.

¹⁰ *Perth Courier*, August 12, 1870

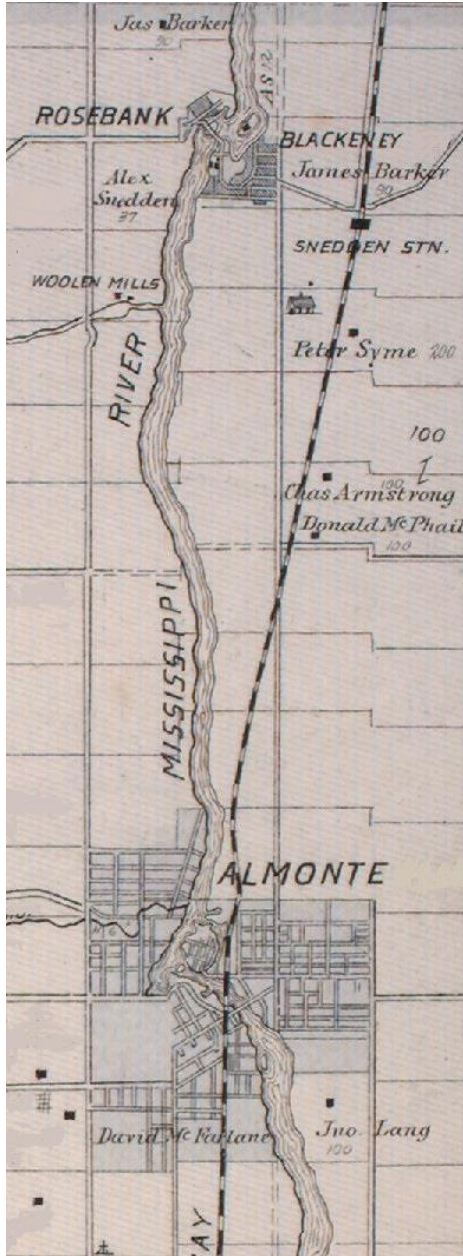
¹¹ *Perth Courier*, August 19, 1870.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

The Great Fire

On the same day, Wednesday August 17th, that fires were destroying farms in South Sherbrook and Drummond Townships, and the Bathurst Township fire threatened the mills and homes of Glen Tay, a work gang was clearing the right-of-way to lay Canadian Central Railway track from Almonte to Arnprior.



Near Blakney, in Ramsay Township, the railway crew set fire to piles of brush. As the sun came up on another baking hot day, the wind rose with it. Flaming embers were carried into the bone-dry cedar, spruce and balsam bush along the line and, within minutes, were fanned into an inferno raging across Ramsay Concession-11. Attempts to control it with tools at hand were futile. Nearby farmers turned out to help, but were driven back by intense heat, smoke and the fire's rapid spread. Part of the railway crew raced their work train back to Almonte and collected enough barrelled water from the Mississippi River to load a half dozen flat cars, but by the time they returned, the wind had risen to hurricane force¹⁴, driving the fire northwest on a front nearly a kilometer wide.

Within hours the inferno was moving faster than a man could run. It soon crowned and, with "*the roar of cannonade*", raged through the tree tops. The gale force winds dispersed flames in every direction, starting new fires, and the blaze, burning up to a kilometer deep, spread across a front six to eight kilometres wide. Temperatures at ground level, subsequently been estimated to have exceeded 500 degrees Celsius, were so intense that the fire consumed the topsoil.¹⁵

The fire swept northeast from the Almonte-Arnprior right-of-way to the Ottawa River, then east toward Ottawa. It crossed the river and levelled the village of Ironsides, before burning north along the Gatineau River valley. Ottawa was narrowly saved by opening the dam at Dow's Lake to create a flood down Preston Street to Nepean Bay. Firefighters and citizen volunteers were, however, unable to save the buildings at Lansdowne Park. From Ottawa, the flames continued east, sweeping across the Townships of Gloucester, Huntley and Coulbourne. The villages of Bells

¹⁴ The wind storm that roared down the St. Lawrence Valley and across southeastern Ontario that day was so powerful that ships were driven from their moorings in Montreal harbour.

¹⁵ The 'Burnt Lands' alvar (limestone plain) near Almonte is the result of the 1870 'Great Fire'. Deep clay land was, however, less affected.

Corners and Stitsville were completely consumed and only the heroic efforts of its residents saved Ashton. Quoting the *Ottawa Times*, the *Courier* reported that across,

... the Townships of Gloucester, Nepean, and Fitzroy, the fires roared on before the fierce gale, devouring barns, stables and houses, and eagerly seizing on small copses or woods, which were instantly snapped up. In Gloucester, a wall of fire ten miles in extent roared on, while in the Township of Fitzroy, a line of seven miles were in blaze.

The country people, terror stricken, fled about from house to house, almost powerless from fear and exhausted from exertion. No sooner did they arrive at one place, and before they could tell their tale of suffering, they would be compelled to fly again, accompanied by the occupants of the house. "The roar of the fire", said one who heard it "was terrible".¹⁶

Roaring through the Long Swamp south of Ashton, the fire was turned southward by the Rideau River and burned on through Montague, North Elmsley and North Burgess Townships. The *Perth Courier* described,

... large stretches of country ... completely burned over, leaving the whole face of the country one blacked mass of smouldering ruins ... not a vestige of the once prosperous and happy homes of the farmers remaining to tell the tale of recent prosperity and smiling fields of waving grain.

It is utterly impossible to conceive of the misery and desolation that exists in many places, both in the Counties of Lanark and Carleton. So rapid and overwhelming did the devouring element often become, that the terrified people were glad to escape with their very lives leaving everything behind ... even to a scanty supply of wearing apparel ... to the rapacity of the dreaded monster. Horses, cattle, sheep, pigs, and even dogs, have, in some instances, become easy victims to the fire, escape having been rendered impossible from the suddenness of its appearance and the utter inability of the weak efforts of man to subdue it or keep in in check.¹⁷

Accounting for losses in its immediate readership area the *Courier* recorded "the following melancholy record",

Burgess - *Eye-witnesses tell us that the scenes in the part of Burgess where the fire raged on those two dark days were of a most heartrending character. As the fire approached a farm-steading, with the rapidity of a race-horse at full speed, the people seemed struck dumb with terror. Men, women, and children cried aloud in their agony of despair, expecting every moment to be swallowed up by the flames. Many of the terrified women, especially, were nearly driven out of reason at the awful prospect presented on every hand. They would frequently rush from their dwellings into the road, and falling on their knees in the most impassioned manner call upon Providence to save their lives and keep their property harmless from destruction.*

¹⁶ *Perth Courier*, August 29, 1870

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Alex McMullan, in Burgess, near Otty Lake, lost everything on his farm – his dwelling house, barns and all other out-buildings, the whole crop of this year, with farming implements, house furniture, &c., and, sad to say, numbers of his cattle and sheep were destroyed also. Mrs. Owen Lally's farm was reduced to one bare and barren field – houses, crops &c, being all consumed.

The Burgess Mills, situated on Rideau Lake, owned by William Elliott, now of Chatsworth, Co. Grey, and leased by Mr. Fox, were totally consumed, with a large amount of material. The buildings on the land owned and worked by the New York Mines Co., J. F. Baker, Superintendent, we understand, were also completely consumed. J. F. Baker lost about 26 cords of wood on Rideau Lake; a man named Noble about fifty cords in the same place; and Messrs. Blackall, Haulon and others, large quantities also, besides tan-bark¹⁸.

James Grierson loses not only his whole range of buildings, but the entire proceeds of his farm during this year – crops, fences &c. William G. Tully's misfortune is fully equal to Mr. Grierson's, and the labors of a life swept away in a few moments. Mr. Tully's two sons – Thomas and John – have also met with a similar loss as their father.

Wm. Buchanan loses the whole of his buildings, crops and valuables, &c. This farm presents a sad scene of desolation. Wm. Noble's farm is completely cleared of all vestige of civilization. Likewise that of Mrs. Noble, his mother, we presume. On the farm of Lawrence Russel everything is burned except the dwelling house.

Owen Quion [Quinn?] lost everything – barn, house, crops, implements, &c. William Ryan also lost very heavily, but we did not learn the full extent. It is rumored, though, that he lost everything. Patrick Doohar [Doober?] escaped with the loss of his hay. Thos. B. Scott was a sufferer to the extent of a new dwelling house and a large quantity of hay.

In one instance the house of a Mrs. Byrne, who had a daughter – a young woman – lying at the point of death, was greatly endangered by the fire, and it was thought advisable, for the sake of safety, to remove the dyeing girl. This was effected only after considerable difficulty, as the poor creature was very much weakened from the effects of the stifling smoke, and anxiety concerning her poor mother's impending loss.

Awful Fires !

**The Whole of Central Canada
in one Mass of Flame !**

Fearful destruction of property

**BELL'S CORNERS COM-
PLETELY SWEEP AWAY.**

**VILLAGE OF IRONSIDES ALSO
WHOLLY CONSUMED.**

**Five Million Feet of Sawm
Lumber Burned.**

**Great Loss of Property on Ca-
nada Central Railway.**

ONE LIFE SAID TO BE LOST

**Ottawa City in Great Danger
of Destruction.**

**BURGESS ALMOST ONE BLACKENED
WASTE.**

HARROWING DETAILS

¹⁸ Bark from Hemlock trees from which tannin, for manufacturing leather, was extracted at the Canada Bark Works mill, Bathurst Township C-3/L-2, on the shores of Christie Lake.

The above fires all took place in North Burgess, and within a distance of not more than twelve miles from Perth – some so near as six and seven miles.

North Elmsley - *Mrs. William Reilly's farm was completely burned over – house, crops, barns, furniture, implements. Such was the rapidity and intensity of the flames that Mrs. Reilly barely escaped with her family to the lake in the vicinity, where they had to take refuge in order to save their lives, and from which position they were only rescued after much suffering.*

Henry Gallaher lost everything – house, barns, implements, crops &c. Andrew Gallaher was an equal suffered with the exception of his dwelling house and its contents.

Simon McVeitie's loss will be very heavy, his barn and house having been consumed. Henry McVeitie lost his house, barn, crops and all combustible materials around the premises.

Bathurst - *The people of Bathurst have not suffered nearly so much as those of Burgess. The following losses have occurred in Bathurst.*

Richard Patterson lost most of his crop. Louis Blackburn lost two stacks of hay some of his standing grain, and one half of his fences.

From a rough calculation, from authentic data, over 600 tons of hay have been lost within a radius of five miles from Dewitt's corners. We hear, also, that large quantities of cordwood and tan-bark have been destroyed.

South Sherbrooke - *Michael Fleming, we are told, had everything burned but his dwelling house. Another man named Patterson, is said to have had everything destroyed also. H. Thompson, the same informant says, lost very nearly everything except his dwelling house.*

Thomas Marks lost all his buildings – barn, sheds, and stables, all of which were filled with splendid hay, over 50 cords of wood and 50 cords of bark, as also his house – a new commodious dwelling.

Widow Dunlap [Dunlop?] lost everything – buildings, house, even to a pig which was in one of the buildings. John Gordon also lost everything, except his dwelling house, which caught fire several times and was, we may say, miraculously saved. Michael Fleming lost his stables and shed, but fortunately saved two barns, one on each side of the burning stable.

Several others, parties whose names we could not ascertain, were equally unfortunate.

Drummond - *In Drummond some very narrow escapes took place; and had it not been for the utmost vigilance of the people and the most untiring labor, we would have been called upon to make a sad record.*

As it was Jeremiah Kelly lost his barn, implements, harness and fanning mill, together with all this year's crops that had been stored in the barn, with about 200 bushels of barley that had been kept over from last year.

Of course, there may be many people who have suffered severely from fire of whom we have not heard; such it is possible some inaccuracies may have crept into the above list; but from our information, we believe it will be found in the main correct.¹⁹

**(FROM SATURDAY'S EDITION)
Awful Scenes of Desolation!
No Prospect of Abatement of
the Flames.**

Even as the *Courier* was tallying the losses on August 26th, fires continued to burn in several places.

In Burgess, the fire continues to rage, but the people have turned out en masse, and are working night and day unweariedly in fighting the fearful monster. During yesterday and last night

[25 August] up to a late hour, no fresh disasters of a very serious character had occurred that we could hear of. The fires were, however, in fearful proximity to the dwellings and barns of many a family, and the most anxious and unwearied exertion were required to keep the flames in check. The slightest rise in the wind might at any moment precipitate the flames from house to house, and from barn to barn, repeating the awful suddenness and sad story of Wednesday and Thursday last [24-25 August].

On the south side of Otty Lake it was momentarily expected that many families would be rendered homeless. The premises of Eb. Bell [Ball?], we understand, was in great peril, as well as that of Geo. McKay, besides others. Great exertions were being made to ward off the calamity, but the slightest freshening up of the wind, or any other unfavourable circumstances, might, in a moment, cause all the damage that a fire could do.²⁰

Dalhousie Fire

The losses in North Elmsley and North Burgess Townships, described by the *Courier* on August 29th, were the result of the 'Great Fire' that swept down the valley, between August 17th and 24th. Those of Bathurst and Drummond, and the earlier fires in Bathurst and South Sherbrooke Townships, however, were more likely associated with separate fires that had been burning in those areas even before the 'Great Fire' began its rampage. There were also separate fires in Dalhousie Township, and those were still burning during the first week of September.

There were two fires raging at the same time in Dalhousie, and only for the vigilance of the people, and their untiring labor, the loss of buildings would have been far greater.

The more destructive of the two was started about two miles from Watson's Corners. It got into a thick cedar swamp, and it is only those that have witnessed a scene like this

¹⁹ *Perth Courier*, August 29, 1870

²⁰ *Ibid.*

who can have any idea of the terrors of such a fire. It carried everything before it, the flames mounting up to the tops of the trees, and some hundred feet above them.

About a mile from the village they met their red enemy working devastation on the fences of Mr. J. Labelle. They went to work to fight the monster by tearing down the fences that it might be confined to the woods, but no sooner were the rails thrown down than they were burned up – so the fences were of necessity left to their fate, and every effort put forth to save the buildings – and a hard fight there was of it, for the dwelling-house was on fire times without number, and as often saved.

As the greatest danger was now over, the crowd had to run to the next neighbor, Mr. J. [R.?] Storie, and work there till they were exhausted saving the buildings with the utmost difficulty. The next victim was Mr. P. Cumming, who lost nearly all his fences and some grain that was in the field, besides twelve thousand rails, though saving his buildings after great difficulty. Mr. C. McArthur was the next one attacked. He lost everything; house, barns, with their contents, and fences.

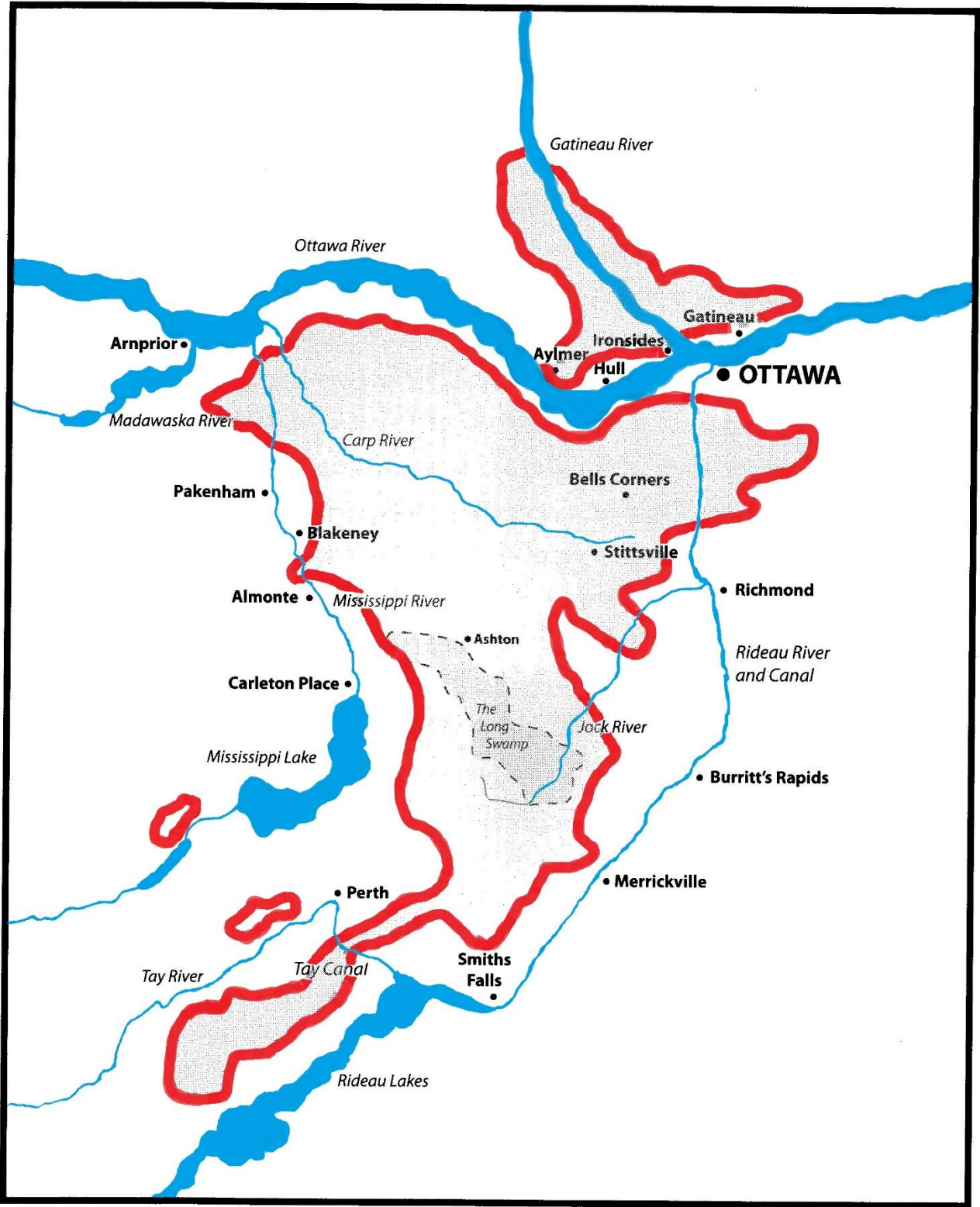
On went the fiery monster to Mr. J. McMullen's farm, sweeping fences as it went, and one hay stack that was in the field. He moved everything of any value from the house, and left it to burn, so great was the heat and smoke. One of his neighbors persuaded him to make another effort to save the buildings which was done successfully.

On the fire swept in the same manner for about seven miles, burning the fences wherever it went, but consuming no buildings of any consequence. The number of rails destroyed by the burning of these fences will amount to about fifty thousand.

Towards evening the fire approached to within a few acres of Watson's Corners, when a general packing of goods, and an energetic hunting up teams to convey these valuables to a place of safety, commenced. St. Andrew's Hall and Mr. A. Park's barn were soon filled with these goods, while the Corners was left without a bed or a chair, so sure were the inhabitants that the whole place would be burned ... but Providence was kinder to them than they expected, for about midnight the wind changed and blew the flames direct from the Corners. Availing themselves of this golden opportunity, they set fire to the swamp at the point nearest the building's though, even then, with the wind in their favor, the heat was so great as to require a constant watch over their buildings until the middle of the next day.

The other fire was burning all this time in Mr. Boyd Caldwell's limits, at the head of Dalhousie Lake, and working its way out to the settlement. A person living in the vicinity of this fire says that when sitting at his own door he counted over one hundred pines falling within an hour. Happily, the flames were confined by the settlers to the woods, and no great damage was done to the settlers. Mr. Wm. McQuat, being the farthest in the woods, lost his house but succeeded in saving most of his household goods. Mr. Caldwell's loss must be enormous.²¹

²¹ Perth Courier, September 9, 1870.



Relief

Remnants of the 'Great Fire' continued to burn in North Burgess and parts of Carleton County until heavy rain fell on Sunday night, August 28th, and through Monday, August 29th. There were no deaths reported in Lanark County, but about 20 people were killed elsewhere across the Ottawa valley. Over 200 square miles were burned, within which the homes and livelihoods of about 8,000 people were destroyed. The total loss in financial terms was never known.

Wherever the fire has passed the country is one scene of devastation, a vast blackened, dismal field. Farmers cannot tell where their property lies, the fences being everywhere in ashes ... horses and cattle are running in promiscuous herds across the country.²²



As the fires still burned in the surrounding Townships on August 26th the *Perth Courier* called for action to assist the victims.

... something must be done to assist the sufferers, and that as speedily as possible. Many families are in absolute want of food, everything of this description has been consumed. It is difficult, in some places, to reach them, owing to bridges being burned, trees falling across the road, and the density of the smoke.

We would suggest that a company of a hundred or more of the citizens of Perth be formed at once to go to the burning districts in order to relieve the people there from the incessant labors they have been engaged in during the past week. These people must be in the last stages of exhaustion, and it would be a grateful relief if a corps of fresh hands were to assume the labor for even one day. Who will take it to hand to organize such a company? Pecuniary assistance can be an after consideration.

²² *Toronto Daily Leader*, August 23, 1870.

*Let a party, say we, of a hundred willing hands start for the burning districts tomorrow morning at SIX O'CLOCK! The better Day, the better Deed!*²³

How many volunteers answered the *Courier's* call goes unrecorded, but efforts were also set in motion to raise relief funds. Perth Town Council appointed members William O'Brien, David Holliday (1818-1900) and Charles Meighen (1823-1917) *"to enquire into the extent of the losses of the various sufferers by fire in the neighboring townships, and the probable state of destitution of each, with a view of affording relief, in conjunction with the County and local Councils"*.²⁴ Meanwhile, at a public meeting in Ottawa, a Central Relief Committee was organized. Carleton County Sheriff, and Perth native, William Frederick Powell (1826-1889) urged the meeting to apply to the Dominion Government for aid. However, Lanark MP, Alexander Morris (1826-1889), opined that such was not the role of the Federal Government, but that *"he was sure that other cities would lend assistance, and perhaps the Province would as well, and that the Dominion government hoped that rain would soon fall"*.²⁵

By the end of September, the Perth Committee had compiled a list of victims from Burgess Township and reported that the *"Central Relief Committee at Ottawa had latterly shown a desire to assist the sufferers in this direction"* with a recommendation that *"the Committee appointed by the Council be increased [and directed to] act energetically in the matter"*. The Perth Councillors also reported that the Ottawa Committee only wished to know *"how much the sufferers of the fire had remaining – not how much they had lost. Their object was to arrive at an estimate of each one's destitution and to provide accordingly"*. It was agreed that the Perth Committee would do so through *"John Manion [1806-1893], of Bathurst, and George Oliver, of Elmsley, ... if they would act"*. Henry Dowsley Shaw (1833-1917), Edward G. Malloch (1839-1922) and Duncan Kippen (1831-1926) were added to the Committee and *"given power to add to their number"* if deemed necessary.²⁶

At its October sitting Lanark County Council granted *"the handsome sum of \$2,000 to the sufferers ... Of this, the sum of \$1,500 is to be distributed among the losses in Lanark County, and the remainder, \$500, is to be given to the 'Relief Committee of Ottawa', to be disbursed by them as they may see fit"*.²⁷ Following the County's lead, Perth Town Council voted to grant \$200 *"for the relief of the sufferers by the late fires in this district, to be handed to the Chairman of the [Perth] Fire Relief Committee"*.²⁸ At the following meeting of Council the Mayor announced that *"the Central Fire Relief Committee of Ottawa had transmitted, for the relief of the sufferers in this section, the handsome sum of \$1,343, together with a large case of clothing"*.²⁹

The Provincial government initially agreed with its Attorney General, John Sandfield MacDonald, that providing any assistance at all to burned-out citizens was unconstitutional. Having reached that conclusion, at a time when the provincial treasury boasted a surplus of more than \$3,000,000, much of it the proceeds of timber limit sales in the Ottawa Valley, subjected

²³ *Perth Courier*, August 26, 1870.

²⁴ *Perth Courier*, September 2, 1870.

²⁵ *The Ottawa Valley's Great Fire of 1870*, by Terence M. Currie (2009) ISBN 978-1-894439-48-0.

²⁶ *Perth Courier*, September 30, 1870

²⁷ *Perth Courier*, October 21, 1870

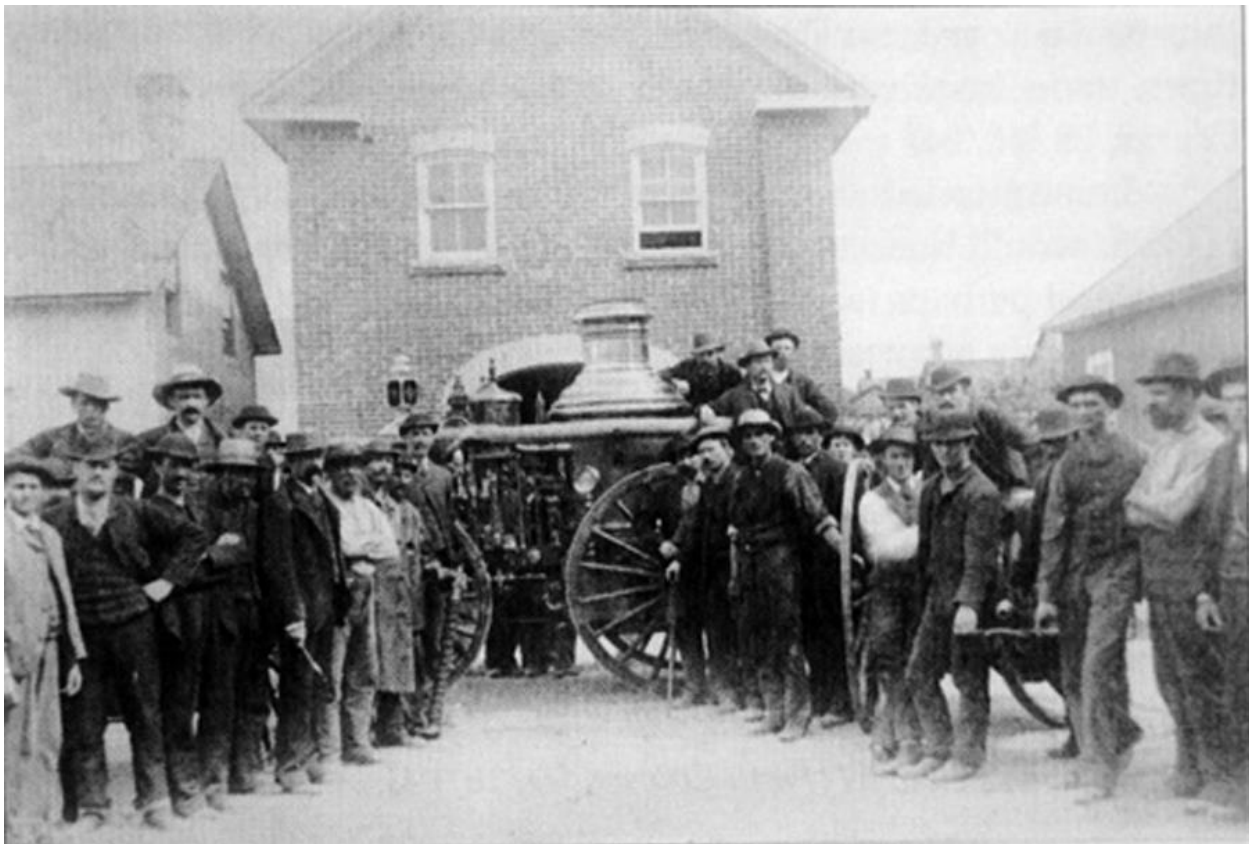
²⁸ *Perth Courier*, November 4, 1870

²⁹ *Perth Courier*, November 18, 1870

MLAs to political heat almost as intense as the fires themselves. Ontario politicians then responded with an offer of government loans at a rate of 6%; another non-starter as attached terms demanded surety from borrowers who had lost everything they owned, in circumstances where bank loans were available on the same terms at 4%. In January 1871, the provincial government finally yielded to public pressure and voted a grant of \$25,000.

Lessons Learned

The disastrous events of August and September also focused the minds of Municipal leaders on prevention of, and preparation for, future wildfires. At their September meeting Bathurst Council voted unanimously to take out fire insurance on the Township Hall. Perth Town Council reviewed the state of its fire fighting capabilities and found them wanting.



Perth Fire Company c1885

On paper, the municipality was served by two fire companies, the Union Company and the Fountain Company, but the Fountain Company engine (water pumper) was inoperable and its crew unmanned.

The Fire Inspector reported that ... the Fountain engine required three lengths of suction hose. He recommended that the Fountain engine would either be repaired or sold. He believed it could be easily made a serviceable engine, and that there would be no difficulty in getting up a good company for it. The report ... was referred to the Committee already

*appointed to consider the matter, with instructions to report thereon at the next meeting of Council.*³⁰

At the following meeting, Meighan advised Council that a Mr. Simonds had been engaged to *“repair the Fountain Engine in a first-class manner, and to make it thoroughly efficient, for the sum of \$100 – and have the work completed by the 15th November next”*.³¹ Simonds completed the job on time and, although *“the Fire Committee had not yet made a trial of the engine since it was repaired, it certainly looked exceedingly well. A test would be made before another meeting”*.³² When the test was completed in late November it was determined that Simonds’ *“job was a good one; and ... the amount agreed upon for the work - \$100 – [should] be paid”*.³³ Simonds, however, was curiously impatient for his money. On the same day Council approved payment, he filed a civil suit against the municipality to collect his bill.

- Ron W. Shaw (2017)

³⁰ *Perth Courier*, September 2, 1870

³¹ *Perth Courier*, September 30, 1870

³² *Perth Courier*, November 18, 1870

³³ *Perth Courier*, December 2, 1870