

1911

The Bangor Fire, April 30, 1911: A True Story of the Fire

Michael J. Callinan

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S O U V E N I R
OF THE GREAT
BANGOR FIRE

A P R I L 30, 1911

BY M. J. CALLINAN





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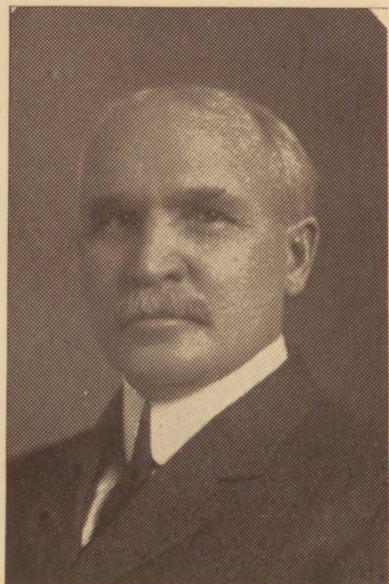
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The Bangor Fire

April 30, 1911

A True Story of the Fire

by

M. J. CALLINAN

*From the Press of
The Kennebec Journal
Augusta, Maine*



EXCHANGE STREET LOOKING TOWARDS CENTRE PARK

A True Story of the Fire

By Michael J. Callinan

April thirtieth, nineteen hundred and eleven, dawned clear and bright on the historic old city of Bangor. It was the first Sunday of the year to show signs of the joyousness of Spring and throughout the day hundreds of pleasure seekers thronged the streets. No sign of the coming catastrophe marred the happiness of the young or the contentment of the old. It was a day of beauty and the horror of its aftermath was beyond conjecture.

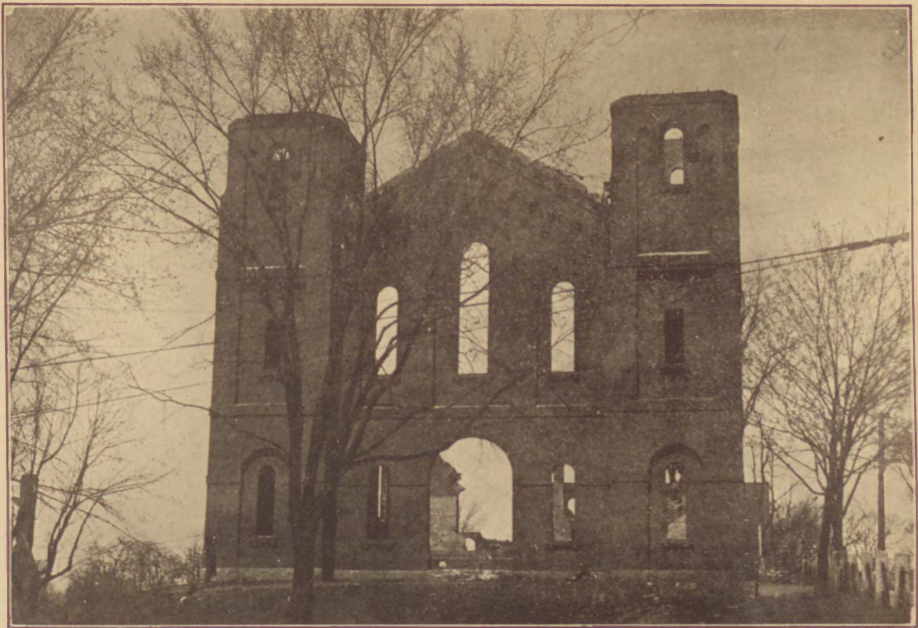
Shortly after four o'clock in the afternoon an alarm of fire was rung from Box 24, the origin of which will remain unaccountable, calling the fire department to the burning hay shed of J. Frank Green on Broad street. Hundreds thronged to view the spectacle of the blazing building, little dreaming that from this small beginning a conflagration, covering an area of over sixty acres, would result. Chief Mason soon realized the danger of the situation on account of the high wind and sent in a call for the remainder of the fire apparatus. Several small fires in the immediate vicinity of the hay shed were quickly extinguished and it appeared to the casual observer that the fire was under control. Some of the people were leaving the scene of the Broad street blaze, when the sight of fire on Exchange street, in the building occupied by the Telephone Exchange, arrested their movements for a time.

A part of the fire fighting apparatus was immediately sent to the scene of the Exchange street fire and then commenced the

real work of checking the advance of the fire fiend. The high wind carried burning embers hundreds of feet away, only to drop them on the roof of some wooden structure.

It seemed as though a hundred small fires had started at once. The Universalist church facing Centre Park, the Library building on State street and the new Stearn's building on Exchange street were wrapped in a sheet of flame almost in a moment. The heroic efforts of the firemen to check the onward march of the flames was fruitless and even the most optimistic of the spectators predicted the total destruction of the part of Bangor lying east of the Kenduskeag stream. On the west side of Exchange street, from the corner of York to State street, every building was in flames and the crash of the spire of the Universalist church, sent a shower of sparks in all directions. The spectators seemed reluctant to move back but the onrushing whirlwind of flame would not be denied and slowly the crowd edged back to the east side of Broadway, from where a commanding view of the burning city could be had.

* The Telephone Exchange building was among the first to be destroyed, thus cutting off telephonic communication and the falling walls of the high buildings on Exchange street soon put the telegraphic wires out of commission. It was at this juncture that Mayor Charles W. Mullen, whose proved worth is something for the citizens of Bangor to be proud of, jumped into his automobile and made a record run to Northern Maine Junction from where he sent out calls for aid to Waterville, Augusta, Lewiston and Portland. A large delegation of Old Town firemen had already answered to the call for help and were doing valiant service. The Brewer fire department was the first outside help to arrive and a more heroic lot of firefighters has never been assembled.



UNIVERSALIST CHURCH—PARK STREET

The fire jumped across State street, from the Library building to the building occupied by the Farrar Furniture Company. In a maze of wooden structures between State and Central streets, the fire raged with unabated fury, destroying the Central Fire Station and creating a heat so intense that some of the more venturesome firemen received bad burns from falling sparks. The new Graham building, the Windsor hotel, High school and Baptist church, all situated in the path of the fire were soon in flames and the firemen, seeing that these buildings were doomed, moved back still farther into the residential district, where they put up a stubborn but unavailing battle to stem the tide of the advancing destroyer. The large Morse-Oliver building at the corner of State and Exchange streets and the Granite block on the opposite corner of State and Park streets, were already doomed.

As the darkness of night approached, the sky was illumined for miles around by the lurid glare from the burning district, volumes of thick, black smoke, hung o'er the city like a pall and men and women voiced their opinions in awed whispers. In the midst of the great conflagration the people remained calm and undismayed, and even, when the fire was at its height, talk of reconstruction could be heard on all sides. This spirit of dauntless courage and fortitude in the face of such a catastrophe has never been surpassed by any people of any municipality.

It was at a time when the sun was slowly sinking in the west and the shadows of night were falling upon a scene of devastation and sorrow, that the first fatality of the great conflagration occurred. The writer was an eye witness of the tragic death of John N. Scribner of Brewer and a more pitiable sight could hardly be imagined. The unfortunate man seemed to rise out of the ground at the juncture of State, Harlow and Exchange

streets at a time when every piece of combustible material in the vicinity was a seething mass of flames. How he reached this point through the flames, without being seen, will never be known. He groped around aimlessly, evidently bewildered by his precarious position. He became entangled in a mass of falling wires, his clothing took fire and he sank to the ground. Regaining his feet, he threw up his hands in motion of supplication and fell back into the burning caldron of flame. An heroic attempt to rescue Mr. Scribner from death was made by Patrolmen John T. Mackie and Frank Golden, but before they could reach the fallen man, the tottering walls of the Morse-Oliver building fell with a crash, burying him beneath tons of debris. His charred body was recovered the following day, tender hands carrying him to his last resting place.

No less sad was the death of George Abbott of the Brewer fire department which occurred about 1 o'clock Monday morning. After a night of unceasing toil, battling with the flames, he fell exhausted and complained of burns and bruises. His courageous spirit, however, would not permit him to retreat for rest and he again hurled himself into the foremost rank of the firefighting brigade. While at work on a residence in Penobscot street, he again fell and this time he was unable to move. A falling chimney struck him and he was removed to the Eastern Maine General Hospital, where he soon succumbed. He received the homage due a hero and his name will hold an honored name among the firefighting heroes of all time.

While death stalked through the ruins, silent and grim, the fire continued its progress northward, taking the beautiful Third Congregational church and parsonage on French street and leaving only burning embers and smoking ruins of once beautiful and costly dwellings. Handsome residences, that had long been



CORNER OF STATE AND EXCHANGE STREETS

landmarks in Bangor, were demolished, and sad-eyed men, women and children wended their way to the homes of relatives. Many of these unfortunates had been rendered destitute by the fire and their courage in facing such a loss, without hardly a tear, is the sort of courage that has given to Bangor the name of the Queen City of the East.

The burning of the Federal building and the old Norumbega Hall, where in the halcyon days, of old, Barrett and the elder Booth delighted great audiences with Hamlet and Julius Caesar, can be replaced with better structures, but the traditions surrounding these old buildings can never be replaced. From Norumbega Hall the fire spread to other buildings on Central street, and the City Hall was threatened for a time, but the fire wall in the Bass building, erected about a year ago, checked the progress of the fire in that direction and the spectators breathed a sigh of relief.

In the residential district the fire was still raging and the firemen resorted to the use of dynamite in an endeavor to check the flames from spreading, but even this drastic measure proved fruitless and the march of destruction continued to Broadway Park. A crew of firemen had worked for hours on the burning First Congregational church on Broadway and they did succeed in holding it there, much to the pleasure of all. Had the fire gone across the street it is doubtful if much of the east side could have been saved.

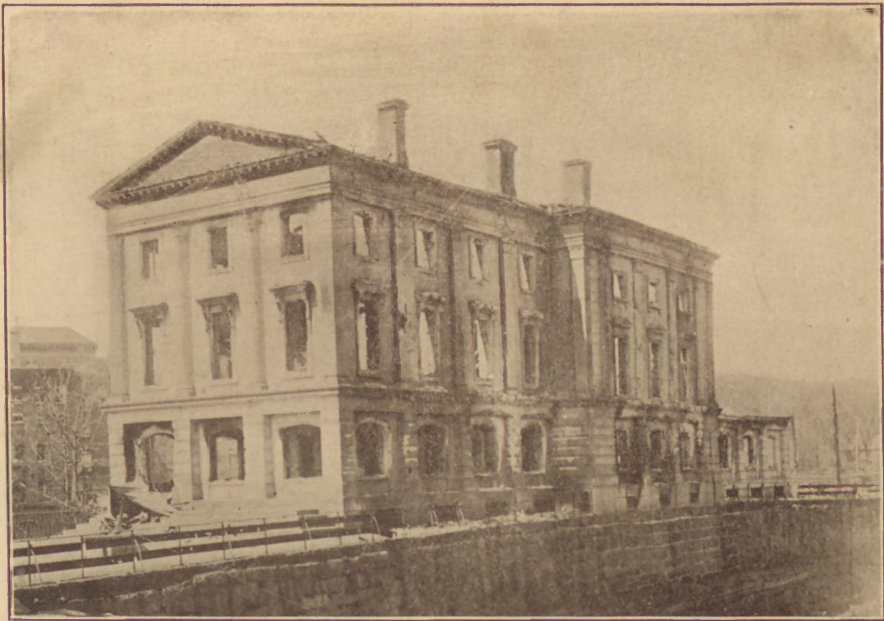
Towards morning a light drizzling rain commenced to fall, adding to the discomfort of those forced to remain at work. The city had been placed under martial law by Mayor Mullen and cadets from the University of Maine, Company G., N. G. S. M., and special patrolmen walked the streets. Newspapermen and some of the destitute victims of the fire were the only

ones that held forth in the gray dawn of the morning after the fire and many scenes of sadness were witnessed on nearly every corner. Every train on Monday brought its quota of sight-seers, but so thoroughly did the force under the command of Chief of Police Frank Davis work, that not one case of attempted looting was reported to the police authorities.

Order was soon restored, burned out business firms found new quarters and the business soon resumed its normal status. Many were the words of commendation showered upon Mayor Charles W. Mullen for his masterly handling of the city's affairs under the most trying circumstances. Fortunate indeed was Bangor to have such an executive in the crisis and his subordinates also came in for happy compliments. Chief W. S. Mason worked for days without sleep and food, and Police Chief Davis proved himself to be master of the situation at all times. It seemed that the right man was in the right place every time.

Expressions of sorrow and condolence accompanied by offers of aid were sent from every city in the east, but Bangor thanked these generous-hearted people and said that they could take care of the destitute alone. Hon. J. P. Bass was among the first to come forward with a donation of fifteen hundred dollars for the relief and from this beginning a fund aggregating over fifty thousand dollars was subscribed by citizens of Bangor and outside business men, who were intimately connected with the business life of Bangor. The insurance adjusters placed the loss at approximately three million dollars. This estimate does not include the heartaches and the loss to those who were left unemployed after the fire.

Governor Frederick W. Plaisted made a visit to Bangor Monday after the fire and offered state aid if it was necessary.



FEDERAL BUILDING TAKEN FROM STATE STREET

Chief Mullen of the Boston fire department also visited the city and aided materially with advice to Chief Mason of the local department.

Among the men whose names should not be forgotten on account of their unselfish financial aid and good advice are: John R. Graham, I. K. Stetson, Fred Ayer, J. P. Bass, Professor Robert Sprague, Dr. David Beach, D. D., Rev. P. J. Gerrity, Louis Kirstein, John Woodman, Ensign Armstrong of the Salvation Army and a number of others. The help rendered by these men cannot be estimated and their names will live as long as any can recollect the great conflagration.

Too much credit cannot be given to the firemen from Brewer, Old Town, Waterville, Augusta, Portland and Lewiston. Every man worked as though he were saving his own home from destruction and to their credit be it said that not one case of flinching from the work before them was recorded. The destruction of a large number of restaurants made it practically impossible for the men to get food but they worked none the less valiantly. The management of the Bangor House and the Elks Club put out hundreds of sandwiches and coffee to the hungry fire-fighters, free of charge, and for this they should be given the greatest credit.

Bangor Will Be Rebuilt

The ruined district will not remain in its present condition for any great length of time. Bangor enterprise is too well known to even suppose such a lamentable state of affairs and within the coming summer construction work will be commenced on nearly every burned building. The work of reconstructing the burned area will be under the supervision of an expert architect and when Bangor has finally recovered from the sad experience, it will be a city of beauty unequalled throughout the eastern states.

All honor to the men and women of Bangor, who make such a gigantic enterprise an assured fact, and may the coming generations give due credit to the valor and courage of the men of the Bangor of today. Let those who suffered the loss of homes and all, and the families of Messrs. Abbott and Scribner, who met the grim reaper, Death, in the midst of the fire, be consoled with the thought that those who bear the cross today will wear the crown tomorrow.



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RUINS OF BROADWAY



VIEW FROM FRANKLIN STREET

FOLLOWING IS A LIST OF THE NAMES OF THE FIRMS AND INDIVIDUALS WHO SUFFERED FINANCIAL LOSS IN THE FIRE:

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A. A. McCluskey
Collins Bros.
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D. W. Cutter
Union Fire Station
Chinese Laundry
W. H. Gorham
Holt & Kendall
Fred Bartlett
W. L. Eldridge
Phillip Coombs
Abbott Barber Shop
Largay Clothing Co.
Pearl & Dennett
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Abel Hunt
A. B. Haskell
Dr. E. B. Sawyer

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Edward F. Kane
H. E. Wentworth
Greek Shining Stand
Fletcher & Butterfield
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C. R. Lane
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Penobscot Garage
I. Bye

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John Frey
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Bangor Steam Laundry
George Wharff
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Penney Arcade
Singer Sewing Machine Co.
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John R. Graham
Mrs. Sarah W. Sargent

Charles Lord
Michael Murray
W. N. Brown
Bernard Pol
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Frank Murray
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Mrs. Henry Crossman
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Fred W. Ayer
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