

## Large Fire on the East Side of the Square in 1879

I've previously shared information in this column about several fires, but one of the largest in Monroe occurred on Thursday night, May 22, 1879 when the wooden buildings that occupied an eighth of the public square were destroyed. It was estimated to have been a \$40,000 loss and was only partially insured. Photos of similar buildings to those that were destroyed can be seen on the top of page 36 and the bottom of page 40 in the Pictorial History of Monroe.

At about eleven o'clock that night, the large three-story brick block, which was owned by John H. Bridge, was discovered to be on fire. It had been occupied by Bloom & Adams, hardware and implements, Edward Ruegger, groceries, and Mr. Fuellemann, jeweler. A short time after the alarm was given, hundreds of villagers were hastening to the scene. "The fire apparatus was on the grounds immediately, and soon got to work; but the bursting of the hose at a critical juncture compelled an abandonment at that point, where, at one time, it was thought the fire could be put out. The flames spread rapidly and the large brick block was doomed."



This stereoscopic photo shows men looking at the damage caused by a fire on the night of May 22, 1879. It destroyed all of the buildings on the south half of the east side of the Monroe square. The brick wall seen on the left, from the building that currently houses Bartels & Co. Tap and Sunrise Donut Cafe, stopped the fire from going any further. That is the oldest building on the east side of the square. Notice was made in the June 4 Sentinel that H. G. White was selling stereoscopic views of the burnt district for 25 cents.

Goods were taken out of the first floor of the building and piled pell-mell in the street, much in the way as was often done at fires. The hook and ladder and engine companies did what they could to prevent the spread of the fire. "A south wind was blowing briskly and the flames were carried into the adjoining buildings on the north, and baffled all attempts at staying its ravages. Thomm & Miller's meat market was licked up in short order, as was Rusch's tobacco store, then D. S. Young & Co's Grocery, and Adam Vogt's saloon, and Adam Schmidt's boot and shoe store took their regular turns in trying to satisfy

the fire king, who threatened at one time to take the whole east side. By indefatigable exertions on the part of a few men, Mack & McCracken's Warehouse, in the rear of Bridge's block was saved, and by that, the destruction of many other wooden structures including Scannel's shops, South's carriage works, and more were spared from the flames.

"The Sentinel Office and Foster's furniture store, and the row of wooden fire traps to the east were only spared by the winds, which blew steadily from the southeast."

They kept a constant stream of water upon the blaze until the fire was stopped at the walls of J. B. Treat's store. Men and women then took hold with a will and worked well and efficiently to save the goods that had been piled in the streets. "But hundreds of men stood with hands in pockets, looking like a set of darned fools, without lifting a hand to help at the fire or to save goods.

"To add to the confusion at one or two points, some very indiscreet persons peddled free whisky, which absolutely unfitted some of the firemen from filling important positions, and did what they could to transform good workers into a mob. Luckily this dangerous business was stopped pretty soon."

At daylight the next morning men were on the grounds cleaning up the remnants of goods and fixtures and housing them. The work of pulling down the dangerous walls continued all day.

The editor added, "A good steam fire engine with plenty of good hose would have saved enough property on this occasion to have paid for itself. It is a hard thing to get the average man to work on the brakes, and it was killing business trying to pump water up hill through 600 feet of hose hour after hour."

A man was seen carrying a double handful of tin baby rattles from Young & Co's down the street to the foundry and carefully depositing them. One stout fellow carried a box full of lamp chimneys across the street and then let them fall "so violently as to break everything to smash." Ladies distinguished themselves by doing "more efficient and preserving work" than many of the able-bodied men who were too selfish to work. The school teachers were especially brave.

There were fortunate people whose injuries could have been much worse. John Sissons was grabbed off the ground where he had fallen just in time to miss a falling timber. Hilmar Stephany had his plug hat mashed down on his head by a falling timber, and came very near losing his head. C. E. Adams came very near losing his right hand by having it wedged in between timbers, one of which had fallen edgewise over the other. A quick jerk saved it, "but the longest finger had its tip-end squeezed most unmercifully."

J. D. Bebee and son, Charles, were in the back part of their shoe shop when the walls of Bridge's block fell to the north. Some of the bricks fell within two feet of them. Mr. Bebee had just moved up from Jackson Street to Rusch's building when the fire overtook him.

Sheriff Morse came through Monticello when the blaze was at its height and was able to see the reflection distinctly; his road home was well lighted. Buildings five blocks west of the blaze were set on fire by the flying debris, and "required watchfulness and great exertions to keep them safe."

"The largest crowd that has assembled in Monroe for a long time came on Saturday. Many came to trade, some to see the burnt district, and a few to get drunk."

Individuals suffered severe loss in this fire, which was by far the greatest ever seen in Green County at the time. The interruption of business was also a great drawback to those enterprising firms. On the bright side, the editor stated, "the appearance of the town will be benefited in some respects, as no wooden buildings will be permitted again on the site of those burned up. Mechanics and other laborers will be put to work, and with the help of the Insurance Companies the burden of loss will be made bearable."