

Rebuilding the East Side of the Square after the 1879 Fire

The Sentinel was able to report much about the fire that burned half of the east side of the square in the May 28, 1879 issue since it had happened six days prior to the publication. That paper was able to share how quickly those who suffered losses were able to find a temporary place and also to make plans to build a new building.

Mr. Bloom took in the situation of affairs at midnight on the night of the fire and proceeded to rent a store in McKey's Block [on the corner where the Eugene Hotel once stood]. D. S. Young & Co. made plans to convert the little church on the corner [where Grace Lutheran now sits] into a place of business.

Peter Wells immediately had a force of men at work clearing away the debris from his lots and planned to begin to build soon after. Mr. Rusch intended to join in the building with a good two story block to go up as rapidly as practicable. Mr. J. H. Bridge planned to begin the erection of a two story block to take the place of the Empire building that had burned down. Mr. Bragg on his north side will join walls, and will also put up half of the wall on his north joining with Rusch.

Adam Schmidt had rented one side of Wettengel & Son's store in Stewart's block and planned to immediately add new goods direct from the manufacturer to those that he had saved from the fire.

Mr. Corson told the editor that he would build unless he sold his property sooner. He did not intend to stand in anybody's way of building. At the time of that paper the McCormick property was not for sale, and it was not known whether that place could be rebuilt at the time. If not, the editor mentioned that it might be boarded up in front and the boards used for circus bills, as they did it in Janesville, Milwaukee, and other towns after they had fires.

The above was all that the paper was able to report at the time of printing after interviewing the interested parties. "The persons who own the lots are not going to let their valuable property remain long unproductive. There are no better business locations in Monroe, and men stand ready to take out leases at fair rates, as soon as the buildings shall be ready to occupy."

At that time Carl Ruf had intended to put up a frame building and veneer it with brick, just north of Spangler's in what is now the 900-block of 17th Avenue, but was ordered to desist, on account of the lot being within the fire limit where stone, brick, and iron are to constitute the walls of all new buildings.

The village trustees had passed an ordinance in May 1874, which took effect as soon as it was published, that it was unlawful to erect any wooden building between 9th and 12th Streets and 15th and 18th Avenues. Anyone who "offended" this ordinance would be fined from \$50 to \$100 and have to pay all expenses that the village might incur to remove the structures.



This photo was printed on page 18 of the Monroe Area Pictorial History. It shows the buildings on the south half of the east side of the Monroe square that were built of brick within three months of the fire in May 1879. Except for the one on the south end that burned in January 1981, they are still standing and being used. The wooden buildings seen here were all replaced by brick blocks before 1900.

Another week after the fire (June 4) it was reported that there was a great demand for brick masons in Monroe. Bloom & Adams were getting the remnants of their iron goods from the fire out and there were piles of old and damaged iron being taken out of Bridge's corner.

Young & Co., who bought the property owned by Jesse Robertson on the northwest corner of the square and expected to have their fresh stock of groceries there, lost \$1,200 over and above their insurance and salvage. Mr. Ruegger's losses were about the same, on goods not mentioned in the policies, but destroyed nevertheless.

According to the Sentinel of June 11, John H. Bridge had let the contract of building his new block on the south end of the block [where the empty lots are now] to Jacob Steinman. It would be two stories of brick (36 feet) with an iron cornice and window caps. It would be 100 feet on the south side and 50 feet on the west. Peter Wells also hired Steinman to build a two story building about 30 feet high and 100 feet deep, also of brick with iron cornices. Rusch was only to build 60 feet back, but the same height and style front as Wells. Bragg would also build 60 feet deep and 32 feet high, the width of his lot, but was considering extending it to the alley.

By June 25, about 35 days after the fire, "The brick work is going forward on the new buildings on the burnt district."

Two weeks later the paper included, "Mr. A. Corson and Jno. McCormick will build a block together 70 feet deep and two stories high on the lots north of Well's block. That closes the gap entirely. Bully for Corson and McCormick."

"The Bridge block, Peter Well's, Rusch's and Bragg's Stores have been built up to the second floor and the joists are being placed to-day, ready for the next story. It is fun to see the masons chase the carpenters." They also reported a wage dispute that was quickly settled. "On Monday morning the laborers on Wells' new block refused to carry mortar and brick any longer for a dollar a day, and the brick masons were furious in their 'calls,' but no 'puts' were made for several minutes at least. It was soon ascertained that the bricks would be carried and the mortar hoisted when 25 cents more per day was considered as wages. The matter was talked over, and finally the strikers went to work with their wages increased. It was conceded that they worked better than they did for the former wages."