

OCCOQUAN VISITED BY SERIOUS FIRE

1916

Loss Between \$40,000 and \$50,000, and Many
Persons Are Homeless

Prisoners fight flames;
Alexandria sends aid

Church, Bank Building, Manufacturing Plant,
Stores and Residences Destroyed.

From a Staff Correspondent of the Star.

1916) OCCOQUAN, Va., August 26. - Between forty and fifty residents of Occoquan last night slept in the homes of friends or in the Odd Fellows' Hall here as the result of a disastrous fire which swept away their homes and other property in the afternoon. The loss is between \$40,000 and \$50,000, thousand.

The fire originated about 2:30 o'clock from an unknown cause in the rear part of the home of Mrs. J. Hood Weedon on Mills street, the principal thoroughfare of this little town. By the time the flames were discovered by Mrs. Weedon, who had gone to the front porch of her home a few minutes before, they had gained considerable headway. The cries of Mrs. Weedon were heard by neighbors and soon an alarm was sounding throughout the village calling for help. A bucket brigade was formed. Water was taken from nearby wells and also from Occoquan creek, on which the town lies. The fire-fighters, however, were unable to do much good against the flames, which were fanned by a strong wind. Although Mrs. Weedon's home, formerly the Alton Hotel, was built of brick, it was soon a mass of ruins.

Bank Building Burned

With the outbreak of the fire James Barbee, cashier of the Bank of Occoquan, which adjoined the hotel, placed all of the money and papers in the large vault, and then went to join the fire fighters in their efforts to keep the fire from spreading to the bank building. Their efforts, however, were without avail, as the roof of the building was soon a mass of flames, and in a few minutes the interior of the institution was wiped out. It was said the money and papers in the vault were believed safe.

The fire spread northward, and soon the general merchandise store and dwelling of W.S. Lynn went up in smoke. About the time this building caught fire Ralph Whitaker, son of W.H. Whitaker, superintendent of the District workhouse, across the creek heard of the fire and dispatched the chemical engine, stationed at the institution, to the scene. For a time the volunteer firemen used the chemicals to advantage, but the wind shifted the flames toward the rear, and soon the dwellings and the Occoquan M. E. Church South were on fire.

Prisoners Render Aid

In connection with the sending of the fire apparatus to Occoquan, Mr. Whitaker with several guards, took seventy-five prisoners from the workhouse to the scene, and they worked diligently in carrying furniture, clothing and other property from threatened buildings. They also formed bucket brigades.

After the flames had destroyed the Lynn store and residence they burned through the residence of Oliver Underwood and then jumped across an alleyway and destroyed the home of Wade H. Hammill.

Calls for help were telephoned to nearby towns, and an effort was made to reach Alexandria by telephone to ask that fire apparatus be sent. Communication however, with that place could not be had, and a telephone message was sent to the Washington Star asking that the fire department of Alexandria be notified. It was on the message sent from The Star that the big motor fire engine of that town was dispatched to the scene. The run of fifteen miles over a road which is bad in spots was made in forty-three minutes.

When the fire apparatus, in charge of Capt. Henry Beach, pulled into the town, he said later, it looked as if the entire place would soon go up in flames. The motor engine was backed up to Occoquan creek and residents assisted the firemen in carrying the hose several hundred yards and soon water was being thrown, but not before the fire had jumped across the street and destroyed the plant of the Viadex Manufacturing Company, a dwelling occupied by Walter Neal and the ice house

of Dr. Frank Hornbaker.

Aided by Shifting Wind

It was but a short time later that the firemen succeeded in checking the fire in the northward spread. The wind, which had shifted, also aided the firemen, as the flames were kept away from a number of buildings. Telephone wires and brick walls of some of the buildings began to fall while the firemen were working nearby and for a time menaced them. When it was seen that there was but little chance of saving the church and property on Commerce street articles of furniture were removed to places of safety.

It was not until the church and several residences on Commerce street had been burned down that the fire was actually under control. It was about 6 o'clock last evening before the danger of the flames spreading was passed. The firemen and residents, as bucket brigades, worked long into the night putting out the smoldering flames in the burned buildings.

No one was injured during the fire, although after the flames had wiped out the places on Mills street several venturesome ones had narrow escapes from falling walls. As soon as it was seen that the fire was under control, preparations were being made by the more fortunate residents to care for those whose property had been destroyed. The Odd Fellows Hall was thrown open and several families spent the night there, while others were taken into the homes of friends.

Origin of Fire Unknown

Mrs. Weedon, in whose home the fire originated, is the mother of Miss Virginia Weedon, a patient at a Washington hospital, who was scalped recently when her hair became entangled in the shaft of a motor boat after she had been rescued from drowning. A report was spread that the fire started from a gasoline stove, but this was denied by Mrs. Weedon, who said she had not been using such a stove. Persons who reached the scene shortly after the fire had been discovered expressed their opinion that the flames were of spontaneous combustion, as they appeared

to have started under the flooring in the rear of the house.

Occoquan was built in 1730. It was here that George Washington Traded during his residence at Mount Vernon.

C.A.L.

From Lorraine Musselman of Occoquan (lives on
Commerce St.)

May 2002

Given to Scott Parham, Volunteer at PWC Courthouse/Archives

Mr. Parham gave copy to RELIC.