

Greetings,

I had read a little bit about the Great St. Augustine Fire of 1887 and have seen pictures of what remained at the sacred St. Augustine Cathedral—they are vivid and sad. Dr. Parker's 2019 article in the St. Augustine Record triggered my research toward other newspapers.

The newspaper article below by Dorothy Lundt on the Great Fire has been in my files for several years, but I never took the time to truly read it—I mean *truly* read it. Today, I took the time and have read it three times. Each read brings out the depth of her writing and sheds light on issues that were controversial during this time period.

One of her sentences that struck me deeply was when volunteers were passing buckets of water to quench the fire. She wrote: "*A noble chain, whereof the links are black hands, brown hands, white hands, as negro, Mexican and pale-faced Northerner work side by side in brave and faithful fellowship.*" It's a powerful reminder that when we set aside prejudice, we can come together in true solidarity—working alongside one another as sisters and brothers, regardless of the color of our skin.

Her words don't just describe what happened—they bring it to life. With each sentence, she paints images so vivid and heartfelt that you can almost feel the heat of the fire, hear the chaos in the streets, and sense the courage and sorrow in every corner of the city. I hope readers enjoy her words as much as I have.

In the final analysis, two major hotels were destroyed, and the Cathedral was badly damaged. The emotional stress was palpable. The church served as a barrier to the spread of the fire because of where it was and how it was built with big coquina stones.

She refers to the "*lower classes of St. Augustine had always bitterly opposed the introduction of a fire-engine within her limits, on the ground that if an engine came into the city a fire would come.*" Sure enough, not long after the fire engines arrived, they suffered through the Great Fire.

Her words about the Apache prisoners are profound, dispelling misinformation that surrounds much of the real history and nature of Native American tribes. Her account of the only death, Bridgett Barry,— "*the head laundress of the St. Augustine Hotel*" —is especially poignant.

If you have time, I hope you read about our wonderful city and where much of its strength and endurance comes from.

Bob Jones

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“BOSTON EVENING TRANSCRIPT

Tuesday, April 19, 1887.

THE GREAT FLORIDA FIRE.

ST. AUGUSTINE'S CALAMITY—WHAT IS GONE AND WHAT LEFT.

It is one of those curious justifications of the post hoc ergo propter hoc reasoning—*“after this, therefore because of this”*—from which, and by which, superstition is born and nourished, that the lower classes of St. Augustine have always bitterly opposed the introduction of a fire-engine within her limits, on the ground that if an engine came into the city a fire would come; and a short time ago the engine came; and night before last the fire came, to the inexpressible sorrow of all who love and honor the venerable landmarks so identified with the city from its earliest history. St. Augustine without its cathedral, St. Augustine without its slave market, are pictures beyond imagination; and yet the southern sunshine of old times of old has shone so tenderly upon them, shines today, where the slave market stood, but rows of pillars, pointing to ruin in their ordered desolation, certain pillars in the Roman Forum; while the cathedral, unroofed, doorless, windowless, smoke-bleached, railed from all approach by ropes placarded with warnings of its insecurity, stands tottering to its fall. A sight with a heartache in it.

We were startled from that heavy sleep which deadens all one's senses through the dark hours before the dawn by the hoarse shout, immensely terrifying from its unfamiliarity to this old city, which is at night the very City of Silence, of: “Fire! Fire!”

A moment later our eyes confirmed the fright our ears had given us. Over behind the dark outlines of the Hotel St. George, in many of whose windows awakened lights were already glancing, a wide column of fire was raging skyward, the smoke and reek of it blotting out the stars, while a dense rain of fiery sparks was borne on the freshening wind directly toward and over us. There was time for but few words. “’Tis St. Augustine Hotel?” Unquestionably from its situation, nearness and the magnitude of the fire, the St. Augustine Hotel. And even in our own confusion, fright and danger, we could but pause to give a thought to the pity of it. The St. Augustine Hotel, with its many guests, its many floors, its wooden walls and too narrow corridors—will everyone be awakened in time? Will no one lose his way in that maze of smoke-darkened passages, and—ah, no, no! Not with such a moon above, with such a calm sea pulsing on the shore, such sweet airs breathing in—such a night no such horror could come! “Chances of saving our own (hired for two seasons) house?” Nil! If the wind continues in its present quarter, for the roof is so steep, wide, and many-gabled, that ten men could not protect it by sea, nothing of there being no ladder on the premises, and our sole means of transporting water one impossibly small pail. So there is nothing for it but trunks and boxes, and a hasty slinging together of clothing and books, rugs and horse-hair and bric-a-brac. Outside the hubbub of the excited city, with its wild babel, the tranquil night air. Myriads of feet go pattering and pounding down the sandy street. Agitated questions and speculations are shouted from house to house. Now and then there is the skewing crash of a falling beam, down yonder where the glow is reddest; sickening when one fancies on what it may have fallen. Bells of the grave

and sweet chiming by the cathedral bells of the pealed hours of service. There is a wild and horrible din, too, of hoarse noise from the “fire tower,” as if its harsh mouth had gone mad in its grief. Oh, for those sweet cathedral bells that shall ring once again to praise and pray—from that quaint belfry nevermore.

Our hurried work is almost done. It remains only to lock the trunks and strain, on the veranda, under the library windows, great boxes into which, if need comes, the bulk of the books may hastily be thrown. There is a knocking at the door; and though it is so sound naturally enough to be expected at a time like this, it gives a tinge to overwired nerves. Somebody suggests to the head of the house that his attire—a Tam o’ Shanter and the pair of overalls purchased when his last “position” of gardening “came upon him”—is not all that could be expected even by nocturnal visitors, and he turns up stairs to re-conventionalize. Our visitors prove to be guests from the Hotel St. George, come to ask shelter under a roof scarcely less in peril than their own. We stand together on the veranda, chatting in that sense of familiar acquaintanceship which danger brings.

I note—and forever be it noted, toward offsetting the many accounts of women’s eccentric dressing when excited or hurried—that the young ladies of the party are habited to a pin’s point, up to the last requirement of decorum and grace; and the youngest of them has even a knot of roses, caught doubtless, in passing, from some table vase, nodding from her belt. “What odd things people will say at such times,” laughs she of the roses. “Did you hear?” when someone said the cathedral was probably doomed, exclaim, “Well, thank heaven I sketched it yesterday!” as if after that there could be nothing to regret. “Yes,” chimes in another, “and wasn’t it perfectly maddening to see Mrs. — sitting in the middle of the drawing-room, peacefully rocking and saying in her pious way, ‘The Lord won’t suffer us to burn.’” “As if the people at the St. Augustine were all tower of Siloamites, and no one could wonder at their being burned out of house and home!”

A moment later there is a chorus of “Oh!” and a disposition toward flight on the part of our group, as a cortege of slow-stepping men comes silently down the street, bearing on an improvised litter something lying awfully still and straight, partially covered by a linen cloth. But with fire-glow and moonlight the street is light as day, and horrified sympathy gives way to amused curiosity as we learn that the prostrate figure so reverently borne is none other than St. Augustine himself—St. Augustine, who for untold years has stood, the city’s patron image, above the high altar, but now, uncrowned, dethroned, his saintly robes of purple and crimson all fouled with smoke and the dust of scuffling feet, is being borne to refuge at the Convent of St. Joseph, just over the way. The bishop’s mansion, as well as the cathedral, evidently thought to be in peril, for, following close on the bearers of St. Augustine, come troops of young girls, convent pupils, bearing pictures and books from the bishop’s library; unwatched and unrebuked they are making gently merry over their novel task, and their young laughter sounds strange, yet most sweet and wholesome, in the tumult and terror that seem to flood the world like a sea.

Presently the master of the house comes down stairs, clothed anew in conventional garments and tranquility of mind. He assures us that we are, for the moment, out of danger; the wind has veered, and the fire is sweeping directly away from us. It is north—*over* St. George's street and Charlotte street and Baya street—which must look to themselves now; southern St. George street may draw its breath, with but the uncertain sense of reprieve. It is suggested that the fire may sweep up Baya street to Fort Marion, ...and necessitate the loosing of the Apache prisoners. A ripple of consternation goes through the little group of our visitors. "Who knows what dreadful things the Indians *might* do on such a night as this?" they cry. "The Apaches?" I answer. Those peaceful creatures whom, no later than Saturday afternoon, I saw at a garden-party given in their honor, dressed in seersucker coats and pork-pie hats trimmed with flowers, and singing a Sunday-school hymn—No. — in answer to a perceptible retirement from my vicinity—*my* mind is not unhinged by tonight's excitement. I really did see them under just those circumstances, and I will tell you all about it if ever the world gets quiet and sane again.

We began to realize, after a time, that we were seeing nothing of the hottest of the fight, and leaving our house in charge of our guests of half an hour, we made our way to the plaza. There was nothing real or familiar in the world around us. The very lights by which the strangeness was made visible were like the impossibly mingled lights of a dream. The lurid fire-glow; the ghostly pallor of the moonlight; the dawn, that in the eastern sky above the river was slowly waking, in a soft glory of rose and pearl. Its very freshness, its very beauty, seemed a cruelty; like a fair, indifferent face looking coldly on the fear and tumult and struggle of the most unhappy world. The pure breath of the dawn-wind lost itself and died in the thick and sickening reek of the burning. We turn the corner of St. George street and we are face to face with desolation. The St. Augustine is a level, smouldering ruin; the slave-market is blazing; Charlotte street on both sides is gone—we cannot see for how much of its length. Baya street opposite the sea wall is gone also. The sea wall itself is piled high with salvage from dismantled shops and houses, and stands a grim silhouette against the kindling east. An old man sits erect upon the wall, bare-headed, disheveled, revolver in hand, keeping watch over the goods heaped at his feet. There are safer neighborhoods, just now, for those sneak-thieves who spring, like maggots, from the hot ashes of a lost cause, than in front of that old man's pistol.

Flocks of birds, roused from their sleep in old, palm-shadowed gardens, are circling all night through the clouds of smoke and the rain of sparks and soot. As I raise my head the better to watch them, I become conscious of an agonizing wrench in the region of my scalp, which had apparently been lifted off bodily. I begin to regret my recent trustful judgment of the Apaches as premature, when I discover that a smoky individual, facing me in the press, is offering me my own hat, the rim of which is in a light blaze. "Saw a spark kindle you up, and thought you wouldn't like to burn," he says, in good-natured explanation. I mingle with my thanks a last suggestion that before removing a lady's hat it is well to remove the hat-pin; but the crowd moves us apart, and I fear he is none the wiser.

We hear, as we struggle on, fragments of personal experience, droll or thrilling, recited by many a wandering voice. "Saw such a funny thing this morning," one says, "a man was going along with a bucket of water, and when the sparks that he spoke of hit about a spoonful of water, he'd chuck a spark, and stopping just long enough to see one go out before he went on to the next. Suppose he thought he was saving the town!"

"Can you tell me something absurd," comes from another direction. "He was hurrying down stairs, at the St. Augustine, when he came across a stout old gentleman bumping with unnecessary heavy trunk from stair to stair, and waiting between every bump. 'For heaven's sake, will no one go up to my room and save my brother!'" one told me that he would take charge of the trunk, and suggested that the old gentleman attend personally to the minor matter of rescuing his relative.

We were still laughing at this, when a surging apart of the crowd gave us for the first time a near view of the cathedral. And the laughter died. We realized in that look what we had already heard many times repeated, that the old cathedral, though itself sacrificed, would check the fire at this point of its course. The sturdy old coquina walls would retain the flames within themselves sufficiently long to enable all communication between the church and the bishop's mansion to be cut away, and so leave a vacant space on which the issuing fire might spend itself harmlessly. The cathedral that had striven, after its own fashion, for a hundred years, to serve the city, now was to save the city indeed, and give its own life a ransom for many. Nearer, as we looked, long, fiery hands of flame were clutching at the belfry, as if they would, with supple, mocking fingers, ring the knell of the grand old church on its own beloved bells. But still the church stood firm, and the barrier of its "Thus far and no farther" the mocking fire might not gainsay. The heart must have been dull, indeed, which could not feel the great and deep pathos of that sight. The last sermon of the old cathedral was its greatest; and he that filled it last themselves wrote its text, "I have built my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

Scant time for gazing or for thought! We were swept onward by the crowd past the bishop's mansion, down St. George street, to where, across the drenched and smoking southern veranda of the Florida House, we could catch glimpses of what that other wonder, in United States uniform, is calling "the key of the situation"—the tiny house on the northern corner of Charlotte and Treasury streets, which, if they can save, they have saved the Florida House and all that lies beyond it. A terrible fight, and fought with a pluck that rises to the heroic, when we remember that the fighters are no trained, seasoned and salaried firemen, but a volunteer band, all new to the work and hitherto untested. On one side of Treasury street—the narrowest street in St. Augustine, scarcely more than fourteen feet wide—blazing houses in swaying to its fall; on the other hand, the tiny cottage, to lose which is to lose everything, is already smoking in a score of places. How they work, those fine fellows, in a heat little short of infernal; such a heat that the blankets hung from the Florida House balconies, and drenched but a moment ago, are scorching brown; such a heat that the pitch is oozing in great drops from the pine pails which are passing

from hand to hand. The brave little engine is doing its best, but its best is in sore need of supplement from the water-buckets which a chain of men are passing from the nearest cistern. A noble chain, whereof the links are black hands, brown hands, white hands, as negro, Mexican and pale-faced Northerner work side by side in brave and faithful fellowship!

With the aid of the volunteer force from the garrison, who from the first “fire call” of their bugles had been on the ground, rendering constant and invaluable help, chains were put around the burning buildings, and how could flesh and blood bear that fiery ordeal—which in mighty strain its hewing walls be drawn down and inward, away from the threatened cottage on the other side of the tunnel-like street. That was the turning point of the battle, though it raged for hours after. And when the sun came up, a ball of crimson fire, made awful and strange by the continual flickering across it of tongues of heated air, it looked down upon a weary city, saved at one limit of its besiegement by noble human endeavor, and at the other limit by the grand old church which had—of heated air, it looked down upon a weary city, saved at one limit of its besiegement by noble human endeavor, and at the other limit by the grand old church which has.....stood to St. Augustine for a hundred years as the symbol of the best inspiration of human endeavor.

As we were making our wearied way homeward a man went galloping past us as one who rides for life or death, clutching in his grasp one small blue-glass hand grenade. The head of the house, his sense of humor strong in exhaustion, gazed after him with appreciative enjoyment. “This city is now indeed safe!” he said; “and I think we may go home and take a nap.”

It is a remarkable fact that in a fire destroying two hotels and seriously threatening two others, and occurring at night in a city wholly unused to such casualty, not a single human life should have been lost. The head laundress of the St. Augustine, after being guided safely from the burning building, plunged back into it again in search of her trunk. It was pitiful to see, when the next day her charred remains were taken from the ruins, the women who had been her fellow workers stand sobbing by the barrier, and to hear them say, “Ah! we wouldn’t, sure, have minded losing everything we’ve got in the world, if only she—poor thing!—could have been here safe with us this day.”

—Dorothy Lundt



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