



History of

1910 Good Friday Fire

By Jack Hauck, May 2013



The fire left a trail three quarters of a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide. Photo, Hamilton Historical Society

1910 Good Friday Fire

Hamilton's first great fire, "the Good Friday fire," of Mar. 25, 1910, destroyed just about every structure in the area of Mill/Willow/Asbury/Main streets. Also consumed were trees, shrubs and vehicles. The fire raged on for over 5 hours. Leaving the area a heap of ruins, lit by the glare of sporadic grass fires.¹

The fire was not limited to the Hamilton center. Embers, carried by strong winds, set fire to and destroyed ice houses alongside Chebacco Lake, in Essex, a mile away, and burned a path 2 miles long through timberland and endangered Essex center.¹

In Hamilton, 25 buildings, including homes and businesses, burned.^{2,5}

The fire began a little after noon time in what was thought to have been a defective chimney on a Mill Street house, near Union Street. Owned by George M. Adams, was it was occupied by the Charles E. Dodge family.¹

At the time, Mrs. Dodge was caring for her sick baby. Her husband was in Boston. They were in a second floor bedroom, when she heard a crackling sound and smelled smoke. She went to the kitchen where she saw smoke coming through the wall. She ran upstairs. Clutching her baby, ran down the stairs, calling out to her other children. She quickly led her children outside.⁷ Flames were coming out around the sides of the chimney.

A hastily organized bucket brigade of men, women and children initially fought the flames.

The first fire-fighting equipment to arrive were Hamilton's single-tank pumper and two hosecarts, bringing chemical extinguishers, hooks and ladders from the west district schoolhouse, on Highland Street, just beyond Winthrop Street.^{2,7}

The small force of local firefighters was inadequate.

The Hamilton telephone exchange, on Railroad Avenue, under the direction of Jetta Roberts, chief operator, sent out calls to other towns for help.¹

Horse-drawn steamer pumpers were sent from Beverly, Salem, Rowley and Ipswich. Each town also sent 20 men. The Ipswich and the Beverly steamers came by street. The Salem engine, sent on a special railroad flatcar, did not arrive until 3 o'clock.²

Unfortunately, when the special train arrived in Hamilton, it ran over fire hoses stretched across the tracks, cutting the hoses that were carrying water to firemen fighting the fire.⁷

At the Wenham line, the Wenham hand-tub "Phoenix" and its crew pumped water from a nearby well to save the homes.² Hamilton had no public water supply; water came from nearby resident wells.¹

The fire was beyond control. Building after building ignited. The flames spread so quickly from house to house that the occupants had little time to escape, leaving all their goods behind.²

Phil Scully and John F. Morrow's blacksmith shop, on the corner of Mill and Union streets.² Across from their shop was a large open lot, next to Alden J. Chandler's shop that the fire fighters hoped would act as a break to keep the fire from spreading to the north.²

A vacant building, on Mill Street, owned by George Adams and an adjoining paint shop owned by E. A. Lane, were saved by covering the roofs with sail cloths which were kept wet by a bucket brigade.³

The winds were too strong. Embers were swept northeastward for nearly a mile, burning through the Willow-Asbury-Main Street area.¹

The house and barns, as well as the Endcliffe kennels and animal hospital of George S. Thomas, on Asbury Street at the corner of Willow Street, burned to the ground. Thomas, a well known dog breeder, saved all his dogs except for one, a valuable Boston Bull. This was the only fatality from the fire. Family heirlooms and jewelry, belonging to Mrs. Thomas were lost.²

The wind carried sparks to the house owned by George H. Gibney on Asbury Street, across from Thomas' kennels and home.²

On Willow Street, north of Railroad Avenue, the fire consumed Mrs. Harriet (*Hattie*) Pearson's house. Also on Willow Street, the fire destroyed the Shamrock Hall, a two and a half story building, erected by George C. Creamer. The Hall, on Willow Street, was where the Ancient Order of Hibernians met and dances were often held.¹

Elbridge D. Lovett's steam laundry, a forty by one hundred and twenty foot building, a story and a half high, on Willow Street was quickly consumed by the fire as

was the Lovett house, next door. The laundry business had been sold and the owner was to have taken over the next day.⁹

One of the biggest and longest lasting blazes was on Willow Street, beside the B&M railroad tracks. Timothy Moynihan's storehouses for coal, grain, and hay, and his dwelling remained burning until the evening. About 3,000 tons of coal burned through the night and next day.²

Air-borne sparks set fire to the roof of the home of Mrs. Samuel E. Thayer, Main Street at the corner of Asbury Street, and it was destroyed.²

Airborne sparks set fire to the roof of the home of widow Mary Thayer, on Main Street at the corner of Asbury Street: it was destroyed. Her husband, Dr. Samuel Thayer, had been Hamilton's doctor for many years.⁵

The site remained empty until 1921, when Emily and George Mandell had the Hamilton-Wenham Community Center built there, in memory of their son, Samuel, and 8 other men from the Hamilton-Wenham area who fought in WW1.⁵

On Main Street, the fire destroyed the houses in the area that now is Winthrop elementary school.²

The flames skirted many of the summer cottages on Asbury Street, but not the summer residence of Dr. Orrin and Mary Jane Cilley, of Boston, which was across from the entrance to the Myopia Hunt Club. Fire also destroyed Mrs. B. A. Pierson's house, near the Cilley estate.⁵

A story goes that the Cilley's were away watching the burning of other houses, not knowing that at the time that their home was in flames.⁷ (*The Cilleys moved to Miles River Rd. following the fire.*)

The Ipswich pumper was the first to reach the ruins of Dr. Cilley's residence. The pumper drew from a rain-water pond at the end of what now is Cummings Avenue. This was the only supply available.^{2, 7} The Beverly engine, on its arrival, took up its station at the same spot, the two working side by side all afternoon.²



Many people came to see what remained of Hamilton's business center.
Photo, Hamilton Historical Society



Fire swept down Willow Street destroying all in its path, including the Shamrock Hall, shown at left.
Photo, Hamilton Historical Society

After the fire, Myopia Hunt Club bought the Cilley estate and donated part of it to the town to be a park, now Patton Park.⁵

The fire threatened the Myopia Hunt Club, but there was no damage to its structures. However, Miles River Farm had extensive damage.⁵

The Eastern division of the Boston and Maine Railroad ran through the center of the burned district. Fire destroyed the telegraph poles alongside the railroad tracks, as well as the flag-shed and crossing gates that crossed the tracks at Asbury street.²

Electric streetcar service to Asbury Grove was held up by the falling and grounding of power lines. Telegraph and telephone wires also went down.²

In its path along Main Street, the fire destroyed everything, except for Jack Brown's house at 351 Main St. (*built in 1850*). Embers landed on the roof, but Brown and others kept the roof from catching afire. His barns were destroyed, in one of which several pigs died. Today, this area is where 343 to 351 Main Street houses are.⁷

At the Brown property, the Wenham hand-tub "Phoenix" and its crew pumped water from a nearby flooded field onto the roof of the Brown house.⁹

Another major source of water was the skating pond alongside Main Street (*now on Patton Park*).

As evening approached, the fire burned itself out, in the grass beside Charles S. Gwinn's house (*built in 1890*), at 479 Main St.¹

That night, the fire had left a trail of smoldering embers, three quarters of a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide, covering about 50 acres. The damage extended from Hamilton's business section through its residential and summer cottage sections to the Wenham line. The fire was, up to that time, the most disastrous fire in Essex county's history.*²

Some reports from the time said as many as a hundred people in Hamilton became homeless. They were cared

for by neighbors. Owners of most of the burned buildings carried some property insurance.^{2, 7} The property loss was estimated to be between \$75,000 and \$100,000.²

While lacking in firefighting equipment, Hamilton was not lacking in volunteers to fight the fire. Men women, children used brooms and boards in their attempts to extinguish fires. Long bucket-brigade lines were formed in many different places.¹¹

One of those children to help fight the 1910 fire was Merrill Cummings, then a teenager. Seventeen years later, he would be Hamilton's fire chief, and would lead efforts to extinguish the 1927 fire at Asbury Grove.¹¹

In 1910, the town spent \$1,058.69 for firefighting, an amount well above the \$400 that had been budgeted.⁸

The Salem News reported that a prominent Hamilton citizen said, "Our towns have over \$4 million of buildings. Isn't time for Wenham and Hamilton to take some steps to securing a water supply and some fire-protective equipment?"⁹

Essex damage

Citizens of Essex also had fire troubles. The embers from Hamilton, whirled in upon the town by the stiff March gale, set fire to the icehouses on the shores of Lake Chebacco.

Five of the icehouses were owned by Charles Sears, and the others by Enoch Storey. The loss of the former was put at \$50,000 and Storey's at nearly \$10,000. Damage to the timber land will bring the total loss to \$75,000.³

The Salem engine, without having been taken from its special train, was sent on over to Essex.²

* The Great Salem Fire of 1914 burned 253 acres and 1,376 buildings, covering an area 1-1/2 miles long by 1/2 mile wide and resulted in almost 20,000 people homeless and 10,000 out of work. On Mother's Day 1927, there was a huge fire, at Asbury Grove. The fire, which destroyed 125 cottages, and many of the pine trees, stretched from from Asbury Street across the Grove to Highland Street.



As seen from the back of George Gibney's house on Asbury Street, the fire left only chimneys standing. Photo, Hamilton Historical Society



In its path along Main Street, the fire destroyed everything, except for Jack Brown's house at 351 Main St. (*built in 1850*). Photo, Hamilton Historical Society



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The special was the only train to pass over the line in three hours, all traffic over the main way between Newburyport and Salem being held up by the fire.²

* On its arrival in Essex, the Salem steamer was run to the shores of Lake Chebacco, near the burning icehouse. In trying to move it to the shore, in order that it might pump water from the lake, the wheels became mired to the hubs, stalling it and putting it effectually out of commission.²

From the ice houses the flames spread northeast through the woodland for two miles and threatened to wipe out Essex Center. The fire was halted at the edge of the village.²

Backfiring was then resorted to by the firemen to save the summer camps along the shore, most of which belong to Boston and Salem people.²

All efforts to save the ice houses proved futile, after the miring of the Salem steamer, and though the backfiring tactics adopted by the firemen saved the summer camps, the flames spread to surrounding trees, and after that the flames marched steadily forward.²

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