

The Great Santa Cruz Fire of 1894

By Pamela Reynolds

On Saturday night, April 14th, 1894, fire ripped nearly unchecked through part of downtown Santa Cruz, and frantic citizens found they could do little more than haul as many possessions as they could carry to safety.

That afternoon a main water gate at the reservoir had burst. The water supply to much of the downtown had been cut off while repairs were being made. When the fire bell rang at 10:30 p.m., the many volunteer fire fighters found themselves nearly helpless. The fire began in the rear of Finkeldey's Store, in the Rice Building; coal oil was later found in boxes at the rear of the building, leading to suspicions of arson. The entire block bounded by Pacific Avenue, Cooper and Front Streets was destroyed. Only the fact that the Hihn building had its own water supply saved the west side of Pacific Avenue. Sentinel Printers managed to put out a fire in a wooden building at the rear of Thompson & Hammer Hardware, or else the fire would have spread to the block bounded by Pacific, Locust and Church Streets.

Destroyed in the fire were: the Courthouse, the Eagle stable, and the Hoataling, Staller, Vahlberg, Pilot, Leonard, Werner, Simpson, Rice, Garibaldi, and Wente Buildings. The Pease Building was badly damaged, and the Sentinel Building had a very close call, sustaining many broken windows from the heat. Chinatown was completely destroyed, and after the fire many local citizens clamored for it not to be rebuilt downtown.

The water supply was restored shortly after midnight, and the fire was under control within just a few hours afterward. One hundred and fifty men came out from Watsonville on a special train trip to help combat the fire, but they, along with reinforcements from San Jose, arrived when the fire was almost totally contained.

This photograph shows the aftermath of the fire. The street you see is Pacific Avenue. Running parallel to it, on the other side of the rubble and burned-out buildings, is Front Street. The structure to the middle right with the rounded top is the vault of the Santa Cruz City Bank. Photo from the Library's collection.



Santa Cruz had, at this time, been extremely proud of its modern and extensive water supply, considering it an almost perfect fire fighting system. However, after this event, a cry went up for the purchase of engines and the improvement of the local fire department. By 1896, the greatly improved fire department was housed in the most modern of facilities, located on Church Street and built especially for that purpose. It shared the building with the Big Creek Electric Power Company offices, and the Pilot Club, a sort of volunteer fire hose brigade and social club formed in 1880. The city also extended its limitations on wooden buildings in the downtown area.

Many of the victims of the fire were tremendously under-insured, resulting in what the April 15, 1894 *Santa Cruz Sentinel* called "The Costliest Blaze in the History of the City."

Sources

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