

HARRODSBURG CONFLAGRATIONS OF 1928: THE CONCLUSION

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Contributing Writer

Research always leads to more research. When one question is answered, three more questions present themselves. That's the fun—and the challenge—of research. Learning something new and sharing that information with others who might be interested, even passively, are the rewards.

During our study of the devastating fires in 1928 that destroyed the State Bank & Trust building, Ballard Store and the Mercer County Courthouse, all of which were located on Main Street in Harrodsburg, we discovered another "conflagration" had occurred in 1890 that nearly destroyed the downtown area. The town also witnessed the power of prayer during that fire.

A newspaper story, dated April 25, 1890, reads as follows:

**HARRODSBURG FIRE
A TERRIBLE
CONFLAGRATION
DESTROYS MANY
BUILDINGS & ENTAILS
HEAVY LOSS
\$168,000 WORTH OF
PROPERTY DESTROYED –
INSURANCE \$51,900
A FULL REPORT**

"Sunday night just as the services had been concluded at the various churches and the congregations were wending their way homeward, the citizens of Harrodsburg were startled by the dreadful cry of fire and, soon after, the loud call of the fire bells gave warning of an impending conflagration. The flames were soon located at the Opera House, owned by Mrs. L.D. Cardwell. Before the people had time to reach the scene and prepare for battle, the flames burst out in majestic defiance and started on their course of destruction.

"The Opera House succumbed to the devouring element and Chenoweth Hall shared the same fate. The flames then fell upon Matheny & Poteet's dry goods store, consuming their immense stock with wonderful rapidity and leaving the building a mass of ruins.

"The news store and confectionery store of H.C. Wood was in the next building attacked, as was the U.S. Express Company's office. The fire destroyed the building and contents.

"Wilson & Powell's storeroom proved a barrier to the further progress of the flames in this direction.

"North of and adjoining the Opera House was the Central Saloon owned by Mr. Bottoms. This building was not proof against the fierce onslaught of the terrible element and was soon destroyed.

"The handsome structure occupied by Hansford, James & Co., the finest building in the town, was the next to fall a victim to what it was evident now would be a repetition of Harrodsburg's terrible visitation of a few years ago, when the town was almost laid waste by a destructive conflagration.

"Hansford, James & Co. lost their entire stock of valuable goods, while the building, owned by the Litsey heirs, is now in ruins. A vacant building adjoining, owned also by the Litsey heirs, met the fate of its neighbor.

"The next to succumb was the corner building occupied on the first floor by Smith & Witherspoon as a drug store and the floors above by the I.O.O.F. The paraphernalia of both a white and [African American] lodge were in these apartments, all of which, together with the building and stock of the drug store, went up in flames.

"Across the street, the whiskey house of J. Gadscomb then took fire. The flames soon had the building at their mercy and then transferred their affection to the building next door, occupied by Baily & Davis, jewelers, and J. A. Henderson, shoemaker. These were all destroyed, but Bemis' saloon and the First National Bank, close by, escaped destruction, but were damaged, the former considerably.

"On Poplar Street, the building owned by C.D. Tucker and occupied by Mrs. Bixler as a millinery store, was destroyed with its contents.

"The Adams Express Co. and the Western Union Telegraph Co., and J.B. Rue, photographer, were occupants of the next building that burned. Then followed Mrs. John Bixler's residence, the City Hall, the Engine House, Henry Morgan's Barber Shop, the office of C.H. Hardin and Deputy Collector J.A.

Tomlinson, Bell & Bell, Cardwell & Allin, "Sayings and Doings," C.A. & D. L. Hardin and Dr. F.L. Harrod.

"The above is about a complete list of the buildings destroyed and their occupants.

"There was great excitement during the conflagration. Very few had hopes of saving the town from entire destruction, and to prepare against the worst, appeals for aid were made to Danville, Louisville, Lexington, and a number of other places. Lexington responded promptly by sending an engine and fire company fully equipped for service, but a delay on the railroad prevented the arrival of the apparatus until 1 a.m. when the fire was under control.

"An incident of the fire that is worthy of mention occurred at the Episcopal Church. Rev. W.Y. Sheppard, the rector, who worked like a Trojan to save property that was in jeopardy, seeing that the flames were encroaching upon the sacred edifice, his church, entered the building with a number of others, and requesting everyone to bare their heads and kneel in prayer, poured out his soul to the Heavenly Father as he invoked His blessing and appealed for protection against the terrible danger that threatened the holy sanctuary. The church was spared.

"The origin of the fire is not known. The flames were first discovered in the furniture store in the Opera House block. In the yard in the rear of the building several boys were seen smoking cigarettes and striking matches, and it is thought possibly the fire originated from this source, though Mr. Cardwell, who saw the boys, does not know that they are responsible for the conflagration."

(Note: The article continues to identify the total losses sustained by each business. Among those were Matheny & Poteet and Hansford, James & Co. each of which reported damages totaling \$40,000 and Chenoweth Hall reporting damages of \$12,000. Mrs. L.D. Cardwell said the loss on the opera house was \$15,000.)

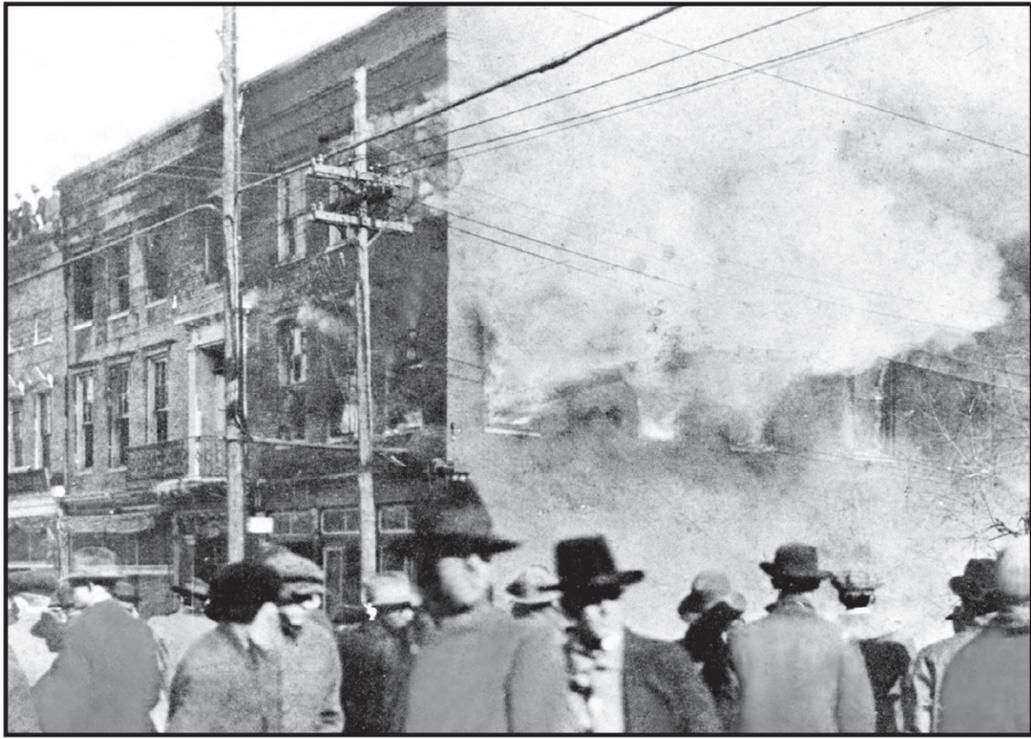
Main Street, Harrodsburg, has experienced other devastating visits by the "Fire Bug" since 1928. A few of those events are listed below.

•In December 1932, approximately 60 shoppers stampeded for the exits of several businesses when the rear of the first floor of the Louisville Store, operated by A. Shapiro & Sons of Louisville, collapsed due to a fire that originated in the basement. The fire soon swept through the whole three-story brick structure. Damage to stock was estimated at \$50,000; damage to the building, owned by Mrs. M.P. Hansford, was \$25,000. Dedman Drug Store, which adjoined the Louisville Store, also suffered \$25,000 in damages. The neighboring Kentucky Utilities Company was saved from destruction by the combined efforts of the Harrodsburg and Danville Fire Departments. The origin of the fire was not determined.

•On January 2, 1936, fire burned the interior of Lee Sanders' poolroom on Main Street in a building owned by Mrs. D.L. Moore. The explosion of a gasoline cooking stove started the fire, but it did not reach the headquarters for Tank Unit 36 of the National Guard upstairs on the second floor. Although no machine gun shells were housed upstairs, as was first reported, Harrodsburg Fire Chief K. B. Phillips found 3,000 rounds of 30-30 rifle cartridges were stored over the poolroom.

•In April 1939, defective electric wiring in the sealed attic ignited a fire in the three-story Hood-Slaton Department Store, owned by the heirs of the late C.B. Sullivan Sr. Damage to stock and store fixtures, mainly from water and smoke, was set at between \$5,000 and \$6,000 by J.W. Hood, manager, who owned the business with Dr. J.T. Slaton, Lexington.

•In November 1990, fire destroyed the old livery stable building that stretched from 107 S. Main Street back to Greenville Street. There were four businesses housed inside the converted stable built before 1876. Those businesses included Jocko & Horace's pool hall, Kenneth Parker's Barber Shop, White Line Screen Printing, and Nautical Specialties. (Although the buildings may be gone, we will always remember those wonderful pool hall hamburgers slathered with ketchup and onions that can never be duplicated because the fire took the magic grill on which they were created. Nor will we ever forget the sounds of men



Armstrong Archives
On Jan. 10, 1914, the James Flats block, located on the corner South Main & East Office Streets, was destroyed by fire and later rebuilt and is now being renovated by Tim Peters and Lois Mateus. In 1857, the same block was leveled by another blaze and rebuilt by 1859.

laughing and sharing war stories as they waited for haircuts at Kenneth Parker's Barber Shop.)

•In June 1999, the dreams of two entrepreneurs, Tim White and John Holiday, were shattered when fire swept through all three floors of Café Benjamin. The building was formerly Lay and Lawson Furniture Store, where many young newlyweds bought their furniture and "went to housekeeping on their own."

•And in October 2014, fire ravaged the old Mercer County Opera House at the top of Main Street at its juncture with Mooreland Avenue. Over the hours the Opera House had been the scene of theatrical performances, gospel music shows, and it served as a recording studio and the broadcasting headquarters for WHBN AM-FM radio for years. Mercer Lodge #777 F&AM and the Order of the Eastern Star held their meetings on the third floor. When the fire occurred, the Opera House was being used as a worship center. Instead of razing the building, the structure was repaired so it could retain the original appearance of the exterior. Buildings adjacent to the Opera House were used as City Hall, the fire department, the police department and, in the late 1960s, an entertainment facility sponsored by the Mercer County Youth Council.

Perhaps the real story is not the buildings on Main Street that were destroyed over the years but, rather, the buildings that are still standing. Their Kentucky River limestone foundations remind us of the basic will to survive exemplified by the early settlers at Fort Harrod, and to great measure, the Native Americans whom they were fighting, during the Year of the Bloody Sevens.

The buildings remind us that economic downturns, such as the Great Depression, and most recently, the Recession of 2008, may result in deterioration due to neglect or the inability to fix this or that.

But if we wait long enough, individuals such as Tim Peters, Lois Mateus or Mike Conover or entities such as the Harrodsburg Historical Society, James Harrod Trust, or individual business owners will see the innate beauty of the structures and oversee their restoration so the buildings can serve a new purpose.

The buildings on Main Street remind us that societal behavior changes over time—admittedly, sometimes not fast enough—but eventually progress is made. During the early days of the Harrod Theatre on Main Street, white customers sat on the first floor of the building in comfortable cushioned seats while their black neighbors, school classmates and friends were sent upstairs to the balcony to sit on less than comfortable seats or benches. Modern restrooms for "whites only" were available; blacks used "the other" restrooms. Yesterday's Harrod Theatre now houses the Ragged Edge Community Theatre where everyone shares their talents regardless of the color of their skin—and the seating is dependent on arrival time for the performance or the price of the ticket.

Harrodsburg will celebrate her 250th birthday in 2024 and plans are underway to make the celebration as special as the "oldest

permanent English settlement west of the Appalachians" deserves. After all, the city was laid out and founded by James Harrod on June 16, 1774. Harrodsburg was the county seat for Lincoln County, one of Kentucky's first three counties established in 1780.

Other Kentucky cities and communities have come and gone, but Harrodsburg is still standing proud and tall.

A courthouse square was included on the city lot map; the

See 1928 | pg. 7B



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The Harrodsburg Historical Society

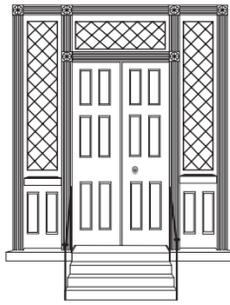
cordially invites you to their meeting

Refreshments served

May 14 • 7:30 pm

Anna Armstrong:

In honor of Historic Preservation Month, Anna Armstrong will talk about "Expanding the Scope of Traditional Preservation and Bringing Our History Into the 21st Century."



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