

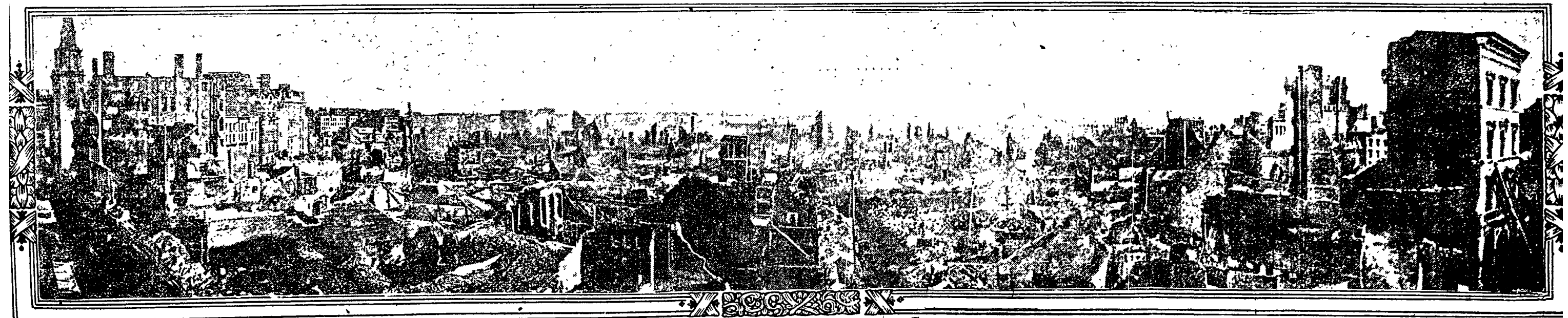
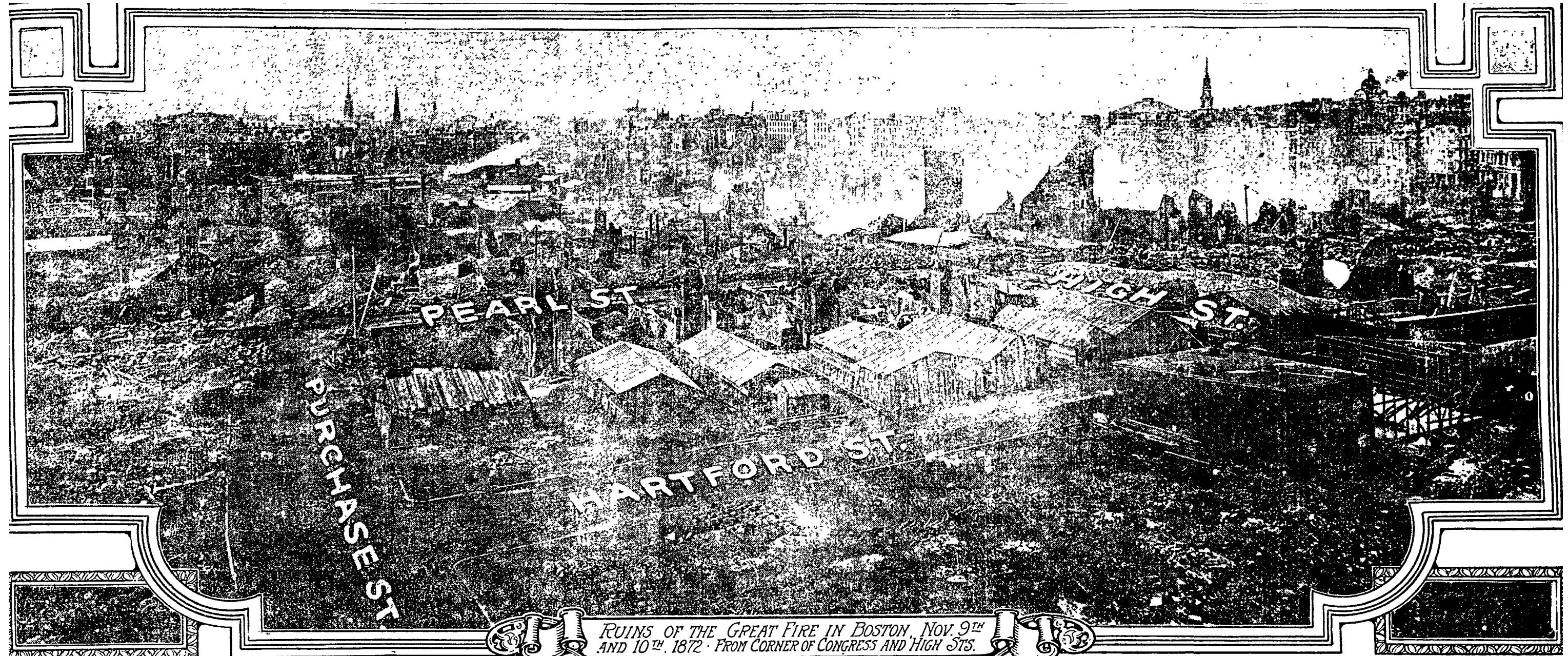
# SIXTY-FIVE ACRES BURNED OVER 40 YEARS AGO IN BOSTON'S WORST CONFLAGRATION, CA...

Boston Daily; Nov 9, 1912; ProQuest Historical Newspapers Boston Globe (1872 - 1927)

pg. 9

## SIXTY-FIVE ACRES BURNED OVER 40 YEARS AGO IN BOSTON'S WORST CONFLAGRATION, CAUSING A LOSS ON BUILDINGS OF \$12,745,000 AND ON MERCHANDISE OF \$38,434,000

### Strange Disease Known as the "Epizootic" and Insufficient Supply of Water Handicapped the Fire Fighters---Starting in a Six-Story Building, Corner of Summer and Kingston Sts, the Fire Raged For More Than 30 Hours---Premonitions of Danger in the Vicinity of Franklin St---Fear of Thieves and Provision of Emergency Civil War Guard.



PANORAMIC VIEW FROM WASHINGTON STREET

Forty years ago tonight, Boston had its worst conflagration. For more than 30 hours it was beyond control. The burned territory embraced an area of 65 acres in the heart of the business district and 700 brick and stone and 67 wooden buildings were destroyed. The loss on buildings was \$12,745,000 and on merchandise \$38,434,000. With the exception of Chicago, in October, 1871, no other city in the United States up to that time had been visited by such a serious calamity. Since then San Francisco has suffered a greater loss and Baltimore is a good second to Boston. The fire originated in a six-story granite building on the corner of Summer and Kingston sts, and the alarm was given at 7:34 p. m. although 15 minutes before that time the flames were seen by two police officers on Prison Point Bridge in Charlestown. Before 8 o'clock a general alarm had been sounded and assistance had been asked from every city and town within 50 miles of Boston. The Fire Department was seriously handicapped at the outset by a delay in getting apparatus to the point of danger. For almost a week before the fire a strange disease known as "epizootic" had prevailed in Boston, and hardly a horse escaped its attack. The

street railway service and teaming was almost entirely suspended and scarcely a vehicle was seen upon the streets unless drawn by oxen. The Fire Department had received orders not to use horses in responding to alarms and it was not an uncommon sight to see an engine or ladder truck being hauled through the streets by 100 or 150 men and boys who cheerfully hauled the ropes that had been provided for the emergency. Another reason why the fire got beyond control of the department was because of the insufficient supply of water. In Summer, Franklin and adjacent streets there were only six-inch water pipes. These had been ample when these sections were devoted to private residences, but were inadequate for the changed conditions after the streets were given up to business. The danger had been pointed out by Joseph Bird when he was chief of the department and his successor, John S. Damrell, who was in charge Nov. 3, 1872, in communications to the City Council, had repeatedly urged the necessity for larger mains, and after the great fire of Chicago had predicted that Boston's danger spot was in the vicinity of Franklin st.

Only one engine could connect with a hydrant in 1872, and after the apparatus arrived in response to Box 52 on the night of Nov. 9, 1872, it became necessary to station the engines a considerable distance apart so that the water flowing through the main should not be exhausted. Today 8-inch mains supply the entire business district of Boston, and if another fire should break out at the same place as in 1872, 30 engines could be massed around the building and each have plenty of water. Foreseen by Insurance Expert. It was a coincidence that only a few hours before the breaking out of the fire, Julius L. Clark, insurance commissioner of Massachusetts, was completing in Liverpool his official examination of the financial status of the English insurance companies doing business in this Commonwealth. In an interview with Henry Thompson, resident secretary of the Liverpool, London and Globe Insurance Company, that gentleman with singular prophetic foresight reminded Mr. Clark that the next great fire of the century might be looked for in the vicinity of Franklin st in the city of Boston. Pressed for an explanation of his reasons, Mr. Thompson produced perfect plans of conditions that existed in Boston and announced that it was the intention of the English companies to withdraw all risks in Boston unless further protection was afforded. The total losses sustained by the English companies was \$4,864,533 and us that amount was soon paid it was of great help to merchants. At points between Summer and Milk

sts, except on Washington st, there was no opportunity to do effective work, as the conflagration had assumed such terrible proportions that all the buildings on Dow, Shire, Federal, Congress, Pearl, Oliver, Battery-march and High sts were swept out of existence, and any attempt to resist the march of the fire through those streets would have meant loss of apparatus and the death of men. A tremendous fight was made to prevent the fire from crossing Washington st at a point opposite Bromfield st, and also to save the Old South Meeting House, both of which efforts were successful. The Boston department had the assistance from other cities and towns of 45 engines of all kinds, 52 hose carriages, three ladder trucks, 1689 men and 41,000 feet of hose. The fire did not die out as many supposed from want of material to burn, but it was conquered by the heroic efforts of indomitable firemen while there yet remained large and densely packed areas of combustible buildings and more combustible merchandise of immense values within the very grasp of the destroyer. The late Judge Thomas Russell, as chairman of a commission appointed to investigate the fire, said: "In the most important element of a fire department—in its men—Boston has the best material. Words fail to describe the courage and devotion of our firemen. No battlefield ever witnessed

nobler heroism than was witnessed on our street. The story of the fire, as told simply and truthfully by the engineers, is a story of hardships endured and danger braved in obedience to duty. The only men in active service today who took part in the 1872 fire are Capt. Samuel Abbott of the Protective Department, and Benjamin F. Underhill, secretary of the Fire Department. Capt. Abbott in 1872 was a member of Lincoln and Mr. Underhill was connected with Protective Company No. 1. Fire Chief Opposed Gunpowder. The blowing up of buildings by gunpowder to stop the flames was resorted to against the judgment of Chief Engineer Damrell, and was carried on by a committee of citizens under the direction of Gen. Benham, a regular Army officer. A few months later the committee appeared as defendants in a suit against them in the United States Court. Gas Supply Shut Off. In the fall of buildings, some of the gas mains were broken and the gas found its way into the sewers. A terrific explosion occurred at the corner of Washington and Summer sts at about midnight of Sunday, Nov. 10, and fire followed, which did more than \$1,000,000 damage. As there were no section shut-offs in those days, the gas company deemed it prudent not to turn on the gas on Monday night and consequently the city was in darkness. There were wild rumors of a gang of thieves, on their way from New York and extra precautions were taken to guard against such an emergency. A fact not generally known is that about 100 men who had served in the Civil War volunteered to patrol Beacon

st and the Back Bay. They were sworn in as special police officers by Mayor Gaston, and there was an understanding among them that if any man was caught in the act of setting fire to a building or committing burglary he should be shot on the spot and nothing said of it. Fortunately no trouble occurred and at no time was there disorder. The fire alarm system, which depended entirely on overhead wires, was out of service for several days, and there were fears that fires might break out and gain headway before being discovered. To guard against this contingency lookouts were established at various points with instruction to notify the nearest engine house if fire were discovered. This temporary arrangement worked well, and no fire of magnitude occurred until after the fire alarm branch was again in working order. Grit and Energy Shown. New England grit and energy was never better illustrated than by the merchants of Boston after the fire. Although many of them were practically ruined they took immediate steps to restore lost fortunes. Before the ashes had cooled, plans for rebuilding were being made and the newspapers had packed of advertisements announcing temporary locations

The Governor called a special session of the Legislature, and to relieve merchants an act was passed authorizing the city of Boston to borrow \$20,000,000 and loan it to merchants. The Supreme Judicial Court declared this act to be unconstitutional and held that money could not be raised by taxation to be expended for private uses. About the same time Congress was asked to refund several millions of dollars paid as duties on goods destroyed, but members from Western States prevented the passage of a bill. The sudden withdrawal of hundreds of millions of dollars as a result of the Chicago and Boston fires it was feared would cause a panic, and Gen. Grant, then President of the United States, was prepared to ask Congress, if necessary, to relieve the stringency. Matters, however, adjusted themselves in a natural way without apparently very great hardship. During the progress of the fire the feeding of nearly 2000 men, comprising the fighting force engaged in subduing the flames, was a serious problem. That duty was entrusted to Hiram A. Wright, then a member of the Common Council from Roxbury and now the head gager at the Boston Customhouse. In the Civil War Mr. Wright had been commissary sergeant of Hooker's old brigade, and his army experience enabled him to successfully surmount all obstacles and carry out the work he had undertaken. It was a difficult job and was attended with almost as much danger as if the men had been on a field of battle.