

“OU’s Famous Fire A Real Spud Sizzler”
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Originally published by The Ottawa Herald March 16, 1987

Ottawa’s history has been marred by several major fires, each with its own disastrous results.

The first such conflagration took place in January 1875 when the Ottawa University building we now call Tauy Jones Hall was gutted by flames.

Besides nearly wiping out the young college, the blaze was a major blow to the progress of an infant town.

The story begins, curiously enough, with potatoes.

Ottawa University in those days was money-poor yet land-rich, due to a generous gift from the Ottawa Indians. To rectify this situation, the administration established a farm around the then rural school which raised and sold thousands of hedge and fruit trees.

In 1874 the OU operation apparently also raised thousands of potatoes. In fact, such a bumper crop of spuds was harvested that the school was unable to sell all of them. Desperate for a storage facility for the remaining bushels of potatoes, OU pressed into service the basement of the only building it had—what is now known as Tauy Jones.

One cold day that next January, so the story goes, the building’s caretaker became concerned that the potato “investment” might freeze. He therefore stoked the furnace extra hot.

Sometime later smoke and fire were discovered on the top floor, probably the result of a defective flue. In a panic, the caretaker raced to the bell rope and wildly rang the bell suspended in the building’s cupola.

As the Ottawa Republican later reported, the bell “rang out its thrilling, startling alarm, and the cry of ‘fire’ brought the people into the streets in awful bewilderment.”

Being a Saturday afternoon, Main Street was jammed with the wagons of farmers in town to “trade.” But the alarm soon emptied the downtown as the shoppers rushed en masse to the college, “joined and reinforced at every street corner by men, women, and children.”

The fire department soon had its horse-drawn engine and hose carts underway with a great clanging of bells. Swung into position over a nearby cistern, the fire hoses were quickly laid and the engines steamed up to shoot a stream of water onto the burning roof.

But no water came.

When the word swept through the anxious crowd that the cistern was dry, “the blankest discouragement was apparent.” Flames had engulfed half of the roof and were licking at the cupola.

Since it was impossible to douse the fire, a new plan of action was immediately rallied to. Dozens of men swarmed through the floors below the blazing attic and began to haul out every moveable object.

In minutes the school was completely emptied of books, maps, and every stick of furniture, including the “splendid Chickering piano.”

Still dissatisfied, carpenters and others stripped the lower floors of doors, blinds, windows, and whatever other pieces of woodwork they could quickly rip loose.

At last they had to give up, and after moving the wooden front steps away from the structure, the crowd could do nothing more than watch the building burn.

“Sunday morning,” the Republican sorrowfully wrote, “We awoke to see nothing but the bare walls standing of our boasted college.”

Most of the goods destroyed had been stored in the top story or attic, and therefore were quickly engulfed in flames. Included were the 12 beds, “ticks,” and bedclothes that had been used to house the Ottawa Indian students.

The greatest sentimental loss was the college bell. It had been cast in Boston in the 1840’s and sent to Kansas by steamboat to the Baptist mission for the Delaware Indians. By the time the bell came to Ottawa it was already considered an honored relic.

After pealing its own death knell, the bell crashed through floor after floor as each one burned out. Blackened and broken, the bell’s remains later were found in the ashes of the basement—presumably with a lot of well-baked potatoes.

There were two immediate aftershocks of the fire. First, the townspeople were indignant to belatedly learn that the cistern was not dry. A misplaced cork simply had stopped up the fire engine.

Second, the OU building was uninsured. The university’s trustees had allowed the insurance policy to lapse due to ongoing financial problems.

Slowly the school came back, however, and the interior of the hall was rebuilt.

So it stands today, a 121-year-old survivor of numerous hardships, including what we might call “The Great Potato Fire of 1875.”