

Lightning struck the tip of the Centenary Methodist Church steeple during a "summer squall." Fire-fighters thought they had a small blaze to handle. Hours later many barely escaped with their lives. See below the account by Advocate Editor Howard Hopkins.

Photo Courtesy Stanley & Morris Snow

Centenary Church Destroyed By Fire March 14, 1908

Struck and set on fire by a lightning bolt early Saturday morning last, the Centenary M. E. Church, with contents, was reduced to a heap of charred wood before daybreak. Value, \$16,000; insured for \$8,000.

The thunderstorm responsible for the loss of this fine church was brief, but exceptionally severe. The bolt which struck the church fell about 1.55 a.m., striking the spire a few feet below the apex. The impact was witnessed by Selectman George Allen, whose back yard adjoins the church grounds, and by Mrs. Dr. Todd, neighbor.

Selectman Allen and Mr. H. O. Sparrow, Jr., reached the church almost side by side and put the

bell in motion.

Within a few minutes bells and steam whistles all about town were joining in the alarm and the entire fire department was at the scene of the fire, or fast approaching it.

Hose 4 quickly connected two lines with the hydrant near B. H. Dyer's shop; steamer J. D. Hilliard drafted water from the reservoir on Commercial, opposite Court street; hose 2 hooked on to the hydrant on Commercial, opposite Atlantic Avenue, running out a 700-foot string; 5 and 1 hose companies hitched to the hydrants at Court and Bradford Sts., and Central and Bradford Sts., respectively, the hook and ladder men having run ladders to the ridgepole of the church, from the Winthrop street side, meanwhile, and all

Chief Engineer Barnett and Engineer Lewis viewed the interior of the spire from a position above the bell, but saw no sparks fall within that great chimney-like structure. To preclude such happening, Chief Barnett detailed Engineer Callaghan, with hosemen Omar Kelley, Joseph Silva and Ed Snow of Hose 4, to take station within the spire, above the bell, and send a stream aloft within it.

Accordingly, a ladder was run up within the steeple, a line of hose was got aloft and fastened, and the ladder men within that confined cone effectually prevented the fall of fire down the now open shaft. Other firemen outside the church sent streams upon the down-crawled flames outside and seemed to have the fight well in hand.

It now appeared as if victory was at hand for the firemen, the spire having burned down to the firemen's reach, but just when all were convinced that the worst had been experienced, fire billowed

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As seen at first, the fire appeared to be confined to the very top of the spire - just a tiny starlike point of flame showing there, a few feet below the big gilded ball which crowned the steeple - 165 feet above the ground.

That little spurt of fire was beyond the reach of the jets of water that straightway leaped aloft from No. 4's double line of hose, so one of the streams was siamesed with that of the steamer's in an endeavor to force the water further aloft. Still the flame coiled defiantly above the leaping stream.

There was no sign of fire elsewhere, within or without the church. At this stage, and until long afterward, the only fear expressed was that of flooding and injuring the magnificent pipe organ in the choir loft. It was even suggested that a sail, with which to cover the organ, should be procured and put into use. None of the church furnishings, in fact - with the exception of the big desk bible, was removed, for none believed that the fire would extend below the bell deck of the spire toward which the slowly growing flames were gradually creeping.

It was not until nearly three a.m. that the big ball showed signs of tottering. Then, its supports burned away, it leaned suddenly toward the Winthrop street side of the main entrance and fell, striking upon the sloping roof of the east buttress and bounding outward to fall with a crash two-thirds of the way down the lawn, barely missing the half-dozen leaping firemen and others who had occupied that spot an instant before. Then, a good-sized aperture having been provided, the burning spire top took on the semblance of a giant, flaming torch; the roofs of adjacent dwellings were outlined ruddily against the darkness of the heavens, and sparks began to stream slowly outward before the weak west wind.

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It now appeared as if victory was at hand for the firemen, the spire having burned down to the firemen's reach, but just when all were convinced that the worst had been experienced, fire billowed furiously outward in the basement at the southwest corner and also along the western wall. In an instant, seemingly, the whole church became filled with suffocating smoke, and the roar of flames bursting their barriers was like that of the sea.

The bolt that struck the spire had passed down the whole length of that towering mass and entered the coal bins in the basement, and darted here and there between the walls, leaving fire trains that burned feebly at first, only to leap uncontrollably outward after the lapse of two hours.

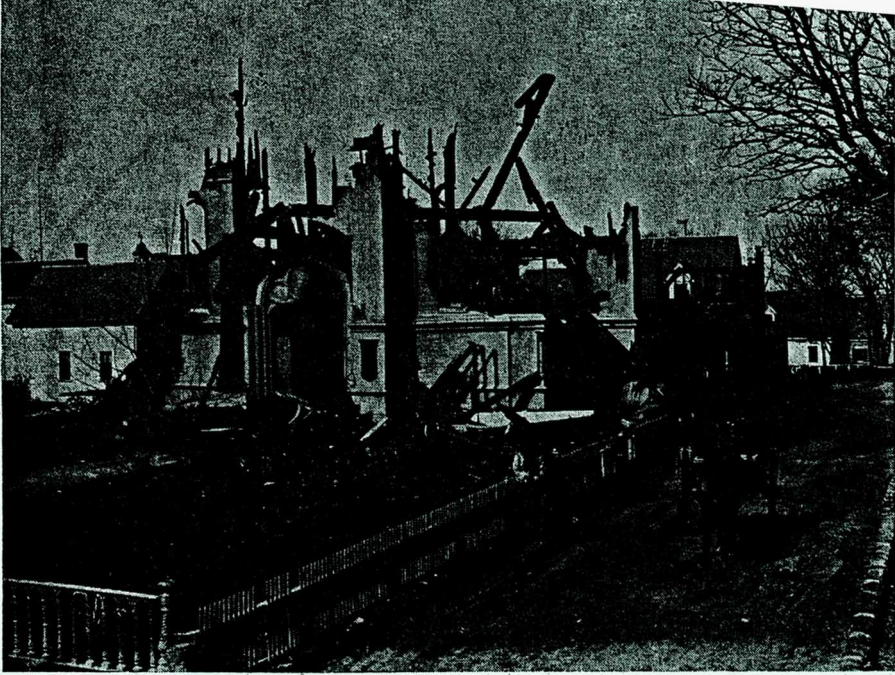
The main fire burst out with a fury and suddenness that was appalling. It was instantaneous, and instantly it was realized that the building was doomed.

Two groups of men—Callaghan's band, perched on a shaky ladder high in the burning steeple, and engineer "June" Lewis, with Coffin and Boatman of Hose 2, who were manipulating a line of hose in back of the big pipe organ, became suddenly enwrapped with flame and smoke and were well nigh cut off from escape. They barely escaped with their lives from a fire-trap sprung with unusual swiftness.

The organ loft group escaped by way of the stairs that led downward on the east side of the church's interior, as did Engineer Callaghan. His steeple helpers, blinded by the smoke, failed of finding the trap door through which he had descended. They were compelled to throw themselves through the belfry openings to the roof, with the hope that the ladder previously placed there was still in place. Failing this, they would be obliged to make descent via the line of hose fastened to the coping. They found and utilized the ladder.

Chief engineer Barnett was in the vestibule when Lewis and his aids escaped. He found the smoke so thick that he was obliged to crawl blindly in his search for the exit. As he gained it, engineer Callaghan emerged at his rear, gasping for breath and nearly suf-

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Day, after the fire, photographer Louis M. Snow lugged his box camera to a second-story window over B. H. Dyer's paint store to record the sorry ruins of a proud Methodist Church. A graphic account of the fire appears elsewhere, and the tragic story of two deaths that occurred when the ruins collapsed on salvagers. The site is now occupied by the Provincetown branch of the First National Bank of Cape Cod, at Winthrop Street.

Centenary Church

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focated. All had escaped death by a narrow margin.

Then came the real battle! All that had transpired previously was, as child's play to the grim work that followed.

A general conflagration seemed assured, for the great edifice became at once a raging furnace from whence there issued clouds of glowing brands that were swept eastward to fall upon the roofs of the close-huddled dwellings, threatening the ignition of all.

Our firemen are "A-1" - there is no question as to the truth of that bit of slang.

Already Chief "Jim" had given instructions for the safeguarding of the to leeward dwellings and seen that a line or two of hose should be kept spraying the roofs most endangered. Now he ordered a more general use of hose for that purpose, and quickly several lines were kept steadily employed - and with need, for so fierce was the heat from the burning church that roof coverings nearby took fire, untouched by flame, again and again while household goods were being hurried to places of safety.

The danger was great, although there was but little wind and the rain that accompanied the thunder storm had thoroughly wet the roofs. The clouds of steam that arose from roofs as far away as the Fisherman's Cold Storage building attest to that fact. Only splendid fire service served to confine the fire to the limits of the church itself.

There ensued a one hour fight of supremest effort and daring, during which individual escapes from being crushed by down-hurled timbers were frequent and horrifying.

At five o'clock the great church was in ruins, but the surrounding dwellings - one not more than twenty feet away - were unharmed, except for blistered paint and here and there a handful of charred roof shingles.

The church, one of the best ever built in south-eastern Massachusetts, (it cost \$40,000) was dedicated June 14, 1866, when "with the Rev. Geo. W. Bridge as captain of the host, the people went up to the feast of the dedication." The sermon on that occasion was preached by the Rev. Jesse T. Peck, D. D., Chancellor of Syra-

It hung in the belfry of the society's first house of worship - the Wesley Chapel - from the date of its occupancy by the society until the building of the new church home - the Centenary, 1866, when it was transferred to the spire of that church.

The Centenary church society may elect to re-build a church home, but not a large or costly church in any event.

Before the smoke had cleared away, and while the firemen were still playing water on the ruins, Mr. Artemus P. Hannum of the Universalist Society, addressed a note to Mr. George F. Miller of-

fering the Centenary church society the free use of the Universalist church as long as they might choose to occupy it.

Great sympathy is manifested about town for the Centenary church society. On the day following the destruction of their fine church, invitations to unite with them in church services were extended to the stricken people by all the town evangelical bodies. Sunday was a day of sadness for all who worshipped beneath the roof-tree of Centenary church in years past; and few, if any, of the congregation entered a church that day, grief at the loss of the beautiful house of worship tending to keep them at home.

TWO BOYS KILLED BY THE FALLING IN OF THE RUINS OF CENTENARY CHURCH

Two boys were killed, one man was injured, and a dozen men and boys narrowly escaped injury or death, when a great mass of charred timber, plaster and board, comprising the floor and ceiling above the basement of the fire-ruined Centenary church, fell at half past one Monday afternoon.

The accident occurred while fire-wood seekers were swarming within and without the ruined church walls. The wonder is not that fatalities occurred that day, but that many more lives were not lost in the reckless scramble for the wood during the several hours that preceded the dislodgement of the floor-ceiling mass in the afternoon.

The dead are Joseph Oliver, 15 years, son of Joseph Oliver, Court St., and Joseph Holmes, 12 years, son of Joseph R. Holmes, of Franklin street. The fathers of both lads were at work about the ruins at the time of the accident.

Early on Monday morning someone having authority posted the following printed notice on the grounds in front of this church: "Any person may take any of the wood clear of the building. Leave all iron or metals."

It was currently reported Saturday, though where the report started no one seems to know, neither church trustees or custodians having made such statement, that the public would be on Monday privileged to help itself to the wood contained within the ruined pile.

The printed notice quoted above was placed to inform the people that only the wood lying without the building was free to the public. In the early hour a host of men

Thereupon a second sign, reading: "All persons must take their own risk on these premises. Leave the sills, floor, bricks and all iron," the manner of rending the timbers was placed in a prominent position.

The workers were frequently warned of the need of caution in and walls, but a few apparently heeded advice. Boys of tender years and men well advanced in life vied with men of middle age in the task of securing a sizable lot of firewood, constantly venturing into positions of danger and taking great risk in their manner of demolishing.

One slight accident occurred during the forenoon, when Manu Steele was slightly injured by falling wood, but the careless and eager workers kept steadily working, ignoring all danger signs and by twelve o'clock great roads had been made upon the mass, where hundreds of loads of prime stove wood still remain magnet of great drawing power.

The crowd which resumed work at one o'clock was larger than that of forenoon. Men pried and ripped the covering from the basement walls, others tore chestnut wainscoting from walls, and big squads, plying axes, slashed away at the huge, blundered beams that littered the floor here and there. But some, they were not a few, assailed supports that up-bore the ceiling, which, with the floor above it, was heaped with debris of tons' weight.

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It was the successor of the "Wesley Chapel" house of worship occupied by the society from September, 1848 (the membership being then ninety-one) to the day of dedication above mentioned.

It was a splendidly built church, with a seating capacity of more than one thousand. Its audience room was exceptionally fine, and its grand pipe organ was the pride of its congregation, as was the stately edifice of the whole com-

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At an early hour a host of men and boys, equipped with axes, saws, shovels, bars, teams and barrows were on the scene, eager to begin the work of harvesting.

Operations of the crowd were at first confined to debris lying outside the walls, but within an hour or two large parties had invaded the interior and other squads were assailing the outer shell, all engaged in the work of demolition.

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At 1.30, when many men a boys were toiling within the vtry, one of the many hollow, iron pillars which upheld the mass floor beams was dislodged with a resounding crash, a huge mass of the flooring tumbled into the basement.

Manuel Prayder, milkman living on Court Street, was knocked down and buried to his shoulder in the fallen mass. He was rendered unconscious momentarily, was quickly extricated and taken home in a dazed condition. He suffered a cut on the fore