

"PORTSMOUTH FIREMEN SAVED THE OLD SOUTH"

Ex-Mayor T.E.O. Marvin Tells the Real Story of the Big Boston Fire

At a little past midnight November 9, 1872, I was aroused from a sound sleep by a loud and peremptory ringing of the front door bell of my residence, then No. 46 State Street, Portsmouth. It needed no second summons to thoroughly awaken and bring me to a window overlooking the hall door in front of which stood a police officer who had just come from the station with a telegram addressed to the "Mayor of Portsmouth." It did not take me long to descend the hall stairs and unbolt the door. Hastily tearing open the envelope containing a slip of paper, I read, "Fire in Boston beyond control. Come immediately to our aid." "Hatch, Supt. Eastern Railroad, Boston." In reply I wrote on the back of the message, "Coming with steam fire engine and forty veteran firemen. Portsmouth, N. H." Returning the message with my reply endorsed on it, to the officer I ordered him to deliver it to the telegraph operator at the Eastern R.R. station for prompt dispatch to Boston. I also instructed him to request the station master to meet me and our firemen as soon as possible at the Dover street side track of the railroad in this city with the requisite means of rapid transit to Boston of a steam fire engine, hose truck and forty firemen.

The officier executed his commission promptly and efficiently as I soon ascertained.

The North church bell rang out a loud, brief alarm while policemen were hurrying to the several engine houses of the city carrying instructions to the foremen of companies to rally their men at the headquarters of Kearsarge

Company on Court Street. As soon as the Kearsarge boys had mustered at their station the foremen of the other assembled companies told off four men each one instantly fell into line with their waiting comrades on the extended drag ropes. One shrill blast of the whistle and the Portsmouth firemen were off to the aid of the dauntless fire-fighters in Boston who were desperately struggling to save their city from utter destruction. The southern sky was all aflame with light from the raging conflagration which held the stricken city in its fiery grasp and we needed no lanterns to guide us on our way to the Dover street side track. The station master promptly arrived with a locomotive, platform car and a passenger car. The Kearsarge was speedily entrained and two hours later, we skidded the Kearsarge and hose carriage off the freight car at the Eastern railroad station in Causway street, manned the prolongs and started a quick time pace through the fire-lighted streets of the North End for the scene of strenuous action that awaited us.

The lurid glare of the flames that were greedily devouring the stately trade palaces of Summer and Washington streets fell upon our advancing column of ununiformed firemen as we toiled resolutely past the foot of School street and threw us into such a vivid light that we stood, or rather marched revealed, garbed in all of the grotesqueness of our hastily donned working clothes, chosen rather for rought and ready action than for mere decorative purposes. As soon as the dense crowd of awe-smitten citizens of the burning city got sight of the suburban recruits their pent up emotions found vent in spontaneous shouts of "Here they come!" "See, see the countrymen!" "Hurrah for the haymakers!" "Three cheers and a tiger, Hip, Hip, Hurrah!!" "Well," responded one of our leaders, "if we had known beforehand that we were coming to a Boston Tea Party we would have put on our swallow-tail coats." The apt rejoinder of the jolly fireman found its way to the funny bones of the amused

Bostonians and the thronged sidewalk echoed to the laughter and welcoming shouts of the appreciative multitude. A few minutes later we halted at a reservoir in front of the Old South Church, where we were met by Alderman Thomas L. Jenks of Ward 3, Boston, who grasped me by the hand and exclaimed: "I am glad to see you Mayor Marvin, you are the right man in the right place, and in just the nick of time. I am an official in charge of this section of the danger zone. If the fire gets past this corner it will carry all before it until it reaches the Charles river.

"Now, Marvin," said he, "as a member of the fire department committee I am wanted at another critical point of danger. I will turn this important scene of action over to you with full power to use your own discretion in every emergency that may arise during this awful fire. But, first I want you to promise me that you and your company will save the Old South."

I told him I would use the utmost exertion I could command of muscle and brain in the try I was prepared to make to justify the generous manifestation of confidence he was pleased to bestow in me.

Giving me a fraternal grip of the hand and waving a parting salute to the Kearsarge and her compliment of men and officers he hastened to other pressing duties and was quickly lost to sight mid the smoke and confusion of a wild conflagration which his cool judgement and efficient exertions, later added materially to subdue.

Our boys soon had the Kearsarge taking water from a reservoir in Washington street, opposite the front of the Old South with a considerable length of hose extending in the direction of Summer street whence the fire was advancing and rapidly devouring the tall stores on the Easterly side of Washington street as they swept on towards Milk street. Joining two other out-of-town companies, we poured an unremitting stream of water upon the

roofs and fronts of the endangered building on the easterly side of the street, ceasing only occasionally to wet down the carpets and blankets that were spread to protect the roofs and fronts of the stores lining the westerly side of Washington street to the head of Milk street, a precaution which kept the flames which flew across over our heads, from spreading destruction in the direction of School street. The wet carpets and soused blankets proved effectual barriers to the spread of fire across the street and the united exertions of the three fire companies seemed to be holding the conflagration in check several doors beyond the tall Transcript building, not yet on fire when we were ordered to move our engines and hose from the vicinity of the Old South as a squad of mining engineers were placing kegs of gunpowder under the shoe and leather store of Messrs. Currier and Trott on the corner of Milk and Washington streets within forty feet of the Old South. Gen. Benham, U.S.A., in charge of the harbor fortifications, led the powder brigade and ordered a load of gunpowder in kegs to be planted in the basement of the shoe store for the purpose of blowing up the building to check the progress of the fire.

As soon as the fuse began to sputter and smoke, we uncoupled our hose and started up School street with the Kearsarge in tow and dropped our suction hose into a well filled reservoir which we discovered in Court Square back of the city hall, about 500 feet from the Old South. Then we reeled off our fire hose down School street and up Washington street and waited with baited breath to see the collapse of the shoe shop and Transcript building, in eager expectations and preparedness for the order: "Ready Kearsarge! On the ruins! Play!" Well, when the outburst of noise and sulphur phumes subsided there stood the mined buildings veiled in wind-borne smoke, looking like eyeless ghosts of "by gone days" uncertain where they were. The powder

must have let loose more thunder than lightning as the only effect produced was to shatter every pane of glass in the besieged buildings. The ill-advised and abortive efforts of the gunpowder squad forced the drenching floods of three fire fighting engines to cease at a critical moment and let the checked and halting march of the baffled fire-fiend gather new impetus and roll his flaming chariot swiftly towards Milk street coverting the Transcript building and the store of Currier and Trott which had withstood the gunpowder explosion, into roaring volcanoes fearfully near the roof and tall tower of the Old South Church, only a scant width of Milk street intervened between the sacred edifice and weltering billows of the fiery flood that hungered to devour it. The retreat of the baffled sappers and miners with their powder wagon left us in full charge of an area now confined to the vicinity of the blazing Transcript building and the head of Milk street, Morton Place in the rear of the Transcript office and the corner of Milk and Devonshire street were blazing near us and we felt that a crisis was imminent.

Mr. Seymour and his assistant engineers had kept a full head of steam up and soon a long line of hose was double manned and two powerful men seized the nozzle and a rapid stream of water rose to the roof and scorched sides of the lofty tower of the Old South. So fierce was the heat from the burning buildings near by that our copious flood of water was quickly converted into steam, which borrowing rainbow colors from the encrimsoned skies and danced like gay troupes of bespangled chorus nymphs, fantastis figures in the air.

We had to use the utmost skill and caution in directing our streams of water aloft without striking any of the numerous windows of the church as the glass had become so hot that contact with cold water would shatter the panes to atoms and open a breach for the ingress of thickly flying sparks. The

other two engine companies now rejoined us and poured their rapid streams into the blazing windows of the buildings on fire across Milk street, thereby keeping the flames somewhat diminished and confining them within the barriers of the lofty brick walls of the ruined business blocks until a part of the roof of the Transcript building at the corner of Washington street collapsed and fell into the seething crater that roared beneath. The falling roof crashed through five successive floors into the basement of the printing house carrying the huge printing press, folding machine and heavy office safe with it into the hell that rioted in the basement.

The eruption that followed sent a vast column of ignited gas and flaming debris up through the belching of the mouth of the fiery crater far into the windy tumult of the angry sky. While the blistered faces of the awe-stricken firemen were upturned towards the fiery column that wrestled with the cyclonic winds aloft. Suddenly a meteoric body of burning brands sprang from the whirling tower of fire and soared high aloft, upborne by the breath of the conflagration until it crashed against and clung with its fiery beak and claws to the tapering shaft of the Old South's tall spire, midway between the bell tower and weather vane which looked calmly down on a burning city from its "coign of vantage," on top of the church's lofty pinnacle.

The flaming wings of the high fire-brand quickly kindled the hot and blistered loom of the steeple into a flaring blaze of climbing flame--the destruction of the historic Old South seemed imminent and inevitable. The anxious, watching crowd of Bostonians huddled together in a mass on the sidewalk opposite the church door uttered a simultaneous groan of dismay as they realized the grave nature of the crisis at hand. I ordered first and then the other of our co-operating steam engines to play their streams upon the fast mounting spirals of flame that danced exultantly far up the giddy

height of the smoking spirt. The utmost reach of their streams fell far short of the hoped for goal. Only one chance of reaching the lofty lair of the fire-fiend now remained possible. In instant response to my call, Foreman Seymour of the Kearsarge rushed the engine from Court Square to the reservoir in Washington Street close to the sidewalk and southwest corner of the Old South. Fifty feet (one short) of leading hose was instantly coupled on and the drafting hose was lowered into the reservoir ready for action. A good head both of steam and water pressure was already on. I requested the engineer to give the furnace free draft and run the steam pressure on the boiler to the utmost limit of its capacity. The foreman then placed thirty firemen opposite each other in double file along the extended hose and double manned pipe and nozzle--the pipesmen (four giants) including the foreman stood directly in front of and within six feet of the Washington street entrance of the church, in breathless silence awaiting the word of command. The engineer, Mr. Mannent, soon signaled "Ready!" The foreman and pipesmen were on the sidewalk so near the perpendicular walls of the square tower supporting the lofty spire, that they could not see up to the spot on the slim tapering shaft where the flames held high carnival. My station in the center of Washington street commanded a full view of the blaze. As soon as the engineer's "Ready" signal was repeated, I uttered one brief order, "Kearsarge, Play!" The quivering, groaning engine almost leaped into the air as an impetuous stream of water escaped through the opened valve into the ready embrace of the waiting leathern hose which writhed like a gorged boa constrictor, under the sudden onslaught of the powerful rush of the eager stream, until the kinks and angles in the line of straining hose were all straightened out. Soon the plucky hosemen got the wriggling serpent subdued and compact, round and almost perpendicular column of water then rushed

impetuously high and steadily higher, helped in its flight by the ascending currents of hot air driven skyward by the fervent heat that rushed through the open window spaces of the burning buildings in our immediate vicinity.

From my point of observation back of the pipesmen I saw the rope-like stream of water from the tense and straining hose reach up to and fairly exceed the altitude of the fast increasing flames. The sturdy and thoroughly disciplined firemen stood unflinchingly restraining and directing the laboring hose unmindful of the refluent water that rushed down the drenched sides of the watch tower and massive belfry like swift cascades descending a mountain side, drenching their clothes in the chilly flood. Yet, heedless of danger and unmindful of discomfort the brave fellows stood every man alert and resolutely determined to save the "Old South" from its impending doom.

Then the order rang clear, "Backward, march! halt! More steam engineer!" How she throbs, do you hear? Steam up, do not fear. Now Pipesmen, high aim, hit the steeple aloft,--just a yard from the flame--a good shot! You have won boys, the game! The brand is dislodged! The fire is out! The Old South is saved! The glad people shout!!"

Yes, the steeple fire was surely extinguished and a fearful peril had been averted. But we realized that the church, roof and tower was so near the combustion point that contact with another vagrant fire brand or aerial flock of incendiary cinders would generate a full fledged conflagration.

As there was then no other engine remaining on duty in the vicinity, the Kearsarge "Haymakers," faithful to the trust Alderman Jenks had committed to their care, organized themselves into two separate companies and continued their efforts to halt the onward march of the menacing flames by alternate periods of work and rest and the means of appeasing the clampering demands of forty hungry stomachs.

For many hours we kept the Old South and the ruined stores on the corner of Washington and Milk streets constantly drenched with water from the exhaustless reservoir which kept the Kearsarge in the throes of strenuous activity while any fire remained to endanger the section we were guarding.

Many exciting and some laughable incidents occurred during the fire to give variety to the impressive scene. As soon as the fire on the spire of the church was extinguished I hastened to the vestry room in the basement of the Old South to relieve the anxiety of the venerable white haired sexton who had remained heroically at his post guarding the vestibule doors of the basement while the fate of the edifice hung in the balance and told him that the fire was out and the church was saved. A more fervent "thank God" never issued from human lips than the glad tidings.

The venerable man recognized and said he was a native of Rye and was glad that his Portsmouth neighbors came so promptly to the rescue of his endangered church.

Before our return to Portsmouth, we went to the Parker House and called for the bill due the hotel company for food furnished our firemen. The clerk in the office with a serious look on his countenance informed me that Portsmouth money was "no good in Boston." "What is the matter with it?" I asked. "Oh," said he, "Mayor Prince came in here and told me not to take any of it, but to take good care of the Kearsarge boys and send all bills for their entertainment to the city hall for payment."

Thomas E.O. Marvin

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T.E.O. Marvin was 79 years old at the time of writing this article. Born

December 18, 1837--Died April 9, 1919. T.E.O. Marvin was 35 years old at the
time of the fire.