



Charleston, January 3, 1921, about 3:00 p.m. All photos courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives.

The Day the Capitol Burned

By Stan Bumgardner

It was a moment no Charlestonian alive at the time would ever forget. A little after 3 p.m., on January 3, 1921, our state capitol burst into flames. The old Victorian capitol was located on Capitol Street in downtown Charleston.

The \$375,000 structure (about \$5.5 million today) was completed ostensibly in 1885 but not really finished for another two years. An 1877 public referendum had determined Charleston to be the permanent capital city, ending a “floating capital” embarrassment in which state officials and records had been transported by steamboat from

Wheeling to Charleston (1870), Charleston to Wheeling (1875), and finally back to Charleston (1885).

But the stately capitol in Charleston (the second on the spot, after the 1870-1875 statehouse) lasted only 36 years. The fire erupted just as children were walking home from school. One of them was future educator, radio pioneer, and historian Harry Brawley (1909 – 1992), just 11 years old at the time. He wrote about January 3, 1921, in our Spring 1986 issue: “Suddenly, the fire bell at City Hall rang out loud and clear. . . . I looked across the side yard of the old Governor’s



The West Virginia Victorian Capitol (1885 – 1921).

Mansion and saw smoke pouring from the Capitol roof.”

A crowd gathered quickly to watch the spectacle but rapidly dispersed when cases of ammunition, stored in the building’s attic—seized during the Mine Wars—began exploding. Brawley described the scene with words like “fireworks,” which scared away much of the crowd for a while but not an 11-year-old future historian. As others ran away, Brawley rushed toward the fire. In moments like this, it’s always a bit odd the things you

remember. For Brawley, it was someone playing “Dardanella,” an instrumental novelty hit of the day, on a phonograph over and over.

The building’s exterior was made of stone and brick, while the inside had wooden floors and fixtures. In other words, it was built like a stove with built-in kindling. The most likely cause of the fire was bad/early electrical wiring. A more interesting, but less plausible, theory is that it was started by security guards who were throwing dice by candlelight.



The Capitol Annex, early home to the West Virginia State Museum and Archives.



The temporary "Pasteboard" Capitol (1921 – 1927), shortly before it also burned.

Since it was daylight in a building with electric lights, the "dice theory" is suspect.

As with many disasters, death is inevitable. Miraculously, everybody in the building escaped to safety. One legislator even carried out his desk during the conflagration. As firefighters fought the blaze valiantly with mostly outdated engines and tools, one of the capitol's walls collapsed, killing a fireman. At that point, fire crews were pulled back and ordered to water down the smoke and flames from a safe distance.

The debris smoldered for three more days. Many early treasures of our state—including the original governors' painted portraits—were destroyed. Artists later re-created the portraits of the pre-1921 governors; these paintings are the ones that hang in our current capitol. Fortunately, a Capitol Annex had been built in the first years of the 20th century, and many of our most important artifacts and documents—such as the first records of our legislature in 1863, Civil War battle flags, and other contents of the West Virginia State Archives and Museum—had been relocated to the

annex, sparing them from the fire across the street.

A building commission selected Cass Gilbert to plan a new capitol. Gilbert had already designed state capitols in Minnesota and Arkansas as well as New York's Woolworth Building. He chose a site for the new West Virginia capitol on Charleston's East End (the current site). Unbeknownst to Gilbert, his father had led Ohio troops into an 1862 Civil War battle on that very site (thanks to historian Terry Lowry for that tidbit).

Meanwhile, a temporary "pasteboard" capitol was erected across the street from the destroyed capitol. In essence, pasteboard is thick cardboard, so it shouldn't have been a great shock when it too burned down in 1927. But we were fortunate with this fire. No deaths, for one, and many documents had already been relocated to the completed West Wing of the new capitol or were still in the Annex. Our current capitol was completed in phases until being dedicated on June 20, 1932.

So, what happened to the artifacts and debris from the burnt capitol? The few artifacts salvaged from inside the building (including the legislative desk) are now

Helaine Rotgin's Memories

On occasion, I've given some history tours of Charleston from one of our city's trolley-styled buses. Helaine Rotgin (1915 – 2010) was a regular on every tour. Helaine was a magical character with vim, vigor, and a steel-trap memory. On my first tour, we stopped at the site where the capitol burned, and I began doing my typical historian spiel. Helaine—well into her 80s—politely interrupted and said, “I was there.” She then recounted how her father had perched a five-year-old Helaine on his shoulders to see over the crowd. She recalled how quickly the building was gone—“minutes,” in her words. Every tour from then on, Helaine was my guest tour guide for that part of the trip. We even worked up something like a Burns & Allen radio comedy routine as a lead-in. I'd say, “Now I could tell you about the fire myself, but I think we'd all rather hear it from someone who was there on January 3, 1921.” I miss Helaine and wish she was here to write this article because she could really tell the story. —Stan Bumgardner

on display in the West Virginia State Museum. The stones and bricks, which were fire-tinged but intact, were sold to general contractors around Charleston and built into various structures in the early 1920s. Some of the outdoor items, such as lights and fencing, can still be seen, too, if you're wandering around Charleston and know what to look for. There's no definitive list, but if you read Stan Cohen and Richard Andre's *Kanawha County Images, Vol. 1*, you'll find a few examples. It's likely, though, that many Charlestonians live in houses made from stones and bricks from our former state capitol without even knowing it. History might be about the past, but there's a certain continuity to it. 🍁

STAN BUMGARDNER is the editor of GOLDENSEAL.

Harry Brawley

More than anyone outside my family, Harry Brawley inspired me to be a historian. A retired educator, he'd take a filmstrip presentation (for young folks, picture an old-fashioned PowerPoint but with better-quality images and more interesting) around to schools and tell stories of West Virginia history. He had a way of making every story come alive in vivid detail. I remember thinking then, “Why does he do this on his own time?” To me, he was a rock star who should've been filling arenas. I could feel his enthusiasm for history. I know most of my classmates were bored to tears, but I was hooked. At age 11, I wanted to be a historian, even if it meant giving free talks forever. Harry Brawley knew something I didn't then. It doesn't matter how many people you're talking to or how bored your audience might appear. If you can get just one kid excited about history, it can change that person's life while preserving a story that otherwise might be lost to the ages. From that time on, I couldn't imagine a more fun and fulfilling life. And, for once, I was right. He also taught me another valuable lesson: if you want to be a historian, don't expect to get rich at it. To Mr. Brawley, thank you! —Stan Bumgardner



Harry Brawley (right) announces election returns, 1956. Other man unidentified. Harry Brawley Collection.









