

ON THIS DAY IN WEST VIRGINIA HISTORY JANUARY 3



On January 3, 1921, the State Capitol in Charleston was destroyed by fire.

CSO: SS.8.24

Investigate the Document: (West Virginia Inspection Bureau Report, 1921, Ms2003- 005)

1. Where was the fire first located inside the State Capitol? Who discovered the fire?
2. Were there any fatalities?
3. What lessons were learned in the fire's aftermath?

Think Critically: Although the cause of the fire was never determined, can you draw an inference as to a *possible* reason for the fire in the report? Has there been any other instances of fires destroying the State Capitol of West Virginia? If so, explain.

**WEST VIRGINIA INSPECTION BUREAU
CHARLESTON BRANCH**

**T. B. SELLERS, MANAGER
COLUMBUS, OHIO**

**FIRE REPORT
WEST VIRGINIA STATE CAPITOL
CHARLESTON, W. VA.**

Date of Fire: January 3, 1921, 3:20 P. M.

E. V. KING, Inspector.

Date of Report: January 20, 1921.

Location: Charleston, Kanawha County, W. Va.

Map: Sanborn, 1912, Page 14, Block 12.

CONSTRUCTION AND OCCUPANCY

Built: 1880-88. Original contract let in 1880. Occupied in 1885 and finally accepted by State Board of Public Works in 1888. **Area**—24,000 sq. ft. **Height**—Three and four stories and basement, surmounted by a clock tower 194 ft. high. **Walls**—Brick with stone facing. Numerous brick interior division walls well above eaves, but not to roof. Large unprotected openings in all walls. **Roof**—Mansard and hip, slate covered, wooden sheathed, and supported by wooden trusses. **Interior Construction**—Ordinary joist, ceiled with lath and plaster; attic unfinished. **Floors**—Concrete in basement; ordinary D. & M. flooring in remainder of building, except corridors which were overlaid with tile. **Open Stairways and Elevators** in corridors, basement to fourth.

Occupancy: Basement—Offices and laboratory of Department of Agriculture. **First Floor**—Governor's office, State Pardon Attorney, Commissioner of Agriculture, Department of Schools, Secretary of State and Attorney General's offices. **Second Floor**—House and Senate Chambers and clerks' offices. Department of Mines, State Banking Commissioner, State Tax Commissioner and Commissioner of Labor. **Third Floor**—Workmen's Compensation Commission and Public Service Commission. **Fourth Floor**—Storage of supplies and some old records; also about 50,000 rounds of small arms ammunition.

Lighting: Electric incandescent. **Wiring**—Knob and tube and conduit. System as a whole considerably below standard. **Heating**—Steam from outside source.

Private Inside Protection: One forty gallon chemical fire extinguisher on wheels and several hand extinguishers. Two vertical pipes with hose on each floor in main corridor, of little value. Night watchman with portable clock. No stations in attic.

STORY OF THE FIRE

Origin: The fire was first seen at about 3:15 P. M. in a storage room on the fourth (attic) floor over the Senate Chamber and while several theories have been advanced by the investigators, no definite cause has yet been assigned, and the exact cause will probably never be determined.

Discovery and Alarm: The fire was discovered by a stenographer who was passing thru the corridor on the second floor when she saw the smoke coming out of the attic. She immediately spread the alarm thruout the building and two janitors went to the attic and found the

ge room over the Senate Chamber. They hurried down and telephoned in
in for the fire department. This alarm was received at headquarters at 3:20 P. M.
monitors after turning in the alarm returned to the attic with a forty-gallon chemical fire
extinguisher on wheels. This extinguisher, however, apparently was never used.

Fire Department: The central station, No. 2 and No. 4 stations responded to the first alarm and reached the fire in a few minutes with the following equipment: One combination squad car, triple combination 1,000 gallon pumper, 75' aerial ladder, combination chemical and hose truck, combination hose and Junior pumper, with a total of 4,000 feet of hose, of which 550 feet was 3" hose. The second alarm brought out the two old steamers which are held in reserve and No. 3 horse drawn hose wagon. The steamers were put into service at once. Two hose lines connected direct to hydrants were carried into the building to the attic and an effort was made to confine the fire to the Senate wing, but owing to the fact that the division wall did not extend to the roof, the highly inflammable roof structure and lack of adequate pressure at this point, these two hose lines were unable to retard the spread of the flames to any extent and one line was soon removed. The other line continued to work from this point until the fire spread to the central part of the building, then it was pulled out. The aerial ladder, after some delay, was raised at the rear of the Senate wing and a line of hose carried to the roof, but this line was soon removed on account of flames breaking out around the eaves. There were six hose lines in all in use and with the exceptions as mentioned above, the fire was fought from the ground outside with little or no effect. These six lines, after considerable shifting, were all finally connected to pumping engines.

Water Pressure: The dial from the recording gauge in the central fire station showed that the water pressure from noon until 3:30 P. M. on the day of the fire was approximately 65 pounds. At 3:30 it jumped to 75 pounds and held at approximately this figure thruout the duration of the fire.

Loss of Life: A brick gable with a heavy stone arch over a dormer window in the rear of the center wing fell when the roof collapsed, killing one man and severely injuring one fireman. Several other men who were engaged in removing records from the building were slightly injured.

Property Loss: The sound value of the building at the time of the fire has not yet been estimated. The original cost of construction was approximately \$400,000.

Points of Interest: Many valuable records were lost, but the heavy brick vaults withstood the heat and the records stored therein were recovered in good condition. The forty gallon chemical fire extinguisher which was taken to the attic at the first alarm exploded during the fire and the tank was blown thru the roof and fell several hundred feet from the building. The exploding small arms ammunition caused considerable excitement among the spectators but no one was injured from flying shells.

CONCLUSION

Owing to the highly inflammable nature of the building, the progress of the fire before the alarm was received and the absence of division walls to roof, it is questionable whether the building could have been saved from total destruction, but it is possible that the fire might have been confined to the Senate wing had all the available hose lines been immediately connected to pumping engines and concentrated on the narrow section connecting the Senate wing with the rest of the building.

LESSONS OF THE FIRE

The necessity of automatic sprinkler systems in public buildings of ordinary joist construction.

