



## "Look Out for the Gunpowder!"

by John V. Morris

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In 1645 eighteen barrels of gunpowder exploded in Boston, setting fire to nearby buildings and destroying valuable records. Shock rocked the city, and not merely because of the damage. That gunpowder had represented the town's entire store. The people

were now left without enough ammunition to defend themselves against Indian attack.

Fortunately the Indians did not take advantage of the situation, but the frightening experience taught the settlers that it was a mistake to store gunpowder in large quantities. They decided that after that it would be distributed throughout the town. There would be no more than one barrel in any one house or store.

However, this apparent remedy proved quite the opposite in the disaster of 1653.

The fire broke out one bitter-cold January night while everyone was in bed, catching the city completely off guard. Its cause was never known, but it had started somewhere along the waterfront, among the ships and wooden warehouses at the foot of King Street.

James Everill was the first one up and out on the street, yelling the alarm and hammering at the doors of his neighbors. Across the way his own warehouse and wharf were caught in the path of the fire. The blaze raced through the buildings, puffing out hot blasts of flames and sparks that jumped the street and set fire to his house. Friends soon arrived, but even with their help very few of Everill's belongings could be pulled out. Soon more than a dozen other buildings along the shore were wrapped in the spreading fire.

There were no bells, no watchmen, no fire engines, no reservoirs—not even fire buckets, ladders, or axes set aside for such an emergency. When finally the townspeople gathered at the fire area, they stood by helplessly, with neither warden nor fire chief to direct them properly.

The blaze warmed the winter night and

lit up the street as bright as noon. Men, women, and children milled about, horrified at their inability to act. The flames had it all their own way, licking and crackling through the wooden buildings.

The town fathers hastily organized companies of men to go into the houses in the path of the fire and carry out food, clothing, and furniture. The salvage work was progressing in spite of the almost unbearable heat, when suddenly it happened. Just as they were about to enter, Sam Cole's "house of publick intertainment" blew up, knocking men to the ground and hurling blazing timber in all directions. The fire had reached the barrel of gunpowder stored in the tavern. No sooner were the men back on their feet than another house blew up in the same manner. The town fathers immediately ordered everyone out of the fire area.

Meanwhile other men had been pulling down buildings along New Street, farther along the path of the fire, and were carting away or soaking the debris. The idea was to make a firebreak too wide to be jumped. The men fastened two strong iron hooks, with chains and ropes attached, over the peak of a roof or the top of a wall, and then pulled on the ropes until the house fell apart. The old thatched dwellings fell with a single yank, but it took many tugs and groans to bring down the heavy-timbered clapboard houses. Many a heavyhearted settler helped to sacrifice his own home in the effort to save the rest of the town, with the tormenting thought in his mind that the fire might yet be stopped before it reached that spot.

The houses on New Street would have

been destroyed anyway. The men were still pulling away at the stubborn walls when flying sparks jumped high over New Street and set fire to a roof in the very center of the area they had hoped to save. As the upper floor broke into flames, some cautious soul yelled, "Look out for the gunpowder!"—and the house was abandoned to the devilish blaze. The fire quickly devoured it, then licked the dry wooden walls of the buildings nearby until the whole area was wrapped in flame.

Now there were two fires, one of them moving through the most congested part of Boston. But the fresh fire hadn't grown to the size and fury of the one from which it had sprung, and weary men with buckets were able to control it somewhat. When the two conflagrations finally met, the flames began to die away, and moonlight and winter winds moved into town once again.

At least a third of the families had been burned out. Stores filled with the goods that were vital to the daily needs of every soul lay in ashes. Many lost everything they owned and, ruined and despondent, sailed back to

England in defeat the next spring.

A general town meeting followed the night of terror, and Bostonians finally took some long-overdue measures:

"Thear shall be a ladder . . . to every house within this Towne that shall rech to the ridg of the house.

"Every howseholder shall provid a pole of above 12 foot long, with a good large swob at the end of it, to rech the rofe of his howse to quench fier. . . .

"A bellman shall goe about the towne in the night from tenn unto five a Cloke. . . .

"Noe fire shall be kindled within three rod of any ware house or wharfe or wood pile. . . ."

In 1654, a year after their great fire, Bostonians signed a contract with Joseph Jynks for "ingins to Carry water in Case of fire"—probably the first fire engines of any kind in America.

And, oh yes—they voted to stockpile their gunpowder once again and forbade anyone to keep more than a small amount in his house or store.

## CHECK YOUR READING

1. The most serious effect of the fire of 1645 was the destruction of
  - A important records
  - B public buildings
  - C gunpowder supplies
  
2. The 1653 fire broke out
  - A along the waterfront
  - B on the highest hill
  - C in the most crowded area
  
3. The townspeople were virtually helpless because they had no
  - A fire-fighting equipment
  - B trained leadership
  - C Both A and B
  
4. Along King Street efforts were concentrated on
  - A starting a bucket brigade
  - B salvaging household goods
  - C stamping out fires on roofs
  
5. This work had to be abandoned because
  - A the heat became unbearable
  - B the men were needed elsewhere
  - C some of the buildings blew up
  
6. The buildings on New Street were torn down in order to make a
  - A gap that the fire could not jump
  - B path for the fire fighters to follow
  - C space in which to stack salvage
  
7. Tearing down the New Street buildings turned out to be
  - A helpful
  - B useless
  - C disastrous
  
8. The flames died out when the
  - A wind shifted
  - B fires met
  - C temperature dropped
  
9. One of the fire laws passed in the town meeting said that every house must have a
  - A bellman
  - B woodpile
  - C ladder
  
10. After the great fire of 1653 the citizens voted to store most of their gunpowder
  - A in one community stockpile
  - B in many private homes and stores
  - C Neither A nor B

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