

BOSTON'S BIG FIRE OF 1872.

Alderman Samuel Little, Fire Alarm Superintendent John F. Kennard and Electrician Charles A. Stearns Tell Their Remembrances of a Most Notable Event in Local History—The Old 52 Box Began Its Reputation for Disaster at This Blaze—The "Deputy Mayor" as a Volunteer Property Saver—Supt Kennard Detected Much Music in the Chiming Bells—Electrician Stearns Relates a Remarkable Prophecy by Chief Damrell.

"I was at the Dudley-st railroad office Nov 9, 1872, waiting for the hour when I usually started homeward," said Samuel Little, chairman of the board of aldermen at that time, "when the alarm was struck from that same old 52 box. I said to George B. Faunce, who happened to be in my office, that I thought I should go down and see if the fire amounted to anything. 'Why,' said Faunce, 'you don't need to go down. It's that same box where there have been so many alarms and so little fire.' "However, I got downtown some way. You may remember that all our horses were out of the service in those days in consequence of the prevalence of the epidemic, and street railroading was a difficult art.

next day without any apparent damage I concluded my counsel to Mr Crump, while well intended, was not sound, and the Washington-st jeweler, being a good customer, kept his stock intact over Sunday at his home.

Many others on upper Washington and Summer sts. who had also removed their merchandise to places of safety on Saturday night, returned it on Sunday as the threatened blocks were deemed the safest place of storage.

"But then came the explosion of Sunday night, which destroyed many stores, arising from gas leakage in the cellar of W. R. Storms & Co, and the Shreve, Crump and Low building was a wreck by Monday morning, and an aged lady, a tenant in the upper story, Mrs Martha Watson, was burned to death.

"During the night I was so busy myself in saving the property of friends and acquaintances," continued Mr Little, "that I saw none of the other members of the government that I recollect, nor did I have anything to do with gunpowder. When I heard that casks of powder, with their heads knocked out, were being carried in and about the burning buildings, I concluded I would avoid such dangerous coworkers, and I did.

"Why, even the Five Cents savings bank building on School st had been marked for demolition by powder, and the money and securities, amounting to \$11,000,000, moved to the house of the president, Paul Adams, at 123 Charles st, and securely guarded.

feature may well be the subject of scientific inquiry."
"I did not see much of Mayor Gaston until the next day," concluded Mr Kennard. "The mayor was in his office most of the time. At night on Sunday and Monday I think he did accept the hospitality of the little bedroom connected with our office, and I think he had his son, at present Col W. A. Gaston, for a companion."

CHARLES A. STEARNS STRUCK THAT FATEFUL ALARM.

He Saw the Blaze Before the Signal Reached Him.

"I was living in November, 1872," said Charles A. Stearns of 39 Church st, Watertown, "on Mt Vernon st in Charlestown, and in walking to the city hall on that fateful Saturday night I could not help with being impressed with the general calmness of the atmosphere. I went on duty at 6 o'clock and at about 7:40, as near as I can now recall, I saw the flames, a tiny but distinct little blaze, coming from a store window.

"Instantly I became alert for the signal which I knew would come, in a few moments at the outside, and I was not disappointed. 'Flitty-two' was quickly clanging on all the bells of the city, and I thus heralded, in the line of my duty, the coming of the biggest fire that Boston has yet recorded in its history of devastating conflagrations. Of course, I could not determine the exact location of that clear little flame that I saw flickering from that Kingston-st window. But instinctively I felt we were in for a fire which the signal for the second and for the third alarm only intensified.

"I was alone," said Mr Stearns, "when I first struck the alarm. But the office, in a short time, was filled with an excited lot of citizens as well as of army and navy officers that were stationed in and about the city, and the unusually quiet fire alarm headquarters was as noisy as the street.

"Well, the alarms kept coming in from all parts of the threatened district," said Mr Stearns, "at a rate that soon exhausted the power to strike them, and for once at least in its career, Boston's fire-alarm system had run itself down.

"I did not sleep at all the first night," said Mr Stearns, "and, in fact, there was no such thing as rest for anyone until the danger point had been passed at 5 o'clock Sunday morning. You see, the flames were checked at the Merchants' exchange on State st, at the Old South corner, at Milk st, and at Washington and Summer sts, at about the same time, and Boston's most destructive blaze was then under control.

"The fire spread very rapidly during the night, and the large building of Macaulay, Williams & Parker on Washington st, which I saw burn from the time it first was on fire until it was a ruin, was about 15 minutes in going through the quick process of destruction.

"I could see also," said Mr Stearns, "the effect of some of the powder explosions, notably those in Kilby st, and this part of the night's work was ill-advised and useless. It was plain that the flames were not checked at all. The fire simply leaped across the gaps created by the blown-up buildings, and this part of the labor was literally a waste of powder."

"It is well to say in this connection, that the powder remedy was proposed by some of the army officers. The plan was not at all favored by Chief Damrell, who by the way, was about the coolest man I saw around that night and while nearly everybody else seemed to lose his head, it is no more than simple justice to say that the fire chief kept his hat on straight and that it covered a head that appeared to be on a level keel at all times.

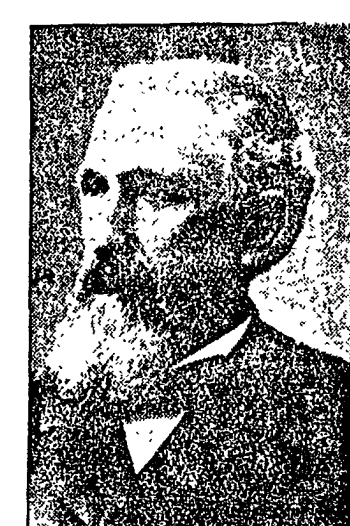
"It was only a few months before this disastrous event," concluded Mr Stearns, "and I remember the circumstance very well that Mr Damrell came into the fire-alarm office with some official visitor from a southern town. The gentleman, who he was I cannot recall, after looking over the city in all directions and apparently enjoying the attractiveness of the scene at all points of the compass, remarked upon the beautiful buildings in the business district.

"Yes," said the chief, "pretty to look at, but dangerous firetraps in their construction. They are, for the most part, surmounted with wooden mansard roofs, and some day we will have a fire that will sweep them all out of existence."

"With a sweep of his hand over what proved to be the burnt district of the terrible night of Nov 9, the chief, with his guest, left the office, and I shall never forget a prophecy that was absolutely fulfilled."



JOHN F. KENNARD,
Formerly Superintendent of Fire Alarm, Boston.



CHARLES A. STEARNS,
Watertown.

At 5 o'clock Sunday morning," concluded Mr Little, "I walked to my home at Roxbury, got a breakfast and a change of clothing, and immediately returned to the scene of the excitement. I did not see any of my people again for four days, and it was indeed a trying time for all concerned, an experience which we cannot easily forget.

"The losses were tremendous, and many a merchant who was bereft of his all on that fearful November night, never again rallied for another attempt to make a competency for himself, while many others took in the situation cheerfully, got on their feet again, and in a few short years were once more commanding a profitable business. But Boston never wants another such visitation."

ALL THE BELLS RANG.

Fire Alarm Supt John F. Kennard Tells His Recollections of the Scene.

"I was in Andrew sq in a car on a street railway turnout," said John F. Kennard, at that time the superintendent of the city's fire alarm, "when the 52 box signalled the beginning of Boston's greatest conflagration, and the glare that lighted the sky over the city seemed to locate the fire much nearer to Dorchester than it proved to be.

"I returned to city hall without my supper and remained on duty until Sunday night. The fire department was then controlled by the committee of the city council as was the fire alarm system and the latter committee for 1872 is shown in the accompanying copy of a photograph in my possession.

It was not many minutes after the first alarm was struck before the second and third alarms were rung upon the bells throughout the city and the universal striking of all these bells in every direction came to us at the top of city hall in much the same cadence as you would notice in a chime.

"First the ringing tones would come from the West End, then from Charlestown, perhaps, then the South End would break in with its complement of brass-throated sounders, and then the South Boston or the East Boston bells would also be heard in their direction. The effect, for all the world, was much like that which one would imagine could be produced upon some gigantic chime of numberless bells, all attuned to each other, and played by some master hand.

"At that time," said Mr Kennard, "there were 23 fire bells in the city, of which five each were located in South Boston and Dorchester, four each in East Boston and Roxbury and five in the city proper. When they were all making music together the sound in the street was stirring if not startling in its effect, and it had a tendency to make a man quicken his steps in whatever direction he might be going."

"Of course, we in the fire alarm office, especially Mr Stearns and myself," said Mr Kennard, "could simply sit still and see the best part of the business section of Boston 'go up' in flames and the blazing light from the rapidly consuming buildings, spreading itself over the entire city, made a scene that will never be effaced. At one time during the night it seemed to us in the fire alarm tower that the entire east part of the town would have to go. The greater portion of the night, however, the smoke was so dense we could not mark the progress of the flames nor determine the location of the fire center.

"An extraordinary feature of that wild and exciting 'Saturday darkness before dawn' was the absence of any wind. If there had been such a high wind as prevailed the following May, on the night of the fire that consumed the Globe theatre and adjacent buildings, at Washington and Essex sts, there would be a much different story to tell of this November burning.

"But it was bad enough as it was, and our office during the entire night was filled with an excited throng of officials and citizens watching the fascinating scene of destruction and certifying the action of the fire fighters. At one time when the buildings at the head of Franklin st were in flames, one could not even put his hand out of the windows of the fire alarm office, and the heat to those standing from the windows was quite perceptible, as the destruction progressed along the burning side of Washington st.

"Be sure and have enough wire for your system's needs," said the auditor to me at the beginning of 1872," continued Mr Kennard, "and I heeded his advice. For on Nov 10 there were 30 miles of the needed article in the storehouse, and 24 hours after the fire broke out in Kingston at every burned-out circuit had been restored and the system put in working order.

"All night long," said Mr Kennard, "the steam from the Parker house ascended in a straight perpendicular line for many feet upward to the sky, and then it slyly floated off toward the harbor. This one circumstantial shows how astonishingly quiet the wind seemed to be, and as it is usually otherwise with large conflagrations, such a