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Fires were very destructive during this decade. Rodgers’ Stable by the Big Spring branch burned in 1890. It was a terrible fire. Horses were roasted. After getting some of them out they ran madly back into the flames. Wells’ Stable burned later, but was rebuilt on Jefferson Street below St. Mary’s Church.

In April, 1891 about nine o’clock at night, Mr. Joe Bradley’s home on Randolph Street burned to the ground. As it was one of the handsome old houses in Huntsville it was a real loss to the town. Set in a formal garden with beds laid out in designs, bordered with English boxwood and ornamented with marble statuary, its white columned porch stood boldly out. Its furnishings were in keeping with the setting. Family portraits, old furniture and silver were consumed by the gluttonous flames. Mr. Bradley was a bachelor. He loved his home and had gone to the expense of maintaining it in hope, gossip said, of some day bringing to it the handsome, charming Sunie White as a bride. But that time never came. He had lived on in elegance, however, with the old dream. It was a bit of romance which returned with every glance at the old house. Humanity likes to be reminded of such faithfulness and is sorry to have that reminder obliterated. It seemed to be a double death.

The home of Major James O’Shaughnessy on Monte Sano burned in March, 1890. The flames attracted many men from Huntsville who drove as rapidly as possible up the mountain to assist the caretaker, Mr. Mat Schrimsher, in fighting the fire and in removing furniture. The flames were so hot that the fire-hose was burned in two. Buckets were then resorted to but they were ineffective.

The volunteers, however, saved about Nine Hundred Dollars worth of furniture. It, too, was a handsome place. The total loss was about Twenty Five Thousand Dollars.

The following description of a fire at Mr. George Scruggs’ store on the Square illustrates how the Fire Department worked in 1891:
The Fire Department drove rapidly around Herstein and Lowenthals' corner and passed by and stopped at the western corner in front of J. Weil and Bros., where immediate connection was made with the plug. As soon as the reel-cart could run off hose, Engineer Wooldridge blew his whistle signaling that he had steam a plenty and was ready to turn on the water. Members of the brigade got in their rubber coats and helmets, made nozzle connection, and were ready for action in a very short time.”

The fire had caught from the stove in the back of the store and was only discovered by accident. As soon as the City Hall bell rang the fire alarm, citizens from every part of town hurried to the Square to assist the firemen in emptying the store. It was soon extinguished.

The Milligan Block was badly damaged by fire in 1899. That was one of the fires, however, which did good. Mrs. Milligan tore down the old buildings and built the present buildings there.

The burning of the Huntsville Female College has been described in Chapter 16 on schools. The Court House fire of 1895 [see Page 71] harmed only the files. The building was of stone.

By 1899 the city employed three full-time firemen and twelve volunteers. The engine room in the City Hall, located at the west corner of Clinton and Washington Streets, was enlarged to accommodate dormitories for the firemen and Chief Ozra Stegall.

Chapter 16: "Schools"

On Tuesday morning, January 8, 1895, the fire department was ordered to the College. The City Hall bell clanged vigorously until a large crowd was gathered in the street in front of the college. The firemen connected the hose at the plug, the fire engine whistle sounded but the water would not reach the fourth storey of the building. Men volunteered to carry trunks and furniture to safety. They went in in squads while the Hook and Ladder Company put their extension ladders to the roof. One man, bolder than the others, went to the part of the roof nearest the flame. The hose was finally gotten to him but the water
pressure was too weak to be effective. A high wind pounding the trees swayed them near the flame and scattered sparks over neighboring buildings. Men on the ground floor were moving pianos while others were letting trunks out of upstairs windows to men below. Many of the girls were frantically wringing their hands crying, "My clothes are all burning up!" The crowd's attention was suddenly turned by a great cry to the fireman on the roof. The flame had broken out in a long line between him and the ladder. He surveyed the situation calmly. It was too high to risk crossing it. The crowd held their breath while he crawled to the edge of the roof and looked over. There was a large gutter a little to the left. Slowly he crawled to it. Clutching it in both hands he swung himself around it and slid the four stories to the ground in safety. The crowd stood dumb. It was a miracle they thought.

The piano squad saved twelve out of twenty pianos. As the fire raged on sparks carried by the wind set the next house, and those facing Clinton Street, afire. Volunteers began a bucket brigade and were almost as effective as the fire engine.

Finally it was too dangerous to go into the College building or to stand near it. The people were pushed into Lincoln Street and up Randolph to Calhoun. Even after the roof fell in some of the girls wanted to go in after their clothes. The fire burned most of the afternoon.

... Dr. Jones received Twenty Thousand Dollars in insurance on the building and Nine Thousand Three Hundred Dollars on the College furniture. He tried to raise the money to rebuild but the citizens were too poor to give their share so the idea was abandoned and the lot subdivided for cottages.

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*When Elizabeth Humes Chapman wrote her book, Changing Huntsville: 1890–1899, she quite naturally included a chapter, “Fires of Huntsville,” to accompany such others as “Clubs,” “Schools,” “Personalities,” and “Civic Organizations.” Fires were an integral part of the past. They took on a life of their own and left in their wake stark monuments testifying to their devastating power.*

*Huntsville awakens each morning and, looking up toward the eastern sunrise may catch the dance of light beaming the shadow of the chimney atop Monte Sano that is all that is left of the Monte Sano Hotel. It stands sentinel on the bluff reminding us that fire is a destroyer. We must preserve those reminders. They are grave markers on our landscape, memorials to our architectural past.*

*Since her chapter is brief, colorful, and may help sell a few of her books (proceeds go to HHF) it is included here.*