



This view of downtown Fall River following the great fire of 1928 shows the ruins of the Granite Block at the corner of Pocasset and Main streets, as seen from the Academy Building.

Photos
courtesy of
the Fall River
Historical
Society.

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By 3 a.m. on Feb. 3, it was pretty much over. Fall River Fire Chief Jeremiah F. Sullivan stood in front of the post office, surveying the wreckage.

The post office had been saved. So had city hall. Much else was gone.

In the wreckage, firemen still worked, directing streams of water on anything that smoked. "Fall River is practically under military rule this morning," wrote *The Fall River Herald News*.

A dozen state troopers guarded the center of the city. They were joined by members of the Naval Militia and National Guard units. The last two groups patrolled with loaded guns and fixed bayonets. There would be no looting.

In the next few days, it would become known that the great fire of 1928 started because workmen tearing down the Pocasset Mill had built a warming fire in an empty drum. The men left for the day, but the fire continued to burn in its barrel. Eventually, the heated bottom of the barrel caught the mill's oil-soaked floor on fire.

Because the Pocasset Mill was being destroyed, its sprinkler system had been disabled and its fire doors had been removed.

The fire had cut the heart out of downtown Fall River.

The Metacomet Bank was burned out, as were the Massasoit-Pocasset Bank, Union Bank and Citizens Bank.

The Mohican Hotel on Central Street and Main Street was gone. The Wilbur Hotel on Granite Street was burnt out, too. The Granite Block on Main Street was consumed and with it J.C. Brady's, P.S. Brown's and Riddell's, all drug stores in that block.

The Mohican Drugstore, located in the Mohican Hotel, was gone, too. The Pocasset Mill, where it started, still had its chimney standing, but nothing else. The Western Union telegraph office and Postal Telegraph's offices were burned out, as were two fruit stands.

The aftermath

The Mohican Hotel, gone. The Wilbur Hotel, gone. The entire Granite Block, gone. **The great fire of 1928** ripped the heart out of Fall River.

Also, the city lost what *The Fall River Herald News* described as "a score or more of small shops and nondescript buildings."

Six firemen were severely injured. Fall River Fireman Arthur C. Lovenberry would die a few days later of pneumonia he caught fighting the fire. Twenty more firemen had what were called "light injuries."

In the city, 250 people were hospitalized, 20 of them kept overnight. Banks not overtaken by the fire stayed open all night during the blaze offering storage in their vaults, saving valuable papers, cash and jewelry. The banks that opened their vaults to the public didn't restrict this good deed to their own depositors.

On Feb. 3, the Fall River Police Department said they did not "favor" any sightseeing until the safes and valuables were removed from the ruins and there was no danger from falling walls. Eventually, 250,000 people would come to view the ruins.

Three hundred and forty-eight firemen from as far away as Boston had fought the fire. They made their last stand at Bedford and Rock streets at 3 a.m. on Feb. 3, stopping the fire before it could burn into the tightly packed neighborhoods to the north and east.

No one ever really knew what the cost of the fire was, but contemporary sources estimate between \$6 million and \$10 million. About \$4 million was covered by insurance.

The city gritted its collective teeth and prepared to rebuild.

But there was more going in Fall River than just the fire. Just before the fire, mill owners, faced with competition from the South, had cut every worker's wage by 10 percent.

At St. Mary's, the church in the heavily Irish Corky Row section of the city, the Rt. Rev. Msgr. James Cassidy took the pulpit and delivered a sermon he titled, "Mills that Burn and Mills that Grind." In the sermon, he lashed mill owners for the pay cut.

"What matters it to build beautiful buildings along Main and Bedford Streets behind which to screen misery, and want and starvation?" Cassidy said.

The Great Depression would begin in 1929.



A view of Bedford Street, from Main Street, the morning after the Feb. 3, 1928, fire. The Buffington Building at the corner of Purchase Street can be seen just to the right of center.