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## **Steam Gauge and Lantern Works Fire Memorial**

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Speaking Stones

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**Names:** All six unidentified victims of the fire, including William Birdsey, Alfres Gannon, John Miller, Frank J. Reimes, John Santry, William J. Smith

**Keywords:** fire, natural disaster, Steam Gauge and Lantern Works, unidentified victims, Rochester, November 1888, fire escapes

**Abstract:**

Description and history of the Steam Gauge and Lantern Works Factory fire and its aftereffects in the city of Rochester. Also includes descriptions of the city wide reactions to the fire, including search for a cause, focus on fire safety, charity and the impact of unidentified dead.



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## Introduction

On November 10th, 1888, the *New York Times* ran an article, stating “In the whole history of Rochester no more frightful calamity has ever taken place than was caused by a fire in the enormous factory of the Rochester Steam Gauge and Lantern Works to-night” (NYT). Even a Rochester citizen wrote home to his family in Germany, describing the incident.

It was at 7:30 in the evening as a lamp factory burned where 250 people work during the day... The fire started on the fifth floor and the people had to jump or be burned alive. On the first evening they already carried out 25 dead. It was heart rendering as the relatives were searching for their husbands and sons. All in all, only six people escaped unscathed, the others either burned to death or were mortally injured. They don't know exactly how many were in the factory, the number will probably go as high as fifty dead; our street was the worst one affected. (Riedmann 2)

Indeed, the fire that began on the night of November 9th, 1888 in the Steam Gauge and Lantern Works factory killed 34 men, including six who could not be identified. These six men were laid to rest in a plot donated by Mt Hope Cemetery on November 21st, 1888 in a city-wide funeral service attended by hundreds. Their deaths represented a collective loss felt by the community of Rochester in the weeks after the fire. Hence, the

memorial stands as a much as a testament to the lives lost by the men who perished as it does to the experience of tragedy felt by all those who were living and affected.

## The Fire



In 1888, Steam Gauge and Lantern Works Co. employed over 250 workers and was “situated at the foot of Center street, upper falls of the Genesee... comprised [of] an immense plant of stone and brick walls and machinery” (*Industries of the City* 267). It produced a large quantity and variety of oil-burning lanterns, used commonly by government services and private companies, such as steamboats and railroads.

At 7:30pm Friday, November 9th, 1888, an alarm was called out from Box 91 at a neighboring building, the Rochester cotton factory. The fire, whose cause is unknown and was suspected to have started in the bottom boiler room, was already out of control by the time firemen arrived on the scene. Most men were working on the fourth and fifth floors, unaware of the fire until black smoke began to filter upwards and the fire began to spread. Many were forced to jump while the firemen scrambled to try and save those who were trapped above. Soon, the east, west and north portions of the factory began to fall, with the floor giving out and crushing the remainder of the men in the building. Some men were able to escape, though with substantial injuries. Many were rushed to

nearby hospitals, including City Hospital and St. Mary's Hospital (Factory Inspectors 46). For days after the fire, workers worked around the clock to dig up bodies from the rubble, hoping to bring closure to the many families worried about those missing workers.

Perhaps the most important characteristic of the fire was the spectacle of death itself, with lives taken so suddenly by a natural disaster. Many accounts list the hundreds of spectators who came with word of the fire, as "crowds gathered at every point where a view of the burning building could be obtained... [even] Central avenue bridge became so filled with people that it was impassable" (Factory Inspectors 43).

The scene of the fire was not a pleasant one. Most men were trapped on the upper floors with no way to get out. Jumping was a common occurrence. Even when firemen held out safety nets, there were many instances where the smoke caused the men to miss. One newspaper reported,

The story of Friday night's terrible calamity has been graphically told in the newspapers, but no description, however vivid, can adequately reproduce the agonizing scenes enacted, nor can the terror of the situation be appreciated by those who did not hear the despairing screams of men who jumped to almost certain death and who did not see the ghostly faces staring through the smoke enveloped windows, praying for the succor that human aid could not give (D&C Nov 11th).

To see the pure terror experienced by those within the fire and the desperation of men jumping from five story windows must have been a gruesome experience of death itself for the hundreds of Rochester citizens watching. The realization of death must have made an impact on the many factory workmen making up a significant portion of the city's population, as it could have easily been their work-shift or their factory that was destroyed in a fire.

## City Reactions

Many survivors sought to find someone to blame for such a disaster. John Van Korff, the engineer at Lantern Works, was arrested on November 14th under suspicion for causing the fire. According to officials, his “record is decidedly a strange one” (D&C Nov 15) while “he has for years shown signs of mental derangement” (NYT Nov 15). The newspaper ran updates on him for days, particularly as the police connected him to a variety of fires around the city. Chief Hayden and Captain McCormic, leaders of the investigation claimed that “we believe the public have the same desire to get at the true causes of this fair that has situated us” (D&C Nov 17). While it is not known if Van Korff was tried or not, the number of stories in the daily newspapers suggested a strong public interest about his history and likely role in the fire’s cause.

Secondly, many of the public responded in anger over the lack of proper fire escapes in the Steam Gauge and Lantern Works factory. One citizen wrote to the Editor of the *Democrat and Chronicle*, arguing that,

The great calamity should teach our municipal authorities as well as the owners and occupants of large buildings not absolutely fire proof, that effective steps tending to the preservation of the lives of our fellow citizens and to their absolute immunity from bodily injury arising from working in such buildings, are duties they will no longer be permitted to ignore (D&C Nov 13).

The letter goes on to suggest specific modifications that could be made to such buildings in order to improve the safety for future incidents. Indeed, such preventions could have saved a significant amount of workmen in the building, as many were unable to access the few fire shoddy escapes attached to the building.

As a result the factory inspector Schaubert was put on the spot as someone who should have been responsible for the safety of factory workers. When condemned for

his role in the disaster, he avoided the blame, claiming that “those fire escapes were placed on the building at the time it was put up and before I was inspector... [and] several months ago I called the Steam Gauge Company’s attention to the fact that I considered its fire escapes inadequate” (D&C Nov 11th). Regardless of the Inspector’s role, the fire escapes were indeed faulty. Witness after witness recounted how the escapes were impossible to use and hard to access. This led to a series of investigations that proved that “most of the fire escapes provided by the Lantern Works had been inaccessible to the workers... or had served as fire traps themselves” (McKelvey 7). This encouraged the city to require new safety precautions, leading to the construction of 342 fire escapes in the next 18 months (McKelvey 7).

### **Focus on the Unidentified**

News articles at this time note how city residents felt a profound sense of responsibility to the victims of the fire, and they assembled committees to organize a proper burial and service. This was especially apparent in the effort to provide relief funds for victims and their families. The newspaper listed several accounts of clubs raising funds or organizing benefits. The unidentified dead were of particular interest. George Smith of No. 187 Reynolds street was known to be the “first to make contribution for the unidentified dead” as he donated a total sum of \$15 to be used in contributing to the burying of the dead (D&C 11th). He was described as “a mechanic and feels that it is his duty to do all he can to secure a proper burial for the unidentified dead”.

If we take George’s donation as a declaration for the importance of a ‘proper burial’, we can understand how unsettling the existence of ‘unidentifiable’ dead was for

citizens of Rochester. If identities and connections to the living, primarily family and friends, could not be constructed, then the bodies were left just as bodies, with no trace as to their lives prior the fire. It became difficult for families then to associate to the physical remains, as “the sense of uncertainty must have added much to their grief. For there was no one coffin of which any of these mourners could say “that is mine; that contains my dead” (D&C Nov 21st).

Therefore, much care and concern was put into the burial and memorization of those “unidentified”. On November 14th, 1888, a letter to the editor of the *Democrat and Chronicle* stated:

Sir: At a meeting of the commissioners of Mt. Hope Cemetery held this day, the following resolution was adopted: *Resolved*, That we hereby tender to the Hon, C R Parsons, mayor of the city of Rochester, a lot for the unidentified dead recovered from the Steam Gauge and Lantern Company’s fire, the location of the lot to be decided upon after consultation with the friends and relatives of the deceased. Frederick Cook, Henry C. Brewster, Henry B. Hathaway. (D&C, 1888).

The funeral arrangements for other victims were already occurring in the weeks after the fire, among the many cemeteries in the city. Discovering bodies themselves was also a slow and tenuous process, requiring a crew of men to dig in the rubble for weeks after disaster. Once found, the corpses were difficult to identify due to the fire. The paper described those found as “a horrible site... in fact, no one would have taken them for remains of human beings had he not known the history of their terrible end” (D&C Nov 12th). For those who could be identified, officials were forced to rely upon small clues. Identities were constructed upon “a spot two inches square covered with hair”, trinkets found among the rubble such as gold rings and watches, house keys and scraps of clothing.

### **Religious Significance**



After weeks of discovering and identifying bodies, the city looked to establish some closure. According to anthropologist Emile Durkheim, “the role of mourning rituals [serves] social ends even more than they serve the private needs of the bereaved” (Davies 14). Since the disaster was experienced on such a broad level, a city-wide funeral was planned and organized. On Sunday, November 18th, “about thirty of the relatives of missing employees of the Steam Gauge and Lantern Company, assembled in the mayor’s office to give their opinion as to the disposition of the bodies unidentified” (D&C Nov 19). A committee was established to find a solution for the unidentified dead. After a debate over the two cemeteries, Mt Hope and Holy Sepulcher, it was determined by majority that dead would rest in Mt Hope. A public funeral was arranged for Wednesday November 21st, in which “the mayor agreed to take charge of the arrangements”. On Tuesday, November 20th, the Mayor issued an address to the city as following:

*To the Citizens of Rochester,*

The closing scenes of the sad calamity with which our fair city has been visited, the funeral services over the bodies of the unidentified dead, will take place at Washington Rink at 10:15 o’clock to-morrow morning. The public schools of the city will be closed during the forenoon, and it is hereby directed that all of the public offices of the city remain closed until noon. The request is also here-by extended to all of our citizens, so far as may be able to join in giving testimony of our common grief with those who have been so deeply afflicted. To this end it is earnestly recommended that so far as practicable, all places of business be closed between the hours of 10 and 12 o’clock of Wednesday morning. The general observance of the day will also testify to our deep sealed resolve by suitable legislation, ordinances and private effort, to provide such efficient safeguards for our working people as shall absolutely prevent a recurrence of this dreadful suffering, sorrowful death.

Cornelius R. Parsons, Mayor

The next day, the newspapers proclaimed that “Rochester [has] never witnessed a sadder funeral than that which closed yesterday morning, one of the saddest chapters

in history” (D&C November 22nd). Rev. Dr. Sankey of the United Presbyterian Church delivered the official funeral sermon, in which he touched upon themes of sympathy, charity and, most importantly, mortality. He stated,

In this day of adversity we are called to consider the obvious lessons which God evidently wishes to impress upon our minds and hearts. Methinks God called us here not simply to weep with those who weep but to teach us a lesson of mortality and of the importance of being ‘ready.’

According to scholar Douglas Davies, funeral rituals such as this one work to “influence and change human identity as that self-consciousness, challenged by mortality, responds in its own defense through literal and metaphorical ‘words against death’” (3). Sankey’s speech included such ‘words against death’, claiming that the death of others should serve as a reminder to the living that we all are mortal beings. He emphasized the “life is a day” metaphor when he proclaimed “death came to them as a thief in the night. So it may come to us” (Lakhoff 6). This is also a reference to Jesus and the second coming, which was a common reminder to listeners to rely upon religion to deliver immortality from death.

Sankey also impressed upon the community a sense of charity and the power that a great disaster can have to bring together citizens of a city. He praised the city and its efforts, exclaiming,

not only did the mayor seem to forget his official duties and give his days and nights to the care of the sick and wounded, but lawyers, physicians, merchants, mechanics, priest, preachers and people, Jews and gentiles, Catholics and Protestants came together and hand in hand, heart to heart, worked together in sympathy for those whose circumstances were less fortunate than our own.

Again, regarding the diverse population joining together in one communal effort, Sankey reminded his listeners that all are mortal under God, subject to the very same tragedies that befell those in the fire. Sankey’s eulogy is also a good example of using funeral

rites to “turn a biological state of grief, with all its negative consequences, into a positive status of one who has survived to tell the tale” (Davies 42). Citizens of Rochester who had survived the great fire are now somehow enhanced through the experience, especially in a religious sense.

Rev. J. E Adams at the first Methodist Episcopal Church built on these very same ideals in his sermon, printed in the *Democrat and Chronicle* on November 19th. For his sermon, he selected the text “For man also knoweth not his time, as the fishes that are taken in an evil net and as the birds that are caught in an evil snare so are the sons of men in an evil time when it falleth suddenly upon them” (Ecclesiastes ix, 12). Again, people are reminded that they are mortal creatures, like the animals that roam the earth. However, he builds upon mortality to add that it is within religion than man can find his immortality. He claimed that

After all it is probable that nothing can ever be done to entirely obviate physical danger. Danger will lurk in every ambush and death stalks through the darkness. Our only safety is spiritual... The safety for men to seek is the safety of their souls... We cannot make the body safe, but we can make the soul safe. Christianity can accomplish this.

Rev. Adams noted religion’s power to overcome death itself and to provide “safety” from the dark, and such “words against death” might have provided significant relief to those experiencing tragedy at the time.

## **The monument**

Three years later, after the events that occurred in the city in the weeks after the fire, a monument was built upon the burial sites of those unidentified victims. In 1891,

Mt Hope Cemetery submitted to the State of New York a request for funds to build a proper monument to commemorate the six unidentified victims of the fire. It reads: The monument for the fire victims sits on plot section BB, lot 123. The burial site was picked by Mayor Parsons himself, along with an appointed committee composed of Alderman McMillian and John Rauber (D&C 21) The site was chosen to be “directly

## CHAP. 274.

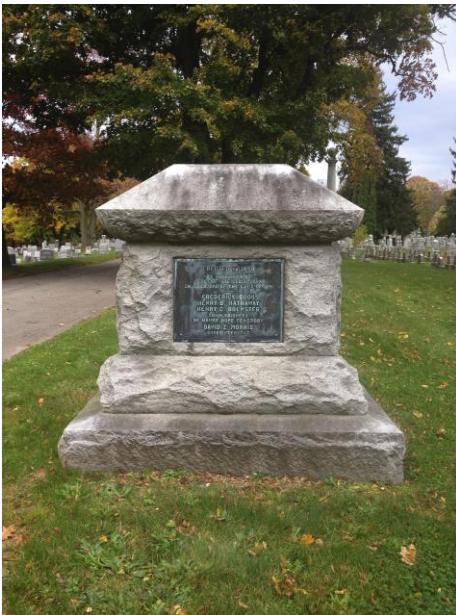
AN ACT relative to Mount Hope cemetery of the city of Rochester.

BECAME a law without the approval of the Governor, in accordance with the provisions of article four, section nine of the Constitution, April 28, 1891. Passed, three-fifths being present.

*The People of the State of New York, represented in Senate and Assembly, do enact as follows :*

SECTION 1. The commissioners of the Mount Hope cemetery of the city of Rochester are hereby authorized and empowered to erect and suitably inscribe an appropriate monument in said cemetery to mark the resting place of the six unidentified victims of the fire which destroyed the steam gauge and lantern works in said city, on the night of November ninth, eighteen hundred and eighty-eight, and to expend out of any undesignated moneys in their hands such sums as may be necessary therefor, not exceeding five hundred dollars.

§ 2. This act shall take effect immediately.



under the shadow of the firemen’s monument”, claiming that “this is a beautiful part of the cemetery, and in the minds of all well suited to the purpose, as the beautiful firemen’s monument will ever be a guide to the spot so closely associated with the one of the city’s greatest calamities” (D&C Nov. 21st, 1888). The fact that the Mayor himself picked out the gravesite stands as a testament to the importance the burial of these unknown victims.

The state passed the legislation to build upon the unmarked plot in 1891, and a monument was erected seven years later in 1898. The stone itself is made of granite, rough for the most part, except for a smooth “roof”-like top. The only decorations are found on the four corners on the top, appearing to look like leaves or a design de fleur, however quite hidden underneath the arches of the top.

The stone itself almost appears to look like a lantern, with its triangular roof atop a set of square bases. There are two plaques on opposite ends. One reads, “Erected in 1898 by authority of an act of the Legislature Chapter 274 of the laws of 1891, Frederick Cook, Henry B.

Hathaway, Henry C Brewster, Commissioners of Mount Hope Cemetery, David Z. Morris Superintendent.”



The other is more descriptive, the description as follows,

In the Evening of the ninth of November, 1885, the manufactory of the Steam Gauge and Lantern Company while filled with operatives, was destroyed by a fierce and sudden fire in which thirty four lives were lost. The remains of these six burned beyond the possibility of recognition were buried here; William Birdsey, Alfres Gannon, John Miller, Frank J Reimes, John Santry, William J Smith.

The inscription also contains a small epitaph of the Bible phrase, “But God was not in the fire, and after the fire, a still small voice...” which can be found in Kings 1 Chapter 19. This verse refers the story of the prophet Elijah, who was spared from death by God, after praying to God to take his life. It suggests that true immortality lies within God, who has the power to decide when and if one is taken into heaven. This verse also emphasizes the very same themes of mortality brought up in the funeral services and sermons given all around the city, in which we have no power over when God decides

to claim us. One must acknowledge one's own earthly mortality in order to truly accept a greater immortality with God.

The lack of details surrounding the identities of the six men inscribed upon the Steam Gauge and Lantern Works monument suggest the stone itself served more as a reminder of the disaster and less about the men who are buried underneath. There are no dates of birth or mention of family. Hence, the monument stands less as a headstone for those six unidentified men, but as a representation for the collective experience of death felt by the entire city of Rochester. Never before had the city experienced such a powerful reminder of mortality than the fire on the night of November 9th and the events that followed.

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