

## **Disastrous Fire Sweeps Fayette – 100 Years Ago**

One hundred years ago at 6:15 in the morning of Friday, March 24, 1911, Mr. Benjamin Thornton was walking down the main street of Fayette on his way to work in his office at the Fayette Mill and Fertilizer Company located southeast of the railroad depot. As he reached the northern-most part of the business district he noticed flames coming from Dr. J. D. Young's drug store located on the east side of Temple Avenue near where Robbie's store is today.

According to the recount from the *Fayette Banner* newspaper published on March 30, 1911, the entire business district including the \$40,000 court house and four residences were destroyed in one hour and forty minutes. "The fire spread very rapidly. Having started near the northern limit of the business district, and the wind blowing in a strong gale in a south-easterly direction, it could easily be seen that the entire street was doomed."

"The entire population of the town turned out and formed themselves into a bucket brigade to fight the flames, and to their efforts is due the fact the greater section of the residences of the town was not destroyed," the paper reported. "The town had only recently invested in a small chemical engine which did good service in saving the home of Zeb Graham [located next door to the Methodist church which sat on the corner of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue and Columbus Street], and thereby preventing the spread of the conflagration [inferno] to the eastern residence section."

Many people threw down their buckets and helped store owners retrieve as much of their wares as could be brought from the buildings in such a short amount of time. Although all the buildings were a total loss, some of the merchants saved a small amount of stock.

The late Mrs. Ruth Riley, who was 10 years old at the time of the fire, recalled she and her mother standing in their front yard at the top of the hill on Columbus Street watching as the fire raged down Temple Avenue. She also remembered men pulling merchandise out of stores and piling it along both sides of the Columbus Street almost to her home. "Some of it stayed there for days and no one bothered it," she said.

As published in the 1911 *Fayette Banner*, "The depot of Southern Railway was saved after having caught fire several times. Astute gentlemen pulled up boxcars between the fire and the depot. As the cars began to burn, they were pulled away and replaced time and again until, from lack of fuel, the fire burned itself out. This building and the county jail were all of any consequence left in the region of the fire."

"There were no lives lost, nor were there serious accidents though many were caught in close quarters and had narrow escapes. There was no suffering from lack of food or shelter, despite the fact that every store in town is in ashes."

Fifty-six buildings were lost. The heaviest losses were suffered by Robertson & Dodds and Propst Brothers, which firms owned their own buildings and carried very large stocks of merchandise. Estimated losses totaled \$383,350. Insurance coverage totaled \$43,850. Losses for Robertson & Dodds were \$100,000 and Propst Brothers losses were \$75,000.

According to the local newspaper, the records of the probate judge's office were thought to all be safe, "but this cannot be determined until the vault is opened. The chancery records were consumed, as were those of the tax assessor. The circuit clerk, sheriff and tax collector saved their records."

The spring session of circuit court was in session and was in the midst of the trial of Mr. Elmer Olive, charged with murder. The trial continued in the Methodist church and Mr. Olive was convicted and sentenced to five years in the penitentiary.

Temporary quarters for all the county officials were erected at the back of the court house property within the following week. Immediately after the fire, merchants erected shacks in the middle of Temple Avenue and at both ends of town. One week after the fire, all businesses that were destroyed were back in business in their temporary shacks and one new business had been established.

The first business to begin operation after the fire was Jones Brothers general merchandise store. Only a few hours after the fire, this enterprising team poured water over the coals and ashes, cleared away the debris, and had a traction engine pull a small building in position to resume business. Robertson & Dobbs, Propst Brothers, J. R. Robertson, Berry Brothers, B. J. Bogard, Graham & Mallory, W. M. Cannon, City Meat Market, and two livery stables which saved their livestock but little else were back in operation within 2 to 3 days.

Although merchants were eager to resume what little business they could, clean-up efforts were surely hampered since the March 30 edition of the *Fayette Banner* noted that the town had been filled with sightseers after the fire. Each day, large crowds were reported to have come to Fayette daily on every train and from all directions over the county roads.

On Saturday, March 25, 1911, the day following the fire, contracts were let to a contractor in Columbus, Mississippi for the erection of three two-story brick buildings for Dr. T.M. Peters, Smith-Dodson & Company and W. D. Putman.

On Monday, March 27, Mayor J. E. Chandler called a meeting of the town council and councilmen Edward Rose, Edgar Walker, Sam J. Sanders, and Joe E. Caine passed an ordinance which stated, "It shall be unlawful for any person, firm or corporation to erect, construct, maintain or repair any residence, business house, office, structure or building within the corporate limits of the Town of Fayette, Alabama, unless they be of a permanent character and constructed of brick, stone or concrete."

By the second week in April the county commission had hire a contractor, approved plans and specifications and advertised bids for the construction of a \$58,000 new courthouse.

The sentiment of the people of Fayette could not be more clearly demonstrated than by the words of the editor of the *Fayette Banner* article published six days after the fire. The publisher wrote, "Heavy as the blow has been to the town, there is no abatement of confidence in the future of Fayette among the citizens. That a handsomer and more enduring town will arise from this fire-swept city is the determination of the merchants who suffered in the [inferno] that swept out the entire business district.

The people, with true American grit, are determined to begin anew on firmer foundations. From out of the wreck and ashes of a disastrous fire, Phoenix-like, this town will rise to greet the best people, in the best town in the United States."

Fayette before fire of 1911.



Pictures after fire of 1911.





Page 1  
Xepet