

THE MIRAMICHI FIRE OF 1825 by Lillis R. (Barnett) Zimmer

The fire which struck the Miramichi area in early October, 1825 was one of the largest, if not the largest, recorded in New Brunswick history. It travelled along the Miramichi and down the Nashwaak Valley into Fredericton. Hardest hit, however, were the inhabitants of the Miramichi settlements. There were no settlers in that region left untouched by its cruel forces. If they, themselves, escaped they were left with the unpleasant chore of burying the dead, and finding a way to survive with winter which was almost upon them.

The summer of 1825 was an unusually warm and dry one. It is recorded that some of the emigrants coming to the United States, fell dead because of the heat, after having drunk too much cold water.¹

Closer to home, it was reported that fires were very common throughout Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. By mid-September most of the regions in Nova Scotia had received enough rain to nearly exterminate all of these fires. The Miramichi, however, did not receive any rain at all during that summer, although little hardship was felt from this due to the plentiful number of springs and other water supplies.²

An eyewitness to the fire recorded that "the climate for two days previous was so intensely close and warm that all doubts were removed as to some great fire existing in the woods."³

By the afternoon of Friday the seventh of October 1825, at about 3:30, a broad and thick column of smoke was seen rising at quite a distance in the northwest direction from Newcastle. Because of the distance of the fire, and the number of other fires which had existed that summer, it did not alarm the people to any great degree.⁴

By about 7:00 pm a strong breeze was coming from the northwest, and the sky was darkening. At about 8:00 pm the full force of the fire hit, creating its own hurricane. It took only minutes to spread throughout the whole town.⁵

The residents hurried to the river for safety, and clung to logs or rafts. Unfortunately, because of the strong winds the water was rough, and many people were drowned when they fell into the violent waters.⁶

The damage caused by the fire was intense. One account states that the fire covered over 4000 square miles.⁷ It is known that this fire also reached Fredericton. In the House of Assembly which opened in January of the following year, Lieutenant-Governor Howard Douglas speaks about the extent of the damage:

Here, in the seat of Government, the loss, though great, has, mercifully been confined to property, but in other quarters, the conflagration raged with more fatal fury.⁸

In the town of Newcastle all but fourteen buildings were consumed. Among those destroyed were the courthouse, church, barracks, and goal.⁹

Douglstown was also practically destroyed. The mercantile establishment of Messrs. Gilmore & Rankin, Abrams & Co., along with their vessel was destroyed.¹⁰

In Chatham hundreds of refugees sought comfort.^{11a} Many who had once been wealthy, had lost all.^{11b}

A newspaper reported in February of 1826 that the total cost of the loss in Miramichi, exclusive of timber on Crown Lands would amount to nearly £249,000.¹²

But more drastic than the financial loss, was the loss of human life. The same newspaper reported that at least 160 people had perished because of the fire, and that 3078 were suffering because of it.¹³ Other accounts claim that at least 200 had died.¹⁴

There are numerous accounts of casualties. Everyone knew of people who had died. There were many deaths within the towns, but more so in the remote areas of the woods, where small farms, and logging camps were consumed. A poem written about the fire makes reference to some of the deaths that the poet knew of. He mentions thirteen families who live in back of Gretna Green, and of sixty more at Black River who were killed by the fire. He also says that there were six men

working on the Nor'west that were unable to escape. Their bodies were found about two miles from their camp.¹⁵

A calamity of this degree has an odd effect on the people involved. Many were convinced that this was the day of the Divine judgement. John Jardine captured this mood in his poem.

Some say it was because the people's
Sins did rise to mountain high,
Which did ascend up to Jehovah,
He would not see and justify.¹⁶

It is also recorded that during the fire, within the manse in Chatham, Reverend Thompson could be found with terror stricken women who clung to his neck and his knees, and begged him to pray, for they felt that the last day had come.¹⁷

Despite some people's fears that this was the last day, there were many who survived. Life still continued, and they had to begin picking up the pieces around them. Being late in the year, they had to hurry to organize themselves to be able to withstand the coming winter.

Several Meetings were held on October 11, 1825. A meeting for the public was held at the house of Mr. George Johnston in Chatham. They decided to set up a committee to assess the needs of the area and its inhabitants, consisting of: Thomas H. Peters, John Wright, Francis Peabody, Joseph Cunard, John M. Johnston, Richd. Blackstock, John Clark, Alexr. Rankin, Alexr. Fraser, Jr., James Ledden, and George Taylor (Esquires).¹⁸

They also resolved to establish communications with Fredericton, Saint John, Pictou, Prince Edward Island, and Quebec to inform them of their catastrophe and to solicit help.¹⁹

Perhaps their most solemn resolution was to set in motion the steps necessary for the appropriate burial of their dead.²⁰

Unfortunately, because of the number of dead, and lack of funds, many of the burials were very simple. The bodies of some of the dead were carried to the graveyard in a common box cart, sometimes without even the blessing of a priest. In some places the bodies were just roughly thrown into a hole in the ground and covered over. In Douglastown twenty seven bodies were reported to be buried in this fashion.²¹

A committee meeting was also held that day, at the same place. Those in attendance were: Thomas H. Peters, Francis Peabody, Alexander Davidson, Richard Blackstock, Chris Clark, William Joplin, John M. Johnson, Isaac Perley and Douglas Thompson.²²

They decided to established a quorum of three people, who each day at 10:00 am, were to meet at the office of the Secretaries to do the necessary business of the committee.²³ Joseph Cunard was appointed treasurer of the committee.²⁴

Some of the other ideas discussed at this meeting, over-lapped with some of the resolutions made at the General Sessions, which was also held that same day. The session consisted of a group of Justices of the Peace. They were: Alexander Davidson, John Fraser, Lewis Henry, Wm. Joplin, Chr. Clarke, John T. Williston, James Abbott, and John Nesmith.²⁵

One item of business was to consider what steps should be taken to preserve public peace. One of the problems resulting from the fire was that since there was no longer a jail, they needed to find another way of assuring that crime did not get out of hand. They decided that additional military forces would be needed to enforce the laws and protect what property remained.²⁶

They also needed to find provisions for the inhabitants. It was getting late in the year and haste had to be made to insure that these provisions arrived before it would be too late for ships to navigate the river to deliver the supplies.²⁷

One immediate step they took was to request that the ship, *LAGUENAY*, which was carrying a load of wheat, but was still in port, undergoing repairs, be detained to feed the people.²⁸

Another step they took was to nominate William Joplin to go to Headquarters, on behalf of the area, to see the Lieutenant Governor. There he was to inform the council of the conditions that existed in the region and to try to obtain aid and instructions.²⁹

William Joplin went before the Lieutenant Governor on October 15.³⁰ Here he was told that he had been appointed by the Lieutenant Governor to go to Quebec to procure provisions and

clothing for the people who needed relief on the Miramichi.³¹

He was urged to operate with all speed in his doings.³² First of all he was to report to the Governor General at Quebec and deliver any dispatches which he had been entrusted with.³³

He was then to purchase 1000 barrels of flour, and 500 barrels of pork, along with blankets and clothing not exceeding the amount of £750. He was then to have these articles shipped to the Miramichi, where they were to be put in the charge of the committee to be distributed as speedily as possible.³⁴

His instructions also stated that the Lieutenant Governor was hopeful that those in Quebec who heard of this great disaster would subscribe to the relief of the inhabitants. Joplin was expected to communicate by letters with the Lieutenant Governor as to the outcome of his negotiations at Quebec. He was instructed to apply any money received towards paying for supplies. All the balance owed, was to be charged to the New Brunswick government.³⁵

Besides these steps taken to obtain aid, many individuals wrote private letters to friends and relatives who lived in other North American cities.³⁶

When these pleas for help from the committee and from individuals were received, there was a general feeling of cooperation as the attempted to help.

In Halifax, they began circulating handbills throughout the town, which called for a meeting at the County Court House on Sunday 16 of October. They established their own committee comprising of: S. Deblois, James Tobin, Samuel Cunard, N. Russell, and John Clark, Enquires, who were in charge of receiving subscriptions and directing the distribution.³⁷

They resolved a number of things at this meeting. First of all they decided that they would send provisions and articles to the store of Messrs. Deblois & Mitchell. Also they decided to give the money from the following Sunday's collections from various churches, towards the relief of the sufferers on the Miramichi. They too would write letters to other areas seeking aid.³⁸

The Miramichi fire was even on the agenda of the Legislative and Executive Council of Nova Scotia, where it was agreed to send His Majesty's Ship, *ORESTES*, and three schooners, *ACTIVE*, *ALBIN*, and *ELIZABETH*, to the Miramichi with provisions and clothing. They too, established a committee which was in charge of obtaining food and clothing.³⁹

From Halifax it is estimated that at least £2999 was raised. Other communities also helped out. It is recorded that Pictou, and Saint John raised £250 and £5000 respectively.⁴⁰

Meetings pertaining to helping the sufferers of the fire were also held in such areas as Lunenburg, Newport, Antigonish, etc., and they all sent aid.⁴¹

But the aid did not come from the Maritimes alone. Newfoundland sent £700, and Quebec sent £6000 (including clothing and provisions.) Even some of the cities in the United States, such as Boston and New York sent aid.⁴²

In Fredericton, they also took steps to help those who were suffering. It has previously been mentioned that the Lieutenant Governor sent Joplin to seek help.

On October 27 his Excellency, Lieutenant Governor Douglas arrived at the home of Reverend Mr. Bacon in Chatham. He was there to visit the poor and the widowed. He wished to try to comfort them, and to report that aid was on its way.⁴³

Douglas also requested aid from the British Nation on behalf of these people.⁴⁴

Although it required a great deal of effort, the towns were soon on their way to recovering. In the 1830's one person wrote:

Newcastle like a Phoenix has risen from its ashes; and now blossoms over its original site with renewed beauty. A larger, as well as handsomer Douglstown, has emerged from the ruins of the old one; and Moorsfields, Bartigog, Napan & C. also display an equal share of general renovation.⁴⁵

¹ B. Murdoch, A Narrative of the Late Fires at Miramichi, New Brunswick-1825 (P.J.Holland: Halifax, 1825) p. 5

² Ibid, p. 5

³ Thompson (d/o Rev. J. Thompson), The Miramichi Fire, (ca. 1825) p. 1

⁴ B. Murdoch, A Narrative of the Late Fires at Miramichi, New Brunswick-1825 (P.J.Holland: Halifax, 1825) p. 5

⁵ Ibid pp. 5-6

⁶ Lt-Gov. Howard Douglas, "Dispatch to Earl Bathurst" October 17, 1825, found in Doreen Menzies Arbuckle's The North West Miramichi (Western Printers Limited, Ottawa, 1978) p. 167

⁷ John Jardine, "The Miramichi Fire" (ca 1825-26), found in Arbuckle's The North West Miramichi (Western Printers Limited, Ottawa, 1978) p. 165

⁸ Lt-Gov. Howard Douglas, "Opening Speech House of Assembly January 19, 1826" found in Arbuckle's The North West Miramichi (Western Printers Limited, Ottawa, 1978) p. 167

⁹ Thompson (d/o Rev. J. Thompson) The Miramichi Fire (ca. 1825) p. 2

¹⁰ Ibid p. 2

^{11a} Ibid p. 3

^{11b} Lt-Gov. Howard Douglas, "Opening Speech House of Assembly January 19, 1826" found in Arbuckle's The North West Miramichi (Western Printers Limited, Ottawa, 1978) p. 167

¹² Miramichi Mercury, February 28, 1826, found in Arbuckle's The North West Miramichi, p. 168

¹³ Ibid p. 168

¹⁴ Thompson (d/o Rev. J. Thompson), The Miramichi Fire, (ca. 1825) p. 3

¹⁵ John Jardine, "The Miramichi Fire" (ca. 1825-26) found in Arbuckle's The North West Miramichi, pp. 165-166

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 164

¹⁷ Thompson (d/o Rev. J. Thompson) The Miramichi Fire, (ca. 1825) pp. 4-5

¹⁸ Resolutions passed at Public Meeting 11 October 1825, Chatham, NB, found in PANB, F1727, NB Executive Council, Chatham Fire 1825-1826 File No. MG9/A1/Vol 122. pp. 12-13

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 11

²⁰ Ibid, p. 11

²¹ ¹ B. Murdoch, A Narrative of the Late Fires at Miramichi, New Brunswick-1825 p. 29

²² Resolutions passed at Public Meeting 11 October 1825, Chatham, NB, found in PANB, F1727, pp. 5-6

²³ Ibid, pp. 5-6

²⁴ Ibid, p. 6

²⁵ Resolutions passed at Public Meeting 11 October 1825, Chatham, NB, found in PANB, F1727, p. 3

²⁶ Ibid, pp. 1-2

²⁷ Ibid, p. 2

²⁸ Ibid, p. 2

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 2-3

³⁰ B. Murdoch, A Narrative of the Late Fires at Miramichi, New Brunswick-1825, p. 27

³¹ Instructions given to William Joplin 15 October 1825, found in PANB, F1727, pp. 8-9

³² Ibid, pp. 8-9

³³ Ibid, pp. 8-9

³⁴ Ibid, pp. 8-9

³⁵ Ibid, pp. 8-9

³⁶ B. Murdoch, A Narrative of the Late Fires at Miramichi, New Brunswick-1825, p. 27

³⁷ Ibid, p. 29

³⁸ Ibid, pp. 29-30

³⁹ Ibid, pp. 30-32

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 30-34

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 34

⁴² Ibid, p. 37

⁴³ Ibid, p. 38

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 43

⁴⁵ Robert Cooney, "A Compendious History of the Northern Part of the Province of New Brunswick" (pub. by Joseph Howe, 1832) found in Esther Clark Wright's The Miramichi, (The Tribune Press, Sackville, NB, 1945) p. 39