The Fires of 1831: Fayetteville and Raleigh in Flames

by Scott A. Miskimon


Copyright of the author.

"FAYETTEVILLE IS NO MORE!" Thus began an account of the fire that swept through Fayetteville and utterly destroyed it in May 1831. But that conflagration was not the only major fire that spring in North Carolina. Three weeks later another devastating blaze hit Raleigh, one that almost changed the course of North Carolina history.

On Sunday morning, May 29, 1831, the people of Fayetteville flocked to their churches for worship. Shortly after noon, after the sermons of Henry Rowland and his fellow ministers had ended, their congregations streamed out of their churches, only to find that a fire had begun in the center of town. It had started in a kitchen at a house on the northwest corner of Market Square. Immediately, townsfolk battled the blaze and thought they would soon have it under control, but the flames escaped and went on to ravage nearby buildings. The wind gusted and blew burning embers on the roof of the old State House, where the General Assembly once met and North Carolina had adopted the U.S. Constitution. In minutes the old State House was engulfed in flames.

The fire jumped from wooden roof to wooden roof, and the light pine buildings were like tinder as the flames raced from the center of town. Fayetteville’s fire engine could not cope with the blaze and after only a few minutes it was abandoned and then destroyed. Water buckets and blankets were employed, but to little effect.

As the fire swept north on Green Street, it crossed the creek, consumed a new bridge, and then devoured the Episcopal church. The fire moved east on Person Street, and pastor Rowland watched in horror as it hit his church: “The tall steeple of the Presbyterian church seemed a pyramid of fire; for a while it stood firm, soon the bell descended with a crash—the steeple trembled, tottered and fell.” The Catholic chapel was next, and all the churches in town, except for the Methodist church, were destroyed.
boom. Raleigh's future had arrived. But they were defeated. But after eighteen months of political wrangling, Raleigh finally won the contest. In December 1832, the General Assembly had decreed that the new State House would be located, with many favoring Fayetteville. Enough people thought so little of Raleigh that even a city that had just been burned to the ground was considered a leading contender for the prize. The editor of the Fayetteville newspaper cautioned citizens there not to take advantage of Raleigh's recent woes, noting that, just weeks before, their neighbors in Raleigh had come to their rescue with money and supplies.

The ruins of the State House, and the headless trunk of Washington's statue, haunted Raleighites long after the fire was out. But Raleighites would have no time to brood. A fire of indeterminate origin set the roof on fire. Governor Montfort Stokes immediately commissioned an investigation to determine its cause. The investigating committee reached no definitive conclusion but it had theories.

In the immediate aftermath of Fayetteville’s destruction, state government turned its attention to protecting the State House in Raleigh. That building had a wooden roof, and the State hired a general contractor, Thomas Bragg, to fireproof it. For the sum of $1,940, Bragg agreed to plate the roof with sheets of zinc. Work was progressing when Governor Montfort Stokes cast his eye upward and saw a problem that needed fixing: the zinc sheets were to be nailed, but not soldered. The Governor convinced Bragg that to ensure that the roof did not leak, the nail heads should be soldered.

At 5 a.m. on the morning of June 21, 1831, three of Bragg’s workers scrambled to the roof of the Capitol to finish the job of fireproofing the building. There was a hazy fog that morning and the roof was wet. The workers passed iron pots of fire through a hole in the roof, which they used to heat the nail heads and solder the zinc plates. With just a few hours left before the work would be finished, they took a breakfast break and left their iron pots on the roof.

Soon enough, smoke was seen pouring from the west wing of the capitol. The alarm was raised, and as the fire began.

With the State House a burned-out shell, Raleigh’s fate hung on whether a Capitol would be rebuilt at Union Square or relocated to a different city. The Capitol was the very reason for Raleigh’s existence, and without it, many in Raleigh would be ruined. A prolonged battle ensued in the legislature and press over where the new State House would be located, with many favoring Fayetteville. Enough people thought so little of Raleigh that even a city that had just been burned to the ground was a leading contender for the prize. The editor of the Fayetteville newspaper cautioned citizens there not to take advantage of Raleigh’s recent woes, noting that, just weeks before, their neighbors in Raleigh had come to their rescue with money and supplies.

The ruins of the State House, and the headless trunk of Washington’s statue, haunted Raleighites long after the fire was out. Bills were introduced to rebuild in Raleigh, but they were defeated. But after eighteen months of political wrangling, Raleigh finally won the contest. In December 1832, the General Assembly appropriated $50,000 for the Capitol’s reconstruction on Union Square. Excitement rippled through the city, and once construction began, it touched off a building boom. Raleigh’s future had arrived.
References:


Rowland, Henry A. 2002. The real glory of a church a dedication sermon, preached in Fayetteville, North-Carolina, at the opening of the Presbyterian Church, which was destroyed by fire in the conflagration of the town on the 29th of May, 1831, and re-built and dedicated August 12th, 1832 : to which is appended an account [sic] of the destruction of Fayetteville]. [Chapel Hill, N.C.]: Academic Affairs Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/rowland/menu.html](https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/rowland/menu.html)

Image Credits:


[5].

[28].

3 August 2010 | Miskimon, Scott A.

Source URL: [https://www.ncpedia.org/fires-1831-fayetteville-and-raleigh](https://www.ncpedia.org/fires-1831-fayetteville-and-raleigh)

**Links**


[3] [http://www.ci.fayetteville.nc.us/history.aspx](http://www.ci.fayetteville.nc.us/history.aspx)


[7] [https://ncarchives.gov/finding-docs](https://ncarchives.gov/finding-docs)

[8] [http://maps.google.com/maps?q=market+square+fayetteville+nc&amp;oe=utf-8&amp;client=firefox-a&amp;Cadm=65120&amp;q=&amp;hl=en&amp;hq=&amp;hnear=Market+Square,+Fayetteville,+Cumberland,+North+Carolina+28301&amp;amp;sll=35.052624,-78.87588&amp;sspn=0.002855,0.00663&amp;ie=UTF8&amp;hl=en&amp;gl=us&amp;ie=UTF8&amp;z=18](http://maps.google.com/maps?q=market+square+fayetteville+nc&amp;oe=utf-8&amp;client=firefox-a&amp;Cadm=65120&amp;q=&amp;hl=en&amp;hq=&amp;hnear=Market+Square,+Fayetteville,+Cumberland,+North+Carolina+28301&amp;amp;sll=35.052624,-78.87588&amp;sspn=0.002855,0.00663&amp;ie=UTF8&amp;hl=en&amp;gl=us&amp;ie=UTF8&amp;z=18)


[11] [http://www.nccp.state.nc.us/history.aspx](http://www.nccp.state.nc.us/history.aspx)


[13] [https://www.visitfayettevillenc.com](https://www.visitfayettevillenc.com)


[15] [http://www.cumberland.lib.nc.us/copyright/content/Hay-Street-United-Methodist-Church](http://www.cumberland.lib.nc.us/copyright/content/Hay-Street-United-Methodist-Church)

[16] [https://www.ncdot.gov/state-capitol](https://www.ncdot.gov/state-capitol)

[17] [https://incarchitects.lib.ncsu.edu/people/P000125](https://incarchitects.lib.ncsu.edu/people/P000125)

[18] [http://www.ncpedia.org/stokes-monfort-research-branch-nc](http://www.ncpedia.org/stokes-monfort-research-branch-nc)


[20] [http://www.nclibnc.edu/collections/object.cfm?key=35&objkey=8704](http://www.nclibnc.edu/collections/object.cfm?key=35&objkey=8704)

[21] [http://portal.ed.unc.edu](http://portal.ed.unc.edu)


[23] [https://ncpedia.org/geography/raleigh](https://ncpedia.org/geography/raleigh)


[26] [https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/antebellum-1820-1861](https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/antebellum-1820-1861)

[27] [https://www.ncpedia.org/category/authors/miskimon-scott](https://www.ncpedia.org/category/authors/miskimon-scott)

[28] [https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/coastal](https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/coastal)

[29] [https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmont](https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmont)

[30] [https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmont-0](https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmont-0)

[31] [https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmont-0](https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmont-0)

[32] [https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/capitol](https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/capitol)

[33] [https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/raleigh](https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/raleigh)

[34] [https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/1831](https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/1831)

[35] [https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/fire](https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/fire)

[36] [https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/capitol](https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/capitol)

[37] [https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/fayetteville](https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/fayetteville)