

Museum Around the Corner  
Georgetown County Historical Society

In the 297 years of our history, fire has been a constant threat to its livelihood. There were probably incidents before 1781, but these are the first ones we know of. Here are the stories.

The British occupied Georgetown for almost a year during the Revolutionary War, from approximately June of 1780 to May of 1781. Patriot Francis Marion was an almost constant adversary, attacking the British fort at least twice. In May of 1781, the British evacuated Georgetown, marched down to the Sampit River, boarded their ships and set off for Charleston. One story goes that later that same night, under cover of darkness, British sympathizers sneaked into Georgetown and set fire to the businesses along Front Street. Another source reports that the British fired their cannons on the town from aboard ship. The fire communicated to other buildings and it is thought that as much as half of the town was damaged or destroyed. As late as 1841, when another major catastrophe occurred, comments in the Winyah Observer mentioned there was still damage visible from “the late war”, meaning the fire of 1781 during the Revolutionary War.

On October 20, 1841, the Winyah Observer reported another great conflagration. It seems to have started in the tailor shop of Mr. C.A. Magill and spread both east and west. Here is part of the report:

*October 20, 1841*

*At about one o'clock yesterday morning our citizens were aroused from their sleep by the alarm of fire – and it was to behold the most awful calamity that has ever visited the town. The fire was first discovered in the rear of the buildings occupied by Mr. C.A. Magill, tailor, Mr. Samuel Kirton and ware house of Mr. Benjamin King. Owing to the high wind at the North, the fire spread with great rapidity, and consumed every building on the privilege land [river side of the street] from Scriven to Queen Street, embracing seven eights of the merchandize in the town, and all the brick stores, as also many of the most valuable wooden stores. This is the first fire of any magnitude that has occurred in the place for the last seventy years, and will long be remembered.*

*Great praise is due to Capt. Commander our town marshal, and to Capt. Howland of the Brig Juno, for the very efficient service which they rendered. The store of Messrs. Farrow and Son was nearly fire proof and long resisted the fury of the fire and would have been preserved and the fire there arrested but for the extensive ware house in the rear.*

*To prevent the spreading of the fire West from Screven street it was adjudged proper to take down our ancient Town Hall and market place. We looked upon this building with reverence and lamented its destruction. It had for half a century held the counsellors of the welfare of the town, in the upper story – and the sustenance of the population as a Market place in the lower. We remembered the remark of our old Friend Gen. Woodberry, of Marion, made to us three years ago, when he said he wished to come to Georgetown once more, rest his body against the middle pillow [sic] of our market place and review the town by the streets which prominently opened to him the scenes of his early life, and look upon the monumental ruins of the town in the days of the revolution. This pleasure is denied him – but we shall soon resuscitate the Town Hall, and we hope with native sons. Our loss is heavy – but we have places to carry on the business of the place. At 10 o'clock yesterday a meeting of the citizens convened at the Court House. E. Waterman, Esq. was called to the chair and B.H. Wilson, requested to act as Secretary. The chair having explained the object of the meeting, on motion of Maj. D.L. McKay, the chair nominated a committee of three to investigate the facts attending the burning of the business part of the town, on the presumption that it was the work of incendiaries. The committee are J.M. Commander, Marshal of the town, E.B. Rothmahler and Dr. S. E. Myers.*

Our fire of September 25, 2013 reminds us that through the years others have endured the heartache and loss of such a catastrophe. We rallied to the aid of those affected and rebuilt and reinvented ourselves. Beauty will once again rise from the rubble.