

Fire in the Fifth Ward: An Interview with Kathryn Noble Wilcox

Carol Johnson

The most destructive fire in Houston's history began shortly after midnight on February 21, 1912. It started in a vacant two-story wooden structure near the corner of Hardy and Opelousas Streets in the Fifth Ward. The cause of the fire was never confirmed. Sparks may have originated from the carelessness of tramps, reportedly seen sheltering in the building; or from activities in the Southern Pacific railroad yards nearby; or from a bonfire in the vicinity.

From that first building, the fire quickly spread to a store, then to two boarding houses, then to a hotel. It seemed impossible to stop the destruction. Blown by a gusting northwest wind of 35 to 40 miles an hour, sparks and burning timbers spread the fire from block to block, sometimes skipping ahead as much as two hundred yards at a time. This advance slowed at the ship channel, where two bridges had been turned to prevent the fire from burning its way across. However, the wind carried sparks which caught on the opposite side. The Standard Compress Company plant, only two years old, was destroyed before the fire was brought under control at the plant of the Houston Packing Company, hours after the fire's start.

Heavy damage occurred over an area a mile and a half long and up to a half mile wide. Twenty-five residential blocks—some 150 homes and boarding houses—were leveled, along with several stores. St. Patrick's church and school were destroyed, and thirteen industrial plants burned. Utility poles and lines, 125 railroad cars, and 39,800 bales of cotton were lost. The total damage was estimated at anywhere from \$4 to \$7 million.

During the fire people fled their homes with only what they were wearing and the little they could carry. When it was over, hundreds were homeless. Those who had worked in the area's factories and stores found their places of employment destroyed as well. Amazingly, no one was killed, and no one was seriously injured.

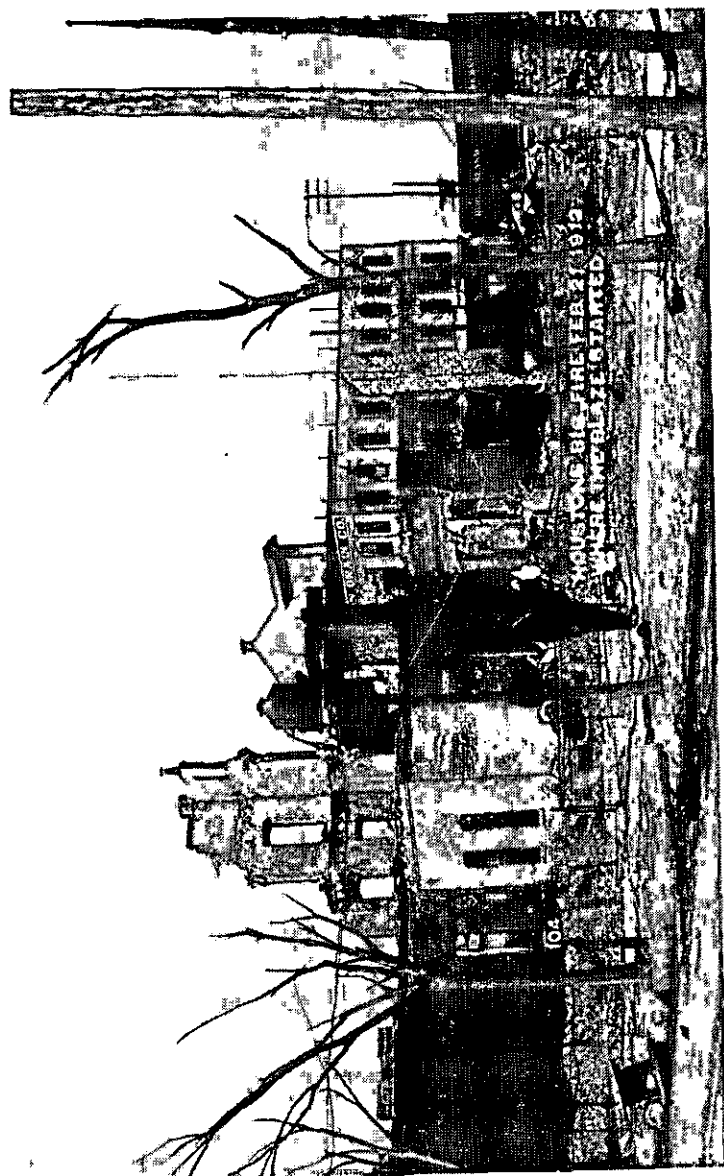
On the night of the fire, Kathryn Noble (later Mrs. John Wilcox) was a young teenager living with her parents, her younger sister, her infant brother, and an uncle, in a house at 1105 Maury Street. Her grandmother, who also lived with them, was away visiting in Columbus, Texas. Mrs. Wilcox recalled the fire in an oral history interview with Dr. Thomas Kreneck and Nancy Hadley of HMRC on March 21, 1985. The narrative that follows is adapted from the transcript of the interview.

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The fire started at this site. The brick structure at left was the Star and Crescent Hotel.

We were across the street from the St. Patrick's church and school. That was the big Catholic church in the Fifth Ward. That was the *only* church on that side of town at that time; it was on the corner of Lyons Avenue and Maury. And the school was down on the next corner. Our house was right across the street from the school. The fire started just three blocks down the street from us.

On Mardi Gras night they had this big parade downtown. My old uncle was a bachelor; he lived with us. And it was twelve o'clock exactly when he came in from the carnival, and it woke us up. He said the wind was just terrible—people could hardly stand on their feet downtown.

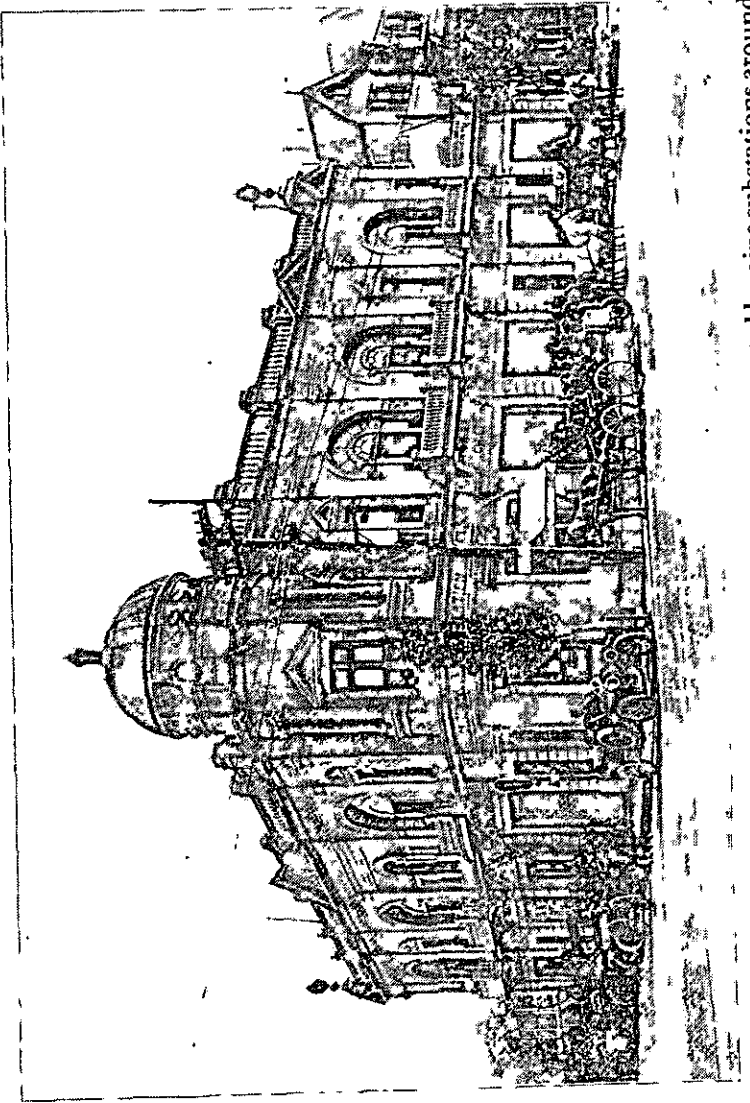
About that time the whistle started blowing at the [railroad] shops. These whistles blew at 6:00 in the morning and at 12:00 noon and at 6:00 in the evening. And if there was anything wrong, they'd be distress signals. While he was talking to us, the whistle started. We looked out, and the whole place was in flames. The skies were red. We looked out, and we just knew we were gone.

My father was quite a close friend of the fire chief. And he came and said there was no way they could save our house, but he would put a couple of hoses on it to let us get some things out. My mother said to get dressed, and to get sheets. We just ripped the sheets off the beds and put them down. Mama said to throw everything on the sheets and tie them up in bundles, to get them out.

My sister dressed, and she wrapped the baby up, and Mama said, "Go as far as you can, and Kathryn and I will stay here as long as we can and get as much as we can out of the house." You have never seen anything like the way those big, burning timbers were just flying through the air. My sister got just about a block and a half away, and a timber fell on the baby, and the baby caught on fire. The firemen turned the hose on them. She had a coat on; it didn't bother her. But the baby's blanket got wet, and for a long time they didn't realize it. So he caught bronchitis and suffered from it for years.

It took us about half an hour to get out of the house. The whole back end was on fire when they finally told us we couldn't stay in there any more. Mama and I were the last two to leave. I had on this flannel nightgown, and a black plush coat. My sister and I each had a little black velvet hat; mine was lined with blue, shirred inside, with a little blue feather on it. As I left the house, the last thing I saw was that hat, hanging there, and I stuck it on my head.

The last thing to go out of the house was the baby buggy. My grandmother had just come back from Kentucky, and she had brought these beautiful handmade coverlets. Mama threw those onto the baby buggy. Papa took it and went down to Mr. and Mrs. Freese's; they had about an hour till their house caught fire. Somebody else pushed it on. Somebody said that thing was pushed all over the country that night. Different people would put their things in there; we never did find the coverlets again.



The Central Fire Station, at 519 San Jacinto Street, was supported by nine substations around the city. Station No. 5 on Hardy Street, only two blocks from the path of the fire, was unharmed.

Mama and I went down Maury, down to Nance, and then on to Elysian, and went on. That's the only way we could go, because everything below us was on fire. Three blocks below us, there was no way to go. The fire was that way. There was nothing for us to do but go down towards the school. We went down on the next block on that side.

It was funny how the fire would do. It would skip a block, just sweep right across the street and not touch a whole block. And people would go put things in a house, and the wind would turn, and it would come back, and that house would catch on fire. You'd have to get your stuff out of there and go again. You just moved any place you could go. You have no idea what a funny feeling that is, just to keep on moving until you find someplace to go. We finally landed, with our bundles, down on the corner of Nance and Elysian, at Mrs. Stewart's.

It was over around 5:00 in the morning. It was daylight when our folks found us. We were scattered. Different ones of my family found us and gathered us together. We went back to see the house. There was *nothing*, not even ashes, just nothing but flat ground. The wind swept it just as clean as if you'd taken a brush. There was nothing left but the sounding board on the piano, and the iron beds were twisted where they were. We had an English bull dog that we just loved. Whenever anything happened, he'd get under the bed. And underneath where the iron bed was, we found our little dog. He didn't get away.

There wasn't a thing to be salvaged. Where my mother's china cabinet sat—you never saw anything like it. It looked like the cups were there, but when you went to pick them up, they just fell apart. All the beautiful silver was just a mess, all melted. And the family Bible was gone; I don't know why we didn't think to get it out. It was a great big book, brought from England. As a child, I couldn't read a lot of the writing. It was in that old script. It was the only thing we worried and grieved about, because it had the family history.

We went over to the church to see if we couldn't find something among the bricks. There was nothing. The bricks were even scattered. You see, when the fire first started, people began bringing things and putting them in the church. They thought if they put them in this brick building, it would be safe. Of course it stayed up a bit longer than our house did, but everything people took over was burned. There wasn't anything left. The bricks were just scattered as if somebody had torn the church down; bulldozers couldn't have razed it any faster or better than the wind and fire did that night.

Nobody had anything, except for the few things they could carry out of the fire. The people who lived behind us didn't have time. And we wouldn't have gotten any of our things out if it hadn't been for the firemen putting the hose on our house. The merchants in Houston were wonderful. They opened the stores and gave us clothes. My cousin went down to the store and



Residents searched in vain for salvageable possessions among the ruins. In the background at left are the remains of St. Patrick's Church.

got me a dress. They found the bundle with my underwear, but a couple of bundles we never did find. At school one day I saw some of my clothes on somebody else!

You know, people lost all sense—you have no idea how people lose it in a tragedy. There's no reasoning at all; the only thing you can think about is preservation. There was a young couple we knew. She put something in a pillowcase for her husband and told him, "Now don't lose this; it's very valuable." And he walked around with it all night, and he said he skinned his ankles from carrying this thing. He thought it was something silver; he didn't know what he was carrying that was so wonderful. The next morning, when daylight came and he found his wife, they opened it up and it was a cut glass vase. And he was so mad to think that he carried that thing all night. Do you know, he threw it down and broke it! Things were just that traumatic, you know; people were just wild.

That night was the worst thing that ever happened to me. But nobody was killed—that's the strange thing. God's hand was with us, that's all. Because we could have been, all of us.



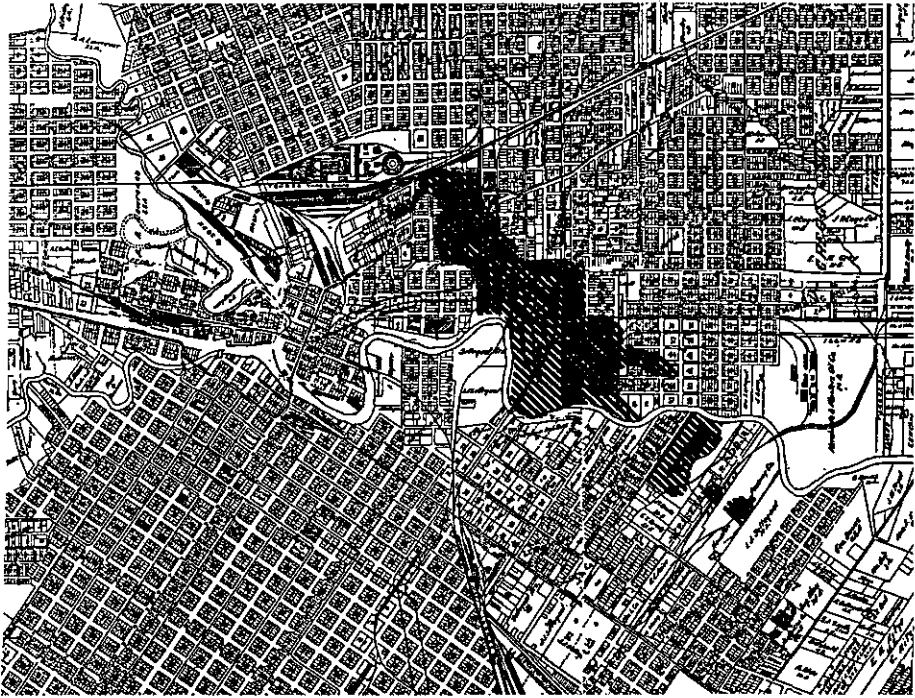
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 WRECK OF BURNED FREIGHT CARS HOUSTON FEB 21 1912
 MORE THAN 100 BLOCKS OF FACTORIES AND HOMES CONSUMED

The International and Great Northern Railroad lost an entire freight train. The company's losses were estimated at \$200,000. The Southern Pacific Railroad's losses were lighter. Switching crews moved many Southern Pacific freight cars from the fire's path while, only blocks away, the crewmen's homes burned.



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The Cleveland Compress Company was destroyed. The plant and the 32,000 bales of cotton in it were said to be worth nearly two million dollars. The metal loops lying on the ground were wrapped around cotton bales. The fire also destroyed two other cotton compresses.



The fire cut a path about 1 ½ miles long and 150 yards to ½ mile wide. It began at the northwest corner of the damaged area and was finally extinguished after it crossed the bayou.

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