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DUE TO BIG BLUNDERS.

WHY ST. JOHN IS LEFT WITHOUT A CUSTOM HOUSE.

Good Reasons for the Rapidly With Which the Structure was Destroyed—Faults in the Construction and Neglect of Precautions in the Care of It.

There will be an investigation, and I think they will find if there had been a janitor in the building the fire would not have gone so far.

The dominion official who said this much is a very committal man in some ways, but in that sentence he voiced the opinion of everybody who knows anything about the beginning, middle and end of the custom house fire.

The daily papers have had something to say about the matter, but there is a great deal they have not said, but which people have heard in the way of rumors. Some of these rumors can only be verified by an investigation. Some, as far as PROGRESS knows, have little foundation. Apart from these, there are some odd facts.

The walls of what was the most handsome custom house in North America stand in bold outline today—a monument to the crime of blunder. The country has suffered a loss of a quarter of a million of dollars which need not have been incurred. Nobody can understand why the building was burned as surely, and almost as rapidly, as if it had an old-fashioned wooden structure, constructed before the modern fireproof ideas had been brought into existence.

It seems incredible that it should have burned at all. It was the boast of some who knew the details of its construction that a bon-fire might be kindled on the floor of any of the offices, and not extend beyond that room, if the doors were closed. The occupants of the building used to point out with pride the absolute security against fire starting, in the first instance, and against its spreading if, under any circumstances, it did get a start.

They seemed to be justified in their boast. To begin with, the outer walls were of stone, and the partition walls were of solid brick. The plastering was upon these, and no wood entered into their composition. The floor joists were of wood, it is true, but each floor was deafened—that is, between the joists and flush with the tops of them was a filling of sand and cement, the latter being considered a non-conductor of heat. The ceilings were of corrugated iron, under which was wire netting on which the plastering was laid. The only part of any joists exposed to fire was the top, into which the nails of the flooring were driven. The building was heated by steam. The steam pipes, where they passed through the floors were midway between the joists. Where they went up the walls there were hollows in the brick to contain them. They did not, it is asserted, come in contact with the wooden sheathing by which the hollows were covered for appearance sake. The roof was of iron, with simply enough wood clamped on to allow of the covering slates being fastened.

The building was in three sections. Between the main structure and the north and south wings were solid walls 28 inches thick. The openings on each floor were protected by iron doors.

On each floor in both the wings and main building were water pipes connected with the street mains. To these were constantly attached fire hose with branch pipes. It was pointed out that if a fire started nothing was to be done but to turn on the water and put it out. The building could be flooded if necessary, it was said.

So much for what seemed to be. It is now remembered that the floors and stairways were of wood, and chiefly of pitch pine. The stairways had wooden studding. There was a fire trap in the janitor's apartments. Originally, it had been intended that this functionary should have his quarters in the basement, so that he could look after the engine and boiler. This idea was abandoned, and as an afterthought, rooms were added up in the top of the building. They were not part of the plan and their construction was not in character with the rest of the structure. They were run up with wooden studding, and were just as inflammable as the apartments in any ordinary house.

These and the stairs made a fire-trap to which the air shafts caused by the stairways gave a most complete draft. The centre of the building burned like a furnace.

It has been proven beyond doubt that, under certain conditions, wood when subjected to the long continued heat of steam pipes, without sufficient air space, will become disintegrated and reach a chemical condition in which great heat will cause fire, possibly without even the contact of the iron pipe. It ignites, as fine sawdust, or even flour will ignite at times. It is probable that this theory is the true one as to the origin of the fire. The civil service employees, as a rule, appear to be a thin-blooded lot, and the building, like the post office building, was kept so hot at

times that ordinary visitors were almost stifled. Some assert that the winter temperature ranged from 80° to 100°. Whatever it may have been it seemed unbearably hot. This heat had been kept up every winter for the last ten years. The super heated wood began to smoke on Saturday afternoon. By Sunday morning the building was in ruins.

There was no hurry about the affair. People now say they smelled smoke all the evening. Chief engineer Kerr drove down Duke and into Prince William street at 11 o'clock on his way to the North End. He smelled the smoke and recognized the odor as that of burning pitch-pine. He told his driver there must be a fire near, and said they must hurry back from the North End. That must have been just about the time the flames were getting ready to burst through the windows and declare itself.

Somebody appears to have gone through the building between 4 and 6 o'clock and saw no sign of fire. Yet it appears there was a smell that nobody could account for. After that nobody went over the premises. They were abandoned for the night.

In more than one private concern in this city, a watchman is obliged to go his rounds once an hour. The government takes things easier. Not only was there nobody to protect the place, but there was no janitor residing in the building. Had there been, it is beyond question that the fire could have made but little headway before it was discovered.

There was a blunder in pulling the boxes, which, however, did not affect the general result; for the building was doomed then. When the firemen arrived, the stairs and upper parts of the main tower were in a blaze. The long room and other apartments were barred as if a gang of burglars had been expected. One door was burst open, and then it was found the floor was on fire in the collector's office and the surveyor's room. The pitch pine finishing of the closets was in a blaze. The centre of the structure was in flames, but as yet there was no fire in either wing.

An effort was made to utilize the water pipes in the wings, with their hose neatly coiled ready for instant action. Capt. Frink and his men endeavored to turn on the water in one of them, but their united strength could not make the handle move. The valve was stuck fast. They took a crowbar to it, but even then it refused to move, and the brass handle broke off short.

One might imagine that no one had looked after the appliances after they were put in place, then years before. It is urged, however, they were inspected once a year! Just think of that! Hydrants, put in position so as to be instantly available in emergencies, looked to once a year, and ignored the rest of the time. It is said that the handles of some of the other pipes did turn, but that was not due to any supervision they had got in the past.

Opinions differ as to whether the iron doors between the wings were all closed. There is a belief that they were not. In any case, it made no difference. The 28 inch walls went up to the top of the stories, but not to the top of the roof. The fire simply went over them and burned each wing from top to bottom. The firemen say they could not prevent it. The building was burned as completely as if there had not been a department in existence.

Was the fire properly handled? Some say that the energies of the department should have been directed to the windward, from Water street. The streams from Prince William street had no effect. The men kept out of the building because of the great danger from falling ceilings, and played through the windows against the wind. They managed to get one line of hose on the roof, but it did no good.

Chief Kerr says that working from the Water street side would not have made any difference. The fire was beyond control. He says the hose could not have been taken up to the top of the interior of the wings without bursting, and if it could have been, there was not enough hose. He would not imperil the lives of his men by sending them into the main building when it was too late to do any good.

Everybody knows that it is an easy matter to criticise a fire after it is over. One thing is certain, the firemen worked hard and stood at their posts hour after hour, until wet, begrimed, bruised and half blinded, the time came when they could leave. The great blunders, by which the custom house was made a ruin, began before the alarm was rung.

Full One Box at a Time.

Two boxes were pulled for the custom house fire, causing a confusion of the alarm that misled the firemen. In the same way, on Wednesday night, boxes 43 and 46 were pulled for a fire on Sheffield street. There is no need of this, if one who opens a box will pause a moment to listen for the ticking that is heard when another box has been pulled. The trouble is that people are too excited to stop for anything, and policemen do not seem to have any more coolness than other folks.

IT IS DIRECT TAXATION.

BUT THOSE WHO ARE TAXED DO NOT COMPLAIN MUCH.

The Banks May Possibly Recoup Themselves by a Stamp Duty on Notes Discounted—Fire Insurance Companies Have a Chance to do Likewise.

There is not so much of a kick as many expected over the local government's resolution to put a direct tax on the banks, insurance companies and other corporations doing business in the province. So far, the objections have been rather to the details of the scheme rather than to the scheme itself. The delegations to Frederickton have been less to protest against taxation than to secure such a system as would not do injustice by assessing what should, from the companies' standpoint, be exempt. This was the way some insurance men looked at it, while others were more decided in their opposition to any taxation whatever.

The bankers had their innings last week. They had a pleasant time at Frederickton and an enjoyable interview with the government. Manager Schofield, of the Bank of New Brunswick, was the orator of the party and is said to have made a clear, concise and logical presentation of his case. Among other things, it is understood, he gently hinted that, should the tax be imposed, the banks might feel constrained to affix a 25 cent stamp to each note discounted in order to recoup themselves for the sum taken out of them by the government tax. Considering that the tax of the Bank of New Brunswick will be \$1,100, it will be seen that a 25 cent charge on each note would not only pay back the amount but leave a surplus for the stockholders. Indeed, a ten cent charge on each note should more than recoup the institution.

Manager Jones, of the Bank of Montreal, succeeded in getting an abatement of \$600 in the amount set against the name of his institution. The other delegates came back feeling that the mission had resulted in a fair adjustment of rates as regarded the various banks.

The insurance men have been afoot this week—that is, those of the fire and life companies, for the proposition to include marine insurance has been abandoned. They are not all happy. Some of them talk of appealing, as has been done in Quebec and Nova Scotia. They cannot get their money back as easily as the banks can, by taxing their customers.

"A life company cannot very well do this," said the agent of a big company. "Our rates are fixed already on certain principles. The money will come out of the company, but in every case where it is a mutual company, or one in which the policy holders share in the profits, the dividend will be reduced by whatever the amount of the tax is."

"I look upon direct taxation as inevitable," said another. "It is one of the things that is bound to come, and the plan proposed is as little objectionable as any I can think of. So long as they arrive at a fair basis on which to assess us, I do not see what we can say against it. I am afraid, however, that some of the English companies which do only a nominal life business here will find the tax oppressive."

The fire insurance agents see a way of getting back their money, as they can change their tariff at any time when occasion requires. It is probable they will do so, and the insured will foot the bills of the insurer.

Taken as a whole, Premier Blair's plan for raising a provincial revenue meets with a great deal less opposition than anybody would have supposed. The companies, as a rule, take the view that, in one way or another, their customers will pay the tax for them. It is a broad and accepted principle that the consumer does so, whether he is always aware of the fact or not.

Why there was no Janitor.

Everybody wonders why there was no resident janitor in the custom house, whose business it was to patrol the building at regular intervals between the hours of closing and opening. Had there been such, the fire must have been discovered in sufficient time to prevent its spread. The absence of such a functionary is alleged to be due to a difference of opinion between Mr. McCordock, who had charge of the building, and Collector Ruel. Some months ago, Shaw, the janitor, left the country. Later Mr. Laird was appointed messenger. Mr. Ruel thought he was the man who should live in the building, while Mr. McCordock considered that Mr. Paul, who was caretaker in the northern wing, should be the man. The matter remained unsettled, and so it was that there was nobody looking after the premises at night as there would have been had it been private property.

Didn't Let the Opportunity Slip.

There was just enough snow balling Wednesday to make good snow balling and the small boy a greater nuisance than ever. It was probably his last chance, however, and he made the best of it.

AFTER A LONG-LEGGED MAN.

One Who Was Found Just in Time to Make an Exodan Happy.

Two English immigrants reached St. John on Thursday of last week. They were not brought out by any agency, government or otherwise, but came of their own accord and in their own extraordinary way. They were stowaways on board the steamer *Labrador*, from Liverpool to Halifax, and they had reached St. John by way of the Intercolonial Railway, stealing rides on freight trains when circumstances favored. They slept in a box car on the night of their arrival in this city, and the next day they went in charge of Rev. Father Connolly, of the Broad street church. One of them was a Roman Catholic, while the other was of the Church of England.

It happened that Father Connolly was not at home, and somebody then recommended them to apply to Rev. R. Mathers, at the Wiggins' Male Orphan institution. They did so, and he went to work to see what could be done for them. First of all he heard their story.

Hard lines enough they had had. They were young men, neither of them 25, and had long been anxious to get to America. Over they had been shipped to Baltimore, as they supposed, but after getting to sea they found themselves on the way to Copenhagen. One of them sold his watch in the latter city, and the proceeds helped to get them back to Liverpool. They determined not to trust a crimp again, and so they stowed themselves away under the boilers of the *Labrador*. It was so hot there that they could not stay, but their discoverers were not sorry to find them, for they were able-bodied youths, and relieved the stokers of much of their work on the voyage across. When they reached St. John, they were very poorly clad, and in particular they had exceedingly little to boast of in the way of trousers.

The demand for men on account of the C. P. R. strike suggested to Mr. Mathers a chance for the youths to carry out their idea of going west. It was not until Sunday, however, that Mr. Timmerman decided to send the men, and then Mr. Mathers began to hustle to get his immigrants fitted out for the journey. Some clothes he had at hand and some contributed by Policeman Dalton did very well as far as they went, but an unexpected difficulty arose. One of the men was over six feet tall and had legs long in proportion to his height. Doherty's second hand store, North End, was ransacked, but the biggest pair of trousers in his miscellaneous assortment were about six inches too short and lacked several inches of meeting at the waist. The poor fellow, fearful of getting no trousers, insisted that they were a splendid fit and proceeded to put them on over the tattered remains of his old garment. As this seemed to be the best that could be done, they prepared to depart for the west.

Then a happy idea struck Rev. Mr. Mathers. There were several long-legged men in town who must have old trousers that would be a perfect fit for the immigrant, and must in any case be better than the abbreviated garments already on him and which any sudden exertion might rend asunder at a most inopportune time. So the clergyman started on a hunt for some of our tallest citizens. It mattered little to him whom he found, whether a judge, a major, or a private citizen. Luck favored him, for on his way he met Mr. E. M. Sipprell, and at once made a requisition on him for a pair of his old trousers. Mr. Sipprell cheerfully acceded to the demand, went to his house and handed forth the articles with the remark that the last pair he had given away were now in Labrador. Mr. Mathers went back to the depot, handed the immigrant the trousers, and went home fully assured that the travellers, Mr. Sipprell and himself, were all feeling happy over the affair.

Very Little Stir About It.

The card of Mr. Richard O'Brien as a candidate for civic honors in Kings ward appears in PROGRESS this week. The indications are that there will be a lively triangular contest. Mr. A. H. Bell, also announces that he is out for Prince ward, while Mr. J. B. Hann will contest Wellington, with it would seem, a pretty good chance of winning. In the other wards there have been no developments since last week, and altogether civic matters are very quiet. It looks now as though the larger proportion of the 8,000 or so voters would have no chance to cast their ballots the first Tuesday in April.

Popular One Night Shows.

After the late train from Halifax arrives on Wednesday nights Mill and Dock streets are quite lively with men, women and children, all loaded with valises and bundles. They go to the International steamers, stay over night and sail in the morning. The runners at the depot have no show with this class of travellers for they all seem to be aware of the advantages offered by the steamship company, and begin making inquiries for Reed's point the moment they arrive.

MESSRS. PUGSLEY AHEAD.

THEIR NEW BUILDING LEASED TO THE GOVERNMENT.

For a Temporary Custom House—Probably For Two or Three Years—Turning the Lawyers Out and the Commercial Exchange Ousted—A Good Fat Rent.

No doubt the Messrs. Pugsley are firm believers this week in the old adage, "It is an ill wind that blows nobody good." If the amount of good is in proportion to the velocity of the wind they are in for a very good thing this time. And if all or half the reports are true they are.

The telegraph companies are civilized right up to the handle and work Sundays with the same degree of exactness as on week days. Before the citizens had realized what was going on, or that the custom house was in flames, the landlords were starting the powers that be at Ottawa "pulling wires" by the wires in favor of their premises as suitable in every particular in which to transact the business of her majesty's customs.

No matter if it was Sunday the people at Ottawa found time to deliberate on the claims of the respective claimants and the Messrs. Pugsley came out ahead in the race, with the result that their huge structure of good bricks and mortar was full of tenants for the first time on Monday morning.

There were more than tenants around. Good reliable citizens permitted their curiosity to draw them within the precincts of the "legal dens" and many of them for the first time found out what was the best way to erect a building that could be used for lawyers, guests, or a custom house offhand. Business men and their clerks hovered about anxious to discover just where they would get at the business end of the new customs place—for a most important period had arrived—the budget was booked for Tuesday and the spots on the changeling tariff could not be relied upon to remain. Goods bought at ten per cent. duty might have to pay thirty Wednesday, and vice versa.

There did not, however, appear to be any gloom or sadness about any of the party. There was no hilarity, but no one wore a sad or a sad and mournful smile indicative of the departure of a near and dear friend. The very handsomest building in the city was a heap of ruins—a quarter of a million building had gone up in smoke—and still no one appeared to feel the loss.

Collector Ruel passed to and fro with several more knits in his brow than usual, but busy all the time directing this or that official in the discharge of additional duties. He is a good member and a warden of the church, and yet Sunday was to him a day of worldly affairs. His first effort was to find a secure spot for her majesty's customs, and the one building that commended itself to his judgment as safe and suitable beyond all others available was the new Walker structure on Canterbury street. Mr. Walker was seen about the matter Sunday morning and the probable arrangement talked over. But neither of those gentlemen knew just how strong a "political pull" was, and Mr. Ruel awoke Monday morning to find telegraphic instructions awaiting him to occupy the Pugsley building. Like a good official he did as he was told and he now passes upon obtrusive invoices and construes the new tariff in the first office to the left, at the Canterbury street entrance otherwise called the "ladies entrance."

The ladies and gentlemen who have attended social assemblies and the little girls and boys who have learned to trip the "light fantastic" in this building the past winter will be interested to know that their dancing room has been converted into "a long room" for the custom house. Here the benign countenance of Mr. Matthews will greet you over the counter while the quick and active Gleason and careful Kain will be just as certain as ever to detect that you are not up on the new tariff rates. Here Mr. Sandall, too, will with the same readiness frown upon a Yankee dollar and tell you that your check is no good—there.

Since Monday the customs have leased the entire building with the exception of the Halifax Banking company's premises. This puts the nose of the Commercial Exchange out of joint, as well as several lawyers out of their offices. Mr. Macrae and Mr. Fenety, who leased comfortable apartments in the new building last fall and furnished them, were invited to step down and out. No doubt they have or will obligingly do so, and look after their own interests at the same time.

But the move is apt to make desirable lawyers' offices harder to obtain than they were and such new buildings as Walker's and Hanington's will be largely sought after. PROGRESS understands that the government is to pay \$5,000 a year for that part of the Pugsley building which they will occupy. It is more than possible that they will be there for two or three years.

HAD SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT.

An Incident With a Moral for Some of the Aldermen of Today.

The needless talking indulged in by the common council over matters on which the aldermen have neglected to inform themselves, reminds a reader of PROGRESS of an incident in the days of the old E. & N. A. railway. The accounts of the company were submitted to the legislature each session, and one year there was an item of revenue from "engines and cars," in addition to the regular receipts from passengers, freight, mails and sundries.

"What shall I do about this?" asked the accountant of the chairman, in making up the accounts. "I am afraid they will not understand what it means."

"It is all right, isn't it?" asked the chairman. He was shown that it was, and promptly replied, "Let it go as it is. It will give them something to talk about."

Sure enough, when that item was reached, this man and that jumped to his feet to denounce the attempt of the company to show such a thing as revenue from engines and cars. After a day or two had been devoted to the subject, a demand for an explanation was sent to the office in St. John, and then it was promptly shown that engines and cars had been hired to contractors to carry on the work of extending the line. That was all there was about it, and the excited members subsided. They did not know the item had been left there to make them chatter, just as some of the aldermen of St. John chatter about similar simple items in these days.

A POPULAR APPOINTMENT.

Thos. F. Raymond, of the Royal, to Be Postmaster at Ben Lomond.

In common with hundreds of citizens, PROGRESS tenders its hearty congratulations to Mr. Thos. F. Raymond, of the Royal hotel, on his appointment to the position of postmaster at Ben Lomond. In these days when almost every vacant place is looked upon as partly spoil and awarded accordingly, it is pleasing to see the government make an appointment of one who is not a rank partisan to the highest office in Ben Lomond. There has been no grabbing for the position, as there is when there is a vacancy at the head of the St. John office. It might be said that the office has sought the man, rather than the man the office. The selection of Mr. Raymond has been made on the principle of choosing the best person for the place. His success as a landlord is a guarantee that the Ben Lomond office will be brought to a high state of efficiency and the public business done with promptitude and despatch. It is satisfactory to know that Mr. Raymond will not be required to give up his hotel business to devote himself exclusively to his official duties, but may be found at the old stand on King street outside of office hours. It is understood that, with the exception of the appointment of Miss Richards, of the Ben Lomond house, as assistant postmaster, there will be no radical changes in the office at the present time. The salary of the postmaster of Ben Lomond is understood to be about \$10 a year.

It Was not What They Wanted.

Some time ago a building on King street east fell, and when cleared away left a dangerous and unsightly hole which anyone was liable to fall into on a dark night. It was an eye sore to the neighbors and they entered a protest, but it was no use. The hole remained as it was. At last the law was resorted to in a mild way. It gave promise of being effective, and the neighbors felt some satisfaction. And a fence was erected. It was built in the night, and when the people turned out to church Sunday morning they could not fail to notice it. But they were not so delighted as might have been expected. The fence was a greater eye sore than the hole had been. There was no uniformity to it. No particular pains had been taken in selecting the lumber, as regards size, shape or quality, the only apparent object being to put up a fence and satisfy the kickers. One of the latter viewed structure with anything but favor and remarked, "Humph! the law can make a man put up a fence; but it can't say what kind of a fence it is going to be."

What Was Your Experience?

This week PROGRESS announced in the *Globe* that it would give a prize of \$5 for the best article on house hunting experiences received before March 29th. A great many people intend moving this year, and more would do so could they get houses that would suit them. But people do not always get what they want. Everyone who has been house hunting can tell some very interesting experiences, and PROGRESS want to get them all. Both sides of the question will be given, for the landlords known as much about house hunters as the latter know about landlords. Of course they take different views of the matter, but that does not detract from the interest. Remember your most amusing experiences, write them on one side of note paper and send them to PROGRESS.