

JONAS HUTCHINSON, *lawyer and notary public with an office at 86 Washington Street, writes to his mother, Mrs. Betsey Hutchinson of Milford, New Hampshire.*



Chicago, Oct. 9

DEAR MOTHER,

This has been an eventful day. Last night about 9 1/2 o'clock a fire broke out here & from that time to this it has raged fearfully. *We are in ruins.* All the business portion of the city has fallen a prey to the fiery fiend. Our magnificent streets for acres & acres lined with elegant structures are a heap of sightless rubbish. It cannot be described. One needs to see the wreck to appreciate it & then he cannot believe that such havoc could be wrought in so short a time. Had you been with me all night & all day seeing this hell of fire doing its awful mission then you could realize how these ruins came. What a sight: a sea of fire, the heavens all ablaze, the air filled with burning embers, the wind blowing fiercely & tossing fire brands in all directions, thousands upon thousands of people rushing frantically about, burned out of shelter, without food, the rich of yesterday poor today, destruction everywhere—is it not awful? It makes me sick. One could but exclaim: "My God, when will it end!"

The end is not yet. Terribly is the fire now burning, though 'tis five miles from where I write so I am in no danger, though our family dare not go to bed. They are camped on the floor. 'Tis midnight and I am keeping watch. Everything is gone—all our public buildings & massive blocks, all the hotels except one & that a minor one, the courthouse & records, post office & United States courthouse—all, all are gone. This is too true. I wish it were other [wise].

The fire extended over acres of ground & it left nothing intact. Our banks are all included in this heartrending catastrophe. I had a few hundred dollars in the Merchants & this is lost. I am discouraged & what to do I know not. My office burned about three o'clock this morning. I barely got out a few papers & just escaped with my life. As I reached the street, the street was full of flames & smoke. I had to run for dear life. \$5000 worth of books besides furniture fed the flames & as I went out, not to enter again, leaving all that valuable stuff to be devoured, I could but cry. Mr. Roberts,¹ whose library & building this was, & who is my dearest friend here, & with whom I am connected in business, loses all & is tonight a sad poor man. I had many things in the office. They all went—I saved nothing. Mrs. Thomas with [whom] I board loses nearly everything. Our house tonight is like the house of death.

The whole city is in grief. Insurance companies can pay nothing.² Two blocks that I had charge of as to renting & collecting rents & for which I received \$500 yearly are among the things of the past. My office is gone. I am stripped and you may conclude that I am about vanquished. I cannot see any way to

¹James H. Roberts, lawyer, practicing with Samuel B. Gookins under the firm name of Gookins & Roberts at 86 Washington Street.

²A premature conclusion. Approximately \$88,000,000 in insurance was carried on the buildings in the burnt area. Of this amount, between \$45,000,000 and \$50,000,000 was paid.



*The
O'Leary Cottage
After the Fire*

get along here. Thirty years of prosperity cannot restore us. It looks as though I must leave here & what to do I know not—possibly I may come home. All newspaper offices are destroyed. When we get papers I'll send them. I am going to try & sleep a little if possible now.

Thy boy,

JONAS.

Ed Lovejoy was in for it too. This morning I was strolling along the street & someone caught hold of me. I looked [and] I saw Ed sitting on a couple of drawers filled with pictures.³ "Well," said I, "Ed, you are gone up, too." "Yes," says he, "this is all that's left." The jail doors were thrown open & the prisoners rushed into the streets & took to their heels. The jail was under the courthouse which burnt. Probably many lives were lost yet I can learn nothing definite as yet.

JONAS.

P.S. We have no gas or water. We have to bail water from [the] lake & use candles. Bridges burnt.

Chicago, Oct. 10, '71

Midnight

DEAR MOTHER,

Last night I wrote you. Tonight I am sitting up and I must tell you more about our great calamity. Ere this reaches you the telegraph & my former letter will give you a faint idea of this sad affliction. Nothing that may come to you can overstate the facts. Two hundred millions of property have been destroyed, 300 acres⁴ have been swept by the besom of destruction. 100,000 people are homeless and the greater portion of them

³Lovejoy was a maker of stereoscopic views.

⁴The burned area covered 2,124 acres. The writer's other figures are approximately correct.



The

Heart of Chicago

Looking North from

Congress Street, Near Wabash

paupers. Only one house stands in the entire North Division and one also in the South Division.

As far as the fire reached the city is thronged with desperadoes who are plundering & trying to set new fires. The police are vigilant. Thousands of special police are on duty. Every block has its patrolmen and instructions are explicit to each officer to shoot any man who acts suspicious and will not answer when spoken [to] the second time. Several were shot & others hung to lamp posts last night under these instructions. The origin of the fire is not known. 40 poor people perished on the prairie last night. Schoolhouses & churches are used to house the destitute. 50 carloads of cooked provisions are on the road from St. Louis & the same from Cincinnati. Genl. Sherman I am informed is here with 5000 troops to protect the citizens.⁵ The roughs are improving the time to sack & pillage. The city is in darkness, no gas. 50,000 army tents are being pitched to house the poor.

The like of this sight since Sodom & Gomorrha has never met human vision. No pen can tell what a ruin this is. Frank Peabody, Mark Knowlton, Ed Lovejoy, George Lovejoy, Wright's Stable, Dave Bradley (Lizzie's husband), Willard Bacon, Charlie Briles, Charlie Towne—all of these are known to some of the family, and all burned out. Imagine all of Boston, its business blocks all in ruin & 100,000 of its people homeless, and you will then get an idea of our condition. The railroads are carrying free such of the poor as will go into the country.

The fire extended 5 miles north & south and $\frac{2}{3}$ of the way east & west & mind you, it missed nothing in its march. No buildings stand half-demolished & nearly every brick & stone

⁵It was Gen. Phil Sheridan, not General Sherman, who, on his own initiative, ordered two companies of infantry from Fort Omaha to Chicago on October 9. By October 12 ten companies of regular infantry and seven companies of state militia were on patrol duty.

PROCLAMATION!

In consequence of the great calamity that has befallen our city, and for the preservation of good order, it is ordered by the Mayor and Common Council of Chicago, that no liquor be sold in any Saloon until further orders The Board of Police are charged with the execution of this order.

R. B. MASON, Mayor.

Chicago, Oct. 9. 1871.

wall has tumbled to the ground. The courthouse & post office walls mostly stand though entirely gutted. Here & there a tall jagged piece of wall limps its form above the chaotic mass of brick & stone. These ghastly obelisks are the only signboards to tell the stroller among the ruins where he is. In groping among the ruins one has to ask where such a street *was* in order to get his bearings. The debris is still smouldering. You can't see far so 'tis easy to get astray. I don't know what I shall do.

JONAS.