

= Great Fire of New York ( 1776 ) =

The Great Fire of New York was a devastating fire that burned through the night of September 21 , 1776 , on the West Side of what then constituted New York City at the southern end of the island of Manhattan . It broke out in the early days of the military occupation of the city by British forces during the American Revolutionary War .

The fire destroyed about one third of the city and some unburned parts of the city were plundered . Many people believed or assumed that one or more people deliberately started the fire , for a variety of different reasons . British leaders accused revolutionaries acting within the city , and many residents assumed that one side or the other had started it . The fire had long @-@ term effects on the British occupation of the city , which did not end until 1783 .

= = Background = =

When the American Revolutionary War broke out in April 1775 , the city of New York was already an important center of business , but had not yet become a sprawling metropolis . It occupied only the lower portion of the island of Manhattan , and had a population of approximately 25 @,@ 000 . Before the war began , the Province of New York was politically divided , with active Patriot organizations and a colonial assembly that was strongly Loyalist . After Lexington and Concord , Patriots seized control of the city , and began arresting and expelling Loyalists .

Early in the summer of 1776 , when the war was still in its early stages , British general , William Howe embarked on a campaign to gain control of the city and its militarily important harbor . After occupying Staten Island in July , he launched a successful attack on Long Island in late August , assisted by naval forces under the command of his brother , Admiral Lord Richard Howe . American general , George Washington recognized the inevitability of the capture of New York City , and withdrew the bulk of his army about 10 miles ( 16 km ) north to Harlem Heights . Several people , including General Nathanael Greene and New York 's John Jay advocated burning the city down to deny its benefits to the British . Washington laid the question before the Second Continental Congress , which rejected the idea : " it should in no event be damaged " .

On September 15 , 1776 , British forces under Howe landed on Manhattan . The next morning , some British troops marched toward Harlem , where the two armies clashed again , while others marched into the city .

A civilian exodus from the city had begun well before the British fleet arrived in the harbor . The arrival the previous February of the first Continental Army troops in the city had prompted some people to pack up and leave , including Loyalists who were specifically targeted by the army and Patriots . The capture of Long Island had only accelerated the abandonment of the city . During the Continental Army 's presence in the city , many abandoned buildings were appropriated for the army 's use . When the British arrived in the city , the tables were turned , and the property of Patriots was confiscated for the British army 's use . Despite this , housing and other demands of the military occupation significantly strained the city 's available building stock .

= = Fire = =

In the early morning hours of September 21 , 1776 , a fire broke out in the city . According to the eyewitness account of John Joseph Henry , an American prisoner aboard the HMS Pearl , it began in the Fighting Cocks Tavern , near Whitehall Slip . Abetted by dry weather and strong winds , the flames spread north and west , moving rapidly among tightly packed homes and businesses . Residents poured into the streets , clutching what possessions they could , and found refuge on the grassy town commons ( today , City Hall Park ) . The fire crossed Broadway near Beaver Street , and then burned most of the city between Broadway and the Hudson River . The fire raged into the daylight hours , and was stopped as much by changes in the wind as by the actions of some of the citizenry and British marines sent , according to Henry , " in aid of the inhabitants . " It may also have been stopped by the relatively undeveloped property of King 's College , located at the northern end

of the fire @-@ damaged area . The total number of buildings destroyed is not known with precision ; estimates range from 400 to 1 @,@ 000 , between 10 and 25 percent of the 4 @,@ 000 city buildings . Among the buildings destroyed was Trinity Church ; St. Paul 's Chapel survived .

= = Suspicions of arson = =

Howe 's report to London implied that the fire was deliberately set : " a most horrid attempt was made by a number of wretches to burn the town " . Royal Governor William Tryon suspected that Washington was responsible , writing that " Many circumstances lead to conjecture that Mr. Washington was privy to this villainous act " and that " some officers of his army were found concealed in the city " . Many Americans also assumed that the fire was the work of Patriot arsonists . John Joseph Henry recorded accounts of marines returning to the Pearl after fighting the fire in which men were " caught in the act of firing the houses . "

Some Americans accused the British of setting the fire so that the city might be plundered . A Hessian major noted that some who fought the blaze managed to " pay themselves well by plundering other houses near by that were not on fire . "

Washington wrote to John Hancock on September 22 , specifically denying knowledge of the fire 's cause . In a letter to his cousin Lund , Washington wrote , " Providence ? or some good honest fellow , has done more for us than we were disposed to do for ourselves " .

According to historian Barnet Schecter , no accusation of arson has withstood scrutiny . The strongest circumstantial evidence in favor of arson theories is the fact that the fire appeared to start in multiple places . However , contemporary accounts explain that burning flakes from wooden roof shingles spread the fire . One diarist wrote that , " the flames were communicated to several houses " by these flakes " carried by the wind to some distance " .

The British interrogated more than 200 suspects , but no charges were ever made . Coincidentally , Nathan Hale , an American captain engaged in spying for Washington , was arrested in Queens the day the fire started . Rumors attempting to link him to the fires have never been substantiated ; there is nothing indicating that he was arrested ( and eventually hanged ) for anything other than espionage .

= = Effect on British occupation = =

Major General James Robertson confiscated surviving uninhabited homes of known Patriots and assigned them to British officers . Churches , other than the state churches ( Church of England ) were converted into prisons , infirmaries , or barracks . Some of the common soldiers were billeted with civilian families . There was a great influx of Loyalist refugees into the city resulting in further overcrowding , and many of these returning and additional Loyalists from Patriot @-@ controlled areas encamped in squalid tent cities on the charred ruins . The fire convinced the British to put the city under martial law rather than returning it to civilian authorities . Crime and poor sanitation were persistent problems during the British occupation , which did not end until they evacuated the city in November 1783 .