

= Great New York City Fire of 1845 =

The Great New York City Fire of 1845 broke out on July 19 , 1845 . The fire started in a whale @-@ oil and candle manufacturing establishment and quickly spread to other wooden structures in the neighborhood . It reached a warehouse on Broad Street where combustible saltpeter was stored and caused a massive explosion that spread the fire even farther .

Before it was subdued , the fire destroyed 345 buildings in the southern part of what is now the Financial District in New York City and caused \$ 5 million to \$ 10 million in damage , as well as killing 4 firefighters and 26 civilians . The 1845 fire was the last of three great fires that affected the heart of Manhattan , including fires in 1776 and 1835 . The 1845 fire was very destructive , but it affected mostly older wood @-@ frame construction in a confined section of the city . This proved the efficacy of the fire @-@ resistant building practices that had come into play in surrounding areas of the city in previous decades .

= = Fire = =

The fire started at about 2 : 30 a.m. on Saturday , July 19 , 1845 , on the third story of J. L. Van Doren , Oil Merchant and Stearin Candle Manufacturer , at 34 New Street in Manhattan , known as a seller of whale oil . The fire spread quickly to adjoining buildings . The City Hall alarm bell began to ring at about 3 a.m. , summoning firefighters .

Firefighters from the Fire Department of the City of New York ( FDNY ) , at that time a volunteer organization , arrived under the command of Chief Engineer Cornelius Anderson . As the fire grew , the FDNY personnel were joined by retired fire chiefs from the city and firefighting crews from Brooklyn , Newark , and Williamsburg . Firemen battling the blaze were aided by water flowing from the Croton aqueduct , which had been completed in 1842 . The fire either weakened in intensity or had been subdued by firefighters by 1 p.m. that day .

During the ten and a half hours that it burned , the fire had destroyed buildings from Broad Street below Wall Street to Stone Street , up Whitehall Street to Bowling Green , and up Broadway to Exchange Place . The fire killed 4 firefighters and 26 civilians . Buildings were reported destroyed on Broadway , New Street , Broad Street , Exchange Place , Beaver Street , Marketfield Street , Whitehall Street , and South William Street . All told , the fire destroyed 345 buildings , doing property damage estimated at the time at between \$ 5 million and \$ 10 million . In today 's currency , damages would be between \$ 127 million and \$ 254 million .

There were multiple reports of looting during the fire and in its aftermath , both of businesses and private residences . At least two elderly women reported being approached by young men who offered to help them move their belongings from their damaged buildings , only to have their valuables stolen .

= = Warehouse explosion = =

In the first two hours of the fire 's spread , it reached a large multi @-@ story warehouse occupied by Crocker & Warren on Broad Street , where a large quantity of combustible saltpeter was stored .

When Engine Co . 22 arrived , it was ordered to pump water on the warehouse . The company 's firefighters entered the warehouse and dragged a hose up a staircase to direct water onto the fourth floor . When heavy black smoke began coming up the stairway , Foreman Garrett B. Lane ordered his firemen to evacuate . Fireman Francis Hart Jr . , trying to collect the hose , became trapped , fled to the roof , and escaped over neighboring rooftops .

At about 3 : 30 or 4 : 00 a.m. , about five minutes after Engine Co . 22 evacuated the building , it exploded . The explosion flattened six or eight buildings , blew in the fronts of the opposite houses on Broad Street and wrenched shutters and doors from buildings at some distance from the immediate area of the explosion . It propelled bricks and other missiles through the air , threw down many people who had gone as far as Beaver Street , and spread the fire far and wide so that the whole neighborhood was set ablaze . The explosion shattered windows a mile away and was heard

as far away as Sandy Hook in New Jersey .

Engine Co . 22 's vehicle was blown across Broad Street ; the vehicle itself was eventually burned up . Several members of the company were injured .

Hart was thrown by the explosion across a rooftop , but only received a minor ankle injury . Augustus L. Cowdrey of Engine Co . 42 and Dave Van Winkle of Engine Co . 5 were throwing water on an adjacent building , when a second explosion occurred in the warehouse . The explosion threw Van Winkle into the street . Cowdrey was killed , his body never found . His company continued to search for his body amid the rubble for two days . His name appears along with many others on a memorial in Trinity Churchyard in New York for volunteer firefighters who died in the line of duty .

The cause of the explosion was debated in the days immediately following the fire . Public speculation led to the arrest of Crocker and Warren , the occupants of the warehouse . The Daily @-@ Tribune reported that the explosions could not have occurred without the presence of gunpowder in addition to the saltpeter , and thus they were suspected of possessing gunpowder , which would have led to a murder charge . However , later inquiry released Crocker and Warren of all charges as no evidence of gunpowder was discovered .

There was some speculation that the explosion had been caused by the NY Gas Light Co . ' s gasometer house , but Chief Engineer Cornelius Anderson released a statement the day of the fire stating that the explosion occurred before the flames ever reached the gas house .

= = Effect on New York City Fire Code and firefighting practices = =

The Great New York City Fire of 1845 was the last of three particularly devastating fires that affected the heart of Manhattan , the other two occurring in 1776 and 1835 . While very destructive , the 1845 fire confirmed the value of building codes restricting wood @-@ frame construction . In 1815 , city officials had banned new construction of wood @-@ frame structures in the densest areas of the city . The 1845 fire demonstrated the efficacy of these restrictions , as the progress of the fire was checked when it spread toward areas rebuilt after the 1835 fire with such materials as stone , masonry , and iron roofs and shutters . In spite of general improvements , the 1845 fire prompted public calls for a more proactive stance in fire prevention and firefighting .

To strengthen the city 's firefighting capabilities , the city established in 1845 a reserve unit called the Exempt Fireman 's Company , so called because it was made up of firemen who were exempt from militia and jury duty . The company was led by veteran fireman Zophar Mills , who had helped stop the great 1835 fire from crossing Wall Street .