

One of the goals of this course is for us to begin doing primary research. Using the guidelines in the “Profiles” chapter in *The Norton Field Guide*, write a profile of an interesting person, place, or event.

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4:53 pm

The year is 2008. Conshohocken—a small suburb of Philadelphia—is thriving. What was once strictly an industrial town at the turn of the century is being rapidly developed. Buildings are going up, businesses are opening their doors, and millennials are flocking to snag their very own piece of this revitalized town. But this is no ordinary success story of some truly profound transformation, because on the path to success, there is often some sort of hitch—Conshohocken is no exception to this rule. A small town trapped between rivers and highways is quickly trying to expand, but can only stretch so far.

This revival of Conshohocken is most evident along Washington Street, the dead-end road paralleling the Schuylkill River on one side and the Norristown regional rail line on the other. Months of trimming overgrown grass and removing rotted wood fencing has cleared the way for new homes, parks, bike trails, and office buildings. What was once only a vision—one of a revolutionary live, work, play community—is becoming a reality. This is Millennium.

The first office buildings, Millennium 2 and 3, went up in the early 2000s alongside Riverwalk at Millennium—an upscale apartment complex boasting its custom floor plans and riverfront views—which first opened to lessees in 2005. Businesses began to fill the open-concept office space quickly, and those hoping to sign a lease at Riverwalk were scribbled on the bottom of a quite extensive waitlist. The single developer behind all of this—Brian O’Neill—was in awe of his Millennium. Its immediate success fueled his insatiable appetite, and he began knocking endlessly at the door to the Board of Directors office, begging for approval to build another complex along Washington Street. In the heat of the moment, the plan for three hundred new apartments was accepted, and the massive construction project began (“Riverwalk”).

It is now August of 2008—Wednesday the 13th, precisely. These soon-to-be apartments, named Stables at Millennium, are in their framing stage—a four-story “lumberyard” sitting on a completely concrete foundation, baking in the summer sun. It is 4:30 pm, and workers from Cavan Construction have just packed up their materials, climbed into their trucks, and left for the day. Twenty three minutes later, Millennium—and all of Conshohocken—would instantly change forever. It is 4:53 pm—the one moment bringing such a fast-paced world to a screeching halt. A worker in adjacent Millennium 3 glances out the window and sees the truly unimaginable—the plywood and two-by-fours are flaming, and it is spreading rapidly (Bretzius).

Witnesses claim that within fifteen minutes, the entire construction site was burning—three hundred thousand square feet of flaming wood, radiating in extremely close quarters between Millennium 3 and Riverwalk.

In a matter of minutes, a slew of people began down the steep hills towards Washington Street by the hundreds—firefighters in their trucks, reporters in their vans, residents in their cars, neighbors on foot. They arrived to a scene of pure chaos—Millennium was, by no means, ready to handle a fire. The water main lines, which dead-end at the river, had very low pressure; the majority of fire hydrants were on the opposite side of the train tracks, blocked by metal gates; and there was insufficient room on the property for necessary firefighting equipment. In a quick decision, officials resorted to calling in additional fire companies from as far out as Delaware, and to pumping water directly from the Schuylkill River (Pradelli).

The railroad crossing gates were lowered, blocking every entrance point to Washington Street—only firefighters and police crossed in, despite the incessant efforts of many. Civilians gathered in an open lot across the tracks with a clear view—standing, watching in utter dismay, as the flames swallowed the entirety of the construction site. The structure collapsed with a loud bang, and the flames became more intense (“Massive”).

The mutual feeling among those in the crowd immediately became one of overwhelming emotion, confusion, and fear—firefighters were screaming to one another, and turning their equipment towards Riverwalk. The impossible was happening—the roofs of two adjacent Riverwalk buildings were smoking. Firefighters doused them with thousands of gallons of water, but the smoke continued along the rooflines. It was too late. Fires sparked in the attics of those two Riverwalk buildings.

The flames continued to spread along the rooflines, destroying everything in its path. The buildings were progressively eaten away, and in certain sections, upper floors collapsed on lower floors. Firefighters cut sections of the roofs to stop the

flames from spreading any further. They spread anyway. Every effort was made, and all of them failed. There was nothing more to do but watch the complete and utter destruction of O'Neill's dream. Over six hours later, firefighters gained the upper hand. The entire construction site, two of four Riverwalk buildings, and Millennium 3 had been destroyed.

The next morning, fog created an ominous mood which helped to highlight the tragedy of the evening before. The fire alarms were still buzzing, hundreds of feet of cyclone fencing had been thrown up, and Geppert Brothers Demolition had begun to survey the damage. Fire hoses were left loose, some continued to pump out water. Empty plastic water bottles and other trash filled the streets. And standing among the crowd was a young boy with his Nikon camera and his curiosity.

I was that young boy. And, while many of my memories have become faded with time, I will never forget this fire. Sticking the Nikon lens through the fencing, I zoom in on the construction site. Click. I capture a photo of all that remains—nothing more than smoking rubble and concrete stairwells. I turn to Millennium 3, and zoom in. Click. The windows have been boarded up, loose roofing shingles flap in the wind, and caution tape has been wrapped around the door handles. I turn to Riverwalk, and zoom in on the two destroyed buildings. Click. Soot hangs from the jagged rooflines. The trees and bushes below the buildings are scorched. And, finally, I turn towards the open lot across the tracks. I zoom in. Click. I capture an unforgettable photo of news reporters broadcasting, police monitoring the scene, and emotional residents being comforted in the arms of their loved ones ("Massive").

Just shy of ten years later, I look back on these photos and cannot help becoming so emotional. Wednesday the 13th began as any ordinary day—people woke up, poured their coffee, and left for work. But 4:53 pm was the moment when the world slammed on its brakes at full force. The news of the fire broke, and residents rushed home from work—they would never enter their homes again. Rush hour traffic on I-76, which overlooks the entire Conshohocken riverfront, sat unmoved for hours. The Norristown regional rail line, which parallels Millennium, was suspended for the night. And, the heat from the eight-alarm fire was so intense that it severely damaged two firetrucks, and created an atmospheric disturbance so large that it was visible on weather radar (Anderson).

But the news coverage is not what I remember. The photos are not what I remember. What I do remember is standing among the crowd of innocent people in the lot across the train tracks. I remember the frantic phone calls made to loved ones. And I will never, ever forget the screams I heard and the emotions I witnessed as the intense flames sparked in the attics of Riverwalk. These were screams of pure terror—a completely uncontrollable force had just begun to wreak havoc on the lives of so many. These screams are indescribable. People sobbed in disbelief as their homes, their pets, their belongings, their precious keepsakes, and their irreplaceable memories lost their fighting battle to the flames.

And to this day, the tragedy of August 13th has been brushed under the mat. Riverwalk has been rebuilt. Millennium 3 has been restored. The three hundred new apartments were completed and renamed Londonbury. And it is undeniable that the tree-lined streets, river views, and upscale amenities are blinding from the truth.

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