



Fiercest of Fires: the Great Orange Fires of 1889, 1908, and 1909

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ALMOST EVERY RESIDENT of the town of Orange has heard the story of the “Great Fire of 1908.” This devastating event still occupies a larger than life place in the town’s collective memory 114 years after it happened, recently being mentioned prominently in a June 2022 speech given at the opening ceremony of the town’s sesquicentennial celebration by State Senator Bryce Reeves. However, there were two other serious fires, in March 1889 and July 1909, that also struck downtown Orange and were fundamentally as damaging as the 1908 blaze. Interestingly, knowledge of the 1889 fire has almost completely faded from Orange’s communal memory, and the 1909 fire is commonly conflated or combined with the 1908 blaze. This essay attempts to correct these gaps in the public recall and provides a description of each fire and its impacts on the town.

1889 Fire

The earliest of the great Orange fires was centered on the block bounded by Railroad Avenue, Chapman Street, and Church Street in downtown Orange on March 15, 1889 (Figure 1). Although it was not the first major blaze that broke out in the town during the late 19th century, it was quite severe and was

widely reported in several regional newspapers from Norfolk to Shepherdstown, West Virginia. An earlier fire that burned several buildings adjacent to the courthouse occurred in 1871, but it will not be discussed here.

Detailed descriptions of the fire and its aftermath are found in the March 21, 1889 *Page Courier* (Luray)¹ and the March 22, 1889 *Salem Times-Register*.² These articles report that the fire broke out around midnight on Friday, March 15th in Luther Jackson Martin’s tinware shop, site of the 1913 Bailey & Willis building on Railroad Avenue, which later housed the Lohr Brothers chicken hatchery in the 1930s.³ The inferno was

¹ “A Big Fire at Orange Courthouse,” *Page Courier*, 21 March 1889, p. 2.

² Untitled, *Salem Times-Register*, 22 March 1889, p. 2.

³ “Ruins of the Great Fire of the Spring of 1888,” *Orange Review*, 8 December 1938, p. 1. Please note that this article misdated the fire by one year.



Figure 1. View Southwest across the Railroad Avenue Block of the Aftermath of the March 1889 Fire (Duff Green Collection: Orange County Historical Society).

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reportedly fueled by high winds and was finally contained by the efforts of local residents who had formed a bucket brigade (as there was no formal fire department at this time) about 3 a.m. the following morning.

Approximately seventeen structures and contents valued at \$50,000 or more (which is in excess of \$1.5 million in today's dollars) were damaged or destroyed by the conflagration. The burned buildings, among which were several downtown landmarks of the late 1880s, included: the John E. Morris & Company mill and farm equipment store south of Church Street near its crossing of the Southern/Virginia Midland railroad; the Virginia Midland Railroad passenger station and the railroad freight depot (north of the Church Street railroad crossing) and two nearby railroad cars; several warehouses of Charles Hellwig (baker/confectioner), Mrs. M. A. Corell, Charles C. Yager (grain merchant/grocer), and H. Goldstein (dry goods retailer); Max Copeland's store; Yager's store near the southern end of the block; W. H. Robinson's saloon; Williams & Company Hardware store; Richard W. Lipscomb & Co. (watchmaker/jeweler); George A. Gaines' saloon; John F. Fox's livery & stable (later, the approximate site of the *Orange Review* newspaper office⁴); J. W. Huff's livery & stable; Luther J. Martin's tinware and stove store (the fire's epicenter); L. T. Oden's house on the south side of Church Street; the Adams Express Company; Thomas Bond's building; and Joshua G. Bell's butcher shop. J. H. Johnson's store (a. k. a. Johnson Block) on the north end of Railroad Avenue was only partly damaged by the blaze.^{5,6,7} A brief report of the fire in the *Alexandria Gazette* indicated that the fire began near the middle of Railroad Avenue and advanced south,⁸ corresponding with the location of the present Bailey & Willis building.

Information from the *Orange Review's* 1963 recollection of the fire indicated that the fire began when Luther Martin's cook placed hot ashes in a trash can along the back of the property which ignited an adjacent wooden fence. The cook is reported to have lived in an upstairs apartment over Martin's store.⁹

While it's difficult to determine exactly where each of the named buildings sat within the footprint of the burned area, careful reading of the period newspaper accounts provides a few key details that aid in recreating the extent of the blaze. These reports indicate that the southern reach of the fire was the south side of Church Street where the Morris Mill and Oden home were located. To the west, the fire burned nearly to the Nazareth Baptist Church, while it extended eastward to just across the railroad (in the area of the Robertson Fountain

Park). An area just south of the Johnson Block (a complex of frame buildings) marked the northern extent of the fire along Railroad Avenue. The Johnson Block lot was bought by G. A. Gaines in 1895 and was where he built his two-story brick saloon and pool hall building.¹⁰

The *Orange Review* from December 8, 1938, printed a photograph taken the day after the fire (incorrectly attributed as 1888) which reportedly belonged to pharmacist Lawrence S. Ricketts. The photograph was taken from a second story window of a building adjacent to the burned district, which appears to have sat on the later site of the Sunny South Grocery building.¹¹ The Sunny South store in 1938 was situated on Railroad Avenue just south of the Gaines building, then housing C. T. Sherman's Orange Billiard and Bowling Association.¹² The photograph shows in grim detail that all the structures along two-thirds of Railroad Avenue, the south half of Chapman Street, as well as a portion of Church Street near the railroad crossing were reduced to ashes and rubble.¹³ The photo also confirms that the Nazareth Baptist Church, home to a black congregation that still meets there today, withstood the fire, marking its maximum westward advance. Figure 2 provides a depiction of the extent of the 1889 blaze.

Examination of the 1905 Sanborn map of downtown Orange along with post-fire newspaper accounts confirms that the burned portion of the business district recovered (and expanded) relatively soon after the calamity and was substantially rebuilt by the early 1900s. Within about six weeks of the fire, new liquor licenses were issued to burned out saloon operators George Gaines and W. H. Robinson.¹⁴ By 1891, the property formerly containing the J. E. Morris Mill near where Church Street crossed the railroad was developed into the 25-room Morris Hotel (a.k.a. Piedmont Hotel). Also in July 1891, Bell's butcher shop reopened for business at "Equine Alley" along Chapman Street.^{15,16} In 1895, Bell moved his shop to a new location on Railroad Avenue.¹⁷ Fox's livery was also rebuilt on Chapman Street (but would suffer in a later fire).

An article in the April 11, 1963, *Orange Review* confuses some of the details of the 1889 fire with those of the fire of 1908. The caption beneath the published photo erroneously conflates the (only known) photo of the 1889 fire aftermath and attributes it as a photo of the 1908 firescape. The original publication of this same photo was on December 8, 1938, but

¹⁰ "69 Years Ago," *Orange Review*, 27 February 1964, p. B-8.

¹¹ "Ruins of the Great Fire of the Spring of 1888," p. 1.

¹² "Bowling A Popular Sport in Orange," *Orange County News*, 20 November 1930, p. 6.

¹³ "Ruins of the Great Fire of the Spring of 1888," p. 1.

¹⁴ "Orange 59 Years Ago," *Orange Review*, 2 September 1948, p. 11.

¹⁵ *Orange Review*, 13 August 1942.

¹⁶ "69 Years Ago," *Orange Review*, 23 January 1964, p. B-8.

¹⁷ "69 Years Ago," p. B-8.

⁴ "July 18th was 43rd Anniversary of Great Orange Fire; Review Burned," *Orange Review*, 24 July 1952, p. 2.

⁵ "Fire at Orange," *Alexandria Gazette*, 16 Mar 1889, p. 2.

⁶ *The Norfolk Weekly Landmark*, 20 Mar 1889, p. 4.

⁷ *Orange Review*, Volume 33, Number 1, 7 March 1963.

⁸ "Fire at Orange," p. 2.

⁹ "The Morning After," *Orange Review*, 11 April 1963, p. B-2.

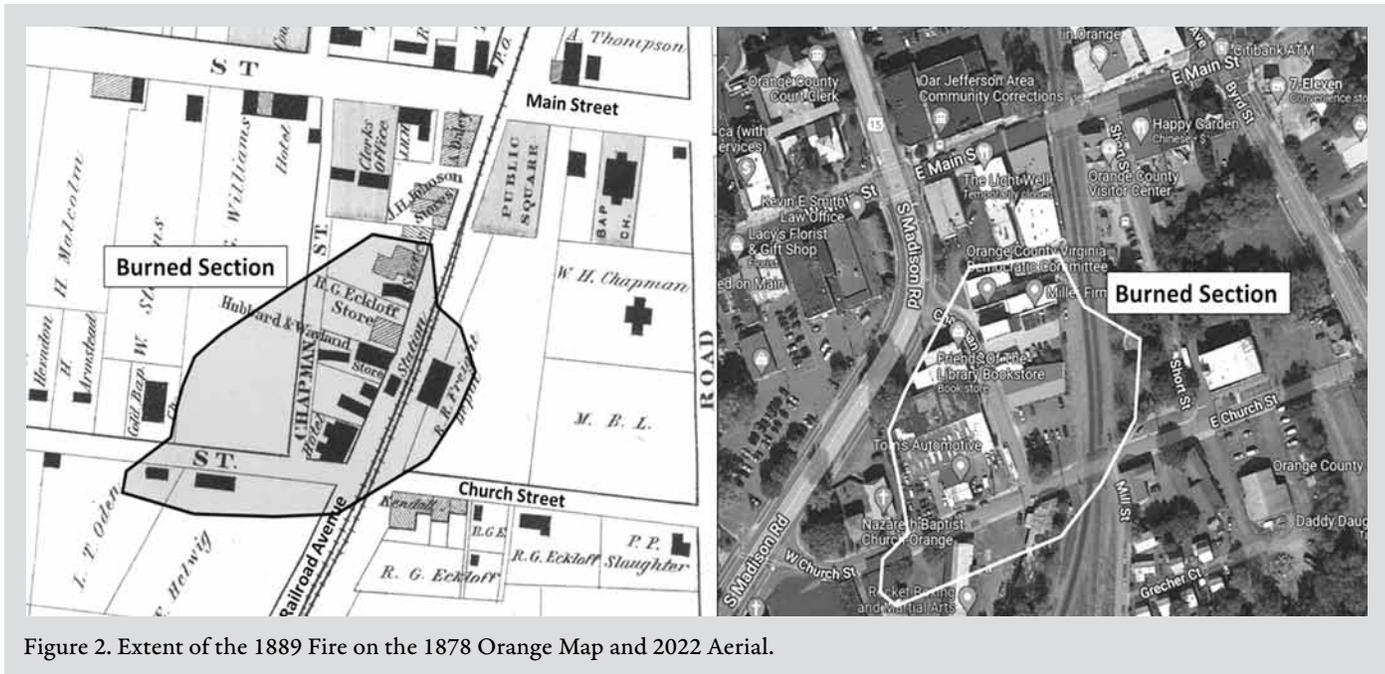
Orange Fires (*continued*)

Figure 2. Extent of the 1889 Fire on the 1878 Orange Map and 2022 Aerial.

the 1963 re-printing included previously unseen hand written notations pointing out a number of buildings and fire details, presumably marked up by the original owner of the photo—pharmacist L. S. Ricketts.^{18, 19}

1908 Fire

The second “Great Fire” to burn downtown Orange still to this day occupies a disproportionate place in the written and oral history of the town. The fire was reported in several newspaper headlines to have destroyed Orange’s business district and much of the town (e.g., *Richmond Evening Journal*). In fact, this was far from the case; however, the awful events of that day have loomed large in the town’s memory ever since. Fortunately for contemporary readers, detailed accounts of the blaze were reported in several regional newspapers (with varying levels of accuracy) and were also revisited over the succeeding years in columns by the *Orange Review* (although some of the details appear to have been misreported or overstated in these later remembrances).^{20, 21, 22} Our most detailed account (and probably most reliable) comes from an article published by Miss Bertha Robinson, associate editor of the *Orange Observer*, a week after the fire.²³ The following section relies primarily on

the *Orange Observer*’s account of the fire, as well as details from other 1908 and contemporary reports.

About 5:30 a.m. on Sunday, November 8, 1908, the fire began in Towles Terrill’s apartment over Dr. Lawrence S. Ricketts Drugstore on Railroad Avenue. Ricketts’ store was near the south end of the impressive, two-story brick George A. Gaines building, situated between the Ware-Watts Hardware Company and Rev. A. J. Harlow’s real estate office, occupying the southernmost space in the building. Similar to the 1889 fire, high winds fueled the blaze and a section of the town’s business district along Railroad Avenue and East Main Street was quickly engulfed. Upon sounding the emergency alarm from the bell towers of the courthouse and the Orange Baptist Church, upwards of several hundred residents responded by forming a bucket brigade of men, women, and children, cross-cutting racial and economic lines, who worked to combat the blaze for the next several hours.²⁴

At about 8:45 a.m., as the fire progressed and intensified, the Charlottesville fire department, within 45 minutes of receiving the distress call from Orange, arrived on a train equipped with a steam-powered pumper with water supply, a team of three horses, and 14 firefighters to supplement the meager fire-fighting equipment being brought to bear by Orange.^{25, 26} The town’s fire suppression equipment consisted of three small hand-powered fire engines (pumps) and a few hundred feet of hose tapping water from nearby residential wells.²⁷

¹⁸ “The Morning After,” *Orange Review*, 11 April 1963, p. B-2.

¹⁹ “Ruins of the Great Fire of the Spring of 1888,” *Orange Review*, 8 December 1938, p. 1.

²⁰ “Orange Business Section Burned,” *Culpeper News*, 14 November 1908, p. 1.

²¹ “November is the 50th Anniversary of the Great Fire of 1908,” *Orange Review*, 20 November 1958, p. 1-B.

²² “It Happened, but Not Recently,” *Orange County Review*, 26 December 2013, p. A-4.

²³ “Fierce were the Awful Flames,” *Orange Observer*, 13 November, 1908, p. 1.

²⁴ “Fierce were the Awful Flames,” p. 1.

²⁵ “Orange Visited by a Big Fire,” *Daily Progress*, 9 November 1908, p. 1.

²⁶ “Town is Burned,” *Richmond Evening Journal*, 9 November 1908, p. 1.

²⁷ “Fierce were the Awful Flames,” p. 1.

Orange Fires (*continued*)



Figure 3. View Northwest from Short Street of the Burned Section of Orange after the 1908 Fire (Grymes Collection: Orange County Historical Society).

The townspeople and the Charlottesville firemen worked feverishly to battle the flames and stem the destruction.²⁸ Eventually the fire was checked and brought under control and effectively extinguished after about five hours. The town's bucket brigade halted any further advance of the fire on the north side of Main Street (across from the Levy Building) by keeping the frame buildings soaked with water to prevent their igniting.²⁹

The destroyed properties included the large brick edifice of the 1873 Orange Baptist Church on the south side of East Main Street midway between Byrd and Short Streets³⁰ and the

G. A. Gaines building at the north end of Railroad Avenue, on the site of the former 1804 Orange County Courthouse.³¹ The Gaines building housed the drugstore of Dr. Lawrence S. Ricketts, several upstairs apartments, the Ware-Watts Hardware Company, the real estate office of Rev. Adoniram Judson (A. J.) Harlow, and Gaines' saloon and pool hall. Other destroyed buildings included: Emil Levy's three-story, brick dry goods store (a.k.a. "Levy's Busy Corner") at the corner of Main Street and Railroad Avenue; the (wood-framed) Levi Perry Building on Main Street — containing the J. Dallas Morris & Son grocery and the clothing/dry goods store of Solomon D. Cohen, along with the upstairs apartments of Cohen and his wife and of H. W. Pasner. The fire probably also damaged R. H. Rawlings' store on the east end of the adjacent Sanford Building where the fire was finally stopped on this end of Main Street.^{32,33}

On the east side of the railroad tracks, the fire consumed the metal clad Waite & Chewing Furniture Company (the former National Bank of Orange building) on the location of the present Southern Railroad passenger depot; a warehouse of the Ware-Watts Hardware Co.; the former house/office building of Dr. E. W. Rowe, then owned by Luther J. Martin, at the intersection of East Main and Short streets; the house of John and Jane McDonald at the corner of East Main and Byrd streets; the house and adjacent store owned by Mrs. Emma T. Slaughter on the north side of East Main Street (about the middle of the block) rented by Mervyn W. Busby for a bakery. The building had previously been the location of Grymes Drugstore before the operation was moved to the west side of the railroad tracks. The fire also consumed the (wood-framed) Thompson Building, owned by Rev. Harlow, on the north side

³¹ Orange County Deed Book 67:222.

³² "Fierce were the Awful Flames," p. 1.

³³ "Memories of the Orange Fire of 1908," *Orange Review*, 28 November 1935, p. 1.

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Orange Fires (*continued*)

of East Main Street housing the mortuary (and furniture repair shop) of Henry R. Bradfield since 1905. Bradfield relocated to Gordonsville in January 1909. John S. Day's residence and the Southern Railway telegraph office and interlocking tower that stood just to the east of the railroad tracks were also destroyed.^{34, 35, 36, 37, 38}

Careful examination of the 1908 fire photographs at high resolution clearly shows the footprint of the fire's destruction and brings an appreciation for the level of damage suffered by the town (Figure 3).³⁹ These photos confirm that the intersection of East Main Street with Byrd Street marked the easternmost extent of the fire, and all the buildings on both sides of East Main Street were lost except for the residence at the northwest corner of the intersection with May-Fray Avenue. A small warehouse just north of the railroad freight depot delimited the fire's extent to the south. The fire consumed the structures along the northern half of Railroad Avenue (a.k.a. the Broadway of Orange) only. Contrary to many subsequent reports (both immediately after the fire and those by later commentators), the buildings along the lower half of Railroad Avenue to the Church Street railroad crossing remained intact. Those accounts left readers with the false impression that the bulk of the downtown was consumed. The western limit of the fire was the large, two-story, brick Sanford building on the south side of East Main Street. To the north, the fire stopped short of the large, brick Peoples Grocery warehouse south of where May-Fray Avenue crosses the railroad tracks. Otherwise, dependencies such as ice houses, privies, sheds, and stables were also lost on many of the burned lots. Fortunately Orange's two newspaper offices at the time, the *Orange Observer* and the *Piedmont Virginian* (forerunner of the *Orange Review*), located north and south of the burned area, escaped unscathed and were able to continue their operations.⁴⁰

Several of the destroyed businesses quickly shifted their operations to other sections of town immediately after the fire. Ricketts Drugstore and Cohen's clothing store relocated to the Star Building on lower Railroad Avenue. Within a week after the fire it was announced that the former Yager Hotel building would be removed and Ricketts Drugstore would be permanently rebuilt on this site on the corner of Main Street and Madison Road. The Ware-Watts Hardware Co. reopened in the Crittendon Building (present county office building)

on West Main Street, and Levy's Dry Goods moved to the former storefront of J. E. Long (in the Fry Building) on West Main Street. Waite and Chewing Furniture relocated to one of Dr. Frank Perry's buildings on the north side of East Main Street.^{41, 42}

Total losses from the fire were estimated at \$100,000 (\$3.15 million in today's dollars) including at least 15 businesses (not including outbuildings), along with electrical, telegraph, and telephone lines in the affected area. Despite the significant property destruction, no lives were lost, and reconstruction on several of the burned lots began shortly after the fire. Typically, brick buildings replaced the ones that were lost, and several were finished by September 1909.⁴³ These included a new two-story Levy Building, a new Ricketts store (Ricketts Corner) on the corner immediately east of the courthouse, a new Chewing furniture store across Short Street on a location that would later be owned by Goree A. Waugh, and a new Baptist Church on West Main Street.

According to fire insurance claims, there were a few other structures that were damaged by the fire but left intact. The United States Post Office in the Sanford Building adjacent to the National Bank of Orange and Dr. Frank Perry's office on Main Street suffered minor damage. Dr. John R. Grymes' drugstore also reported a small loss of stock and furniture; however, at least one report indicates that his entire building narrowly escaped ruin.⁴⁴

A 1963 *Orange Review* article noted that Mrs. Frank B. Perry, wife of the mayor at the time of the fire, recalled that her home on the corner of East Main Street and May-Fray Avenue was in danger of succumbing to the blaze. Water from the well in their yard was used by the bucket brigade, and her home was ultimately saved. "That's because I prayed so hard," Mrs. Perry is quoted telling her husband as he surveyed the fire's aftermath.⁴⁵

Initially, the cause of the fire was rumored to be a cat that knocked over a lantern.⁴⁶ However, the cause for the conflagration was quickly (and correctly) shifted to 77-year-old Mr. Towles Terrill who lived in one of the apartments above Dr. Ricketts's pharmacy. He apparently had fallen asleep and dropped a lit match, which ignited loose papers in his room. Terrill escaped the fire, but had to be hospitalized due his inju-

³⁴ "Fifteen Buildings Burned at Orange," *Culpeper Exponent*, 13 November 1908, p. 1.

³⁵ "November is the 50th Anniversary of the Great Fire of 1908," p. 1-B.

³⁶ Sanborn Map Company. *Orange, Orange County, Virginia*. December 1905, Library of Congress Map Room.

³⁷ "Memories of the Orange Fire of 1908," p. 1.

³⁸ "Fierce were the Awful Flames," p. 1.

³⁹ Four Panoramic Photographs of the 1908 Fire, Grymes Collection, Orange County Historical Society. Orange, Virginia.

⁴⁰ "Orange Business Section Burned," p. 1.

⁴¹ "Orange County Weekly Budget," *Culpeper Exponent*, 20 November 1908, p. 4.

⁴² "Fierce were the Awful Flames," p. 1.

⁴³ Sanborn Map Company, *Orange, Orange Co., Virginia*, July 1909, Orange County Historical Society, Orange, Virginia.

⁴⁴ "Fierce were the Awful Flames," p. 1.

⁴⁵ "The Morning After," p. B-2.

⁴⁶ "Orange Business Section Burned," *Culpeper News*, 14 November 1908, p. 1.

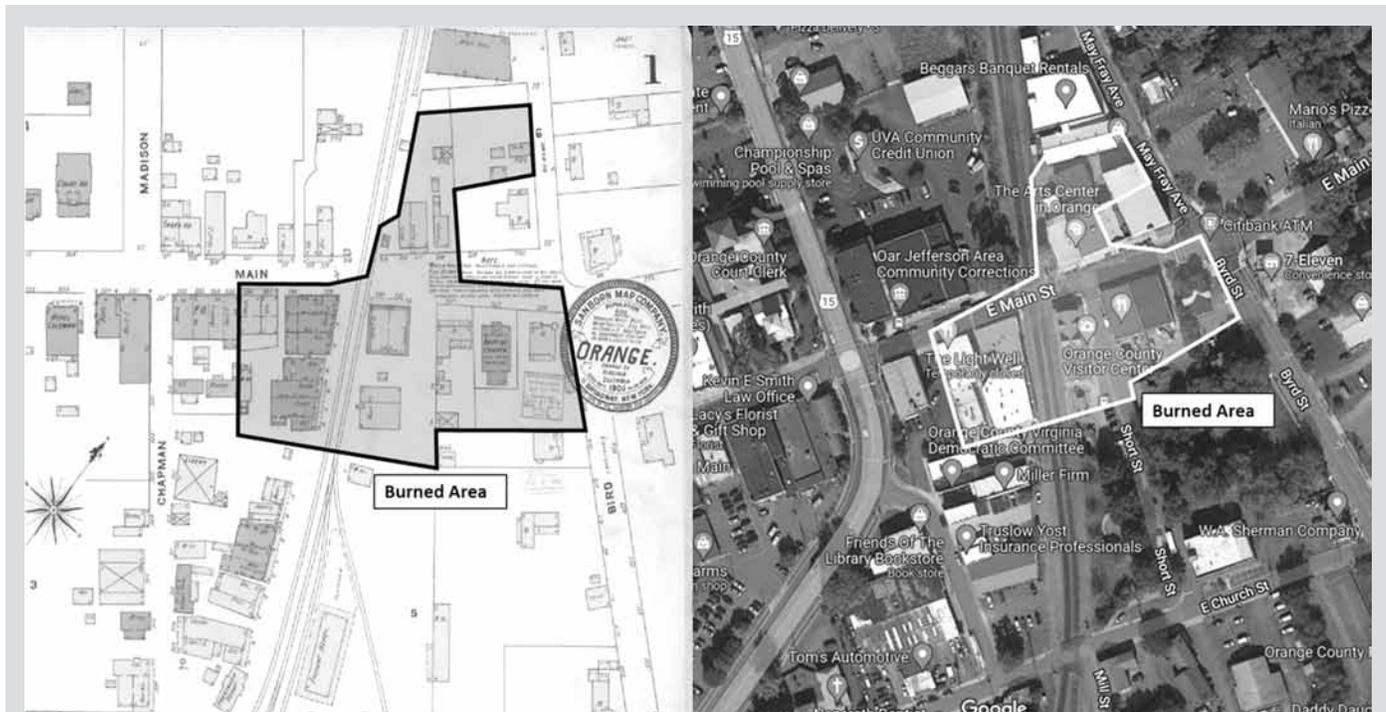
Orange Fires (*continued*)

Figure 4. Extent of the 1908 Fire on the 1905 Orange Sanborn Map and Current Aerial.

ries.⁴⁷ He recovered but later lost his life in another downtown fire in 1916.⁴⁸

Scarcely two weeks after the fire, the congregation of the Baptist Church, while meeting in the Masonic Opera House on Main Street, raised \$4,000 for the construction of a new church. The new Baptist Church was promptly built at its present location on West Main Street in 1909, on a lot purchased from Frank B. Perry. One third of the brick needed for the new church was donated by Prof. E. P. Hatcher who had established a brick plant in Orange County the month before.^{49, 50}

While the effects of the 1908 blaze were certainly awful, its footprint was less extensive than was generally reported in some newspaper headlines and what has been typically understood by Orange residents and recent historians (Figure 4).^{51, 52} The primary reason the 1908 fire has occupied so much of the community's memory is that it was the first town disaster to have been extensively photographed. The week after the fire, the Seabrook Brothers photographers of Charlottesville, who had opened a studio in the Levy Building in the spring of 1905, photo-documented the damage to the

town.⁵³ Subsequently, a fine series of panoramic photo postcards were quickly produced and, within a week, sold by the Grymes Drugstore. Ricketts Drugstore also circulated their own series of photo postcards with similar scenes of the fire damage. These images serve as important historical benchmarks, and have been reprinted in the Orange newspaper as a way of periodically reconnecting readers (and the community) to the past.^{54, 55}

1909 Fire

The last of the three great fires that struck Orange began about 5 a.m. on Tuesday, July 20, 1909. The fire burned a familiar section of downtown bounded by Chapman (a.k.a. Wall) Street and Railroad Avenue, which had not fully recovered from the catastrophic blaze nine months earlier. Accounts of the July 1909 conflagration were also widely reported across the Commonwealth.^{56, 57, 58} Of the two newspapers in town, the *Orange Observer* made the only local report of the fire on July 23, 1909.⁵⁹

⁴⁷ "Orange County Weekly Budget," *Culpeper Exponent*, 27 November 1908, p. 4.

⁴⁸ Certificate of Death, 30 October 1916. On file, Bureau of Vital Statics, Virginia Board of Health.

⁴⁹ "Orange County Weekly Budget," p. 4.

⁵⁰ "Orange Wheat Crop is Looking Fine," *Culpeper Exponent*, 23 October 1908, p. 3.

⁵¹ "It Happened, but Not Recently," p. A-4.

⁵² Frank S. Walker, Jr., *Remembering: A History of Orange County, Virginia* (Orange, Virginia: Orange County Historical Society, 2004).

⁵³ "Orange Personals," *The News Leader*, 10 April 1905, p. 12.

⁵⁴ "November is the 50th Anniversary of the Great Fire of 1908," p. 1-B.

⁵⁵ "Orange Swept by a Most Terrific Fire," p. B-7.

⁵⁶ "Orange Visited by Another Fire," *The Daily Progress*, 20 July 1909, p. 1.

⁵⁷ "Twenty Buildings Were Destroyed," *The Daily Progress*, 26 July 1909, p. 1.

⁵⁸ "The Orange Fire," *Culpeper News*, 23 July 1909, p. 4.

⁵⁹ "Flames were Fierce," *Orange Observer*, 23 July 1909, p. 1.

Orange Fires (*continued*)

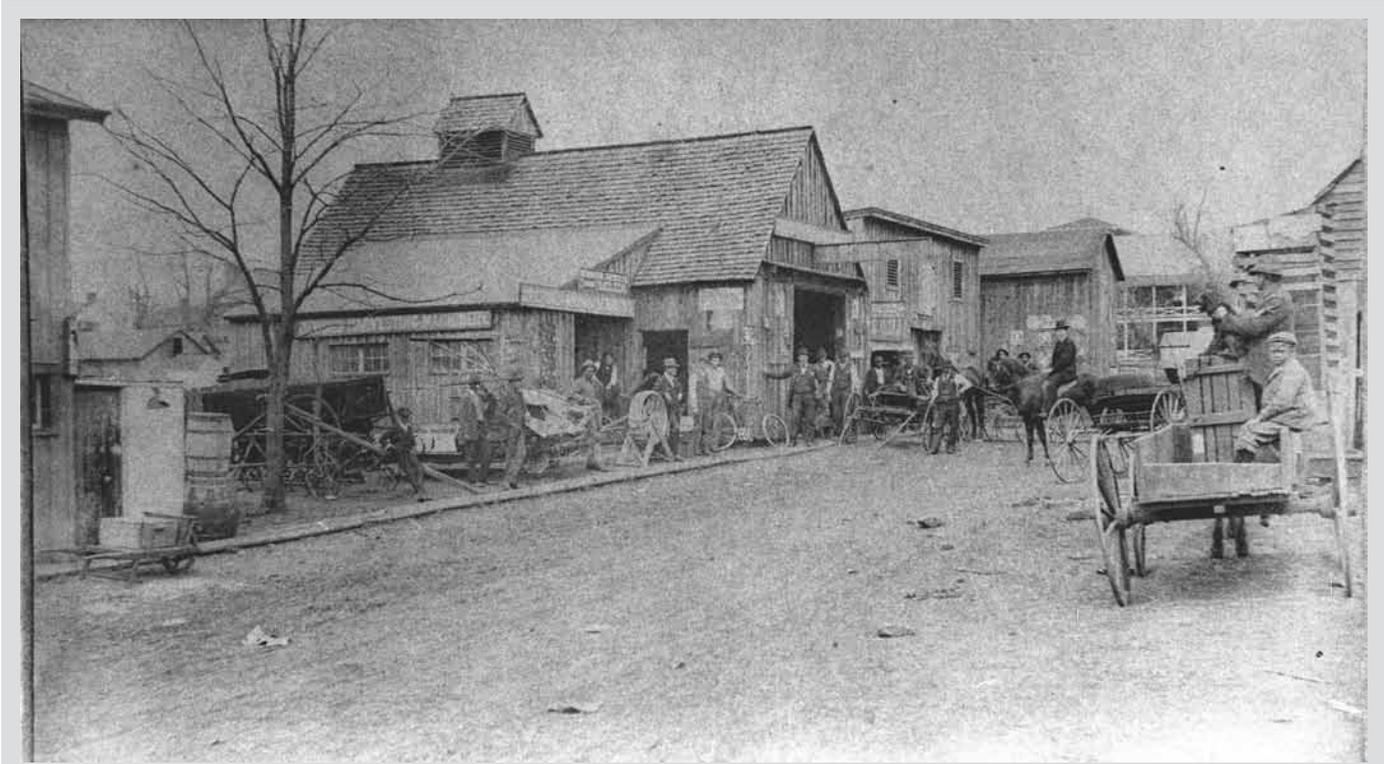


Figure 5. Pre-1900 View Northwest Toward the Courthouse of where the 1909 Fire Began along Chapman Street (Orange County Historical Society).

Just after the fire began in Elhanan Chester Cook's blacksmith shop on the west side of Chapman Street (north of Church Street), the alarm bell was rung at the courthouse and a siren was blown at the electric light plant along Caroline Street to alert the citizens of the emergency. Almost immediately, a bucket brigade was formed to combat the rapidly intensifying flames with the town's two small, hand-powered engines.⁶⁰ For a time the buildings along upper Chapman Street, near its intersection with Main Street, were in danger of being destroyed, but the prevailing winds and the work of the bucket brigade saved this section of town.⁶¹ However, the same could not be said for the majority of Chapman Street and Railroad Avenue (Figure 5).

The winds carried the fire southeast across a wide swath of downtown with disastrous effect where numerous tightly packed buildings fed the flames. Among the losses were Col. C. B. Maddux's Piedmont Hotel (a.k.a. the Hotel Morris) managed by W. G. Strickler on the south side of Church Street.⁶² Maddux had recently purchased the building and contents from J. B. Parrott in March 1909.⁶³ The flames extended east across the railroad tracks, damaging the freight depot of the Southern and C & O Railroads.

Along Railroad Avenue, the fire destroyed a number of buildings: at the intersection with Church Street, the shared passenger depot of the Southern and C & O Railroads; the brick, two-story Star Building containing the *Orange Review* and *Piedmont Virginian* printing offices and the Saunders & Johnson plumbing shop; the J. H. Pierce grocery in W. H. Robinson's two-story, brick building just north of the Star Building; Ebenezer Francis McIntosh's grocery/poultry store; Rev. John Hansbrough's two-story, frame building containing the H. E. Grasty and Bros. lumber company office (here since before 1905), as well as the apartments of Joseph Oddenino, H. L. Aylor, and William C. Cox; the two-story, frame W. S. Grymes Building containing J. W. Heflin's grocery store, soft drink emporium, and restaurant; and John W. Lee's pool room in Abel M. Daniel's building.⁶⁴

On Chapman Street the fire consumed C. W. Parrott's soft drink saloon and pool hall at the corner of Church Street; J. D. Morris' two-story store and apartment (he had been burned out by the 1908 fire on Main Street too); E. C. Cook's blacksmith shop and H. B. Scruggs' paint and repair shop in John R. Hughes' building; E. F. Fox's livery in W. S. Grymes' building; H. C. Herring & Son's wheelwright and blacksmith shop and the J. W. Lewis tin store in two of E. F. McIntosh's buildings;

⁶⁰ "Flames were Fierce," p. 1.

⁶¹ "Flames were Fierce," p. 1.

⁶² "Flames were Fierce," p. 1.

⁶³ "Orange," *Culpeper News*, 19 March 1909, p. 1.

⁶⁴ "Flames were Fierce," p. 1.

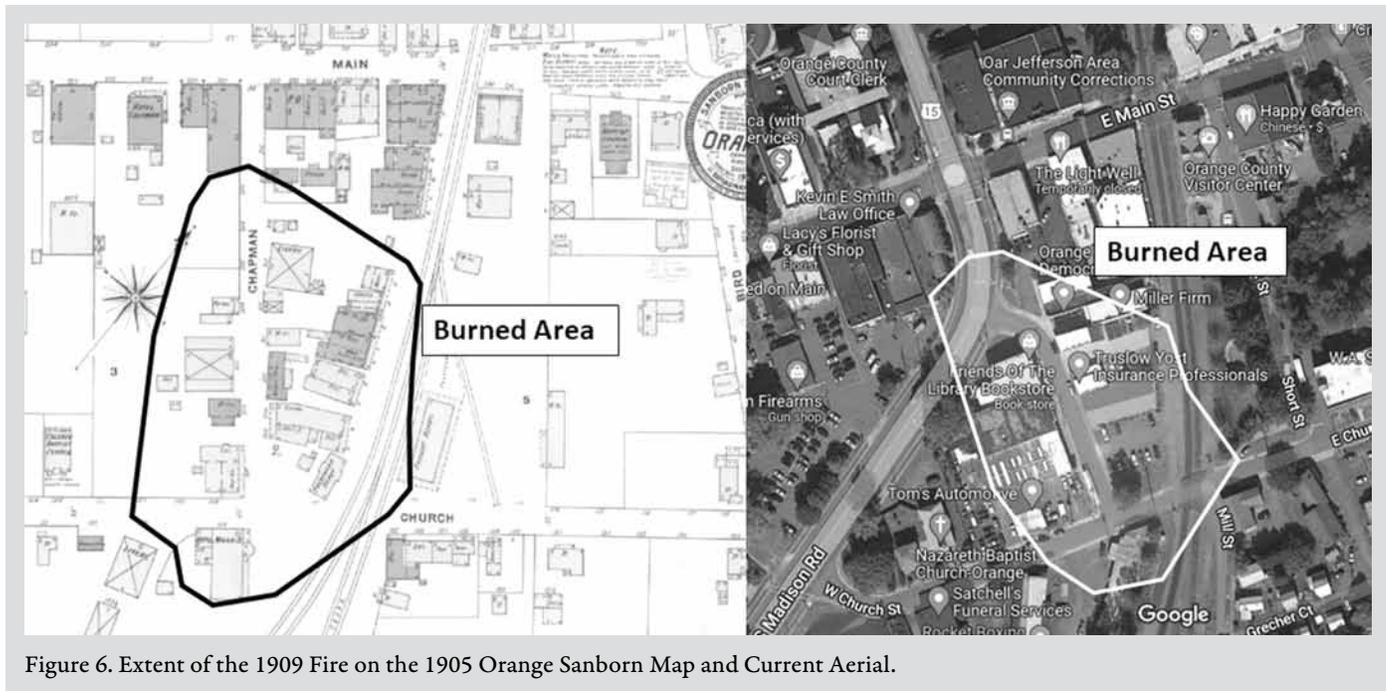
Orange Fires (*continued*)

Figure 6. Extent of the 1909 Fire on the 1905 Orange Sanborn Map and Current Aerial.

John O'Neal's harness and repair shop, and the N. T. Butler shoe repair shop in two of B. J. Farrar's buildings; and A. J. Harlow's Orange Undertaking Company in A. W. Shackleford's building. Luther J. Martin, whose home was destroyed by the 1889 fire, lost his two-story, frame grocery store and apartment in this blaze as well.⁶⁵

Black-owned businesses and homes also suffered from the fire. Two single-story frame buildings, owned by Rev. Hansbrough, housing Lizzie Gordon's barber shop and William R. Staff's meat market were destroyed. John R. Hughes' building containing a carpenter shop and Eunice Jones' apartment was also destroyed.⁶⁶

Other buildings that were damaged but not ruined included: David May's brick building (probably the rear of the May-Rudasill Co. store at the corner of Main and Chapman Streets); the W. C. Graham livery and the Gill & Nelson building on the west side of Chapman Street; and Maynard & Mason's brick building.⁶⁷

After several hours, the fire was finally subdued. Firemen had been dispatched from Charlottesville to help combat the blaze, but they were called off before reaching Orange, as the blaze had been brought under control by that time.⁶⁸

As with the previous downtown fire, the extent of its destruction was sometimes exaggerated in the press that seemed to report total and widespread devastation. For example, the *Staunton Spectator and Vindicator* proclaimed, "the business

portion of that town was...wiped out."⁶⁹ According to the *Orange Observer* and other regional newspapers (which probably picked up the story from the *Observer*), at least twenty buildings were destroyed (Figure 6).^{70,71} According to the *Culpeper News*, only a fireproof tool shed of the C & O Railroad was left standing in the burned area.⁷² The inferno caused \$75,000 - \$100,000 in damage (\$2.36 million-\$3.15 million in today's dollars). Fortunately, no lives were lost in the blaze that was at least as destructive as the "Great Fire of 1908."

Several of the firms burned out by the fire immediately relocated to other buildings. E. C. Cook moved across the railroad tracks to a building that was demolished in 1938, on the lot now containing the W. A. Sherman Company. L. J. Martin's grocery moved to the Coleman Building. H. E. Grasty & Bros. relocated to the Gaines Building on upper Railroad Avenue. Heflin's restaurant moved to the Lipscomb house, and Staff's meat market moved into quarters on lower Chapman Street.⁷³ H. C. Herring & Son relocated to a lot adjacent to Kate Oden's house on the south side of Church Street.⁷⁴ The Southern Railroad replaced their passenger depot by building a new facility at its present location in 1910, on the site of the former Waite & Chewning furniture store lost in the 1908 fire. The September 1909 Sanborn map of Orange indicates that several new brick buildings were already planned for Chapman Street, and a new,

⁶⁹ "Personal Mention," *Staunton Spectator and Vindicator*, 30 July 1909, p. 3.

⁷⁰ "Flames were Fierce," p. 1.

⁷¹ "Twenty Buildings Were Destroyed," p. 1.

⁷² "The Orange Fire," p. 4.

⁷³ "Flames were Fierce," p. 1.

⁷⁴ "Adjoining Counties," *Culpeper News*, 13 August 1909, p. 8.

⁶⁵ "Flames were Fierce," p. 1.

⁶⁶ "Flames were Fierce," p. 1.

⁶⁷ "Flames were Fierce," p. 1.

⁶⁸ "Orange Visited by Another Fire," p. 1.

Orange Fires (*continued*)

large, brick structure would replace the burned Hansbrough Building on lower Railroad Avenue. Much of the affected portion of Railroad Avenue would be rebuilt within a few years.

Interestingly, there are no professional photographs known to exist documenting the extent of the fire, which is surprising since the previous fire in 1908 was completely photographed. Whatever the reasons for the lack of documentation, the scene afterward was the same with large swaths of consumed buildings and smoldering piles of rubble that represented livelihoods lost, some of which were regained, but others were not.

These three fires represent the most destructive days in Orange's history, and each should be remembered as distinct events. One outcome was that businesses ultimately responded by building back with more substantial (and safer) brick build-

ings. Masonry construction also became the norm in the other areas of downtown as well, creating a more substantial, cohesive, and appealing architectural fabric that served commerce here well for many years afterward.

Postscript: It is possible that there are a handful of photographs of the aftermath of the 1909 fire tucked away in scrapbooks or in boxes of family papers in attics and basements around Orange today. Examination of these photos could improve our understanding of the extent of the fire and how the reconstruction effort mitigated the damage. If you have any photos of the 1909 fire, the Historical Society would appreciate access to them for study.

In Memoriam: Alan J. Shotwell

Ann L. Miller and Gary W. Jones

Orange County history, and particularly the Rapidan region, lost a devoted, dedicated, and active chronicler and friend with the passing of Alan J. Shotwell in May. Alan had ties to many local families in and around Rapidan, and became a full-time resident following his retirement from the U.S. Navy, a career that included service in the Vietnam conflict. In addition to his longtime membership in and support of the Orange County Historical Society, he was a member of Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Rapidan, the Rapidan Volunteer Fire Department, the James Madison Museum, and the Viet Nam War Foundation and Museum.

Like all of his interests, Alan's historical interests were many and varied, and were pursued with great enthusiasm. He produced extensive research material concerning his beloved village of Rapidan, encompassing information on local families, local houses and other buildings, landholdings, natural history (including the many floods that impacted the region), and the history and evolution of the village (the last running to multiple updated editions over the years). An interesting subset of his work was gathering data on other places and items (including ships) that were named "Rapidan."

Gary W. Jones of the Rapidan Volunteer Fire Department shared some thoughts about Alan (from remarks given by Gary at Alan's memorial gathering).

Reflections on Alan Shotwell
by Gary W. Jones

I have been pondering about the life of Alan James Shotwell. I have come to the conclusion that his life did not fit neatly in a box. Or better said, simple summary of his life is like trying to pull a single ingredient out of Louisiana Gumbo. He had great interest in many endeavors and any project of his was attacked with gusto. He was supportive of the people around him and will be missed by many.

In closing, I will recount a classic Shotwell story to remember him by.

July 28, 2018, Rapidan VA, Alan Shotwell's 75th birthday.

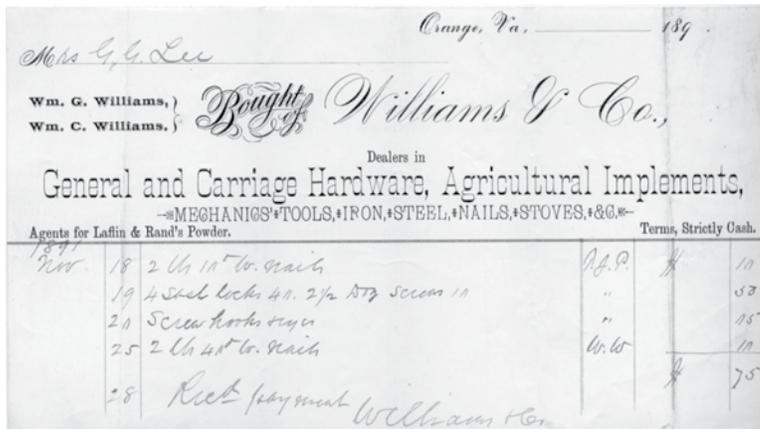
After nearly a year, the Rapidan Post Office finally reopens and Alan planned a grand reopening ceremony. He had a boom box with patriotic music (cassettes, of course!) in place and Johnny and Cecilia Rose (kin) help him do dry runs raising a brand new American flag so everything is ready. The appointed time came, with a decent crowd gathering to listen to the music, a short speech with a few well-chosen phrases — and time to raise the flag!! So the flag goes up, only to get snagged on the pole light with no tugging able to break it loose! I head to the firehouse to get a fire truck so we could get a ladder to set up on the pole to get the rope loose. I get to the railroad overpass when a whoop goes up! I turned around to see Shotwell going up the pole like a squirrel and get to 2 feet of the snag when he starts slipping. A rush from the crowd grabs at his feet to push him up and he gets to untangle the rope and the flag goes up with a Cheer! Hooray for Alan Shotwell!

The image of Alan clambering up a light pole (on his 75th birthday, no less!) to free a snagged American flag for a patriotic observance is a vintage and memorable picture of the man. He will be missed by many, not the least by our Historical Society, and we extend our condolences to his friends and family. It was an honor and a privilege to have his support, interest, and involvement for so many years. Alan placed copies of his extensive research on Rapidan and the surrounding area in the Orange County Historical Society collections, so that his contributions will continue to be available to researchers into the future.

Hooray for Alan Shotwell, indeed!

Archival Glimpses of Local Businesses Affected by the Great Fires

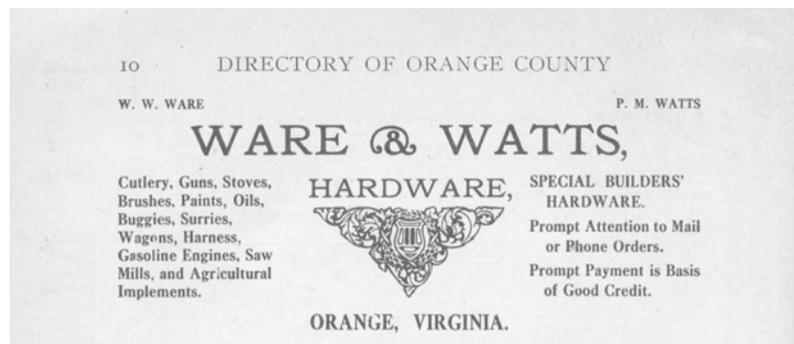
As a companion to the lead article, we present a selection of documents from the Historical Society and from the *Virginia Chronicle* website about some of the businesses that suffered losses during the Great Fires in Orange.



The Williams & Company Hardware Store was burned during the 1889 fire, but the business survived, as indicated by this November 1891 receipt from the Historical Society Collections.



Ware-Watts Hardware Company was one of the business establishments that suffered during the November 8, 1908 fire in Orange, losing both their store in the Gaines Building and their warehouse on the other side of the railroad tracks. The raffle ticket above (photocopy from Historical Society Collections) shows that in April of that same year Ware-Watts raffled off a fancy Laurel Steel Range. The Ware & Watts Hardware ad from the 1910 *Directory of Orange County* in our collections suggests that the company was flourishing in spite of losses during the 1908 fire.

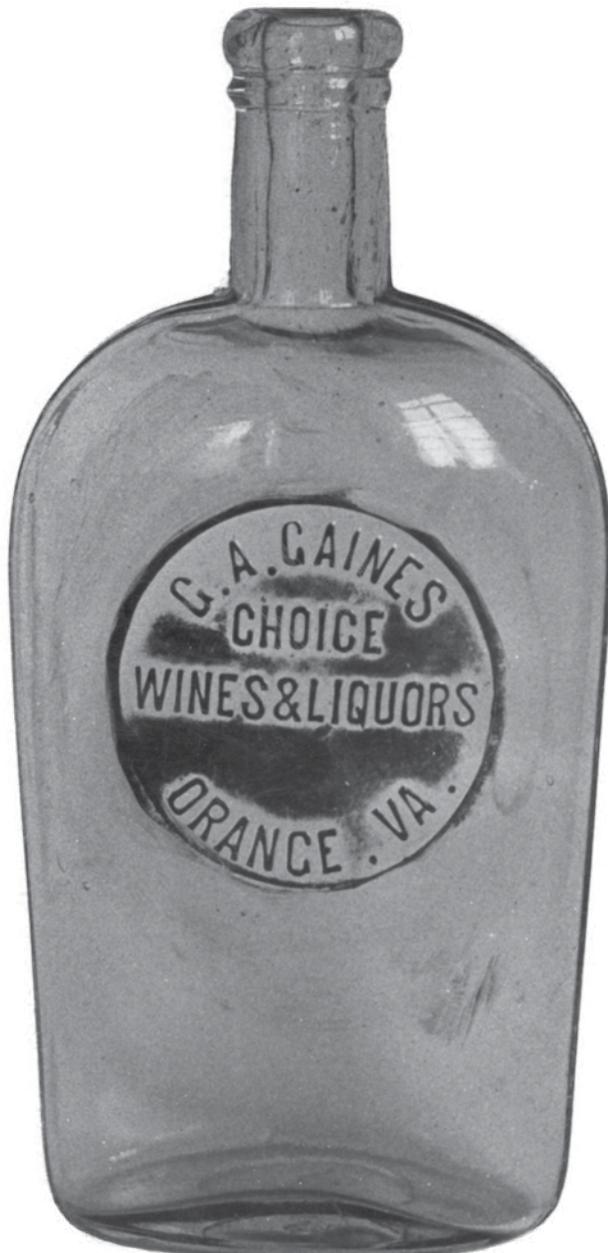


See *Glimpses* on page 11.

Glimpses (*continued*)



The June 8, 1972 issue of the *Orange Review* reprinted some material from the February 23, 1872 issue of the *Piedmont Virginian*, including this ad for the Oak Hall Saloon, George A. Gaines, Proprietor. We thought this was especially interesting, since, as noted in Ray Ezell's article about the Great Orange Fires, George A. Gaines was still in the liquor business decades later. We don't know where his saloon was in 1872, but it clearly predates his 1895 building on Railroad Avenue that was lost in the 1908 fire. Further research is needed to determine whether the Oak Hall Saloon of the early 1870s was already in the location of Gaines' saloon that burned in the 1889 fire. The photo of the G. A. Gaines bottle is from a reprint in the Historical Society Collections. The ad can be found in the *Orange Review* issue on the *Virginia Chronicle* website: <https://virginiachronicle.com/?a=d&d=PVGN18720223.1.1>



Please Join Us!

We invite you to join the Orange County Historical Society. Please provide your name and contact information as you wish it to appear in our records and select the appropriate dues level. Mail the completed form, along with your dues payment, to the Orange County Historical Society (OCHS), to 130 Caroline Street, Orange, VA 22960.

The Orange County Historical Society is a non-profit organization. Your membership fees are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

Name: _____
 (If business/organization member, name of business or organization)

Street: _____

City: _____

State: _____ **Zip:** _____

Telephone: _____

Email: _____

Membership Status: New Renewal Address, name, etc. update

Membership Level: Society dues are for the period of January 1 - December 31.

- Annual Individual Member: \$25
- Annual Student Member (High School or College): \$12.50
- Annual Family Member: \$35
- Annual Friend Member: \$50
- Annual Sustaining Member: \$100
- Annual Patron Member: \$200
- Annual Sponsor Member: \$500
- Golden Horseshoe Lifetime Member: \$2500

Orange County Historical Society
130 Caroline Street
Orange, VA 22960

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Tech5 Edward Hill Richardson, Sr.

Paul Carter

Tech5 Edward Hill Richardson, Sr., son of Vivian Scott and Elnora Burruss Richardson, was born 8 October 1920 in Orange County, Virginia. He was from a family of twelve children and completed three years of high school. Edward married Mary Elvira Lewis of Louisa County on 7 December 1940 and had two sons before being drafted into the Army on 21 April 1944 in Richmond, Virginia.

Driving trucks delivering gasoline and supplies often became life threatening for the Quartermaster Corps soldiers. Unfortunately, very little is known about his military service. The family received word that he drowned in the South Pacific on 19 March 1945 and his death is noted as DNB¹ in a June 1946 listing of the war dead.² The exact circumstances and location of his death are unknown. He initially was buried overseas. Later his body was repatriated and buried in the Richardson Family Cemetery in Daniel, Virginia, in 1949.

REGISTRATION CARD—(Men born on or after February 17, 1897 and on or before December 31, 1921)			
SERIAL NUMBER 613	1. NAME (Print) Edward Hill Richardson	ORDER NUMBER 30A229	
T. PLACE OF RESIDENCE (Print) Daniel	(City, town, village, or hamlet) Orange, VA.	STATE VA.	
2. MAILING ADDRESS SAME			
4. TELEPHONE	5. AGE IN YEARS 21	6. PLACE OF BIRTH Orange, Va.	
7. NAME AND ADDRESS OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS None	DATE OF BIRTH Oct. 8 1920		
8. EMPLOYER'S NAME AND ADDRESS L. W. Foster			
9. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS Rt. 3 Orange, Orange, VA.			
I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.			
D. S. S. FORM 1 (Revised 1-1-42) (cont.) * GPO 15-21000-1 <i>Edward Hill Richardson</i>			

Edward Hill Richardson's World War II draft registration card.

Before entering the Army, he worked for Leroy Foster in the Pamunkey area of the county. Leroy Foster owned a private sawmill on Marquis Road and approximately 200 acres of farmland. Much of the sawmill work was done for the local people. Edward worked at the sawmill and on the farm. He later moved to Alexandria and worked at various jobs until returning to Orange when he was drafted.

Edward was assigned to the 344 Quartermaster Corps, laundry platoon. Laundry and service jobs were typical of the work assigned to African Americans during World War II.

CHECK TYPE REQUIRED		WV II APPLICATION FOR HEADSTONE OR MARKER	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OFFICIAL HEADSTONE	REGISTRATION DATE 4-4-44	REGISTRATION NO. 33855506	MARKER (Check one) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NEW <input type="checkbox"/> RENEW <input type="checkbox"/> NONE
<input type="checkbox"/> PLAY GRANITE MARKER	REGISTRATION DATE 3/19-45	PENSION NO.	
<input type="checkbox"/> BRONZE MARKER	NAME (Last, First, Middle Initial) Richardson Edward H Sr	STATE VA	NAME REC 5
NAME (Last, First, Middle Initial) Richardson Edward H Sr		U. S. RESIDENT, STATE ORGANIZATION, AND DIVISION 344 QM Laundry Platoon	
DATE OF BIRTH (Month, Day, Year) 8 Oct 1920	DATE OF DEATH (Month, Day, Year) 3/19-45	46 QMC	
NAME OF CEMETERY Daniel, Va.		NEAREST FUNERAL STATION (City and State) Orange, Va	
SHIP TO (I CERTIFY THE PERSON FOR WHOM THIS HEADSTONE OR MARKER IS TO BE PREPARED IS THE SAME PERSON AS THE PERSON LISTED ON THE REGISTRATION CARD)		NAME OF OFFICE ADDRESS OF COMMISSIONER Daniel, Va	
SIGNATURE OF APPLICANT <i>J. W. Richardson</i>		DATE OF APPLICATION 5/10-49	
DO NOT WRITE HERE		I certify this application is submitted for a stone for the unmarked grave of a veteran. I hereby agree to assume all responsibility for the removal of the stone promptly upon arrival at destination, and properly place it at the deceased's grave at my expense.	
FOR VERIFICATION MAY 17 1946		SIGNATURE OF APPLICANT <i>J. W. Richardson</i>	
ORDERED GREEN MOUNTAIN, VT. JUN 1-1949		ADDRESS (Street, City, State) Daniel, Va	
ALL 3857754		DATE OF APPLICATION 5/10-49	
SHIPPED			
GOMC FORM 623 (REV. 4-24-46)		IMPORTANT—Complete Reverse Side	

Application for a military grave marker for Edward Hill Richardson, Sr. Source: <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/243708667/edward-hill-richardson>

¹ DNB: Died, non-battle, which designates 'other' line-of-duty deaths, such as from sickness, homicide, suicide or accident, outside of combat areas (including training and maneuver deaths).

² *World War II Honor List of Dead and Missing: State of Virginia*, War Department, June 1946. Louisa County, p. 21. (<https://www.fold3.com/publication/893/wwii-army-and-army-air-force-casualty-list>; accessed October 1, 2022).