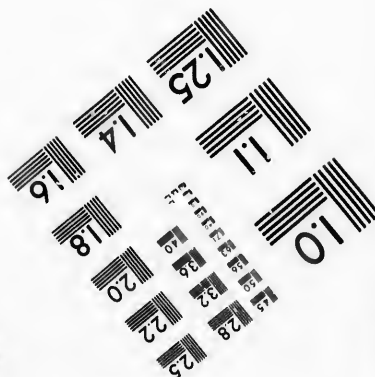
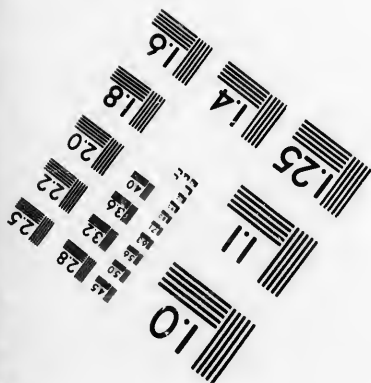
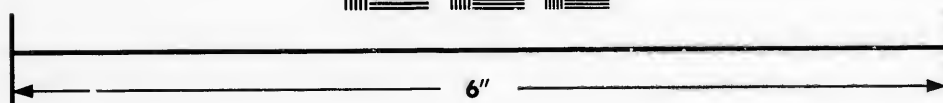
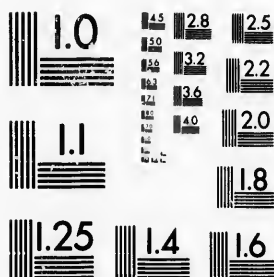


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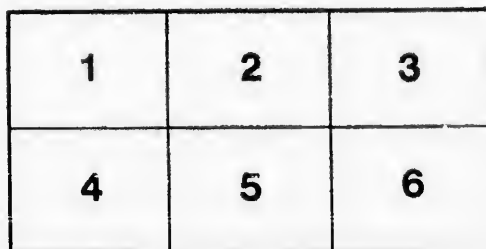
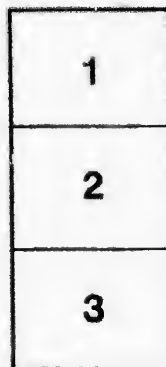
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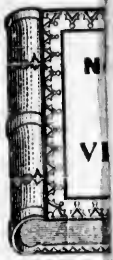
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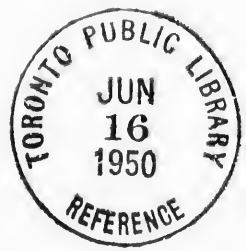
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## THE BURNING OF THE ST. LOUIS THEATRE, QUEBEC.

A RECORD OF THE EMINENT SERVICES OF THE MILITARY.

BY SIR J. E. ALEXANDER, KNT., K.L.S., 14TH REGT.

"Quos deus vult perdere prius dementat."

IN the upper town of Quebec,—the queen of North American cities, and looking down from its rocky site on the broad St. Lawrence, whilst extensive plains, scattered villages, and distant mountain ranges greeted the eye on all sides,—stood the Castle of St. Louis, the residence of the Governors-General of Canada; this interesting edifice was burned to the ground in 1831; subsequently the Earl of Durham caused the ruins to be levelled, and converted into a terrace, enclosed with a railing, and which from the charming prospect it commands up and down the river (in summer alive with shipping), became the favourite promenade of the inhabitants.

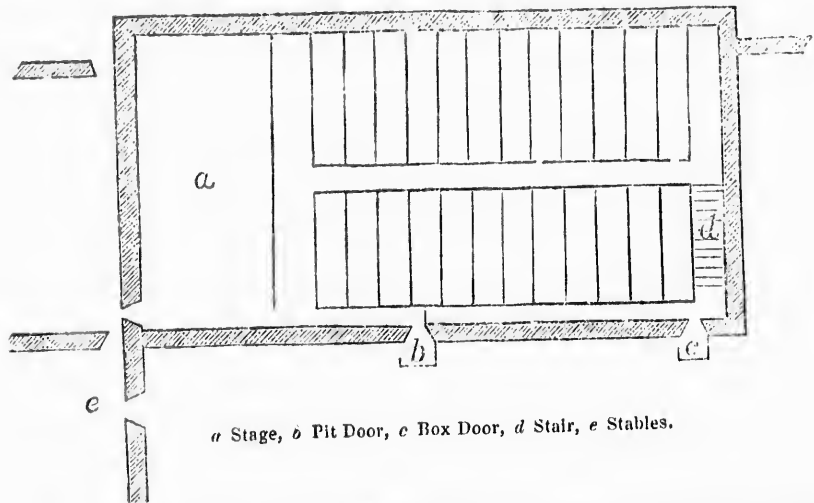
A wing of the old chateau still remained, also the castle guard-house at the entrance; adjoining it were the Governor's stables, which were let to a livery stable keeper, and next to them the St. Louis Theatre, formerly a riding-house built by Sir James Craig; this was lately the scene of a fearful calamity, with which it pleased Divine Providence again to afflict Quebec, so severely chastened by the great fires of May and June, 1845. These, it will be remembered, laid in ashes the greater part of the suburbs, and deprived 20,000 of the inhabitants, or two-thirds of the population, of their homes. The seas of fire raged round the walls of the upper town on these fearful occasions, when the exertions of the military, under General Sir James Hope, the Royal Artillery, the 14th, 43rd, and 89th Regts., were so very conspicuous, and so eminently useful in saving the upper town from falling a prey to the flames. The soldiers pulled down and blew up houses, drove before them those who still uselessly clung to their property, and saved the lives of many helpless women and children. The flames quite overpowered the firemen and the engines.

The St. Louis Theatre was a stone building, 80 feet by 40, and the walls about 30 feet high; the roof was covered with sheets of iron; along the upper part of the walls, and close under the eaves, were ten windows on each side of the building; there were no windows near the ground. Riding-houses have not usually windows below. When the officers of the garrison were allowed to fit up the building as a theatre, they found only two doors, one in the north gable, and another in one of the side walls. To gain access to the theatre, and also to prevent danger in case of fire, and give a readier exit, they got leave to make a third door in the side wall; they also suggested to the Corporation the expediency of having a fourth door in the opposite wall, but this was never carried into effect. However, over the two side doors the officers placed strong porches, so that a person dropping on them from the windows above could easily save his life on an emergency; also below the stage there was an easy exit for the musicians and for the pit

audience, if necessary; so that, with the stage door, the passage under the stage, the pit and box doors, and the windows over them, the officers had arranged six outlets from the theatre, in case of an alarm; and whilst they found that, with the box or original door only open, it took half an hour to empty the house of a full audience, or 300, yet, with both pit and box doors open, three minutes sufficed to get every one out.

No accident had ever occurred during any of the garrison performances; the camphine lamps were then placed under the charge of a man who knew well how to manage them; there was always a fatigue party of strong artillerymen in attendance, and plenty of water; and no doors were locked.

On the 8th of June last, a Canadian artist, Mr. M. R. Harrison, hired the St. Louis Theatre from the Corporation of Quebec, for the exhibition of "illuminated dioramas." For this purpose the pit was boarded over, and the floor sloped upwards from the orchestra to the back part of the house; a centre passage was left as before between the seats, and from the upper and back part of the house a steep wooden stair, three and a half feet wide, led to the box door.



*a* Stage, *b* Pit Door, *c* Box Door, *d* Stair, *e* Stables.

To illuminate his dioramas, Mr. Harrison unfortunately did not take into his employ the person who understood the management of camphine lamps; he merely hired four of his lamps, to be used with 200 oil lamps. The camphine which is used in North America is usually prepared by distilling turpentine, and is a very dangerous fluid to handle; it is very light, floats on water, spreads rapidly all about if spilt, and water thrown on it only increases the danger without extinguishing the flame. The insurance companies in Quebec will not now grant policies for buildings where camphine is used.

On the evening of the 12th of June, the theatre was crowded to the door,—at least 300 people were present: the price of admission had been reduced to a quarter of a dollar. The audience was very respectable; heads of families, who would have hesitated to attend a theatrical exhibition, took their children to witness these interesting illuminated

pictures. It was very properly objected by some that the awful scene of the crucifixion should not have been exhibited, with its accompanying darkness, gleams of light, &c.; yet an aged couple, named Tardif, who had charge of the Court-house, were rich, and who had never been in a theatre before, went to see the dioramas solely from religious motives.

At 10 o'clock, the exhibition having finished, the band played the National Anthem, the audience were retiring well pleased with what they had witnessed, and a few young men at the upper part of the house were calling out, as a joke, for "Yankee Doodle," when a strong light was observed behind the green curtain—a camphine lamp had been upset by a boy, and the flame began to communicate with the baize. Some of the audience in the front rows sat for a short time, watching the progress of the flames. Lieut. Armstrong, 14th Regt., leapt on the stage and assisted to extinguish them, but nothing could master the camphine. The leader of the band, Mr. Savageau, quietly collected his music and instruments, and retired underneath the flames, telling his son to follow him. So little danger did Mr. Savageau apprehend, that, missing a favourite piece of music, he returned for it, and again retired in safety; but not so his son.

About 240 people had already quitted the house by the only door left open for them, namely, that by which they had entered, the box door; and now, when the thick camphine smoke began to roll round the walls, the 60 people, who still remained on the front rows, now suddenly got up, without uttering a word, and made their way to the stair. They seemed awe-struck—their silence was fearful.

M. Dupuis, a French Canadian, who was present with his wife, now showed great presence of mind. When he was entering the house, he had remarked the porch over the pit door, which door was not used to admit any one, and now seeing a rush towards the box door, he thought to try another mode of escape. Where he had seen a porch he thought there must be a door; he therefore took his wife, who was greatly agitated, to a dark passage on the left, and found the pit door, but it was locked; he felt about for the key; it was on a nail near; he applied it to the lock, the door opened, and he found himself inside the closed porch; but he soon kicked out a panel, and got himself and his wife out. Lieut. Armstrong also escaped by the same door. A boy, twelve years of age, named Shaw, who had taken his two little brothers with him to see the dioramas, also maintained his self-possession, and when the rush to the back part of the house took place, he held the children, and said, "Stop! we won't go there and be killed; we'll go out another way." And they did so in safety.

Armstrong now ran round to the box door with some others; it was found closed; it was pushed open and all was darkness inside: he returned to the pit door calling out "fire!" which cry was carried on by others; he again entered the theatre, the flames were among the scenery, though the stage was still clear. Armstrong then kicked down a door communicating with a passage between the pit and box doors, when about twenty people rushed past him and escaped; he fell in the passage from the effects of a light-coloured vapour, but retaining his presence of mind, he did not get up again, but crawled out of the pit door on his hands and knees and saw the light cloud passing into the body of the house; he next ran for a light to the guard-room near, and got one;

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when taken inside the box door, dreadful screams and cries for help were suddenly uttered from a mass of human beings struggling, writhing, and interlocked on the ground and up the steep wooden stair.

The cause of their being in this situation is as follows. A number of people were clustered round the door at the top of the stair waiting to hear "Yankee Doodle" played; when the alarm of fire was given, Miss Brown, a schoolmistress, dashed past those people and fell head foremost from the top to the bottom of the stair. Her friends went down immediately to her assistance and kept the crowd back; while doing this, a rush of burning vapour and flame caused those in the rear to crush upon those people stooping down over Miss Brown, pushed against the door, which opened inwards, and the whole became irretrievably mixed together.

The money-taker's table and the lamp at the door were overturned. Two or three strong men at the top of the stair rolled down over the faces of the mass and were dragged out. Mr. Macdonald, Editor of the *Canadien*, a stout person, was squeezed out of the mass by the pressure around him, and escaped; the rest, men, women, and children were closely wedged together, and though their heads and arms were mostly out, yet their lower extremities were firmly fixed.

There was no more screaming heard after the first burst; the helpless sufferers saw that vigorous efforts were made for their relief, and kept quiet. An axe was got, and an attempt was made to knock down a partition which separated the stair from the ladies' cloak-room below. Lieut. Pipon, of the Royal Artillery, who had been walking near the theatre when the alarm was given, after several vain efforts, dragged out a Mrs. Stansfield. Lieut. Leslie Skynner, 89th Regt., was also on the spot and assisted the others. Mr. Hardie, an oil and colour merchant, assisted by Mr. Kimlin, the Editor of the *Quebec Mercury*, and others, (Messrs. Shea, Mac Donald, Todd, Lepper, Back, Bennet, Stewart, Captain Von Zuile, Commander of the "Ocean Queen," &c.) released, by powerful exertions, Mrs. Wheatly and Mrs. Roy. Mr. Hardie remarked among the crowd of sufferers, Lieut. Hamilton, of the 14th Regt., who had gone to the theatre with two daughters of Assistant Commissary General Rea, to the elder of the two (Julia) he was about to be married in a few days; that morning she had been arranging her wedding clothes; the younger sister was lying furthest out, and Lieut. Hamilton's arms being free, Mr. Hardie said, "Assist me to get out this young lady," Hamilton did so, and she was pulled out with difficulty. Mr. Hardie then said, as he carried her out, "I'll come back and try to release the other;" Hamilton said, "For God's sake do so!" but it was too late. Mr. Stewart Scott, an advocate and clerk of the Court of Appeals, and father of a large family, was in the crush with a little daughter; his brother tried, with others, in vain to free him and the child; one of Mr. Scott's arms was actually pulled out of its socket; he said, "Save the child! it is useless to try to save me;" it was a most heart-rending scene; both were obliged to be abandoned. Mr. Hardie and Mr. Kimlin were both seized by sufferers and nearly dragged among them, and were obliged to strike to release themselves. One in the lower tier offered all his worldly wealth for release.

A little boy had previously made a singular escape: he had been sent to the theatre with a maid who was accompanied by a young man who

was attached to her; the boy felt sleepy before the performance was over, and said, "One of these big lamps will fall down and burn us, I want to go home." The young man took him home, returned, and he and the young woman were now in the dead crush.


Comparatively few people were present to assist. The sentry outside and the policemen thought at first that all had escaped, before the flames appeared at the doors and windows, but all this time they were raging round the interior; the wooden lining of the walls (the building had once been used as a racket court) quickly caught fire, also the sloping floor and benches; black and stifling smoke from the canaphine rolled down the fatal stair, and hid the victims for a moment and drove those courageously assisting outside; then the smoke would roll back and disclose the agonized countenances of those doomed to destruction; then at once a stream of flame ran down from the top to the bottom of the stair, every head seemed on fire, and they were painfully and helplessly moved about, the swollen tongues preventing utterance: it was an appalling sight. Again, another cloud of smoke, the roof fell in, and forty-five human beings, lately in health, ceased to exist.

The Rev. Mr. O'Reilly, a Roman Catholic priest, in the conscientious discharge of his sacred office, stood in the doorway, and prayed over them to the last. To the last they were sensible. How fearful must have been their mental agonies!

Living at the time in St. Louis Street, I was soon at the scene of the dreadful calamity; though I was not aware at first that any one had been left in the theatre. I saw the horses and carriages saved from the livery stables, which the fire was approaching. The bells began tolling and the bugles blew loudly "The Assembly." I worked at first with the 89th Regiment (which was quartered in town in the Jesuits' barracks), to get water for the military engines. Colonel Walker, R.A., the Commandant of the Garrison, was on the spot. Colonel Thorpe, commanding the 89th, was actively directing the energies of his men, and was ably seconded by his Adjutant, Lieut. Knipe.

At first there was great delay in getting water. The fire companies brought up their engines, but they were useless for some time: at last the neighbouring wells were tapped, and water-carts brought up a supply from the river. A good deal of struggling now took place between the military and the civilians in their eagerness to get water, each party for their own engines; no blows were struck, there was only an excess of zeal. Mr. Okill Stuart, the Mayor, was present and busily engaged, as were Mr. McCord and Mr. Russell with the police force, and Mr. Wells, the Inspector of the Fire Department.

I met Lieut. Armstrong in the crowd after his escape; he told me of those burning inside. I ran round to the south gable where ladders were being planted. Some British sailor had, with an axe, knocked out a hole in the wall near the box door, but the opening was made too late to be of use; but those who made it are deserving of every praise. I saw Mr. Alexander Bell, a merchant, and Mr. Jessop, a collector of customs, carrying a young lady (Miss Rea) down a ladder. I ascended another and carried down a respectable-looking woman, who was scorched, yet who in the midst of her agitation cried out for her bonnet! I saw a poor man, near the door, who had been rescued, crying in despair for a young woman with whom he had gone to the theatre, and who was



no where to be seen. The building was white and red with flames inside. The charred victims of the fire were in a heap inside, and the smell of roasted flesh was sickening.

A strong detachment of the 14th Regiment came from the citadel with the engines, hooks, and ladders. Major Watson, commanding the regiment, was present with most of the other officers. The men, in conjunction with the Royal Artillery and 89th Regiment, formed streets to pass supplies of water, and by means of their united efforts with the hooks and ladders, they dragged the roof off the stables, and saved the guard-house. Among them worked vigorously Captain Ingall, the Deputy-Assistant Quartermaster-General. Nothing could exceed the devotion and energy of the soldiers; they fearlessly exposed themselves to danger from falling timber and their clothes to injury; and it is the opinion of those who lost relatives on this occasion, that if the soldiers had been present to assist those who so courageously tried to save the sufferers, that all might have been got out.

The wing of the old chateau began to smoke. I was interested about it, to preserve it as a relic of the palmy days of Quebec. On the outer wall is a cross of St. John of Jerusalem, cut in stone, and with the date 1647. I got an axe, and hewed down part of a wooden spout at an angle, to prevent the fire from running up to the roof. I was immediately surrounded by three of the corporation, who thought there was no danger; but danger there was, for a ladder on the roof quickly caught fire from the sparks brought by the fire-wind which began to rise, though before this the night was fortunately calm and the moon shining brightly on the scene. I ran upstairs, with an active corporal (Garlin, 14th): we found that the fire was not inside. A bold fireman, Thomas Andrews, climbing on the roof, cut away the burning ladder, and hurled it over the eaves. Water thrown on the windows prevented further danger.

The appearance of the fire and surrounding objects was now awfully grand. Under the black canopy of smoke, the flames rose high in the air, illuminating the tin-covered roofs and spires of the churches and buildings around, and shewing the large body of military at work, the helmeted firemen and their bright painted engines, and a great multitude of anxious spectators in the Place D'Armes. Among them were those who ran about, and who cried distractedly for their lost relatives or friends—for those who were never again to cheer the domestic hearth.

The progress of the fire was most rapid, yet it was at last got under when there was nothing left to burn. The gongs of the engines signalled for more water ever and anon; and, about two in the morning, one by one they left off working, each company, unnecessarily, giving three cheers: silence was best after such a scene of distress.

The energetic magistrate, Mr. R. Symes, had directed that the bodies should not be touched till daylight. I went to bed for a few hours, and rose early to search for my brother officer. The blackened remains of the sufferers were brought out, and laid on the grass of a small terrace at the south gable of the theatre. Forty-three at first were found in a heap, ten feet long, four broad, and four in height; two others were afterwards found but mere trunks: forty-five victims in all.


Most of the heads, the chests, and the arms were consumed by the fire; the lowest of all were tolerably entire; the legs were twisted and distorted in every possible manner, some drawn up to the chest, others stretched out, the feet and legs in one line; in some the clothes were almost all burned off, in others the gowns and trowsers were entire. By the dresses and shoes and boots the bodies were made out. One body, that of a man, was covered with long brown hair, trunk and limbs! It was two hours before I could identify poor Hamilton. At last, with the assistance of the Hospital Serjeant, Radford, Corporal Rundall, and some of the men of the regiment, we recognized the remains, and had them carefully removed: a lady's black scarf was under the left arm: the watch had stopped at twelve minutes to eleven. It was most distressing to witness those who came in search of relatives—the intense grief which blinded them as they spread a sheet over the miserable remains of mortality, and removed them to their residences for the coroner's inquest.

Besides those already named, there perished Mr. H. Carwell, a merchant, and two of his children; Mr. Sims, a druggist, with his eldest daughter and a son; the wife and daughter of the editor of the *Canadien*; Mr. Hoogs, book-keeper Montreal Bank, and two sons; Mr. T. Harrison, brother of the owner of the Diorama; Mrs. Molt and two sons; Mrs. Atkins and her son; Mrs. Gibb and daughter; Mr. Marcoux, a bailiff; Mr. Devlin, a watchmaker; Mr. Wheatley, a stationer; &c. The aged pair Tardif, formerly mentioned, were found among the rest, arm in arm.

On the Sunday following the fire, the tolling of the bells was heard from an early hour, and funeral processions traversed the streets all day. Fifteen coffins were laid out at one time in the Roman Catholic cathedral, and an air of melancholy reigned over the city. For a considerable time after the late distressing event people could talk and think of nothing else. Lieut. Hamilton and Miss Julia Rea were buried in one grave: "wedded in death."

Some useful lessons may be derived from this fire. That there should always be very easy modes of egress from public buildings, and doors opening outwards, according to the laws of Holland, in which a theatre was burnt sixty years ago, attended with loss of life. In Richmond, in Virginia, December 26, 1811, six hundred persons were present at a theatre, of whom seventy-two perished by fire, among whom were the Governor of the state and the Mayor of the city. Last year, in Russia, three hundred are said to have perished under similar circumstances. Again, fire companies should be frequently drilled, exercised, and directed to act without noise or confusion, and the captains should have, and *should use*, speaking trumpets; above all, the supply of water should be ample. There are no water works at Quebec, though they are proposed (as is also lighting the streets, which are still in total darkness); the water at present is got from wells, by introducing suckers, and in water-barrels or carts from the river. This last is a very rough way; much is lost, and long delays arise.

In the West India Islands there is an excellent arrangement for water. Large upright tanks, made of plates of cast iron, which stand up against the public buildings, like immense octagonal sentry-boxes, twelve or twenty feet high, and are supplied by rain-water from the



roofs. The pressure of the water sends a powerful stream through the cock below when the key is applied, and the water is useful for household purposes—after filtering, for watering the streets, or for extinguishing fire. In Canada, by casing the tanks, the frost might be kept off; but even if they were useless during five months of the year, they might be of essential service during the other seven months, and there is only a trifling expense attending their construction.

Quebec, 27th June, 1846.

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