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Nikki Davidson
ndavidson@dailyastorian.com

WEEKEND BREAK



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THE DAY THAT CHANGED ASTORIA FOREVER

December marks the 99th anniversary of the Great Astoria Fire

By JULIA TRIEZENBERG
For *The Astorian*

This month marks the 99th anniversary of one of downtown Astoria's worst disasters: the Great Astoria Fire.

On Dec. 8, 1922, the majority of the business district burned to the ground.

The fire of 1883 devastated much of Astoria's waterfront, and locals quickly worked to rebuild what had been destroyed.

However, in their rush to rebuild as quickly and inexpensively as possible, they reused the wooden piling design that caused the widespread destruction.

Most accounts of the December 1922 fire report the fire started in the basement of a restaurant and pool hall on 12th and Commercial streets. Once the fire started, there wasn't much anyone could do.

The pilings that made up Astoria's downtown acted as a sort of bellows pumping fuel to the flames underneath the streets. As the flames spread down Commercial Street, the power went out and gas mains ruptured.

The city technically had fire hydrants, but they were buried under wooden railways. The lighthouse tender *Manzanita* was brought in to help.

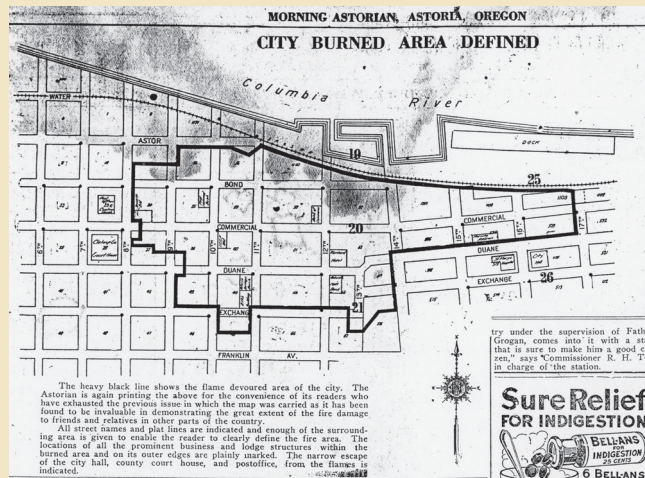
In an attempt to contain the fire, some Astorians resorted to blowing up buildings in the vicinity with leftover logging dynamite to create a firebreak in the city. By the end of it all, an estimated 32 city blocks with 200 shops, hotels and businesses had burned.

The final costs were estimated to be around \$12 million, which translates to almost \$200 million today.

Only a few buildings from that time period survived. The post office, county courthouse and City Hall all narrowly escaped the flames.

Unfortunately, most buildings weren't covered by fire insurance because the city was made of wood. Still, Astorians were hopeful for a rebuild.

One of the town's newspapers still published the day after the fire, even though the building housing it had been damaged. A columnist wrote the optimistic message:



An illustration of the burn area printed in *The Morning Astorian* after the fire.

"Phoenix-like, Astoria is unfolding her wings to arise from a couch of flame with greater and more splendid glory ..."

Businesses from Portland shipped food and supplies for people who had lost everything in the fire. The Seaside Hotel opened up to Astorians whose homes were destroyed.

The newly-appointed city manager, O.A. Kratz, was tasked with the rebuild. Reconstruction was organized into two phases. The first phase focused on public works projects. The city made it a priority to improve sidewalks, sewers, water and electricity. The previously wooden streets downtown were widened and filled in to become pavement.

The second phase of reconstruction aimed to help businesses reinvest in downtown by building brick and concrete structures.

So much of what you see downtown has a similar architectural style and feel because of Astorians' rebuild after this disaster. Examples of reconstruction are nearly everywhere you look in Astoria today, including the Hotel Elliott and the Liberty Theatre.

Julia Triezenberg is an educator at the Columbia River Maritime Museum.



ABOVE: A view of 14th Street downtown toward the Lovell Auto Co., which eventually became part of Fort George Brewery's campus. BELOW: The remains of the Weinhard-Astoria Hotel after the 1922 fire. Pillars from this building now stand at Shively Park.

