

Appendix D – Town Fires

Fires in these early days were nothing unusual, and the founders of Hillsborough made sure that chimneys were made of stone from the very beginning. Nevertheless, wooden structures were fraught with catching fire (lightning as well) and burnt quickly. In the southeast U.S., fat-pine would repel termites and weather, but it is volatile around fire.

Fire of 1790

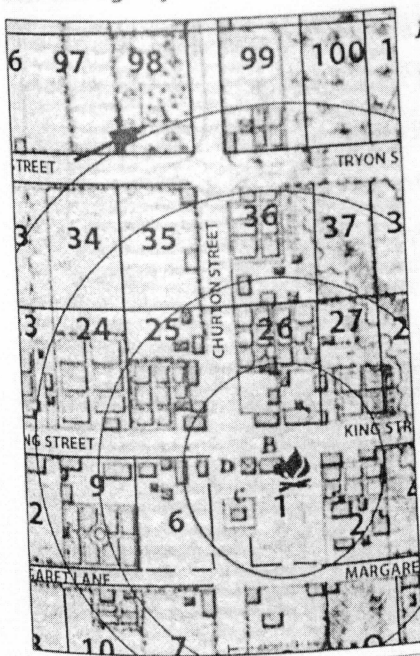
The courthouse is well documented as being damaged by fire in 1790, as an Act of Assembly (See Appendix B) was created to rebuild the fire damaged building. It is also believed that the old Anglican Church, which was used as a school house and meeting place, was also damaged by this same fire, although blocks away. Because of the rarity of newspapers during this time-period, a detailed account has not been uncovered. Neither has a letter, or other written accounts, been located by historians as they pour over the voluminous collection of documents in the Wilson Library (SHC). Nevertheless, this appears to be the first occurrence of a large town fire. (Note: as a side note to the courthouse fire, is the damage to the old 18th century clock. If the courthouse burned, wouldn't the Market House be damaged if not destroyed? – Mrs. Engstrom did a lot of research on the town clock, as well as other aspects of Hillsborough, and she did not locate anything more about the fire. Neither could I.)

Philadelphia, Feb. 13, 1790.
NEW BERN, March 16.
By a letter from Hillsborough of the 8th inst. we learn that the greatest part of that town had been destroyed by fire a few days before.
EDENTON, March 27.

The only document about the fire was in this old 18th century newspaper – “The State Gazette of North Carolina”. The March 27, 1790 edition states, “By a letter from Hillsborough of the 8th instance, we learn that the greatest part of that town had been destroyed by fire a

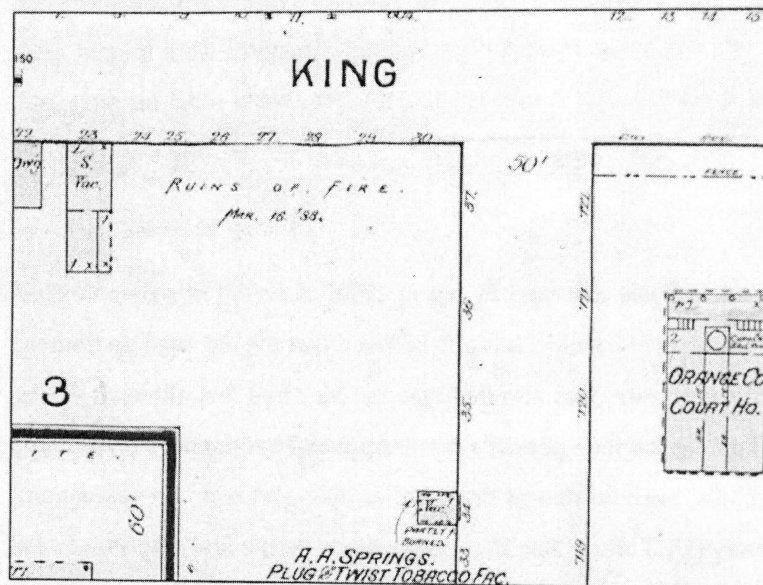
few days before.” This newspaper article would infer a large devastating fire, burning the town to the ground, so to speak. This author is not disputing the fire, just the amazing lack of information about such an event, and questioning the extent of the damage, and the lack of any records about other buildings being destroyed.

The map on the left is used to illustrate the problem this author has over the fire at the courthouse versus the old Anglican Church being destroyed as well. It appears that such a distance between these two entities would mean that everything between them would also be subject to fire damage. This would have caused a serious impact to the town. However, there isn't any corroborating information to support the idea of the church damaged by fire.



Fire of 1888

Reviewing the earliest Sanborn map, the author discovered that a fire was annotated on this map.



Although not a massive devastation, it certainly destroyed a number of businesses in the heart of town. It is certainly fortunate that the fire was controlled, as fires in this era typically were disastrous, literally destroying whole towns. The Sanborn Company noted the missing buildings on the corner of King and Churton Street. It is also amazing that the courthouse was not damaged from flying embers.

Researching the local newspaper did provide more information about the noted March 16, 1888 fire by Sanborn. This newspaper article was also helpful in identifying businesses and their owners for this area of King and Churton Street.

The Hillsborough Record included a very small article about the fire, such that I passed by it several

times looking for a large heading – of which there was none.

Friday the 16th.—Our old town was visited by a destructive fire last night or rather this morning about 4 o'clock. The fire originated in Mr. Robert Faucett's Shoe Store, and was not discovered by our night watchman until about 4. The Tin Shop owned by Mr. John Laws; the bar room by Mr. John Hayer; Joe. Allen barber shop; Mr. Alex. Rosemond, Jewellery Store; Mr. S. T. Smith bar room; Mr. Israel Turner, bar room; Mr. George Laws, Furniture; and several other houses; eight in all were burned to the ground. Very little insurance on any—loss pretty severe. We take this occasion to compliment the "Hillsboro Citizen's Fire Brigade" the best in the world. The colored people acted a noble part and worked like Turks. They deserve well of our people and will be remembered by our citizens. The fire originated in the house of Mr. Robt. Faucett, and is supposed to be accidental.

"Friday the 16th – Our old town was visited by a destructive fire last night or rather this morning about 4 o'clock. The fire originated in Mr. Robert Faucett's Shoe Store and was not discovered by our night watchman until about 4. The Tin Shop owned by Mr. John Laws; the barber room by Mr. John Hayes, Joe Allen barber shop; Mr. Alexander Rosemond, Jewelry Store; Mr. S. T. Smith bar room; Mr. Israel Turner, bar room; Mr. George Laws, Furniture, and several other houses, eight in all were burned to the ground. Very little insurance on any – loss pretty severe. We take this occasion to compliment the Hillsboro Citizen's Fire Brigade; the best in the world. The colored people acted a noble part and worked like Turks. They deserve well of our people and will be remembered by our citizens. The fire originated in the house of Mr. Robert Faucett, and is

supposed to be accidental."

The next week's edition documented more details, "The losses at the late fire here as far as can be ascertained at this time are as follows; D. M. Laws [Dudley M. Laws] three houses \$2000; S. T. Smith one house that he had but recently bought for which he paid \$1600, loss \$1200 insured for \$500; another insurance of \$500 which had expired a day or two ago; Israel Turner one house, \$1000; Robert Faucett one house, shoe makers outfit and some stock \$500; Alexander Rosemond Silver Smith and Jeweler \$150; Lewis Jenkins one house \$300; George Hill one house \$300; two insurance except as above stated. John Hayes part of stock \$290. Most of the houses burnt were small and old and the fire burnt rapidly. Josiah Turner saddler lost a small lot of tools, bridle bits etc. about \$25."

As the first newspaper article stated, the help from the local people, regardless of color, was recognized by Samuel Smith, warranting a thank-you note in the paper.

"A Card. - The undersigned most respectfully takes this opportunity to return to the citizens of Hillsboro, White and Colored, his profound and heart-felt thanks for aiding him in saving most of his stock at the recent fire. Respectfully Samuel T. Smith - March 17."

A Card.

The undersigned most respectfully takes this opportunity to return to the citizens of Hillsboro, White and Colored, his profound and heart-felt thanks for aiding him in saving most of his stock at the recent fire.

Respectfully,
SAMUEL T. SMITH.

March 17.

The losses at the late fire here as far as can be ascertained at this time are as follows: D. M. Laws three houses \$2,000; S. T. Smith one house that he had but recently bought for which he paid \$16.00, loss \$12.00 insured for \$500; another insurance of \$500 which had expired a day or two ago; Israel Turner one house \$1,000; Robt. Faucett one house, shoe makers outfit and some stock \$500; Alexander Rosemond Silver Smith and Jeweler \$150; Lewis Jenkins one house \$300; George Hill one house \$300; two insurance except as above stated; John Hayes part of stock \$290. Most of the houses burnt were small and old and the fire burnt rapidly. Josiah Turner saddler lost a small lot of tools, bridle bits etc. about \$25.

We call the attention of the town Commissioners to the dangerous place on the side walk opposite Mr. Parish's residence on King Street, the hand railing should be extended a few feet. We call this place "Turner's look out" and it is truly a dangerous place to a stranger or to a fellow a little "how come you so." A few nights ago a young man who had been taking some John Barleycorn, pitched off at this place and how it happened it did not break his neck we cannot tell. We must provide for them drunk or sober.

"...In obedience to an Act of ...First the balance now on hand is £19.0.3. The buildings now good repair with the following exceptions. A pair or set of new steps will soon be wanting. A stove which was ordered for the Court House 12 months ago not purchased. The chimney to the jail may want rebuilding. It is necessary to

May Term 1812 Court of Pleas & Quarter
Sessions for the County of Orange

James Webb Treasurer of Public Building
in obedience to an Act of Assembly submit-
ting out his duty submits the following
report.

First The Balance now on hand is
£19:0:3 The Buildings now good repair
with the following exceptions

A Pair or set of New Steps will soon
be wanting.

A Stove which was Ordered for the
Court House 12 Months ago not
Purchased

The Chimney to the jail may
want Rebuilding.

It is necessary to keep a small
fund constantly on hand to meet con-
tingent charges. &c

I would therefore recommend a Tax of
4 or 6 as usual.

I now offer to you my Resignation

All of which is Respectfully

Submitted By

J. Webb J. P. B.

keep a small fund
constantly on hand to
meet contingent
charges... I now offer to
you my resignation. All of
which is respectfully
submitted. J. Webb
J.P.B."