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The Christmas Fire

December 22, 1904

It was unusually cold on the night of December 22, 1904, just three shopping days before Christmas. At a little after 9 p.m., the streets were deserted as young John McCullough, fourteen-year-old cash boy at The Robeson Department Store, hurried east along Main Street, heading for a warm supper at his family home on the east side of Champaign at 111 E. Church Street. McCullough walked rapidly past the Cunningham Bros. Store and crossed Walnut Street. Presses of the *Champaign News* were quiet at that time of night, but young McCullough would soon give them reason to spring to life. He continued along Main Street until he reached the double storefront at 33-35. In the past, it was the location of Louis Vitton Manspeaker's fancy grocery store, but on that cold night, it was the new home of the big Meis Brothers Dry Goods Co.

As I passed the Meis Store, I saw it was on fire. I yelled as hard as I could and two men heard me. They ran up and when they saw what was the matter, they went away to get the Fire Department. It was only a little while until the building was all on fire inside.

Champaign News, December 27, 1904

At that time, the fire station was at City Hall down at Walnut and University. The two men shouted FIRE as they ran down past the saloons and businesses that lined Walnut Street. Within a few minutes of the alarm, a sizeable crowd had formed and the fire company and its volunteers were racing to Main Street to fight the fire that was rapidly spreading. Soon they had four streams of water spraying on the Meis Building. The facade had already collapsed into the ruins and the water had little effect on the roaring furnace inside. All the available equipment was put to use, but to no avail and the fire continued

to grow and spread. By 10 p.m., the fire had spread west into Ben Mollet's drug store and east into the Hessel Building and the offices of American Express.



Images of America: Champaign, Raymond Bial, Chicago, IL: Arcadia Publishing, 2008
This photo is a group of sturdy workers pose in front of Hessel's Harness and Carriages, circa 1890s.

A call was made for assistance to Urbana and by 10:10 p.m., Chief Roughton and his equipment were on the scene. They quickly took position in the alley and rail yard north of the burning buildings, fighting a valiant battle to keep the flames from spreading into the piles of material in the Alexander Lumberyard that covered the block north to Washington Street. The Illinois Central Roundhouse took fire several times but was saved by the work of the railroad men and the Urbana Fire Company. All the locomotives were moved to a place of safety.

Meanwhile, many of the merchants and businessmen in the immediate area attempted to save their stock, fixtures and records. It was reported that a crowd of 8000 people watched the fire from the neighboring streets, scores of people coming from Urbana when it was reported

there that the greater part of the business district was aflame. The inter-urban even brought people from Danville as word had reached there before the last train left for the night. The crowd attracted the usual pickpockets and thieves. Goods thrown out of windows or carried out by Good Samaritans were never returned after the fire. One saloonkeeper on Main Street lost half his store of whiskey to the supposedly helpful crowd.

But the combined efforts of both Fire Departments were unequal to the task. By 10:20, all the buildings in the block were a mass of flames, with the exception of the two story block at the northeast corner of Main and Walnut, the first floor and basement occupied by the *Champaign News* and the second story by the offices of Drs. Heckman and Thompson and several private sleeping rooms. A massive firewall between the *News* and the three-story building to the east, occupied by the Akers and Wilson Furniture Company, prevented any loss to the printing offices. Firemen positioned themselves on the roof of the *News* and poured gallons of water into the windows of the Akers and Wilson Building. The interior and all the stock were a total loss, but the brick wall survived the fire. Both the *News* building and Akers and Wilson Building are still in place today.



Current photo of the Akers and Wilson and *Champaign News* buildings.

