

Excerpt from
Gates of Heaven: Sweet Love Remembered,
A History of Christ Church, Windsor,
125th Anniversary of the Building, 1882-2007
By The Rev'd David Curry.
(pp. 64-67, footnotes omitted)

The Great Fire of 1897

No account of the present Christ Church would be complete without some mention of the Great Windsor Fire of 1897, an event of almost epic proportions and one which had an important impact upon the Parish.

The fire started on Water Street early in the morning of Sunday, October 16th, 1897 and quickly spread throughout the town, aided no doubt by “*a strong northwesterly gale of almost hurricane force,*” consuming in its wake almost all the businesses and between 400 and 500 buildings.

A poignant image of the fire is the sad spectacle of pianos being hauled out of the homes of Windsor only to burn in the streets. It captures the desperate hopes of the people of the town and speaks to the cultural aspirations of the time. According to the Hants Journal of October 20th, written in the wake of the disaster, “*the remains of over one hundred pianos were counted in the ruins.*”

Christ Church, though not entirely unscathed by the fire, was the only church building in the town proper which escaped total destruction. The story of its survival is legendary and not without its admixture of the folkloric and the factual.

Canon Maynard, though no longer Rector, had retired in the Parish to a dwelling house already on the property at the time of its having been purchased for the Church. On the morning of the fire, he went into the Church to pray for the deliverance of the Church from the conflagration that was sweeping the entire community. But it was students from King's College, not angels, it is said, that assisted in the preservation of the bulk of the structure by hauling pails of water and dousing the roof, saving as well, perhaps with a certain kind of appropriate concern, the tavern across the street, namely, the building with the high stone wall.

An additional account by Arthur Dill, then a youth, as recounted by Garth Vaughn, tells of how he and Mr. Macnamara “*who was milking his cow,*” “*took a bucket of milk and a ladder, climbed to the church roof, and extinguished the cinders to save the building.*” Christ Church, the Rectory, the Parish Hall, the tavern, the Baptist parsonage next to the tavern and across from the Church, and the home of Godfrey P. Payzant, on the corner of Albert and King, later to become the Evangeline Trust Company and now the Woodshire Inn were among the very few buildings to be left standing after the fire. For years afterwards, the Anglican community in the form of Christ Church, the University of King's College, King's Collegiate School and the Edgehill School for Girls (founded in 1891) provided worship space for the other congregations who had lost their buildings.

Parts of the building, apparently, were scorched and burnt, notably the vestry. The Windsor Tribune's account of the funeral of Canon Maynard in February 1903, makes mention of his white stole which survived with scorch marks and which was placed on his coffin as a poignant reminder both of his connection to the building of Christ Church and to his role in its preservation from the threatening danger of fire by prayer.

“*Every church excepting the Episcopalian was burned. How this escaped is a mystery,*” the Hon. Monson Hoyt Goudge noted in his account of the Windsor fire. A mystery indeed, of prayer and

action that allowed at least one beacon of hope to continue to stand in the midst of the blackened sea of a community's devastation. A mystery, too, of a building consecrated to the greater mystery of the presence of God in human lives that bears testimony to the larger history of the community and the Church.

The town of Windsor recovered, miraculously and rather quickly, from the Great Fire of 1897. A number of outstanding and interesting buildings would arise out of the ashes of the fire, including some of the other churches that are of architectural note, particularly William Critchlow Harris' design for the Roman Catholic Church, St. John the Evangelist.

It was another fire that would have a much more devastating effect on the Parish of Christ Church and on the fortunes and the future of Windsor. That was the fire in 1920 at the University of King's College which resulted in the relocation of the College to Halifax. This had a serious impact upon the cultural and intellectual aspirations and life of the Church, which was integrally and intimately connected to the College and the School, and the community. Coincident with the end of the Great War, it marks a kind of watershed moment in the life of Windsor. Something of its former glory and its hopes for the future had passed.