

The Great Fire of 1870: What really happened?

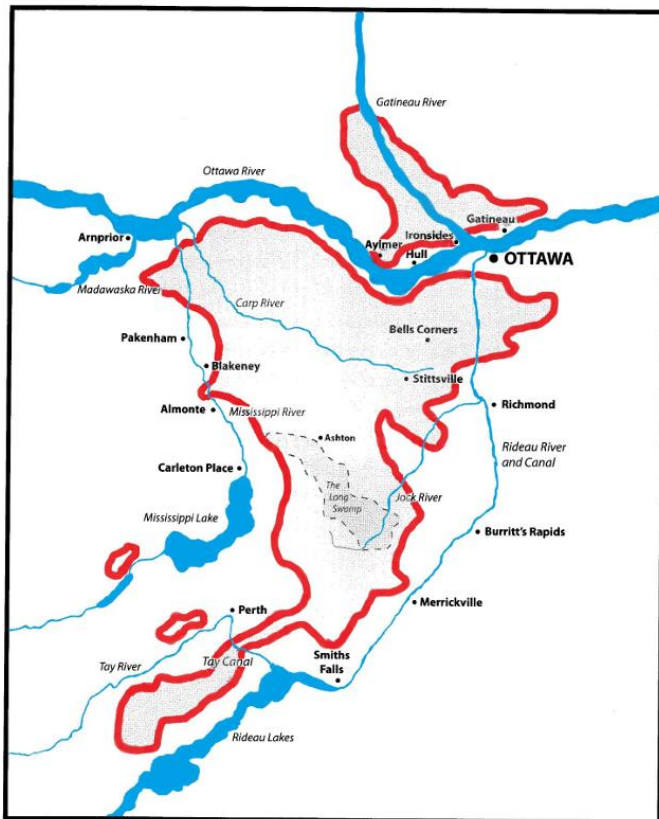
Over the years, some of us have heard little snippets about major fires that have happened in this area in the past.

One day, when exploring the southwest side of Otty Lake, a friend suggested a burnt stump could be a remnant of a big fire that had happened years ago. The rest of us were doubtful; we had heard from an elderly resident that the fire was on the other side of the lake.

So, what really happened? I decided to do some digging to find out.

A story about Anna McLaren, whose family lived in the area now known as Burgess Woods, reads “Fire worried Anna because there was only one way in and out of the property, and she was concerned that trespassers might accidentally start a forest fire, such as the one that swept the area in 1870.” (The story “Anna Lees Gemmell McLaren: Otty Lake Pioneer” by Don and Shari Beatty is on [our website’s history page.](#))

Growing up in Bells Corners, I had heard about a fire in Ottawa, and that our whole village had nearly been destroyed. Little did I know these tales all related to the Great Fire of 1870.



Extent of The Great Fire of 1870, taken from Ron. W. Shaw’s story “Devouring Element”.

The Great Fire 1870 happened in August and was the greatest natural disaster in the area up until the Ice Storm of 1998. Several hundred square miles burned, from northern Lanark down to Rideau Lakes, across to the west side of Ottawa. The fire jumped the Ottawa River and spread up to Wakefield. (See map). By the time the fire was out, about 3,000 farms had burned, 8,000 people had lost their livelihoods, 20 people had died, and thousands were homeless. Thankfully, none of the deaths were in Lanark County. The villages of Bells Corners and Stittsville were gone, and three deaths occurred Bells Corners.

The fire only reached the western side of Ottawa, but residents knew it was happening. Dark clouds were visible, ash was falling from the sky, and the streetlights were on during the day. Ottawa was saved by breaching the St. Louis Dam near Dow's Lake, sending a torrent of water 900 feet wide down Preston Street to the Ottawa River. Ottawa was seen as a refuge for victims of the fire. On August 19, *the Ottawa Times* reported that 2,000 homeless and hungry people were slowly making their way along Richmond Road to the capital.

How did the fire start?

Spring and summer had been unusually dry that year, with next to no rain. Several smaller fires had occurred but did not spread significantly. On August 17, a railway crew in Ramsay Township had set fire to some brush piles when the wind came up and blew the embers into the dry bush along the line. The fire started advancing "quicker than a man could run" and could not be controlled.

Devastation was extreme in Fitzroy, Huntley and Goulbourn. At times the fire advanced as a wall 6-8 kilometers wide. One account stated the fire was 10 miles by 20 miles and created its own high winds. The fire missed Almonte, Pakenham and Carleton Place, and continued through the great swamp of Ashton, then turned south at the Rideau River and burned through Montague, North Elmsley and North Burgess Townships. (The western half of Otty Lake falls in North Burgess, now part of Tay Valley Township.) The fire came within six or seven miles of Perth, which was spared, but the fire did reach Otty Lake. The fire burned until about August 24, but smaller remnant fires remained for a few more days until heavy rains fell on August 28 and 29.

The devastation was extreme. The area had been settled about 50 years before, but the farms were small, not completely cleared, and were surrounded by forests and brush piles. Many structures at that time were wood, so homes and barns burned along with timber and crops. Fire spread along the wooden fences. Communication was cut off with Ottawa, as the telegraph poles burned, and stagecoaches were stopped. You can imagine how terrifying it was for the people, who did not have complete information about where the fire was headed, no emergency crews to help, and no way to leave the area quickly. People were hiding in creeks and wells, and seeking refuge in green fields. Livestock died of heat and suffocation, and those that survived were left wandering, as the fences were gone. More prosperous farmers with stone or brick homes were more likely to have their homes spared, but many residents ended up homeless, and some people eventually left the area. In places the heat was so intense the topsoil burned and could not be farmed again.

The *Perth Courier* gave detailed coverage of the fire on its pages, listing many of the farms destroyed in Burgess Township. Here are some excerpts from their August 29, 1870, issue.:

“Burgess township badly affected”

“Alex McMullan, in Burgess, near Otty Lake, lost everything on his farm – his dwelling house, barns and all other out-buildings, the whole crop of this year, with farming implements, house furniture, &c., and, sad to say, numbers of his cattle and sheep were destroyed also. Mrs. Owen Lally’s farm was reduced to one bare and barren field – houses, crops &c, being all consumed.”

“On the south side of Otty Lake it was momentarily expected that many families would be rendered homeless. The premises of Eb. Bell [Ball?], we understand, was in great peril, as well as that of Geo. McKay, besides others. Great exertions were being made to ward off the calamity, but the slightest freshening up of the wind, or any other unfavourable circumstances, might, in a moment, cause all the damage that a fire could do.”

An *Ottawa Times* reporter said of Bells Corners, “Exaggeration is impossible; gloom, horror and desolation reached the climax of terribleness on that fearful night”.

A total dollar value of the loss was never tallied. Disaster relief was not something that was done very thoroughly in those days. The federal government did not contribute, and the provincial government eventually yielded to public pressure and provided \$25,000 in aid months later. The County of Lanark provided \$2,000 and the Town of Perth supplied \$200. In one jurisdiction, it was said “Amounts given to individual recipients were small, ranging from \$3 to a maximum of \$390.” It was commented that the wealthiest farmers would take four or five years of continuous labour to recover, and less wealthy people up to 20 years.

Learn more

Check this list of online references for more information.

- “The Wildfires of 1870” on the Perth and District Society’s Neighbouring Townships page [Perth & District Historical Society - History of Townships near Perth, Ontario](#) (fourth story down)
- Perth Courier excerpts from Aug. 29. 1870 - thanks to David Taylor of the Perth Historical Society for passing on a copy the Perth Courier stories
- “Carleton Saga” by Harry and Olive Walker has a chapter “Carleton’s Ordeal by Fire”
- “Great Fire Survivors” story by Neil Carleton in the July 2013 Millstone [Great Fire Survivors | The Millstone](#)
- Local resident Paul Weber recorded a song about one family’s experience with the fire, available here [The Great Fire \(of 1870\) ** Official Video **](#), and there are three short videos he made, Ottawa Walks numbers 6, 7, and 8, that are worth watching.
- Terence M. Currie’s 2009 book [The Ottawa Valley’s Great Fire of 1870: The Nineteenth Century Press and the Reality of a Great Disaster](#) is available in the Almonte, Pakenham and Perth libraries concentrates of the news coverage of the disaster.

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