

A century ago, the W.Va. state Capitol burned

By **RICK STEELHAMMER**
Staff writer

Charleston's first workday of the new year was shaping up to be pleasant, if uneventful, 100 years ago today, as mild temperatures and an absence of rain lured crowds of post-holiday bargain hunters and office workers to errands in the capital city's downtown district.

Those scanning that day's edition of the Charleston Gazette might have read about evangelist Billy Sunday drawing a crowd of more than 5,000 to his sermon on "The Evils of Society" the previous night in Fairmont.

Among news items closer to home, at the mouth of Elk Two-Mile Creek, Charleston police demolished a moonshine still fashioned from tin cans, a rubber hose and an iron pipe. They also chased off a pair of grifters posing as toll collec-

tors on the Kanawha City Bridge just out of sight of the span's official tollbooth.

By the time the gigantic clock above the main entrance to the four-story state Capitol building let passersby know it was 3 p.m., the day had earned a spot in West Virginia history books.

At that time, pedestrians in the vicinity of the Capitol, then located in a block bounded by Lee, Dickinson, Washington and Capitol streets, noticed wisps of smoke streaming from windows on the fourth (and highest) floor of the 85-room building. They alerted city firefighters before any of the more than 300 workers inside the building apparently became aware of the blaze.

While firefighters marshalled personnel and equipment, an unidentified stenographer for the Public Service Commission spotted smoke and flames in a stairway leading to an attic storage area and sounded the alarm inside the Statehouse.

"The flames spread rapidly through the top

SEE **CAPITOL, 11A**

CAPITOL FROM PAGE 1A

story of the southern end of the building and soon communicated to the north side over the House of Delegates' hall," according to the Charleston Gazette's account. "It was soon evident that it was but a matter of time until the entire building was doomed. From 3 o'clock in the afternoon until dark, flames ate their way from the lofts to the cellars, from wing to wing, until as dusk settled over the scene, the havoc had been so complete that the once-beautiful statehouse was completely destroyed."

The Charleston Fire Department sent every piece of firefighting gear in its inventory and all available firefighters. Initially, firemen focused on knocking down flames rising from the building's attic and upper floors. That allowed police, Statehouse workers — even Boy Scouts and military cadets home for the holidays — to sweep through the lower levels of the structure to evacuate stragglers and haul official records and office equipment to the relative safety of the Statehouse lawn.

Soon, the situation became even more chaotic as the first of more than 50,000 rounds of machine gun and small arms ammunition that had been stored in the attic by the state police and National Guard began to cook off.

Firefighters and volunteers working in or near the building were sent scurrying for cover as the sound of rapidly discharging ammunition echoed off the walls of neighboring buildings



Pedestrians cross Lee Street from the site of the former West Virginia State Capitol Building, destroyed by fire 100 years ago today.



Gazette-Mail file photo

Built in 1885 in downtown Charleston, West Virginia's fourth statehouse building, with its 194-foot clock tower, could be seen from much of the city. It was destroyed by fire 100 years ago today.

Battle of Blair Mountain.

Somehow, the tens of thousands of discharged bullets injured no one. The same was not true for the collapse of the building's fire-weakened walls and sections of roof.

down a ladder, the wall and roof section gave way, leaving him clinging to a window frame until help arrived. The debris narrowly missed Hallanan, while falling bricks struck West Virginia National Guard

shells from his office.

By dusk, the fire had transformed "a vine-clad, picturesque building into a smoldering, flame-lit mass of little form," according to the newspaper account.

Vaults in the building melted, destroying the official records inside. Safes transferred enough heat to cause paperwork inside to smolder into ashes.

Gov. John Cornwell, whose office was on the ground floor, was among the last state employees to leave the burning building. Later that night, he announced that while the loss of records and workspace "would be an inconvenience to many persons, the monetary loss will not be great" due to a \$6 million blanket insurance policy in effect for all state buildings.

Cornwell also assured the Capitol would remain

transferred to Charleston, where a group of investors led by John Hale built an Italianate-style structure on the site of the structure that would be destroyed by fire 51 years later.

The seat of government was becoming something of a musical chair when it returned to Wheeling and the Linsly Institute in 1875 before moving into a new and much larger state Capitol building a few blocks away at the end of 1876. But in the years that followed, a referendum on the seat of government's location made Charleston West Virginia's permanent capital city. The Statehouse built by Hale was incorporated into the new state Capitol that was completed in 1887 and destroyed by fire a century ago.

While the loss of that structure caused major problems for the state, it also solved some. State gov-

business was passage of a joint resolution affirming Charleston would remain West Virginia's once and future capital city and the Legislature would not countenance attempts to use the fire as a pretext for moving the seat of government.

While smoke from the Statehouse blaze was still in the air, political maneuvering was already underway to move the state's Capitol to, among other places, Parkersburg, Clarksburg, Wheeling and the Barbour County town of Belington, then with a population of 1,766.

Perhaps the cramped quarters of the 1921 session helped legislators quickly come to the conclusion that a much larger Statehouse was needed on a campus big enough to accommodate growth. A Capitol Building Commission was quickly appointed and by the end of the year had identified a 16-acre tract along the Kanawha in Charleston's East End as the site of the new Statehouse. Architect Cass Gilbert was tapped to design it.

Moving even faster at problem-solving than the 1921 Legislature was the state Building Commission, which hired the architect and contractor for a temporary state office building on the grounds of the governor's mansion and adjacent state property in downtown Charleston within a week of the fire.

Work on the foundation of the new building began on Jan. 14, 1921 — the same day the Legislature convened — and was ready for occupation by early March.

As it turned out, the building, which relied heavily on fiberboard for

for more than an hour. Throngs of onlookers numbering in the thousands in the block encompassing the Capitol quickly began moving to vantage points a few hundred feet more distant as the heat-detonated ammo made it sound as if an insurrection was underway.

The ammunition, along with a cache of weapons, had been stored in the Statehouse for possible use in subduing combatants in the West Virginia Mine Wars, which had been underway since 1912 and would culminate eight months after the fire in the

Charleston fireman Charles Walker was crushed to death by a falling wall and a portion of roof connected to it. The same wall produced chest injuries that led to the death several months later of fire Captain Oscar Thaxton.

The collapse occurred as Charleston police Chief John Charnock and his officers threw boxes of records from the State Tax Commission office to State Tax Commissioner Walter Hallanan, who was standing on the lawn below. As Charnock was preparing to exit the office by climbing

Col. Thomas Davis in the back. He was not seriously hurt.

Later, supports holding the weights to the building's iconic clock came loose and plummeted to the ground floor, rolling through an open doorway onto the Statehouse lawn, knocking several spectators off their feet.

After carrying out law books to safety, Assistant Attorney General and sportsman Frank Lively, recently elected to the state Supreme Court, managed to rescue a fishing rod and six boxes of specially loaded shotgun

in Charleston and said it would be up to the now-homeless legislature to come up with a re-building plan.

The demolished Statehouse, described by The New York Times as a structure of "high Victorian Gothic" design, was West Virginia's fourth state Capitol building and the first to be built and owned by the state.

From 1863, when West Virginia achieved statehood, until 1870, the Linsly Institute, a private school in Wheeling, served as the state Capitol. In 1870, the seat of government was

ernment had outgrown the building at the time of the fire, with the state Health Department, Road Commission, Board of Control, Department of Public Safety and Adjutant General's office moving out of the building and into commercial office space elsewhere in Charleston.

The 1921 regular legislative session got underway just 11 days after the fire, with the House of Delegates meeting in Charleston Baptist Temple's auditorium and the Senate convening in the Charleston YMCA's assembly hall.

Among the first orders of

interior walls and was nicknamed the "Pasteboard Capitol," was a bit more temporary than planned. On March 2, 1927, it, too, caught fire and burned to the ground without causing death or injury.

According to the West Virginia Legislature's Blue Book for 1922, the cause of the Jan. 3, 1921, Statehouse fire was "defective electrical wiring" in the fourth-floor storage area.

Reach Rick Steelhammer at rsteelhammer@wvgazetteemail.com, 304-348-5169 or follow @steelhammer on Twitter.

Additional photos by Chris Dorst – Gazette-Mail ["Buy Now" indicates photo is available for purchase from the Gazette-Mail]



Only a few walls of West Virginia's State Capitol Building remained upright after fire gutted its interior and brought down its roof on January 3, 1921.



A marker at the Lee Street Triangle fronting stonework remnants of the former West Virginia Capitol Building shows how the structure appeared before it was destroyed in a fire that took place 100 years ago today. The marker also observes the death of Charleston volunteer fireman Charles Walker, who died in the blaze.

Buy Now



Decorative stonework from the former West Virginia State Capitol Building can be found in a corner of the Lee Street Triangle, where the statehouse once stood. [Buy Now](#)



A historical marker now stands at corner of Lee and Capitol streets in downtown Charleston to commemorate the site of the former West Virginia Statehouse, destroyed by fire 100 years ago today. [Buy Now](#)



Pedestrians cross Lee Street from the site of the former West Virginia State Capitol Building, destroyed by fire 100 years ago today. [Buy Now](#)



Stonework from the front portico of the former West Virginia Statehouse, which burned in 1921, is perched on a brick pedestal next to a historical marker at the Lee Street Triangle in downtown Charleston.

[Buy Now](#)