



PORTSMOUTH'S GREAT FIRES

SEVENTEENTH AND EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY PORTSMOUTH WAS A VERITABLE TINDERBOX. Narrow streets were crowded with wooden buildings where residents used open fires for heat and to cook. Craftsmen, who occupied first floor shops, often created highly combustible wood shavings.

Three great fires in December 1802, 1806, and 1813 destroyed most wooden buildings at the heart of the town. In 1814, a law was passed mandating all new buildings be built of brick. Since blazing wooden shingle roofs played a major role in the spread of the fires, the roofs of the new brick structures were often slate or gravel and tar.



1802 FIRE

On the morning of December 26, 1802, fire suddenly burst through the back wall of an old wooden house near Market Square, which was used both as a bank and a dwelling. Over one hundred buildings were destroyed. "The whole beauty of the town is gone! is gone!!!" lamented *The New Hampshire Gazette*. With little insurance and no government assistance, those who lost property and possessions were at the mercy of private charity. Ministers sent messages to distant congregations and a committee was formed to collect and distribute aid.

Manuscript of private charity gathered to aid the fire sufferers, 1802. Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenæum.



1813 MAP of PORTSMOUTH SHOWING THREE FIRES

Surveyor John G. Hales' 1813 Map of the Compact Part of Portsmouth was the first map of a New England town with footprints of individual buildings and their wall materials. It was published only months before the third and most terrible of the three fires. Within weeks of the fire, the map was overprinted and colored "with the different fires of 1802, 1806, and 1813 accurately delineated." It also showed new brick buildings in the 1802 and 1806 fire zones, and the shapes of all the structures destroyed by the 1813 fire.

Map of the Compact Part of the Town of Portsmouth in the State of New Hampshire, 1813, J.G. Hales, cartographer. Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenæum.

BRICK ACT of 1814

As a result of these disasters, and the intervention of the New Hampshire legislature, the central part of Portsmouth north of Court Street consists mainly of brick buildings, while the South End remains largely wooden. In 1814, in response to a town meeting request, the state legislature voted to protect its only major port by mandating that all new buildings over 12 feet high be built of brick as a matter of fire protection. In the map on the right, the red line represents the controversial boundary of the Brick Act, which included the whole urban center. Until 1825, this law controlled both rebuilding and all new two story structures throughout the town.

Map based on research by Richard M. Candee; cartographer, Eliza McClennen.



1813 FIRE

The final catastrophe occurred on December 22, 1813, when fire broke out near Court and Pleasant Streets and worked its way eastward to the river. The blaze, the worst in the City's history, could be seen as far away as Salem, Massachusetts. It destroyed more than 15 acres and consumed 108 dwellings occupied by 130 families, 64 public buildings, stores and shops, and 100 barns.

Broadside, Verses written on the Great Fire, 1813. Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenæum.



1806 FIRE

On December 24, 1806, a row of wooden commercial buildings near the edge of the Piscataqua River became engulfed in flames as the result of a poorly-insulated hearth. Flames soon consumed all the shoreline structures as well as the wooden St. John's Church, originally built as Queen's Chapel in 1732. The total loss of this fire was estimated at \$130,000 (about \$6,500,000 today). This woodcut illustrated "Portsmouth in Flames," an 1806 ballad broadside about "Unhappy Sufferers of Portsmouth."

Woodcut, "Portsmouth in Flames," Illustration from an 1806 ballad broadside about "Unhappy Sufferers of Portsmouth." Courtesy of American Antiquarian Society.



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