

A fiery end

In one of the worst local disasters of the 19th century, an out-of-control blaze destroyed the Newhall House hotel and claimed more than 70 lives in its path — but could this tragedy have been prevented?



By daylight on Jan. 11, 1883, the Newhall House was destroyed; its charred ruins steaming and coated with a thick layer of ice.

Story by Larry Widen - Photography courtesy of the Milwaukee Public Museum

In the middle of the night on Jan. 10, 1883, a sudden alarm from Box 15 alerted Milwaukee's firemen to a fire in the Newhall House hotel, located at Broadway and Michigan Street (now the Loyalty Building, 611 N. Broadway, which houses Icon Salon, Webcom Solutions Inc, Milwaukee Women's Center, Ardor Pub and Grille and the Michigan Street Diner, as well as law offices, insurance agencies and several business association offices.) Nearby residents, roused by the alarms, went back to sleep with the assumption that all was under control. In fact, nothing could have been farther from the truth. In what was acknowledged as one of the worst disasters of the 19th century, the Newhall House burned uncontrollably in less than four hours, taking more than 70 lives as it went down.

The hotel opened in August 1857 under the direction of owner Daniel Newhall. The six-story, 300-room structure, designed to emulate the opulence of a Chicago or New York City hotel, was constructed and furnished at a cost of

\$275,000. From the start, the Newhall House was an accountant's nightmare. In its 25-year existence, the hotel had nine owners, none of whom were able to realize a profit. Despite the hotel's ongoing financial troubles, it was a favorite show biz stopover for the many acting troupes that passed through Milwaukee. The Newhall also counted Judge George Reed, postmaster Henry Payne and Evening Wisconsin newspaper owner William Cramer among the number of prominent residents who lived there permanently.

Although the Newhall was a popular hotel, it earned some notoriety for its tendency toward fires. Prior to the blaze that eventually consumed it, the Newhall burst into flames no less than 20 times in 20 years, the first recorded on Valentine's Day 1863. The Newhall narrowly escaped total destruction that evening, with firefighters containing the blaze to nine rooms. After several other fiery mishaps, the proprietors installed additional fire escapes for guests and standpipes to expedite the delivery of water.



NEWHALL HOUSE

JOHN F. ANTISDEL, Proprietor

The Newhall House hotel, located at Broadway and Michigan Street, in 1880.

Faced with a growing reputation for fires, the hotel found itself losing even more money as guests began finding other places to stay. John Antisdell, the final owner of the hotel, sought to solve this public relations problem by simply not telling guests when the hotel was on fire. Antisdell's hope was that any situation could be solved without their knowledge. It was this policy that was in place on Jan. 10, when the hotel was again discovered to be on fire. Here's how the events unfolded:

❖ At 2 a.m., watchman William McKenzie goes on his scheduled rounds of the building. His function at this hour is to see that all locks are secured and to chase away the tramps that huddle in the doorways for warmth. As McKenzie passes the elevator on the fifth floor, he notices tiny tendrils of smoke seeping from the door. Alarmed, he leaps into the elevator, hoping to discover the cause. He tries to take the elevator down to the first floor, but suddenly the smoke is so thick it blinds him and he can't catch his breath. McKenzie stumbles out of the elevator on the second floor and dashes headlong down the stairs to the Michigan Street entrance, only to find great clouds of smoke billowing into the frigid night air. He dashes back into the hotel and down to the basement where he shouts for William Linehan, the Newhall's chief engineer. When Linehan sees fire coming through the elevator shaft, he grabs a standpipe hose line and begins to douse the flames. Realizing his efforts are fruitless, he shouts for McKenzie to summon the fire department. The watchman, afraid for his job, wants to call owner John Antisdell to get permission. "Antisdell's not here, and this place is going to be gone if we don't get some help!" Linehan yells. After a moment of hesitation, McKenzie telephones the Broadway fire station three blocks up the street. It is 4:05 a.m.

❖ At 4:08 a.m., the Broadway fire station bell sounds and the first hook-and-ladder truck, hauled by a powerful team of horses, charges out of the building. As the firemen come down Broadway they can see the reflection of fire against the buildings opposite the Newhall House. It takes them less than two minutes to arrive on the scene, but already frightened guests are fleeing the hotel. Worse, the firemen see people jumping out of windows and landing on the concrete below. As one of the firemen runs into the hotel to find the source of the blaze, he is hit by a falling body from one of the windows above. Returning from the inferno, the fireman pronounce the hotel doomed. Assistant Fire Chief John Black orders a crew with hoses into the hotel, hoping to at least prevent the fire from spreading to the surrounding buildings. With 11 dead or dying bodies at his feet, Black organizes other fire-fighters into groups to catch people falling from the upper stories.

❖ Inside the Newhall House, engineer Linehan frantically searches for his sister, Kate. In charge of the

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Newhall's laundry, Kate Linehan is a permanent resident of the hotel. Linehan finds her in the rear of the building, waking other employees and helping them to safety. The heat is unbearable, and the smoke makes breathing nearly impossible. Yet Linehan and his sister make six trips back into the blaze, each time carrying an unconscious victim to safety. On the final trip, he looks back to make sure Kate is with him. Horrified, he sees her turn and head back into the fire to save another person. Overcome by smoke inhalation, he collapses on the sidewalk, unable to stop her. Around him, the calamity continues. Actor John Gilbert leaps from the fifth floor with his wife. Gilbert is seriously injured, but

survives; his wife is killed instantly. Another actor, the world-famous midget General Tom Thumb, is rescued by a fireman who carries the 25-inch Thumb from the hotel on a ladder.

❖ Out in the street, Assistant Chief Black's men hold large pieces of canvas in a futile attempt to catch people who either fall or jump from the upper floors. At 5 a.m., the Newhall's rear wall comes down with a crash, burying a fire truck in the process.

By daylight, the entire structure was destroyed, its charred ruins steaming and coated with a thick layer of ice. Public Works officials turned up 47 corpses, many of them burned beyond recognition. The official death toll was listed at 71. Among the dead was the heroic Kate Linehan, who fell to her death while climbing from an upper story window. Also found in the ruins was the charred body of Judge George Reed. Curiosity seekers who prowled through the smoking debris came away with half-burned books, fused pieces of metal and other grisly souvenirs. They also carried away a number of rare and valuable coins, part of the huge collection owned by General Tom Thumb.

The Newhall House fire immediately became a story of nationwide importance. The horrific spectacle was detailed on the cover of Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, the National Enquirer of its day. Milwaukee Journal editor Lucius Nieman expressed outrage over the hotel's poor construction and the lack of adequate fire escapes as John Antisdell defended himself against charges of gross negligence. His policy of trying to contain the blaze without first rousing guests was harshly criticized in open court. Even more damaging was evidence brought forth suggesting the fire was deliberately set, possibly by a disgruntled employee. Ultimately, Antisdell was cleared of any wrongdoing. A disgusted Nieman published a sarcastic editorial in the Journal thanking the jurors for their decision. Perhaps the only good that came from the Newhall House disaster was that it led Milwaukee to the eventual creation of a building inspection department and a set of codes to minimize a repetition of the 1883 fire. ❧



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