

Toledo Firefighter Captain James Fraser And The 1894 King-Quale Elevator Fire

Toledo's Promenade Park lies quietly along the riverfront where Water Street meets Madison, providing no indication whatsoever of the tragic events that took place at that very site in early January of 1894. Beneath the concrete and sod, unbeknownst to the passers-by who visit the park, lie the remains of the 'brave and fearless' Toledo firefighter Captain James Fraser, who valiantly died battling the King-Quale grain elevator fire, the largest fire in Toledo's history - a fire that very nearly destroyed all of downtown Toledo that bitterly cold winter night. For over 100 years there has been no marker or plaque at the site where the massive grain elevators and other offices once stood, but Captain Fraser is still there somewhere beneath the grassy fields of the park. Despite an intensive search of the ashes and still-smoldering rubble in the days following the fire, Captain Fraser's remains were never found. Only his brass suspender buckle, a twisted pair of his spectacles and a partially melted brass fire hose nozzle were found - grim testament to the intense heat of the inferno.

At the age of 12, *Captain Jim*, as Fraser was known to his firefighting brothers, came to America from Fermoy, Cork County Ireland, with his 10 siblings, mother and father. The Fraser's sailed from Liverpool, England, during the height of the horrific Irish Famine, arriving in New York City in 1849. Within a year, the entire Fraser family had somehow found their way to Toledo and set up shop on Walnut Street as shoemakers, the family trade.

In 1864, three years after marrying Ellen Corrigan in Toledo, young Captain Jim enlisted in the 130th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, the fourth of his brothers to serve during the Civil War. Within days after his muster, Captain Jim was guarding Confederate prisoners at Johnson's Island, followed by duty at Bermuda Hundred, Virginia, in support of the siege of Petersburg.

Following his discharge from the Union Army, Captain Jim worked 8 years as a sailor on Great Lakes ships before being hired as a Toledo fireman in 1872.

M. I. Wilcox, President of Merchant's National Bank in Toledo, spoke of Fraser the sailor and Fraser the fireman in 1894:

"I have known Capt. Jim since 1854. He was then sailing, and one of the bravest men that ever trod a deck. Along about 1869 or 1870 he came to me one day and said he was tired of sailing and would like to get something to do on land. I took a great deal of interest in Jim and got Chris Wheeler, then fire chief, to put Jim on the department. He did so reluctantly, but he never regretted it, for many a time after he told me that he considered Jim the ablest and bravest fireman he ever knew."

In September of 1882, Captain Jim's wife, Ellen, died tragically after suffering for many years from severe neuralgia and chronic dysentery. A 14-year-old niece who was staying with the Fraser's awoke one morning, walked into the kitchen and found Ellen Fraser hanging from the ceiling with a noose around her neck. Her death was ruled a suicide. Captain Jim and Ellen had no children.

Devoted to his duties as a firefighter, Captain Jim rose through the ranks of the Toledo Fire Department, was appointed Captain in 1889 and had transferred to Engine House #1 just weeks before the King-Quale elevator fire erupted the evening of January 3, 1894.

The first alarm came just before 6:00 p.m., when a grain elevator worker noticed smoke and flames at the top of one of the tall wooden structures. Within minutes, a series of 3 massive grain-dust explosions, heard by many startled Toledoans miles away, created an immense blaze. Captain Jim and his crew were among the early responders to the rapidly growing fire that was already out of control by the time they arrived with their horse-drawn steam pumpers. He and his partner, Alfred 'Fred' Blaine, a French-Canadian who had immigrated to America in 1870, quickly entered the King elevator at Water and Madison streets. Their plan was to work their way to the top of the building, signal firefighters below to turn on the water and pour a stream of water downward. They managed to reach the 3rd floor, but were immediately knocked to the floorboards by a fiery explosion that occurred just as they broke through a door.

As Blaine later described the moment, *"Suddenly there was a flash and we were both enveloped in flame. It seemed as though all the furies of hell had been let loose through the door."* He cried out to Captain Jim, *"Come on, Captain, I'm going to follow the line. For God's sake, follow the hose down."* He heard Captain Jim say, *"Where are you, Fred?"*, but never heard another word as Captain Jim disappeared into the smoke. With his face horribly

burned and a cut artery in his right arm gushing blood, Blaine laid down, pulled his coat over his face and prepared to meet his maker. *"Here goes, I said to myself and I made up my mind that my time to die had come."* Dazed and badly injured, he lunged toward a sliver of light from a window, only able to summon enough strength to partially break through the glass. His comrades below saw him hanging out of the window, badly burned and bleeding profusely, and carried him to safety. Captain Jim was not so fortunate.

In the confusion and terror of the dark smoke-filled room, he had walked into a corner that had no windows, no doors and no way out. He was never seen again.

Blaine's friends and fellow firefighters said that Blaine mourned the loss of Captain Jim as a brother and long after he had recovered from his injuries, he could scarcely mention Captain Jim's name without sobbing violently.

Throughout the rest of the night, a wind-driven shower of sparks and embers ignited building after building in its path in a seemingly unstoppable advance from the waterfront toward the heart of the downtown business district. Residents and business owners told of red-hot embers falling like snow on their rooftops as they frantically shoveled foot-high piles of the red-hot coals and poured buckets of water, desperately trying to save their buildings.

"The demon of fire held high carnival for half the night and beneath the sway of the fiery scepter, tall buildings, great business blocks, huge elevators, grain and merchandise of every description crumbled into indescribable ruin.

A vast sea of flames raged for hours. They crackled and hissed and roared as though all of the furies of hell had come to their aid bent upon the destruction of Toledo's most imposing business marts. These were no thin, puny flames creeping along in sinuous march, but they arose in mighty volumes, sweeping and twisting and writhing in majestic and thrilling grandeur, as though they laughed with contemptuous glee at the puny efforts put forth to stay their progress.

Aeolus came to their aid and gave his strong blasts in the mighty work of destruction. Writhing and surging, hissing and roaring, in fiery columns and volumes the fire king rode triumphant, pouring out his fiery breath in every direction and in shapes as fantastic as the changing figures of a kaleidoscope.

It was a scene that baffled description. Showers of fire were swept by the wind over one-third of the city, and it was only with the utmost vigilance that buildings were saved from the ravages of the remorseless element, many blocks away to the northward from the storm-center of flame."

"Like A Frenzied Fiend"

Toledo Bee; January 4, 1894

First the King elevator ignited and burned to the ground, followed by the Quale elevator, the Chamber of Commerce building, Wonderland Amusement Center and scores of smaller buildings and storefronts were all consumed by the conflagration. The monkeys, bears, antelopes and other animals in Wonderland screeched and howled in terror as their handlers did their best to rescue those they could reach. Serpents were carried out of the building wrapped around their handlers' necks and a black bear was led across the street to Wallace's saloon where it spent the night in the safety of the cellar. The firefighters were powerless to stop the onslaught and late in the night had given up all hope of saving the rest of Toledo's thriving downtown. The crowds of onlookers were so large that the military had to be called out to maintain control, prevent looting and, most importantly, to ensure that the firefighters were unhindered as they went about their dangerous business. In an ironic twist, among the soldiers called out that night was Captain Jim's young nephew, William J. Fraser, Jr., a member of the famed Toledo Cadets.

"Flames that glowed and crackled and grew while in their destructive ecstasy, flames that laughed and danced and crept and groveled and climbed; vast sheets that swept up into the air in graceful curves, and glistened with changing hues; oceans of flame that roared and surged and howled, and buried every obstacle from their path; hells of flames, hungry for prey that made the onlooker's heart grow faint, his pulses leap and his blood surge through his veins with a mighty rush, ate up, last night, bit by bit, story by story, wall by wall, two of Toledo's finest business blocks; placed the whole city in jeopardy; consumed thousands and thousands of dollars in their greed, and left behind

them as a sad memorial a heaping mass of gray and smoking ruins, silent testimonials of the wrath of the elements that speak louder to the heart of the patriotic citizen than could a flood of oratory eloquence."

"Oft Expected, Came At Last"

Toledo Commercial; January 4, 1894

The situation was bleak, but in the wee hours of the morning a miraculous 180-degree wind shift took place, allowing the exhausted firefighters to bring the fiery beast to its knees.

Early the next morning, while thousands of curious onlookers silently surveyed the many blocks of devastation, Captain Jim's comrades painstakingly sifted through the still-steaming debris at the northeast corner of Madison and Water streets, the exact location where Captain Jim was last seen by Blaine inside the third-floor room of the King building, searching for

any trace of their beloved brother. The next day, January 5, 1894, a Toledo Blade headline declared "*Fraser Is Dead*", noting that, "*Captain Fraser was one of the bravest firemen that ever wore a uniform. He was absolutely without fear. Intense heat and suffocating smoke had no terrors for the gallant officer.*"

Three days after the fire, while the debris still smoldered, all hope of ever finding Captain Jim was officially abandoned. Fire Chief Chris Wall reflected on the loss of his dear friend:

"Twenty years ago, when, as a boy, I began to work with the Toledo Fire Department, old Jim Fraser taught me how to do it best, and from that time until Wednesday night, he needed no one to point out the work, or tell him how to handle it. He was not ordered into the King building; he did not need to be. He saw what was wanted and his own sense of duty took him there without the word of command. Neither did he order his men there. He said, 'Come,' and led the way himself. 'Don't let go of the line,' he has told me many a time, 'You can always find your way out by it.', and Jim Fraser never feared a fire before him or behind him, so long as he had a stream of water to fight with."

"Fraser's Death His Great Regret"

Toledo Commercial Times; January 22, 1894

A reporter in the same edition of the Commercial Times went on to describe Captain Jim as, "*A brave and noble man. Personally he was a pleasant man to meet, of kindly heart and gentle disposition. The children of the neighborhood of No. 5 Engine House will mourn over his death, for he was a dear friend to them. His gentle, kindly nature found pleasure in the company of the little ones, and hardly a day passed by but what they came to him in little knots of five and six to 'play' and pass away a happy hour.*"

On January 21, 1894, throngs of solemn Toledo citizens congregated at an overflowing Memorial Hall to pay their last respects to Captain Jim. At the service, eulogies were many and heartfelt. Fire Commissioner L. G. Richardson paid tribute to Captain Jim's devotion to his city and his country, saying, "*Born in a foreign country, Ireland, he came to America and soon offered his services and his life for the preservation of the nation of his adoption.*"

"For seventeen years after his arrival here he sailed on lake vessels, making Toledo his home. Why he renounced this perilous life for that more perilous one of a fireman, in 1872, is unknown, unless it was because the latter was more dangerous.

He served fifteen years as a pipeman, three years as a ladderman, was appointed captain in 1889, and a more meritorious appointment was never made. He was absolutely without fear - cool, level-headed, and his judgement unquestioned.

Brave men were never led by a braver officer. Monuments have been erected to the memory of men whose deeds of bravery would not compare with those of Captain Fraser."

"The Honored Dead"

Toledo Bee; January 13, 1894.

After his death, Captain Jim's legacy of service and devotion was carried on by subsequent generations. One nephew, George W. Fraser, became Chief of the Toledo Fire Department in 1914, and another nephew, Lewis B. Tracy, was a career policeman and Captain of Detectives with the Toledo Police Department during the early 1900's.