

# The Jocelyn Hotel

By Frank Hodgdon



Ironies abound in the story of the Jocelyn Hotel at Prouts Neck, which was consumed by fire during the early morning hours of Tuesday, July 27, 1909. The last of the "big seven" hotels to be built in the resort area, it was the first to disappear, and the only one to be lost by fire.

Unlike its neighboring resort hotels, the Jocelyn did not start modestly and grow, but from the very beginning rose imposingly to its full six-story height. It did, however,

undergo a remodeling some nine years after its construction at the direction of noted architect John Calvin Stevens, who changed its somewhat bland exterior with the addition of turrets, towers, porches, and fancy dormers. Built by Mr. and Mrs. Frank B. Libby in 1890 on the rocky bluff overlooking the two-mile arc of Scarborough Beach and Ram and Richmond Islands, the structure presented an imposing facade from the bathing beach.

The fire, that fateful morning six weeks into the tourist season, was first discovered by Henry C. Munsey, a teamster employed by Alonzo Googins. Mr. Munsey was unloading a wagonload of lumber he had brought to the Neck the night before for Mr. Googins' cabinet shop when his horse, "Old Tom," became unmanageable as he was being harnessed. A few moments later Mr. Munsey discovered fire in the stable of the Alonzo Googins complex of adjoining structures. It was 4:45 a.m. Munsey shouted for help even as he released nine horses from the barn; but even when help arrived, the flames proved too fast for them to extinguish. A brisk wind out of the South doomed the entire Googins complex, which consisted of his residence, garage, machine shop, carpenter shop, blacksmith shop, and stable. Ultimately, the adjacent Lemuel Lane cottage was consumed. The Jocelyn was next.

About 100 guests in the hapless hotel were quickly aroused from their beds and were able to pack their trunks and evacuate the doomed structure. The staff hurriedly removed the furnishings from the first floor parlors and dining rooms; items in the upper floors, however, went up in smoke. As many as 50 men tried to save the Jocelyn by covering the roof with wet blankets, but in the end, the intense heat and roaring wind drove them down and in less than two hours, the massive structure had been reduced to a heap of smoldering ashes.

Alonzo Googins lost everything he owned in the world. He had only \$1,000 worth of insurance on his residence, while his losses in 1909 dollars exceeded \$15,000. Lemuel Lane of Westbrook was fully insured for his loss, amounting to \$10,000. Mrs. Frank B. Libby was partially insured for loss of the Jocelyn, valued at \$50,000.

The final irony in this saga was that Frank B. Libby's widow, who had run the hotel for several years following his death, was expecting the arrival the following Saturday of a prospective purchaser! Instead of selling a grand hotel, she took the insurance money into retirement and sold the vacant lot, which to this day is a parking lot for the bathing beach.