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ALERT FEATURED TOP STORY

The fire last time: A history of Kirkland Flats, Kirk Apartments

ROBIN McCLELLAND Globe Gazette

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On Oct. 4, 1902, the Kirkland Flats caught fire. The building was destroyed except for its North and West walls. Also a portion of the South wall including the entrance. Photo courtesy of the Mason City Public Library Archives

ROBIN McCLELLAND Globe Gazette

On Monday, Mason City residents gathered downtown to watch in horror as the Kirk Apartments building at 206 N. Federal Ave. burned to a husk.

It was the second devastating fire at the historic location.

In 1902, the Kirkland Flats, a previous three-story apartment building on the same ground, was destroyed by a calamitous fire.

Horace P. Kirk was born in 1843 in Mahoning County, Ohio. He came to Mason City following three separate enlistments in the Union Army during the Civil War. When he arrived, the hamlet consisted of only three permanent homes. In 1867, he purchased a photography gallery from A.M. Thompson, establishing himself as a businessman in the growing town.

He married Elizabeth R. Wordsworth of Lake Mills, and the union produced two sons, Clara L. and Verne P. By 1896, he had become director of the Mason City School System and constructed a four story apartment building known as the Kirkland Flats. The structure contained apartments, offices and storage rooms. Directly to the north sat a warehouse known as the Kirk Building.

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Tradesmen of all stripes were scurrying to put the finishing touches on the Kirkland Flats so that she could welcome the young families eager to grow their lives there.

On Oct. 4, 1902, cries of "Fire! Fire! Fire!" rang out at about 7 p.m. Kirk ran into the wholesale house. Later, he was unable to say if the fire was burning above or below him, but George Williams, an attache with the E.P. Stacy and Sons fruit company, ran into the back rooms at the same time and believed the fire to have started on the third floor near the light shafts as that was where the early flames began to show.

The Kirk Building, was a wholesale house where goods were stored for distribution to grocers, pharmacists, and artisans of all kinds. There were three inhabited apartments, as well.

The Dennison Fire Company arrived within 10 minutes. There was some delay as those on site who discovered the fire attempted to evacuate the building and fight the flames themselves. The alarm was not sent until precious minutes had passed.

Driver Conner of the company got the alarm from the Park Hotel alarm box number 24. He and the firefighters arrived within a minute. Hydrants were tapped to the north, east and west with a total of six hoses battling the blaze.

Engineers at the pump station pushed their machinery to the edge, increasing the water pressure to 90-100 pounds per square inch. Water mains had been tested at 120 PSI, and the crew knew they couldn't go above that without a catastrophic failure of their equipment. The choice to keep the water pressure at that rate would eventually be a topic of derisive conversation.

The Dennison Fire Company brought no fire engine and no aerial ladders to combat the roaring conflagration. The pressure from the hoses barely reached the third floor where the flames raged. It was noted the stream from the hoses was so weak it did not even break the glass when trained directly on the windows.

Fire Chief J.W. Adams was away from Mason City at the time and his duties fell to his Assistant Chief J.C. Williams. The fire tore through the building, burning from 7 p.m. until past 1 a.m., when it seemed to simply run out of fuel. The timber roof and flooring were no match for the heat of the flames.

As floors gave way, so, too did the eastern wall. The crumbling structure contributed to the injury of firefighter Max Gorman, who was attempting to knock down an unstable tower of bricks from a perch in a young tree. He was concerned citizens could be crushed. The unstable bricks *did* collapse and struck the tree he was balanced in. The action flung Gorman a significant distance into the basement of the burning structure, where he received serious bruising and burns.

The only other reported injury was H.C. Clinton, who in the smoky confusion slipped from a stack of grape crates while trying to hose down the flames. He fell down the light shaft and was luckily discovered and rescued by J.H. Murphy.

While some goods were saved from Kirkland Flats, the majority of the structure and its contents were completely destroyed.

Kirk held insurance on the building. Losses were estimated to be over \$100,000 for both the building and content. Kirk was insured for \$44,500, and the payout for the destruction was \$44,000.

Asked about his plan for the future, Kirk was quoted as saying, "I must figure and find out just where I am. It will take two weeks before I can adjust myself. I cannot afford to let the property remain idle."

By Oct. 9, just five days after the fire, Kirk was supervising the cleanup and making plans for reconstruction. He ensured that his previous tenants would return and had begun designing a grander iteration of the Kirkland Flats. He stated that under no circumstance would he build higher than three stories as he had no faith that the fire department would be able to protect a building any taller.

The west and north walls of the Kirkland Flats stood strong, and H.P. Kirk kept them in place as he constructed anew.

The Kirk Apartments were completed in 1903 and offered Mason City's first luxury rentals. With 25 single and 11 double rooms, the 36-apartment structure was appointed with the finest of accommodations.

Outside, it was made up of pressed brick, sandstone and copper-clad window coping. The elegant entrance survived the 1902 blaze and was incorporated into the new design. Maple floors and oak trim proclaimed their opulence. Halls and entrances were decked out with mahogany finish, and each apartment had a private bath and kitchen with heat, light and hot and cold running water.

By August 1903, the Kirk Apartments were nearly complete. Boilers provided steam heat to the building, a welcome change from drafty rooms with fireplaces, and those boilers were placed in a separate building in order to make the Kirk "absolutely fireproof in every particular."

And for a century, it was.



PHOTOS: Kirk Apartments in Mason City destroyed by huge fire

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Mason City firefighters battle a huge blaze at the Kirk Apartments in downtown Mason City on Monday, April 24, 2023.
MATTHEW REZAB, Globe Gazette

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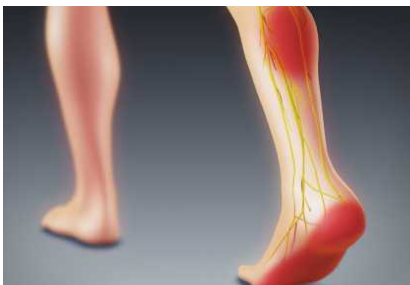
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