

The West Point Fire of 1880

As reported in The New York Times, November 30, 1880

Railroad Warehouses Burned

Destructive Fire at West Point, Va.—Losses estimated at \$250,000.

West Point, Va., Nov. 29—Last night about 10 o'clock the watchmen employed by the Richmond, York River and Chesapeake Railroad Company on its wharves at this place discovered a fire on board the steamer Shirley, which plies between West Point and Baltimore, and that the flames were making rapid progress toward the wharf at which she was lying. The watchmen gave a prompt alarm, but before anything could be done to cut the steamer loose the wharf had caught, and the vessel herself was wrapped in flames, the crew, who were all asleep, having barely time to save their lives. As it was, several had to jump into the river, not being able to reach the wharf. The fire, having got a good headway on the wharf, spread with such fearful rapidity that, in a few minutes, all the wharves, warehouses, and sheds were enveloped in flames, and in less than an hour were all consumed and in ruins. The extent of the conflagration can be estimated from the fact that there were 2,100 feet of wharves and six immense warehouses, which included 1,300 feet on the water front, the whole covering an area of nearly four acres. All the company's offices, including the telegraph office, were destroyed, and but for the wet condition of everything from the recent rains, the town of West Point would doubtless have also suffered greatly. Twenty-six hundred bales of cotton, 223 of which were on board the Shirley, were burned, besides a large amount of other freight, and 21 freight cars partially laden.

The loss, so far as known, is over \$250,000, as follows: On cotton, \$130,000, covered by insurance by the Piedmont Air Line, which had it in transit northward; on wharves and warehouses, \$45,000, insured for \$20,000 in the London and Liverpool and Globe Company; and \$15,000 each in two Baltimore companies; on the steamer Shirley, \$50,000, insured for about \$40,000; on rolling stock, \$25,000, also insured in the London and Liverpool and Globe. The following companies also had risks on the cotton and other merchandise destroyed: Phoenix, of London, \$5,000; La Confiance, of Paris, \$10,000; Hamburg-Bremen, of Germany, \$10,000; London and Staffordshire, \$5,000; Farragut, of New-York, \$5,000; Home, of Columbus, Ohio, \$2,500; Manhattan, of New-York, \$2,500; The Pennsylvania, \$10,000; Watertown, of New-York, \$10,000; Underwriters' Agency, of New-York, \$20,000; Washington, of Boston, \$10,000; Imperial and Northern, \$10,000; Royal, of England, \$10,000; London and Lancashire, \$5,000; and local companies, \$30,000.

The steamer was a screw propeller, iron hull, and comparatively new, of 576 tons burden. She was owned by the Baltimore, Chesapeake and Richmond Steam-Boat Company, Thomas P. Clyde, President. How the fire originated on board the steamer seems to be a mystery. Everybody on board was asleep, including the watchman on board, and none can give any explanation. Work has been already commenced to restore the destroyed property. The steamer Hatteras, of the Old Dominion Line, which runs between New-York and West Point, arrived at the latter place soon after the fire broke out. She laid off until it was safe to make a landing. As she cannot land her freight at West Point, she has been ordered to proceed to Richmond. West Point is 38 miles from

Richmond, at the head of the York River, and is the eastern terminus of the York River and Piedmont Air Line Railroad, and is also known as Port Richmond, being embraced in the Customs district of the city of Richmond.

Transcribed by William A. Palmer, Jr.