

Peter Mesier in NYC - Houses Burned

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The Great Fire of 1776 in NYC

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1776: From Fire, a Wasteland

More than a century had passed since the war with the Indians. But as the wind blew hard one night in 1776, moving northwest across Lower Manhattan, another disaster was about to unfold.

The Dutch had long since lost control of New York and the site of the future trade center had taken a much more modern shape. The windmill that a Dutchman named Pieter Mesier had built there in 1682 still stood. But Church Street had been laid out prior to 1695, followed by Cortlandt Street in 1733 and Vesey Street, named after William Vesey, the first rector at Trinity Church, in 1761. On the southern end of the site, reflecting New York's status as a British colony, was Crown Street - which was renamed Liberty Street in 1794.

Rows of small houses occupied by craftsmen and laborers had been built along these muddy, tree-lined streets. A sailboat ferry that departed from the foot of Cortlandt Street connected New York to Paulus Hook, New Jersey, where a two-day stagecoach could be taken to Philadelphia. The marshy land at the edge of Damen's old farm had been filled in, widening the island nearly to Washington Street.

On the windy night of Sept. 21, 1776, all this sense of order was destroyed.

Events started about 1 a.m. on the eastern side of Broadway, near Whitehall Slip. How the fire started was debated for years. Many blamed British soldiers who had occupied the city at the start of the Revolutionary War. Other suggested it was rebels, including Nathan Hale, who was executed for being a spy after being questioned about the fire.

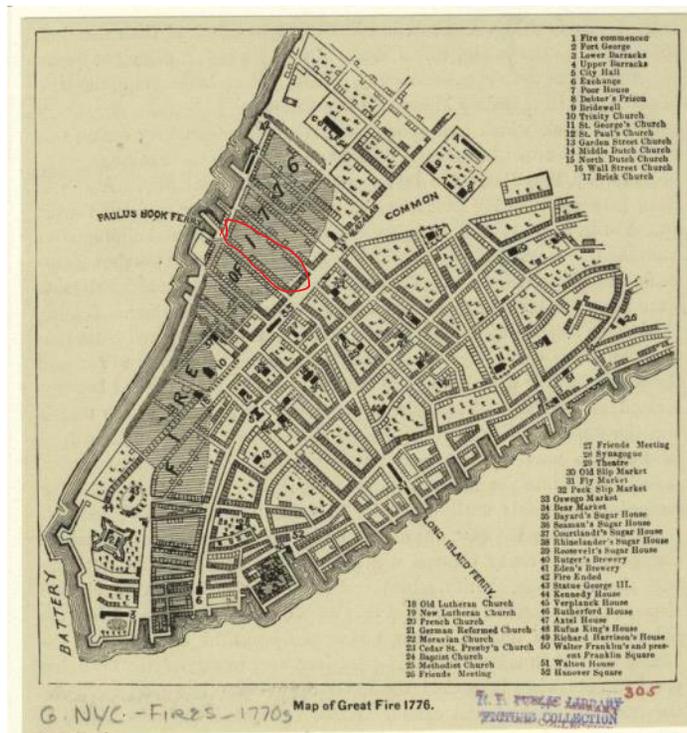
In any case, the consequences were clear. The gusts fanned a small blaze and carried it north and west, toward the trade center site. As the fire crossed Broadway, Trinity Church fell to the flames.

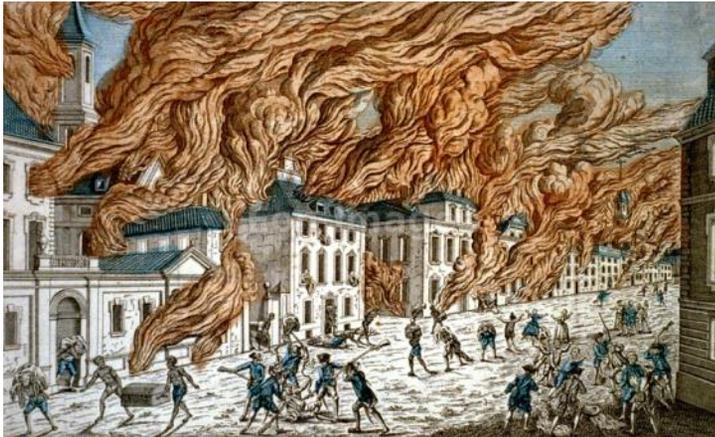
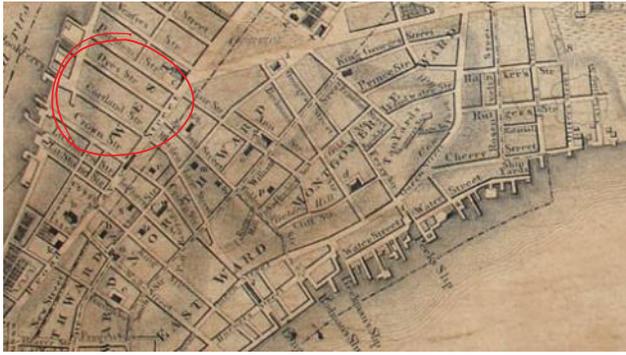
The fire pushed across the houses lining Cortlandt, Dey and Vesey Streets. "Several women and children perished in the fire, their shrieks, joined to the roaring of the flames, the crash of falling houses and the widespread ruin which everywhere appeared, formed a scene of horror grand beyond description, and which was still heightened by the darkness of night," read an account published in The New York Mercury.

The fire was not brought under control until nearly 11 a.m. the next day. From 500 to 1,000 homes, one quarter of the settled city, were ruined.

Reconstruction came, as it had before, but this time, it was not immediate. The site lay untouched for many years, and soon became known as the Burnt District.

From <http://wirednewyork.com/forum/showthread.php?t=5062>





<http://books.google.com/books?id=V4Q7AQAAMAAJ&pg=PA188&lpg=PA188&dq=great+fire+nyc+1776+%22peter+mesier%22&source=bl&ots=OZkvtSeSol&sig=qDfFGjE47Xl64RlktjWphk8UCIA&hl=en&sa=X&ei=jj-u6CZNPgAYgSs6oLoDA&ved=0CEMO6AEwBg#v=onepage&q=great%20fire%20nyc%201776%20%22peter%20mesier%22&f=false>

The capture of Burgoyne gave a new turn to Tory speculations. From exultation they sank to despondency. They no longer felt secure even in New York. Gates, it was said, was coming to besiege the city, and its inhabitants must prepare for its defence. The loyal gentlemen and refugees now formed themselves into twenty companies of Provincials, and commanded by the Mayor, David Mathews, paraded in the fields. They made a fine appearance, and would, it was thought, materially aid the Royal forces in defending New York.

Soon the Tories found that the danger was indeed imminent. Parties of rebels, full of confidence, began to plunder the neighborhood of the city. No part of Long Island was safe from their attack; and the Baron Reidesel, in his quarters opposite New York, could seldom sleep at night while the enemy were so near; or if he slept, his wife kept watch at his side, amusing her wakeful hours with the reflection of the city lights in the tranquil river, and listening to the low tap of the drums or the voices of the distant patrols.

Even New York island was no longer safe from the foe. A party of rebels landed at Bloomingdale, surrounded the house of Brigadier-General Delancey, plundered and set it on fire. The male inmates were made prisoners, and the ladies of the family, Mrs. Delancey and her two daughters, fled in their night-dresses to the neighboring woods, where they remained all night, exposed to the chill November air. Colonel James Delancey, the active leader of the Westchester Rangers, was also captured at the house of Robert Hunter, in West Farms, and carried off to Connecticut. The insecurity of the Tories, too, was increased by the flight of Clinton from Philadelphia; and they saw with shame and terror their General-in-Chief chased over the Jerseys by Mr. Washington, and only saved from captivity by the misconduct of the volatile Lee.

A second great fire in August, 1776, desolated a large part of the already overcrowded and suffering city. Sixty-four fine houses and many stores were burnt, chiefly around Little Dock Street and Old Slip, and the wealthy Tories again lost largely, as if the elements conspired to impoverish them. Colonel William Bayard,

who had suffered severely in the fire of 1770, lost six houses and stores, the rents of which amounted to £520; the Cruger family, six houses; Gerardus Duyckinck, seven; while Peter Mesier and his relatives lost by the two fires no less than fifteen buildings.

Great Fire of NYC, 1776
 NYC Fire 1778
 2 fires!