

ALEXANDRIA GAZETTE
Monday Evening, Feb. 11, 1895

BURNING OF GEORGE R. HILL & CO'S BAKERY.

About half past nine o'clock on Saturday night the low moan of the whistle of Smoot & Co.'s saw mill, on the east side of Lee street, between Cameron and Queen, caused all who heard it to surmise that the building was on fire, and this report traveled from mouth to mouth as the bell in the City Hall steeple rang out the alarm and was taken up by the bells and on the various engine houses. It was intensely cold, but the hour not being late most people were up and hundreds ran to the scene as quickly as the slippery pavements would allow them. It was, however, not the sawmill, but George R. Hill & Co.'s bakery and confectionery on the opposite side of the street which was burning and at a rapid rate, too. Before the fire department could be gotten in working order a gentleman who had arrived early on the scene forced his way into the molasses room next to the engine room. He was soon compelled to desist and flee for safety. A few minutes later both engines had gotten to work, but from some cause a sufficient pressure could not be brought to bear and it was found difficult to throw streams as high as the second story windows. The firemen worked heroically, but the devouring element resumed a fearful headway, and with their clothing encased in ice and the water freezing almost before it left the pipes, they manfully fought the fire for five hours and a half, and though the entire building was destroyed they succeeded in confining the fire to the bakery and saved all adjoining property. A high and frigid northwest wind fanned the flames greatly, and burning embers were flying thick and fast and settling upon the roofs of adjoining houses. It is generally conceded that it was the hardest fight Alexandria firemen ever had with the devouring element. Between two and three o'clock Sunday morning, when nearly all the woodwork in the building had been burned, and no further damage was apprehended, the firemen ceased work, leaving the frozen hose on the ground. Shortly before five o'clock a second alarm was sounded, the fire having been reported to have broken out afresh, but this proved false. Yesterday morning a desolate scene was presented, nothing but the base walls of the former building and the ruined machinery being visible. During the progress of the fire there were several slight explosions which were caused by some fireworks which had been left over from the Christmas sales, but the bulk of the stock of such goods was in a brick house on the opposite side of the alley. Many people worked assiduously in removing goods from the building, and it is reported that in some cases articles were stolen. The bakery was a three-story structure and was fitted with modern machinery, and the loss, including stock on hand, will reach \$60,000. There is but \$28,000 insurance, \$4,000 of which is in Alexandria companies -- \$2,500 in the Alexandria Fire Insurance Company and \$1,500 in the Mount Vernon. Mr. Hill only a few days ago cancelled a \$16,000 insurance, believing the premium to be too high. The books of the company were saved but the trade record, invaluable to an enterprise like this, was destroyed. Numbers of people visited the scene yesterday and the Hydraulion engine was kept there

throwing water occasionally during most of the day. Numbers of boys swarmed about the burned building searching for almonds, candy and other articles which had been scattered during the night. The origin of the fire is mysterious, though Mr. Hill is clearly of the opinion that it was the work of an incendiary. Mr. Stephen Henderson, engineer at the bakery, was the first to discover it, he having entered the engine room to feed two dogs he had placed there. There was nothing to indicate how the fire had been started. George R. Hill & Co.'s bakery was the evolution of the old Jamieson bakery of our grandfathers' days. In the year 1869 Mr. Hill came here from Baltimore and purchased the property at a time when it was supposed nothing would flourish in Alexandria. At this period the products of the bakery were distributed throughout the city from a hand cart, the locomotive power being furnished by a colored man. The new proprietor was young and energetic, and he determined to extend the business of the concern, and he was not long in doing so, but during the depression which followed the Jay Cooke Disaster Mr. Hill was forced to make an assignment and offer the best terms he could to his creditors. Like a practical business man, this reverse only stimulated his mercantile spirit and he worked assiduously to surmount this temporary setback. In a short time the increased trade having rendered the old building too contracted, he purchased a larger structure on the opposite side of the street and enlarged it for his purposes. The enterprise prospered, and a few years ago, Mr. Hill paid off all his assignment with six percent interest added. As many as five thousand barrels of flour have been used in one year to meet the demands made upon the factory. Mr. Hill will, as soon as possible, commence the erection on the old site of a modern bakery, and in the interim will conduct his business at the northwest corner of King and Lee streets, he having leased the warehouse on that corner for his purposes. He has issued a circular to the trade in which he says: "We will be ready for business on Monday morning, the 11th inst., and until our factories are rebuilt we will have our goods made for us. We shall hope with the advantage of a modern structure and improved machinery to compensate for any inconvenience which may attend our business transactions in the interim." The fact that the saw mill and Chas. King & Son's building on the opposite side of the street escaped destruction, seems miraculous. A wooden cornice, it will be remembered, was blown from the latter building during a storm last May, and had been replaced by a fire wall. This wall is believed to have saved the building. Wm. H. Steuernagle distributed twenty gallons of coffee and five gallons of whiskey to the firemen. Lieut. Smith and Messrs. A. D. Brockett, Fred. Kaus, E. S. Leadbeater, and others also furnished coffee. Between fifty and sixty persons were employed at the bakery and when it shall have been rebuilt the force will doubtless be increased.

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