

self-guided
FIRE HISTORY TOUR



POCO
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SELF-GUIDED FIRE HISTORY TOUR



Cover • Academy of Music Block Fire, 1926.

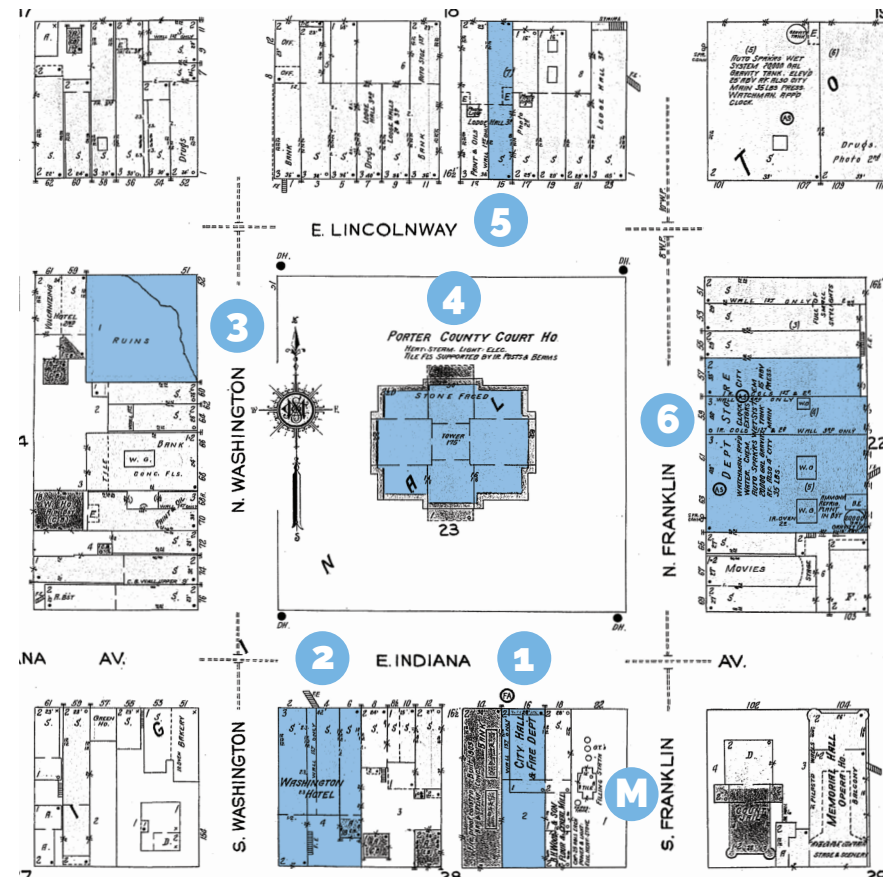
Above • Aftermath of the Porter County Courthouse Fire, 1934.

Right • Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1926.

how to use **THIS GUIDE**

This guide will show you the locations of five impactful fires that occurred on Valparaiso's courthouse square. Each of these fires played a significant role in shaping the downtown's past and present – some more than others. Aside from their immediate impacts – causing loss of life, serious injury, and property destruction – each fire shaped the trajectory of downtown Valparaiso. These fires altered the existing architectural language and shifted the ways in which people interacted with this area. As you walk around the square, we invite you to consider how these fires affected different generations of Porter County residents.

- 1** Central Fire Station
- 2** The Merchant's Hotel Block
- 3** Academy of Music Block
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- 5** Wark's Hardware
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1 CENTRAL FIRE STATION (16 INDIANA)



Image • Central Fire Station, circa 1880.

Central Fire Station (16 Indiana Avenue)

The Valparaiso Fire Department occupied the structure at 16 Indiana Avenue from 1878 until 1963, when it moved to Fire Station No. 1 at 205 Indiana. Note the large bay doors, which allowed equipment to enter and exit the building. Also on display in the present are statues of a circa 1878 firefighter and “Old Joe,” the firehouse dog.

If you look closely at the firefighters helmet, you’ll see “67,” which commemorates Valparaiso’s first attempt to form a fire department. In June 1867, a group of citizen volunteers gathered to create a firefighting force - the

group disbanded six months later when they failed to raise enough money to purchase a fire apparatus.

J. W. Kellogg created the Valparaiso Hook and Ladder Company in 1869. In the next few years, citizens of Valparaiso organized various independent firefighting companies. They had names like the Alert Company and the Long John Hose Company. There was a company of German-speaking firefighters who organized out of the congregation of Immanuel Lutheran Church. There was even a firefighting company of college students from the Northern



Image • Central Fire Station and Valparaiso City Hall, 1923.

Indiana Normal School, who in their group photograph successfully concealed the many holes in their hose.

In 1886, a city ordinance regulated the reorganization of the various firefighting forces in Valparaiso. It created a hierarchy of authority – at its top was the chief engineer. This ordinance coincided with the completion of Valparaiso’s water works, which for the first time allowed firefighters access to a plentiful supply of water through strategically-placed hydrants. Before that, water was drawn from cisterns via pump, and transported

to fires by “bucket brigades.” Even after the professionalization of Valparaiso’s firefighting forces, the firefighting process still required volunteer help. When a fire was discovered, the call went out, and neighbors rushed to help where they could. •

2 THE MERCHANT'S HOTEL BLOCK



Image • Aftermath of the Merchant's Hotel Block Fire, 1927. Note the painted signage for Polk's Piano Tuning School on the west façade.

The Merchant's Hotel Block, January 1927

On a cold January night in 1927, a fire destroyed one of the oldest brick buildings in Porter County. By the time it burned, the so-called Merchant's Hotel Block had housed a variety of people and enterprises. Originally called the Excelsior Block, the building's first owners used it to let rooms to private families. Eventually, Thomas T. Maulsby purchased the structure, renaming it the Merchant's Hotel. During this time, it hosted many parties and famous individuals. If the stories are true, Indiana Governor Oliver P. Morton and former President Benjamin Harrison both overnighted in the Merchant's Hotel. The building also housed

a number of stores, including the well-known Polk's Piano Tuning School. At the time of the fire, the Washington Hotel let rooms inside the old structure at some of the most inexpensive rates available in Valparaiso.

On the night of the fire, Washington Hotel clerk Jimmy Stevens detected a faint smell of smoke, and, upon investigating the odor, realized a large fire had started in the basement of one of the connected businesses. He immediately left the hotel to alert the fire department located just down Indiana Avenue.

After raising the alarm, Stevens returned to the hotel to find the

blaze had engulfed much of the structure. Constructed in 1854, the three-story brick block possessed a wood frame, with only a few iron supports, which builders added after its initial construction. Both the age of the building and its ramshackle state combined to allow the flames to quickly whip through the structure. Even worse, these factors made rescue efforts all the more dangerous, as it increased the chance that the walls and staircases in the building might collapse.

From Stevens' brief description, Valparaiso Fire Chief Fred Wittenberg understood that the severity of this fire required all available help. He called in the Gary Fire Department to help subdue the blaze.

When the full firefighting force of Valparaiso arrived at the location they could see groups of panicked hotel occupants gathered at the building's windows. From the outset, Chief Wittenberg knew that the old brick building could not be saved. "Lives first, property afterward," he ordered. Firemen set to the task of rescuing the trapped occupants. Volunteers and, later, an engine from Gary joined them. Rescuers rushed into the smoke-filled hotel, unsure whether the floor might give out beneath them or above them.

Volunteer Jimmy Stevens worked heroically, breaking down interior doors to reach trapped occupants. Stevens saved one man, Earl James, whose arthritis prevented him from walking under

his own power. After carrying James out of the building, Stevens returned to the blaze. Another man, panicked and disoriented, fought off Stevens' rescue efforts and attempted to return to his room. Eventually, Stevens managed to carry the confused man out of the fire. Thanks to the heroic efforts of firefighters and volunteers like Stevens, all 48 people in the hotel escaped with their lives.

However, business owners were not so lucky. The fire destroyed most of the goods in nearly all of the block's stores, which included the Fidler Piano Store, Leetz Grocery, Albe and Pool Tobacco and Candy Sellers, and the Kozlenko Clothing Store. Due to the building's high risk of fire, none of these stores were sufficiently insured. Total losses from the fire amounted to \$110,000, approximately \$1.7 million in 2022 dollars. •



Image • The Academy of Music Block Fire rages at the southwest corner of Washington Street and Lincolnway, 1926.



Image • Aftermath of the Academy of Music Block Fire showing the building's South Washington Street façade, 1926.

Academy of Music Block, February 1926

The Academy of Music Block stood for sixty-two years at the southwest corner of Lincolnway and Washington Street. Samuel Anthony and Ruell Starr constructed the building in 1864, when it was first known as Valparaiso Hall. For a time, the building's third floor, with its tall ceilings, served as the city's preferred theatre. In the years before it burned, the third floor housed Valparaiso's Masonic Temple.

In late February 1926, an overheated furnace unleashed a fire that quickly engulfed the building. Firefighters rushed to save the three-story brick and stone structure – Chief Wittenberg again called in help from Gary. The flames, a beacon visible five

miles away, attracted other people to the heart of the county seat. Representatives of the Lowenstine Department Store supplied mittens to those working to extinguish the blaze. Electricians rushed to the scene in order to secure fallen live wires. Shop owners and some who lived close by provided hot coffee to the firefighters. Hundreds looked on as the fire fiend gutted a gem of the downtown.

Three local volunteers, Robert Bartholomew, Claus Helmich, and Lloyd Miller, joined a pair of firefighters from Gary's No. 2 Engine as they entered Kaufmann's Bargain Store, which occupied a structure adjoining the Academy Block directly to the south. The group of men found a vantage on

the building's second floor, where they began to pour water onto the flames. Tragically, the massive walls of the Academy Block then gave way, with a blast then a thud that crushed the neighboring Kaufmann's Store like "an eggshell."

Other firefighters and volunteers, pouring water from the roof of the Farmer's Restaurant, just south of Kaufmann's, were showered with a hail of bricks, one of which struck Porter County Surveyor Morthland in the head. Dazed, Morthland attempted to walk off the roof and into the craterous ruins, his pals on the roof pulled him back from the edge.

The collapse of the Academy Block's south wall killed Bartholomew and Harry McNamara,

a seasoned veteran of the Gary Fire Department. The four others inside the Kaufmann building during the collapse were rushed to the Christian Hospital, all survived. McNamara and Bartholomew were the last firefighters to die in the line of duty in Valparaiso.

By morning, the blaze had consumed the available fuel within the Academy Block, and the firefighters had battled whipping wind to prevent the flames from spreading to nearby buildings. The Academy Block still stood, though now hollowed, burned black, and adorned with columns of ice, like glistening stalactites drooping down from the ceiling of a cave. •

4 PORTER COUNTY COURTHOUSE



Image • Aftermath of the Porter County Courthouse Fire, 1934. From the Belange Collection.

Porter County Courthouse, December 1934

Without a doubt, the most well-known fire in the history of downtown Valparaiso occurred on December 27, 1934. At about 12:15 that morning, merchant police officer Tracy Elgin noticed a red glare in the northeast corner of the circuit courtroom, in the upper level of the courthouse. Elgin ran the short distance to the Central Fire Station and alerted the firefighters. The engines rushed out of the station, traveling halfway around the block to the north side of the courthouse to get to the hydrants.

After connecting their hoses, the firefighters trudged through a foot of newfallen snow, and forced entry into the locked courthouse. By then, flames began to pour out of the roof on the building's east side, directly above the circuit courtroom. Firefighters tried to reach the upper levels of the building, where the fire raged, but smoke-filled stairways cut off their

advance. As they struggled through the smoky courthouse, the flames advanced rapidly. The oak joists in the courthouse's upper levels burned like tinder.

The blaze engulfed the stately clock tower. Firefighters decided to focus all their hoses on the county recorder's office in the lower level of the building. This prudent decision saved that part of the building and the valuable records it contained. However, countless other records, many unique and invaluable, were lost.

The Gary and LaPorte Fire Departments came to their neighbor's aid. None were killed, though a LaPorte firefighter suffered severe frostbite on his face after driving to Valparaiso without a windshield. Belle Vevia, a trained nurse, administered aid to the injured in a makeshift hospital in the fire station. A Gary firefighter reported that he saw the blaze from

as far as Hobart, some 10 miles away. The flames burned green, as the fire had at that point reached the tower's copper roof.

Hundreds came to see the destruction, from town and countryside. Businesses on the square opened up so that spectators could get out of the bitter cold. According to contemporary reports, when the flames were most intense, "Lincolnway looked as light as in the glare of a noonday sun."

Volunteers used fire ladders to gain access to nearby roofs to extinguish rogue embers. Like so many other fires on this tour, a layer of snow helped to contain the blaze to a single structure. Police matron Ann Benson-Cowdrey called county officials at their homes to inform them of the disaster.

The 1883 courthouse, which was for many residents the pride of Porter County, stood gutted, its charred stone walls greeted the midwinter morning. Faulty electrical wiring likely caused the fire. A number of inspectors for the State Fire Marshall had pointed out exposed wires that ran along wood beams in the structure's upper level. A year previous to the fire, the County Commissioners had the option to pay \$500, the material cost for rewiring, and the Civil Works Administration, a New Deal-era jobs creation program, would carry out the work for free. The estimated loss of the courthouse was \$500,000, roughly \$10.4 million in 2022 dollars. •

January 1934

Eleven months before fire gutted the Porter County Courthouse, another 1934 fire nearly claimed it. Around 11:15 in the morning on January 23, a trial in the circuit courtroom was interrupted when attorneys and jury members realized that the roof of the room was on fire. The court bailiff immediately sent out an alarm, and firefighters were able to control the blaze. The fire only created minor damage in the courthouse attic. Firefighters' timely response saved a collection of murals on the walls of the circuit courtroom painted by local artist and contractor Swan Nilson. The murals would not survive the second fire, and, though Porter County residents reportedly cherished them, we have yet to find an account of what they depicted. In reporting the small fire, *The Vidette-Messenger* noted, "Had it broken out at night, it is more than probable that the fifty-year old structure, which is accounted one of the finest pieces of old architecture in this section, would have been leveled to the ground."



Image • A view of Lincolnway (looking northeast) the blue arrow shows the location of Wark's Hardware, note the "hardware" sign, circa 1918.

Wark's Hardware, July 1927

In 1927, the Fourth of July arrived a day early at Wark's Hardware when a store employee accidentally lit a set of firecrackers in a window display, causing the store's entire selection of fireworks to ignite. The ensuing fire destroyed much of the building's façade, which had to be completely remodeled. Compare the current façade of 15 E. Lincolnway (now Radius) to the photo above.

Charles Wark reacted with characteristic nonchalance. In a *Vidette-Messenger* article the following week, he remarked that "fires are bad...the after effects are worse." The "after effects" Wark

referred to were the outpouring of well-wishes and questions he had received regarding the severity of the fire at his hardware store, as a number of regional newspapers picked up the story and, according to him, exaggerated its effects.

Wark received around eighty letters from regional business partners, each expressing sympathy and inquiring about the amount of damage done. The shopkeeper answered each letter, assuaging fears that he would close down, and repeating his line: "These goods were made to burn – not eat. The only difference is I burned them instead of my customers." •



Image • A view of the Lowenstine Department Store, view looking northeast up Franklin Avenue, circa 1970.

Lowenstine Department Store, February 1996

Near midnight on February 15, 1996, Jim Maryonovich and coworkers at the Hidden Garden Florist were finishing up flower arrangements for Valparaiso High School's "King of Hearts" dance when they smelled smoke. They called the Valparaiso Fire Department, who, after arriving on the scene, discovered that the old Lowenstine Department Store, directly north of Hidden Garden, was in flames. From the time they arrived, firefighters knew they could not save the venerable old building. Their concern, rather, was that the entire block might catch as well.

They immediately set to work dumping thousands of gallons of water on the structure. Valparaiso Fire Chief Phil Griffith

activated mutual aid agreements – firefighters from Chesterton, Boone Grove, Lake Eliza, and Washington, Liberty, and Union Townships joined the effort. Embers large as dinner plates rose from the blaze, landing blocks away. Two tankers from Union Township patrolled the vicinity to assure these did not lead to additional fires. Again, a fresh layer of snow aided the firefighters.

After sixteen hours battling the blaze, the efforts of some sixty firefighters, and three minor injuries, the combined firefighting forces had extinguished the fire. At its height, flames leaped some fifty feet into the air from the store's third story. Roughly 100 locals looked on, and at least one took video. Smoke rose from a black pit



Image • Fire rages in the former Lowenstine Department Store building, 1996.

of ashen debris, only the façade of the century-old structure remained.

Jacob Lowenstine began his first retail business in Valparaiso in 1885. Not long after, he purchased the Odd Fellows' building on Franklin Street. Soon, the Lowenstine Department Store outgrew the old stone structure. Lowenstine purchased lots surrounding the Odd Fellows' building, and, in 1916, built a new, three-story structure complete with a terra cotta façade, a landmark on the east side of Valparaiso's courthouse square.

The Lowenstines operated their family business for 101 years. For many of those years, "Lowenstine's" was a downtown institution, a one-stop shop that offered clothing, groceries, and household goods, along with a signature gift wrap. The store suffered a fate similar to many

independently-owned department stores. Unable to compete with regional and national chains, the store closed in 1988. The Highland Department Store bought and reopened the structure later that year, only to close in June 1994.

When flames brought the structure down in 1996, Thomas Krafft had plans to remodel the historic structure. Krafft maintained his interest in the property, and, along with local architecture firm Design Organization, pushed forward with plans for an entirely new business and retail space. For nearly three years, "the Hole," as locals called the empty space, scarred Valparaiso's downtown. In 1999, work finished on 57 Franklin, a two-story structure that maintained the Victorian style of downtown Valparaiso and returned life to its east side. •

general INFORMATION

POCO MUSE

The award-winning PoCo Muse is this area's oldest institution devoted to the history and culture of Porter County.

MONTAGUE/URSCHEL GALLERY (MUG)

20 Indiana Avenue, Valparaiso, IN 46383

(219) 510.1836, pocomuse.org

Accessible by door on the south façade, the Montague/Urschel Gallery (MUG) is the exhibit and gallery space of the PoCo Muse.

Hours:

Tuesday-Sunday, 11a-4p

POCO MUSE FOUNDATION

20 Indiana Avenue, Valparaiso, IN 46383

(219) 510.1916, mypoco.org/about

The PoCo Muse Foundation is a recognized 501(c)3 organization that that supports the operation of the PoCo Muse.

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