

RELIEF TO WISCONSIN SUFFERERS

The Public Response to the Peshtigo Fire

by Jessica Huguet and Tanner St. John

ON OCTOBER 8, 1871 the city of Peshtigo, along with large swaths of Northeast Wisconsin, were consumed in flames by the largest wildfire in American history. This October will mark the 150th anniversary of the Peshtigo Fire that burned down multiple cities and left thousands needing to pick up the pieces. About 2,500 square miles of forest and countryside were burned and the fire destroyed farms, homes, businesses, schools, and churches. The fire, which was in actuality several separate conflagrations spread across Northeast Wisconsin (the fire that razed Peshtigo did not, as lore has it, cross the Bay of Green Bay) that have become collectively known as the Peshtigo Fire, affected Brown, Door, Kewaunee, and Oconto counties, even burning through a section of the Upper Peninsula in Michigan. The death toll of the Peshtigo Fire varies from 1,200 to 2,200 people with many having died during the fire or days afterward from smoke inhalation or other severe injuries.

There was no definitive cause of the fire, but a variety of factors created the perfect storm that set Wisconsin ablaze. The previous winter had seen very little snow and the spring and summer of 1871 were dry with little precipitation, leaving fields and forests as waiting kindling. In a letter to a friend in August 1871, Elizabeth Baird, chairwoman of the Office of Relief Committee alongside her husband, described the horrible conditions of that summer, stating, "We have had since began to write the first rain of any account for weeks. The weather is very hot, and the dust is perfectly fearful. So you may imagine how grateful this shower is." Rivers had shrunk from no precipitation and swamps dried up. Wisconsin was a match waiting for a spark, which came in the form of neglected fires and embers left in the dried-up brush. Workers and farmers working on the construction of the Chicago & North Western Railroad from Green Bay to Menominee had left embers to smolder on the dried land for weeks, causing multiple fires to break out even before the Peshtigo Fire.

The destruction and loss of life that occurred as a result of the Peshtigo Fire must have seemed insurmountable during those first few weeks after the fire. An article in the October *State Gazette*, "Among the Ruins of Peshtigo," recounted how awful a scene it was once the smoke cleared: "We cannot describe the scenes—we cannot! Infants clasped in mother's arms; fathers, brothers, sisters

stiff in their last embrace; actual lines of dead, from the once-happy farm house to the adjoining creek, consisting of charred groups, blackened corpses, crumbling bones, lacerated and torn members, the loved baby, the adolescent and the old, fill the observer with horror as he passes over the country. The roadsides are strewn with dead horses, oxen, cows, swine and fowls. Even the untamed of the forest flew toward civilization for relief, but only to find death in their flight." Recovering from such a disaster would not be easy and would require incredible amounts of time, money, and hard work. It was not only food and clothes that were needed but everyday objects such as tools, beds, utensils, chairs, and so many others that were lost in the fire. As news spread about that fateful October day, responses and support began pouring in to offer relief to Wisconsin sufferers.

The response to the Peshtigo Fire was widespread and immediate once news had circulated. Individuals and organizations from across the United States sent monetary donations and a variety of resources and other materials to Wisconsin. A letter from the St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Wamego, Kansas sent \$7.50 to Governor Lucius Fairchild to help those affected by the fire. In a letter the church wrote, "the amount is very trifling, but we are few and our means are but small." Another letter was received by Governor Fairchild from the Navy Yard in Kittery, Maine with \$50.50 sent after being collected by sixteen yard employees. From California to Massachusetts people were gathering what little money they had to spare to send in relief of the Peshtigo Fire. In Buffalo, New York the town became a joint headquarters in receiving provisions for the sufferers of the fires in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Chicago.

The story of the Peshtigo Fire had reached the newspapers of readers in England and money and supplies started coming in all the way from London. The January 20, 1872 *State Gazette* noted that three large bales were sent from London containing brand new white blankets. Many shipments came from London for months after the fire in support of the survivors.

All the support for the fire was useful and necessary but it was Belgium that was a constant contributor to the relief efforts. A large population of Belgian emigrants had settled in Door County and were greatly affected by the fire. An article in the May 4, 1872 *State Gazette*, "Death of the First Belgian Settler in Brown

County," stated: "The hardships and privations of all sorts which they encountered the first year did not discourage them, and they wrote to their friends in Belgium describing the beauties of the virgin forests in which they were and the future prospects of themselves and children. Those letters were read by thousands of people in Belgium who came from 25 to 30 miles around to read them and to go home determined to emigrate to America." Thus it was no surprise why the people of Belgium, with strong ties to their kindred in Northeast Wisconsin, would want to help with recovery and relief. The Belgian people ended up raising thousands of dollars to help with the recovery and are mentioned in the *State Gazette* multiple times for their generous donations.

Notes

1. Henry Baird to Lucius Fairchild, 27 December 1871, box 25, folder: Disasters, December 17-31, 1871, Series 34, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives (hereafter cited as WHS), Madison, Wisconsin.
2. Alexander Brush to the Supervisors of the Towns in Erie County [New York], 20 October 1871, box 25, folder: Disasters, October 20-25, 1871, Series 34, WHS.
3. Samuel Peed to Lucius Fairchild, 19 December 1871, box 25, folder: Disasters, December 17-31, 1871, Series 34, WHS.

Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society

Top: Letter with a \$500 donation from the mayor of Cambridge, Massachusetts to Wisconsin Governor Lucius Fairchild.

Center: Letter from Alexander Brush of Buffalo, New York, making an appeal for survivors of the fire.

An Appeal for the Sufferers by Fire.

BUFFALO, OCT. 20TH, 1871

To the Supervisors of the Towns in Erie County,

GENTLEMEN:

The people of Michigan, Wisconsin and Chicago are suffering terribly for want of clothing, bedding and provisions. We are doing all that we can in Buffalo

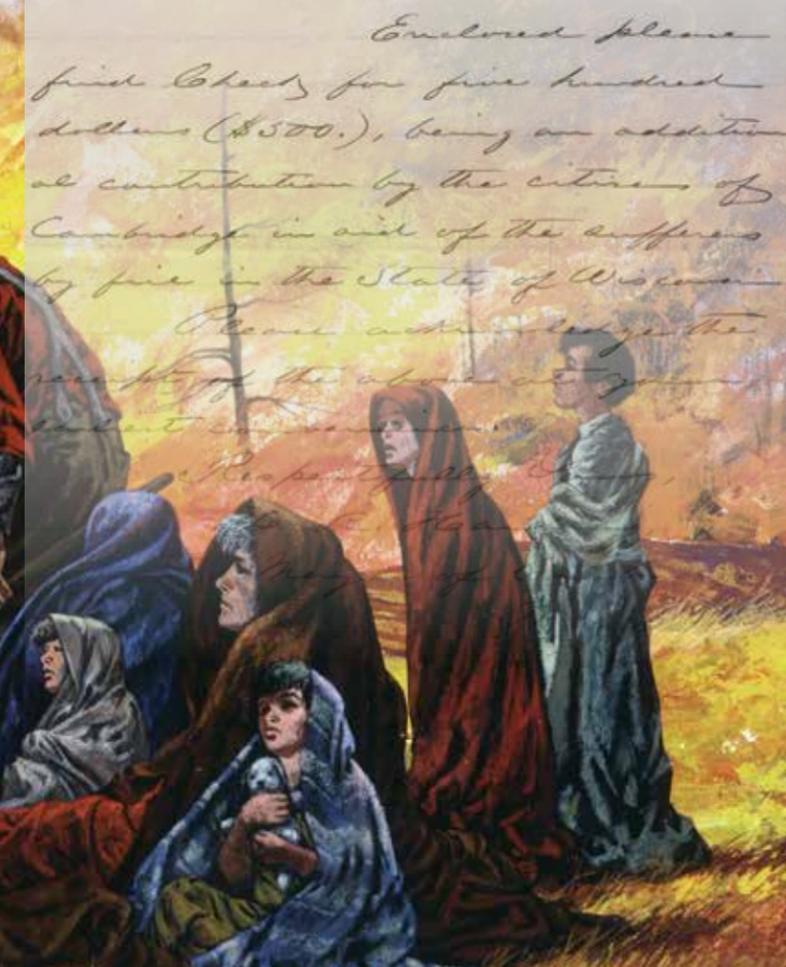
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Office of Relief Committee,

For Burned District, Northern Wisconsin.

Green Bay, December 27 1871.

His Excellency Lucius Fairchild, Gov
Green Bay

Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society;
Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society, WHS-1881

Left: Letter from Henry Baird, Office of Relief Committee, to Governor Lucius Fairchild.

Opposite: A painting of families huddled in a field in the Sugar Bushes, attempting to escape the Peshtigo Fire.

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