

Way We Were

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The tragedy of the Truscotts

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“It seems almost a libel on our city government, on the fire department, and on the entire community,” the *Park Record* stated on September 24, 1893, “that a neat and cozy residence situated right in the heart of the city was destroyed by fire at noon day, a human life sacrificed, and the calamity not known two blocks away from city hall.”

The unfortunate victim was thirty-six year old Harriet Truscott, a native of Cornwall. On September 18, 1893 Harriet’s husband, Gershom Truscott, filled a small oil can before leaving for work at the Daly mine. He cautioned Harriet, “who it seems was in the habit of using oil to kindle the fire not to touch the can for that purpose,” but Harriet either forgot or disregarded the warning. “When it came time to start a fire in the cooking stove,” Harriet picked up the can and poured some oil into the stove. “The can exploded,” the paper reported, and “the burning oil was scattered over the lady’s clothing and about the room.”

Harriet ran into the street, screaming for help. Three passers-by rushed to her aid, trying to suffocate the flames, one seriously burning his hand in the process. Her neighbor fired five gunshots in order to raise the alarm. But though the Truscotts lived “within a stone’s throw” of the Marsac Mill, the mill did not blow its whistle to alert the town, and therefore the volunteer fire department, that there was a fire.

“The credit for putting the fire out is due entirely to the mill men and mill hose,” the *Park Record* said. “On account of no alarm being given it was some time before the fire department got out.” Though mostly inexperienced with firefighting, the mill men did their best to douse both Harriet and the burning house. But “the handsome little residence was completely gutted.” Harriet was carried to a neighbor’s house and the doctor called, but her burns were too severe. She died the following evening.

Her son Arthur was not in the home at the time of the accident, instead out playing with neighborhood children. But while he might have escaped physical injury, he likely witnessed the horrific event. Though his stepfather Gershom continued to live and work in Park City, Arthur returned to Cornwall just six months after his mother’s death, where he lived with his grandmother, aunt, and cousin.

As if the death of his wife and destruction of his home weren’t enough, Gershom suffered another tragedy just a short time later. In March 1895, he was severely injured in a mining accident at the Daly when ten fuses prematurely exploded right next to where he was working. Though doctors did not expect him to survive, he did eventually recover. That September, he too returned to his home country of England.

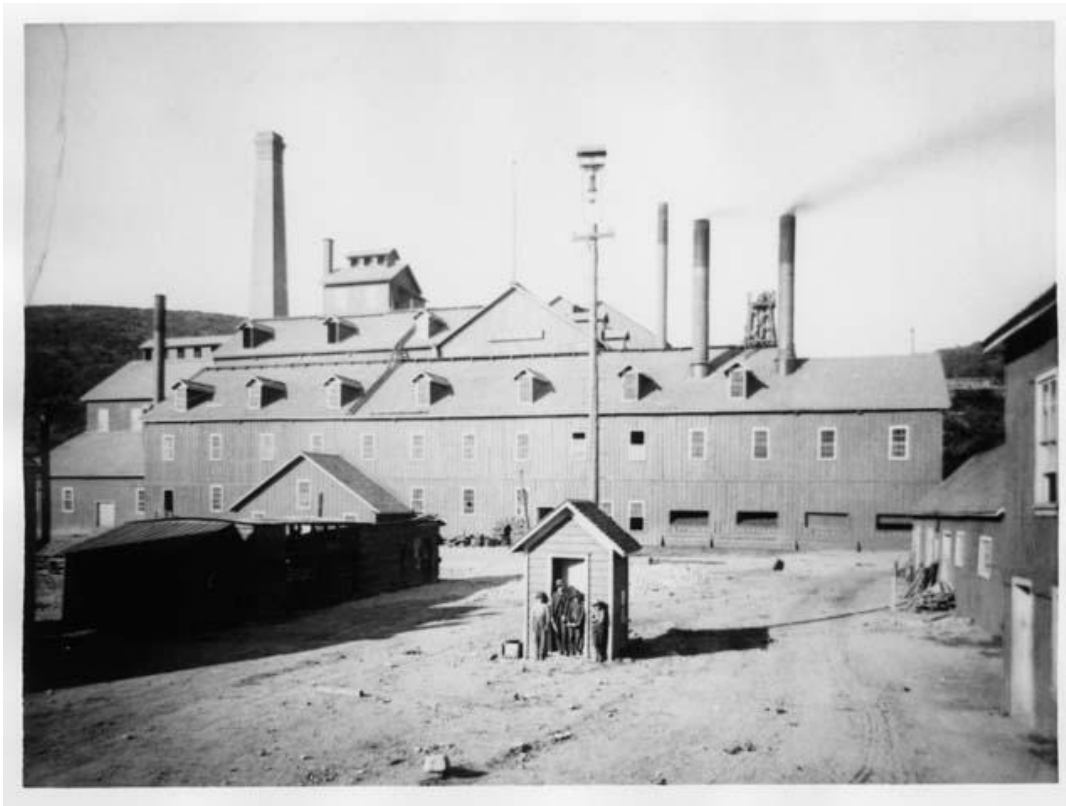


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Caption: Workers at the Marsac Mill, pictured ca.1890s, stretched a hose from the mill's hydrant down the block to the Truscott house in an effort to douse the flames and keep the fire from spreading.