

From the Ashes Part I: 1884

October 12, 1884 undoubtedly began like any other Sunday in Summerside; by day's end, however, it would go down in history, the result of "one of the most destructive fires that ever scorched this town". Its genesis was rumoured to have been a lighted match. Although malicious intent could not be proven, what began in the Franklin Commercial House stables quickly rendered ablaze the entire block formed by First, Second, Central, and St. Stephen streets. The timely arrival of the Fitzroy St. Engine House, coupled with a "perceptible breeze from the south" boded well, but it wasn't enough to stop the fiery havoc. Lost was the Franklin House; the residence and warehouse of Richard Hunt; the customs house; the law offices of J.M. Howe and H.G. Wright; two domestic dwellings on St. Stephen Street...and the offices and plant of the *Summerside Journal*.

Sole proprietorship of the *Journal* had recently come into the hands of William Arthur Brennan, who'd quickly risen through the editorial ranks since buying into the newspaper as a shareholder in 1876. In 1882, he'd succeeded in expanding the size and scope of the *Journal* after acquiring the resources of the defunct *Summerside Progress* at auction. An editorial at the outset of 1884 waxed that the *Journal's* "immense subscription list, prosperous condition and bright prospects" put it "under very favorable circumstances". Those favorable circumstances had come to an abrupt end.

The monetary value of the fire was reckoned at a whopping \$30,000. Although insured for about \$3,000, Brennan's losses were the heaviest, estimated at \$15,000 (likely north of \$500,000 today).

To Brennan fell what must have seemed a herculean task. The *Journal* had been riding high but now, with his enterprise in ashes, he was faced with the prospect of utter ruin. In a business where profit margins were tight and even one poor decision could mean the difference between boom or bust, fire was absolutely disastrous.

Had he wanted to, Brennan could have tossed in the proverbial towel and called it a day. The *Journal* was coming into its twentieth year, a respectable run for any newspaper. Perhaps the fire was a sign to move on. But not for Brennan. Faced with a fight or flight scenario he opted to fight, and vowed to maintain the *Journal's* print schedule.

Because the fire occurred on a Sunday, and since the *Journal* was published on Thursdays, Brennan had a small window in which to form an *ad hoc* printing office in time for the following

Thursday, allowing the *Journal* to maintain its scheduled publication date. Going the extra mile (so to speak), Brennan made his way to Charlottetown, where he was able to make use of business connections and temporarily avail himself of the necessary resources. And on October 16, as if nothing at all had happened, off the press came the *Journal*, somewhat on the bare bones side but alive and kicking and in print all the same. According to Charlottetown's *Daily Examiner*, it was "highly commendable". Following this, Brennan returned to Summerside and established temporary offices at Montgomery's Hall on St. Stephen Street, which had managed to escape the flames. From there the *Journal* was printed until March 1885, when renovations wrapped up on its new headquarters at the corner of Water and Queen Streets, "even more complete than the one [it] lost by fire".

If not for the inspired tenacity of Brennan, the *Journal's* story could very well have ended on that Sunday in October 1884. Instead, things eventually returned to a state of normalcy.

Until 1895, that is...