

**THE SOUTH SALINA STREET ARSON
THE BENNETT INSURANCE CASE
SYRACUSE, NEW YORK
1869**

A story that could easily be torn from today's newspapers or watched on the nightly news unfolded over 140 years ago. In today's dollars the loss was close to \$11 million and countless lives were placed at risk in a fire on South Salina Street, Syracuse, NY. December 27, 1869 at 1:15 a.m. the night watchman sounded the alert and before all was said and done eight brick stores along South Salina Street were destroyed. Newspaper accounts from across New York as well as Illinois shows the story was of great interest to the general public at that time.

Local officials blamed the fire on one of three accidental causes with the fire starting in the basement of Bennett Brothers. Three months later rumors circulated that the fire was intentionally set and by the end of April, Insurance Company investigators claimed the fire was intentionally set and that fraud was being committed regarding the insurance claims. Near the end of April 1870 Francis P. Vedder confessed that the fire was a result of arson and named those he claimed were responsible.

This first installment of many, chronicles the original report of the fire and Vedder's confession in the Syracuse Daily Journal. These two articles have been transcribed from copies of the original news reports as written.

As additional installments are added you will see the motives for the fire unfold, see defenses put forth including denial, insanity, threats and deals to turn states evidence.

Trial coverage or reports will range from civil cases where insurance companies and victims of the fire try and recover their losses up to criminal proceedings for arson and fraud.

As a fire and arson investigator of nearly 40 years and someone who has qualified numerous times as an expert witness. I am amazed how the fire was set and how it compares with many I have investigated with the use of an ignitable liquid and timing device. Expensive merchandise was removed prior to the fire and replaced with cheaper goods then the more expensive items were claimed under the insurance policy. One of the main characters in this true story is my great great-grandfather. I can only try and imagine what he might think of my career choice.

Now, please enjoy the first section below:

Syracuse Daily Journal
Monday, December 27, 1869

ORIGINAL ACCOUNT OF THE FIRE

THE FIRE FIEND

Destruction of Eight Brick Stores in South Salina Street

ONE OF THE MOST SERIOUS CONFLAGRATIONS IN THE HISTORY OF SYRACUSE –
LOSSES, NEARLY HALF A MILLION DOLLARS – INSURANCES, A QUARTER OF A
MILLION DOLLARS

The most destruction conflagration that has taken place in this city for many years, occurred early this morning in South Salina Street. Eight of the large, eligibly-located brick stores in the row on the east side of the street, extending southward from the Washington Block, are in ruins. Five of them, with their contents, were destroyed by fire, and others, with their contents, partially destroyed by fire and the falling walls of the others.

The aggregate losses are in the neighborhood of \$450,000, on which there are insurances for about \$250,000. The particulars of the origin and progress of the fire, and of the results, are given below.

ORIGIN AND PROGRESS OF THE FIRE

About fifteen minutes past one o'clock, Night watchman Stafford discovered smoke issuing from the grating in front of the dry goods establishment of Bennett Brothers, Nos. 85 and 87 South Salina Street. He endeavored to awaken the inmates of the store, but failing he sounded an alarm, bringing the steamers all out, No. 1 taking position at the hydrant in front of the Presbyterian Church, No. 3 at the hydrant on the opposite corner, and No. 2 at the hydrant in front of the Westcott House. The fire having originated in the cellar filled the stores above with smoke making it impossible to save but a small portion of the goods and those nearest the door. The flames burst up through the floor, and in a short time worked their way upward, bursting out through the roof. The flames spread rapidly to the north, and soon the stores of V.P. Vedder, No. 83, F.W. Walrath, No. 81, and F. Wolf and Brother, No. 79, were in flames. At three o'clock the high south wall of the Bennett Brothers' stores fell with a crash, crushing in the roof of the American Tea Company's store, No. 89, and a portion of the roof of the store of J.A. Atwell, No. 91. Although fireman exerted almost superhuman efforts, they were unable to save the buildings on fire, and their efforts were finally directed to the staying of the flames, and so well did they succeed that very little damage was done on the north beyond Wolf Brothers, or Atwell's on the south. The two stores of Bennett Brothers, with the Crouse House above, Vedder's store, and Wairath's store are entirely destroyed. The store of the Wolf Brothers is badly damaged by fire. The store occupied by the Tea Company was crushed completely into the

cellar, all the floors giving away. The upper portion of the store of Mr. Atwell is but little damaged by fire, the principal damage being from the falling bricks and water.

The store of Stafford & Leonard, No. 93 is damaged by water, as is also the store of Pease, Johnson and Plaisted, No. 77. Up to the present time of writing, noon, the firemen were still pouring water upon the ruins, as it is nearly impossible to tell whether the fire is out or not, owing to the volume of steam and smoke rising from the ruins. The heat of the burning buildings, when the conflagration was at its height, was intense, and the buildings on the opposite side were badly blistered and nearly all the glass cracked. The damage to the new Brigham Block, in this respect, is estimated at upwards of \$400. Several other stores were similarly damaged by the heat, but not to so great an extent. At one time the Washington Block was in extreme danger, but the judicious disposition of the various streams of water prevented its destruction.

LIST OF SUFFERERS WITH PARTICULARS AS TO LOSSES AND INSURANCE

The following is a list of the sufferers by this destructive conflagration as far as we have been able to learn up to the present writing:

The buildings destroyed by fire and crushed by falling walls were the property of Mssrs. Cifford, Howlett and Crouse, and were valued at about \$70,000. They have an insurance of from \$50,000 to \$55,000.

Store No. 79 was occupied by Mr. Wolf and Bro., furniture dealers. They succeeded in removing but a small portion of their stock, all their best stock being damaged by fire, smoke and water. They estimate their loss at from \$10,000 to \$12,000, upon which they have an insurance of \$9,000.

Store No. 81 was occupied by F.W. Walrath, wholesale grocer. A portion of his stock was removed. He estimates his loss at \$15,000, upon which he has an insurance of \$11,000.

Store No. 83 was occupied by F.P. Vedder, dry goods dealer. Mr. Vedder removed but a small portion of his stock and that in a damaged condition, in the second story Mr. V. had about \$18,000 worth of goods, not one dollars worth of which was got out. He estimates his loss at about \$35,000. Insured for \$40,000.

Stores Nos. 85 and 87 were occupied by Bennett Brothers as a dry goods store. But a small portion of their stock was saved from the stores. The carpet storeroom in the rear was broken into and nearly all the stock of carpets taken out. The loss sustained by this firm is estimated at \$200,000 to \$225,000. They have an insurance of \$100,000.

Store No. 89 was occupied by W.H. Bell, American Tea Company. A large portion of the unbroken packages of Mr. Bell's stock was removed before the walls fell, crushing in his store. He estimates his loss at from \$4,000 to \$4,500 insured for \$3,500.

Store No. 91 was occupied by J. A. Atwell, grocer. A portion of his stock was removed in a damaged condition. Loss estimated at \$8,000, insured for \$3,500.

Store No. 93 is occupied by Stafford and Leonard, stove dealers. They lose about \$2,500

from water. They also had about \$400 worth of stoves stored in the basement of the Bennett Brothers store, which were destroyed. Their loss is fully covered by insurance.

Store No. 77 is occupied by Pease, Johnson and Plaisted, stove dealers, who lose from fire and water about \$2,000. They are fully insured. This building is the property of Mr. Charles Tallman, and is damaged to the extent of about \$2,000. Fully insured.

The upper stories of the stores destroyed were mainly occupied as a boarding house, and known as the "Crouse House." The house was kept by Mr. J.R. Cowles, who did not succeed in saving anything, not even his books. At the breaking out of the fire, Mr. Cowles was awakened by the cries of "fire!" and immediately proceeded to awaken all the boarders. By the time this was accomplished the smoke was so dense in the halls and rooms, that it was impossible to live in it, and beyond a single trunk, containing one or two dresses belonging to Mrs. Cowles, nothing belonging to Mr. Cowles was got out. The single boarders succeeded in saving nearly all their effects, but the various families saved little or nothing. Mr. Cowles estimates his loss at about \$8,000, upon which there is a small insurance of several hundred dollars.

The following persons occupied rooms in the upper stories of the several burned and crushed buildings:-Madame Phillips, millinery, loss about \$200. No insurance.

Miss P. Lambert, dress maker, loss \$200, no insurance. Mr. John Mowatt had a piano, valued at \$530, stored in Miss Lambert's room, which was carried down with the floors. Mr. Mowatt has no insurance.

H.O. Pratt, boot and shoe maker, loss from water \$150, fully insured.

James D. Adams, tailor, loss about \$500; insured for \$1,000

Among the boarders at the Crouse House we have only been able to learn the names of the following persons:

Mrs. Merrill, loss \$1,000, insured for \$500.

George H. Roberts, loss \$1,000, no insurance.

INCIDENTS

The cry of fire in the hall of the Crouse House created no little alarm among the numerous boarders, and the greatest consternation prevailed for a short time. The single boarders suffer the least, as they were able to get out the major portion of their effects, while the families had little more than time to dress and get out before the smoke was so stifling that no one could stand it.

In the excitement attendant upon the discovery of the fire, a hired girl named Maggie Murphy remained too long in the smoke and in attempting to get down stairs fell in an insensible condition in one of the halls where she was discovered by a colored man named Morris Robinson, porter at the house, who carried her to a place of safety where she soon recovered from the effects of the smoke. When the front walls fell several firemen and others had a very narrow escape from being crushed, but beyond slight bruises we learn of no injury.

ORIGIN OF THE FIRE

The origin of the fire is attributed to one of three causes. That it originated in the basement there is no doubt, as there was a furnace in the north store basement, a stove in the packing room and a lamp always kept burning in the basement and no fire elsewhere in the establishment. Mssrs. Bennett inform us that they are certain that the fire took from one of the above causes, but which they are not prepared to say.

LATEST

At half-past one o'clock the steamers are still at work pouring water on the ruins, and it is feared that there is still fire in the building No. 89. Owing to the manner in which the timbers have fallen, it is almost impossible to get at the fire, and the only resort is to drown the flames out, which is being done as fast as possible. The recovered goods are being taken to various localities for storage.

AFTER THE FIRE OF DECEMBER 27, 1869

As printed in The Syracuse Daily Journal, Tuesday, December 28, 1869

EXPRESSION OF SYMPATHY

To the Editor of the Syracuse Journal

We, the employees of Bennett Brothers, in grateful recognition of the many courtesies shown us, during our connection with the firm, and as an expression of our regard for the integrity and uprightness which has characterized their business transactions, not only with us but with all whom they dealt, and prompted with a desire to manifest our respect and esteem for them, and our heartfelt sympathy for the great loss they have sustained in the recent disastrous conflagration, do hereby unitedly and publicly, with one accord, tender them our best wishes, our deepest sympathy and condolence, in this hour of their greatest affliction, and we do furthermore declare, as our belief, that in the destruction of their property and business this community has sustained even as great a loss, by being shorn of the enterprise and business talent which has always marked the progress of Bennett Bros.

EMPLOYEES OF BENNETT BROTHERS

Syracuse Daily Journal
April 25, 1871

F. P. VEDDER'S CONFESSION

The Bennett Insurance Case

STARTLING REVELATIONS BY FRANCIS P. VEDDER – HE CHARGES ARSON UPON FRALICK, BENNETT AND BRIGGS – ARREST OF THE ACCUSED, FOR ARSON IN THE FIRST DEGREE

The investigation of the Bennett insurance case, which has been in progress before Judges Bacon, Johnson and Holmes, referees, at the Supreme Court room in this city, at intervals for several weeks, developed new and highly interesting features yesterday afternoon. The case involves the validity of the insurance policies upon the stock of goods in the stores of Bennett Brothers, when destroyed by fire; the insurance companies contesting their payment, because of the belief that the fire was of an incendiary origin. A mass of testimony has been taken during this investigation, mainly relating to the management and condition of the business affairs of Bennett Brothers; but up to yesterday, the revelations showed only that irregularities of an unusual and suspicious nature had occurred. These were sufficient to base the contest upon, although not conclusive as to the origin of the fire.

TESTIMONY OF FRANCIS P. VEDDER – INCENDIARY ORIGIN OF FIRE

The most important witness examined was Mr. Francis P. Vedder, who was yesterday afternoon on the stand for several hours, and made a startling revelation of the manner of the origin of the fire, by which Bennett Brothers' store was destroyed. He testified, in substance, that he knew the fire was to occur, three weeks before it happened; Adam Fralick then mentioned it to him; he knew of the exact time, three days in advance; Mr. Bennett spoke of it, to Fralick and him, several days before; on the Sunday night of the fire, Fralick, Bennett, Briggs of Rome, and himself, were in the basement of the south store, about eight o'clock; when he went down there, the others were twisting cotton batting or wadding into rope-like pieces, each about the size of his wrist, and in all about a bushel of them; some one remarked that it wouldn't answer to make a failure, when Fralick said he had never made a failure yet, and that it was necessary to have the fire all over the room at once; he (V.) left, after staying with them about half an hour; he felt sick, and on saying so, Fralick said he was weak-kneed; afterwards, Fralick told him how the fire was started; he said he put candles around in different places in that cotton and lit them up; he said the cotton was soaked in kerosene.

The remainder of Vedder's testimony related to the transfer of goods from Bennetts' to his (V.'s) store on Saturday and Sunday nights, before the fire; and to the packing of five boxes of goods from Bennetts' store, three for Oswego and two for Auburn, on Sunday afternoon; and to the business transactions between Bennett, Fralick and himself, between the 2nd and 15th of December, in which time he bought goods of Bennett and gave him notes to the amount of

\$18,000, part of which was taken up by Fralick, and others were still held by Bennett. The cross-examination developed some confusion on the witness' part, as to what was said and done in the basement when preparations were being made for the fire, and the fact that he drinks applejack, two small horas: of which he took on the evening before the fire.

THE ARREST OF FRALICK FOR THE ARSON

Last evening, three warrants, charging Adam Fralick with arson in the first degree, were issued by Justice Corbett; and at about half-past nine o'clock, he was arrested by officer Prettie, while standing in South Salina street on the sidewalk in front of the Globe Hotel. He was delivered into the Sheriffs custody immediately, and confined in the Court House cells. Fralick was cool and collected when apprehended; and visitors to him in his cell, found him serenely smoking a cigar. He asserted that he would clear this matter up wholly. Regarding Vedder's revelation, he denounced it as a "put-up job;" asserted that his evidence is false from top to bottom, and that he is an imbecile and insane.

It is said that Mrs. Fralick went east on the cars yesterday morning, with three trunks, and having left them somewhere, returned in the evening.

FRALICK DEMANDS AN EXAMINATION

The accused, Fralick, was arraigned in the Police Court this forenoon. He entered a plea of not guilty to the charges of arson preferred against him, and asked for an examination, which was set down by Justice Corbett for to-morrow (Wednesday) morning, at ten o'clock. The prisoner was then remanded to the custody of the Sheriff, and again locked up in the Court House cells.

ARREST OF BENNETT AND BRIGGS

At the noon adjournment of the referees' investigation, Deputy Sheriff Meldram arrested Samuel F. Bennett and Edward Briggs, by virtue of the warrants issued by Justice Corbett, charging them with arson in the first degree. They were immediately taken to the police office. On arraignment, they plead not guilty, and demanded an examination.

Mr. Sedgwick, counsel for the accused, demanded an immediate examination on the criminal charges, and that pending these proceedings, the investigation before the referees be suspended.

F.P. VEDDER'S TRIP TO THE LUNATIC ASYLUM
As reported in the Syracuse Daily Journal, May 22, 1871

Another Chapter in the Bennett Case

The Principal Witness Abducted – An alleged conspiracy to defraud the bride of justice

VEDDER TAKEN TO A LUNATIC ASYLUM AND AFTERWARD RELEASED

A most singular attempt to defeat the ends of justice has just come to light in this city, in connection with the notorious Bennett incendiary case, which has recently caused so much excitement in this city. As already known, Francis P. Vedder is the most important witness for the prosecution, and the confessions made by him two or three weeks ago fell like thunderbolts on the defense, and caused the arrest of Bennett, Fralick and Briggs; since then it has been deemed important to break down Vedder's confession, and a plot was made to do it by means of

THE INSANITY DODGE

and the following is a statement of the plan of operation.

PHYSICIANS CALL ON VEDDER

Last Wednesday two physicians and a lawyer made a visit to Mr. Vedder's residence, and introducing themselves, one of them asked a private conversation with Mrs. V which was [?]ingly granted. After assuring her of the deep interest he felt in her husband's welfare, and his belief that certain persons were attempting to defraud him of his property, he proposed a plan by which he could

RECOVER HIS PROPERTY

and save himself from a term in State's prison. Something must be done or he would be involved in hopeless ruin, and his family disgraced, which should not be. He believed Mr. Vedder comparatively innocent, but cunning men were plaguing him into difficulties from which there was

BUT ONE WAY OF ESCAPE

If he would only consent to be adjudged insane, and go quietly to the Lunatic Asylum at Utica for a little time he would eventually be restored to liberty and would recover his property for his assignment would be invalid no further proceedings could be had. Mrs. Vedder

DECLINED TO ENTERTAIN THE PROPOSITION

and said that though her husband was easily confused, and perhaps rather weak-minded, she had

NEVER SEEN ANY SYMPTOMS OF INSANITY

Mrs. Vedder was firm, and the medical gentleman abandoned the effort to get her cooperation with the execution of the plot.

AN INTERVIEW WITH VEDDER

was then had, when startling revelations were made to him of the determination of the prosecution

to punish and disgrace him at all hazards. All parties joined in picturing the trials and vicitudes which the future had in store for him. Then it was represented that if he would follow their plan, he could save his property, add to it a handsome sum, and be relieved from further legal proceedings. The manner of escape was then arranged, as it had previously told to his wife, but

HE DECLINED TO CONSENT

and the interview ended.

The next day, a legal gentleman and a businessman called upon him and repeated the proposal. One of them remarked to Mrs. Vedder "If you consent to have your husband go to the asylum, make them

COME HERE WITH THE MONEY

in hand, somebody said to me when we were coming here that any amount of money could be had." Mrs. V declined to hold any further conversation on this subject, and referred him to Mr. V. Every argument was brought to bear on him, and finally

HE CONSENTED TO GO

and the party left the house to make arrangements for taking him to the place where he was to assume a sick role. Accordingly, he was on Friday taken to Utica and admitted to the asylum.

DISCHARGED

Since Vedder's admission to the asylum, Dr. Gray had made an examination and pronounced him sane, though most broken down physically and in a precarious condition of health. Following the examination, Vedder was discharged, and will return to this city this evening.

COMMENTS

In connection with these proceedings, the names of several physicians have been mentioned who had nothing whatever to do with them; and we wish it understood that the physician who writes the subjoined letter, is in no wise referred to in what was being written above, he having met Vedder for the first time in his life on Friday morning.

A LETTER FROM DR. DIDAMA

To the Editor of the Syracuse Journal

Last Thursday morning I received a message informing me that Mr. Vedder was insane, and requesting me to go with him to the asylum, after first calling at a designated law office for

instructions. I called at the office and was told that Vedder's tragedies had so worked upon his mind that it was feared he would commit suicide. As it was not convenient for me to go to Utica that day, I agreed to go the next. So on Friday morning, in company with Dr. Hancock, who, I understood, was Vedder's attending physician, I visited Vedder at his residence. He came into the room appearing nervous and dejected. His pulse was one hundred and twelve in a minute; his hands trembled. The fingers were cold and his tongue furred. He said that everybody, even his own children seemed to despise him and that everyone whom he trusted turned out in the end an enemy. He said he felt distracted in his mind, that his memory was gone and that he several times determined to take his life. He broke down in a proxsym of hysterical weeping when said that he "kept thinking of the risk those poor people had of burning up in that building." He said he was getting worse, instead of better every day, and that every time he went by his old place of business he felt terrible. I stepped into another room and talked with Mrs. Vedder briefly. She confirmed his statement concerning the threats to take his life, but said she had paid little attention to them till she found a box of morphine pills in his pocket.

Returning to Vedder, I told him that in his present nervous and depressed condition I thought it would be best for him to be under the care of those who made a specialty of treating nervous diseases. I advised him to go to Utica for a time and be away from the scene of his troubles and under the care of Dr. Gray. He said he was willing to go with me at any time. And the agreement being made that we should take the noon train. I was at the depot at the appropriate time and then learned that Vedder had refused to go, giving as reason that his family would starve if he left. A few minutes before eight o'clock in the evening I was informed that Vedder had gone on the six o'clock train, that he was at Bogg's Hotel and that he not only refused to go to the asylum, but threatened to return on the next train unless I should go down. I went and met Vedder and the doctor at the hotel. In the morning we all went to the asylum. I gave a brief sketch of Vedder's troubles to Dr. Kellogg and told him that Vedder had come for rest and treatment. Dr. Kellogg conversed with Vedder a short time and asked him if he came voluntarily and if he wanted to stay. Vedder gave an affirmative answer, then inquired if the doctor thought he could be cured. He stated that he had several times contemplated suicide with poison and pistol. On examining his pockets before sending him to his room, Vedder drew out a loaded revolver and sent it to his wife. In manner he seems very depressed and abstracted. Unless he was feigning, his appearance and words indicated a mental condition which rendered treatment at the asylum proper and necessary. I was not called upon to express any opinion as to his sanity; I made no affidavit, and I left the money for his support in accordance with instructions. I know of no tricks in the case; I did not suppose that there was any attempt to shield Mr. V. from the law. I believed that his friends feared as they proposed to me, that he would commit suicide if not removed from Syracuse. I was quite sure that I saw enough indications of nervous disorder to justify me in advising him to seek the skilled care of Dr. Gray and his assistants. And such advise, I should now give.

H.Didama