REPORT

on the

OHIO STATE PENITENTIARY FIRE

Columbus, Ohio

April 21, 1930

OHIO INSPECTION BUREAU

T. B. Sellers, Manager

Columbus, Ohio
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INTRODUCTION

What was perhaps the worst catastrophe to visit a penal institution in this country occurred in the late afternoon and night of Monday, April 21, 1930, in a fire which swept through the north wing of the cell blocks of the Ohio State Penitentiary at Columbus where 320 convicts lost their lives and 133 others received injuries which may eventually cause death or permanent disability. While the resultant property damage was comparatively small, the various circumstances surrounding this fire and the appalling loss of life forcibly calls attention to the potential hazards to life and property which are present in institutions of this kind, and emphasizes the necessity of providing greater safeguards for the unfortunates confined therein.

CONSTRUCTION AND OCCUPANCY

The main building is about 50' to eaves and has masonry walls, the main section being of stone construction and the section where the fire occurred, of brick. The ground floor is concrete. There are no other floors, except in the warden's dwelling and main office section.

The section in which the fire occurred was a wing extending north along Dennison Avenue from the west side of the main building. This wing was constructed in 1876.

The roof was continuous over the entire building. It was surfaced with slate on 1-1/4'' tongue and grooved wood sheathing, supported on 2''x10'' laminated trusses. The roof was ceiled under the joists but above the trusses with matched wood. There were no center posts, the trusses being supported solely on the outside walls. In the cell block the ranges or decks upon which the cells are built rise in the center of the building and do not extend to the outer walls. Cell construction in G and H had just recently been completed and these cells occupied. These cells are built of reinforced concrete columns with 8'' reinforced concrete floors and 6'' reinforced concrete partitions. There are six ranges or decks in the cell block with 8' ceilings. A reinforced concrete slab is constructed under the wood roof in Sections G and H and is without openings and extends from a point 150' south of the north end of the building over the entire section. This slab came directly under the wood roof trusses. Sections I and K of the cell block were being constructed in the same manner as Sections G and H and the concrete had been poured on the fourth range. The wood forms were left on this range and the new forms for the fifth range had all been placed with the reinforcing steel in position ready for pouring on Tuesday, April 22nd. The cells in Sections G and H were approximately 8' square and were outfitted with two folding bunks, one above the other and attached to one wall. Along the other wall was a double-deck bed. Each bed was outfitted with a mattress and blankets only. The cells contained four folding wood chairs and one board or table about 2' square. Two wood shelves were attached to the rear wall of the cells. A commode and wash basin were provided for sanitary purposes. There were four men in each cell.

Of the other buildings involved in the small secondary fires, all were of combustible construction. The Catholic Chapel and the Cotton Mill Building were both two stories with masonry walls and wood floors and roofs. The one-story Dormitory Building was of frame construction with wood floor.

Heat was provided in all buildings by steam from the main power house, although several large stoves were installed in Sections G and H, apparently, for emergency service during the past winter. Light wiring was all in conduit, the work having been done by convict labor under the direction of a skilled electrician. All circuits were properly fused and all temporary circuits put in for construction and emergency use were fused to 10 amperes.
PROTECTIVE FACILITIES

The penitentiary being centrally located, is surrounded on all sides by city water mains of considerable capacity, as shown on the diagram, on the main lines of which are numerous hydrants located along the south and west walls. The principal line entering the grounds is a 10", connecting with a 24" on Dennison Ave., which directly supplies three of the hydrants used during the fire, this also connects with an 8" running north through the center of the grounds to the north wall, making a 6" connection with a 16" main on Maple St. Most of the other hydrants, including the first two used, are taken off of a 6" main fed through an 8" running back to a 20" on West Spring St. Static pressure in this vicinity averages about 85 lbs. Although the supply was severely tested, it held up well.

The institution also maintains a 125,000-gallon steel water tank on a 134' tower and a system of domestic mains throughout the premises which, however, have no fire hydrant connections and, therefore, have no bearing on fire-fighting facilities.

While there are several hundred feet of 2½" cotton rubber-lined hose kept on reels on the premises, there is no institutional organization, and almost entire reliance is, apparently, placed on the city's facilities. There are also numerous small extinguishers distributed throughout the premises.

STORY OF THE FIRE AND HOW FOUGHT

A gang of convicts engaged in construction work on the new concrete cell block, I and K, had discontinued operations about 4:00 P. M. for the day, or about an hour and a half before the fire was discovered, and the occupants of G and H cell blocks had been locked in for the night. Just who actually first observed the fire is unknown, but it was presumably seen by several at about the same time. It is thought that a guard in the tower on the outside wall which is a short distance beyond the north end of the building, where the fire originated, was among the first and called to someone on the street below who pulled fire alarm Box 261 at the head of Dublin Ave., as the first call was received by the fire department at 5:39 P. M. from this location.
The first fire apparatus to arrive was on the ground in not to exceed two minutes after the call was sent in, and was promptly admitted at the wagon stockade gate at the corner of Dennison and West Spring Sts., from where it proceeded into the grounds. The first equipment to arrive consisted of one truck and three engine companies and was under the command of Assistant Chief C. W. Ogborn.

The first company to go into action connected to the hydrant at the northwest corner of the new auditorium and directed a stream from a turret nozzle into the north window of I and K cell block. However, the heavy iron grilling in the window caused the stream to be so broken up as to be rendered ineffective and this line was eventually cut off. In the meantime, a second pumper had connected to the hydrant directly north of the auditorium and a line was carried through the east door of the cell house directly opposite the passageway between G and H and I and K cell blocks and a stream directed toward the north end of the building. By this time, the fire was burning fiercely and the entire roof over I and K blocks had fallen in. It was also at this point that some of the prisoners from the outside, apparently, driven to desperation by the plight of their fellow convicts locked in the cells of G and H blocks, and whom the guards had failed to release, wrested the hose from the firemen and attempted to carry it into the ranges themselves. However, they were finally persuaded to leave the firemen to proceed uninterrupted with their work. During this time, also, another line had been run from the second pumper, carried to the foot of the cell block, and two small lines attached to a siamese, which were carried the entire length of the fifth and sixth ranges, being turned into the various cells to extinguish the fires in the bedding and cell furnishings. At the same time, firemen and guards aided by convicts armed with axes and sledge hammers, proceeded to knock bars and locks from the cell doors and remove the dead and dying from their cells, carrying them down the stairs or lowering them by means of ropes through holes cut in the outer netting to the floor below, and to the outside.

Following the first alarm at 5:39, fire department officials, seeing the seriousness of the situation upon their arrival, immediately sent in additional alarms, the second going in at 5:42, the third at 5:48, and a fourth at 6:03, the second and third alarms each calling out three engines and one truck company, and the fourth four engine and two truck companies, or almost all the available equipment in the city, a total of thirteen pumper and five truck companies. There were approximately 140 fireman normally responding on the equipment called into service, although this number was considerably supplemented by response of members of the off-shift, so that the total number of firemen working was actually greater than this.
The third pumper to go into action connected to the hydrant on West Spring Street, directly opposite the penitentiary entrance, the lines being carried over the roof of the front office and up a ladder to the top of the front dormitory, as the fire had spread rapidly through the roof structure above G and H cell blocks, eaten its way over the top of the temporary frame partition between the dormitory and the cell block and was creeping into the concealed roof space over the dormitory. However, the quick and effective action on the part of the department in cutting holes in this roof and directing streams into the concealed space, as well as bringing a hose line in through the barred windows of the south wall on the third range, prevented the fire from spreading into that section. Lines by this time had also been carried up ladders to the roof from the north side of the dormitory. Two additional pumpers connected to the two hydrants directly northeast of the Cotton Mill and another to the hydrant north of the kitchen. There was also a pumper operating in Dennison Avenue through a line over the wall and across the wagon stockade. Still another machine set up at the next hydrant north, but was not brought into action. At the height of the fire there were eight pumpers, mostly of 1000-gallons capacity, in actual operation, supplying twenty-three streams directed on all sides of the burning building, and by about 9:00 o'clock, the fire was brought well under control.

When the first companies arrived on the scene, the fire was raging fiercely among the wooden concrete forms at the top of incompletely cell blocks I and K, which had not yet been poured and in the debris of the roof which had already fallen in on this section. The intense heat and smoke from this section had also been driven, aided by a fair breeze from the north, under the concrete roof slab above G and H cell blocks, the heat being of sufficient intensity to ignite the bedding, chairs, etc. in the sixth range and to burn and suffocate the inmates, and the heaviest casualties occurred in this range. The heat and smoke that invaded the fifth range, while severe, was less than in the tier above, so that a higher percentage of the men in this range survived. A few, but not many, casualties occurred in the ranges below, principally from suffocation.

While the main fire was at its height, outside of the first difficulty experienced by the firemen in having their hose taken away, and while the bodies were being removed, many of convicts assisted and there was no trouble. However, some later on became unruly, menaced the firemen, and cut the hose from the pumper north of the kitchen. Axes and minor equipment were broken or stolen, rocks were thrown at the apparatus, and one group of convicts attempted to set fire to the large gasoline tank supply wagon of the department by igniting piles of blankets which had been placed under the truck. The driver, although warned by the convicts not to do so, jumped on the truck and removed it from the grounds.
The militia was mobilized promptly and aided by naval reserves and almost the entire police force of Columbus, immediately established a cordon around the outside of the walls. They kept back the public a block around the penitentiary, maintained open lanes for the fire apparatus, doctors, nurses, and rescue forces, and reinforced the guards within the walls.

**ORIGIN OF FIRE**

The point of origin of the fire is definitely established as near the northwest corner of the new cell blocks known as I and K. The fire started either in the wood roof or wood forms, which were ready for the concrete for the fifth range of cells. The actual cause of the fire may never be known, although the following theories have been advanced.

**First:** Incendiary. One theory is that one or more of the prisoners set fire to the forms in the hope that they and some of their fellow convicts might escape in the confusion resulting from the fire.

**Second:** Defective electric wiring. This theory is advanced as in many other cases where wiring exists and the origin of the fire is in doubt. All temporary circuits were protected with 10 ampere fuses. Permanent circuits were all in conduit, properly fused. All permanent circuits in the burned section are still intact.

**Third:** Gasoline torch. The theory has been advanced that a gasoline torch might have been left burning on the job and ignited the forms or exploded, starting the fire. It has also been said that an acetylene torch was used on the job. However, neither type of torch has been found and no evidence has been uncovered to substantiate such a theory.

**Fourth:** Spontaneous ignition. Although this theory was advanced, nothing has been found to support it.

The wood forms in this section were within 10 feet of the wood roof and inasmuch as the floor and interior walls and partitions were all of reinforced concrete construction, a large amount of combustible material was present. This material naturally contributed both to the intensity and the rapidity of the spread of the fire.

During the course of the main fire, three smaller fires were discovered in other buildings on the grounds, which were unquestionably of incendiary origin. The largest of these occurred on the first floor of the North End of the Cotton Mill Building. It was discovered by the chief engineer, who ran over from the power house, broke in the door, and applied a 2½-gallon chemical extinguisher. He was shortly afterward assisted by a line of hose manned by firemen, and the fire was extinguished with very little actual damage, other than that caused by water. It was reported that the convicts became rather menacing toward the firemen who worked at this location. Assistant Chief M. C. Ijams was injured, but not seriously, by being jostled against a brick wall by a group of convicts.

A third fire started under the steps leading to the second floor of the Catholic Chapel, but was immediately extinguished with small damage.

A fourth occurred in a bunk house for negro prisoners, several beds having been ignited. One of the city firemen who first entered this structure was threatened and driven away by several of the occupants, but the fire was shortly afterward extinguished by a group of other firemen supported by guards.

These secondary fires, it would seem, were not part of any prearranged plan for a general prison conflagration, but were presumably started by small groups or individuals who took this occasion to add further to the excitement and general confusion of the situation.

**LOSS**

Inasmuch as this is a penal institution where convict labor is used and the state carries no insurance, a definite estimate of the loss involved is difficult to obtain and of little comparative value. The brick walls of the building were undamaged, except for some slight spalling of the stone caps on the upper row of windows and parapets. The concrete work on the cell construction in Sections G and H is, apparently undamaged. The steel fronts of the cells on the first four ranges in Sections G and H are little damaged, but the fifth and sixth ranges will have to be replaced. The concrete work in the cell construction in Sections I and K appears to be but little damaged with the
possible exception of the green concrete still in the forms on the fourth range which may have to be replaced. The forms and reinforcing metal erected for the fifth range in this section are a total loss. The wood roof over the entire wing was completely destroyed. The contents of the cells on the two upper ranges of Sections G and H were totally destroyed by fire. The contents on the first four ranges were damaged principally by water and probably will be salvaged. The damage as estimated by Warden Thomas is: buildings $10,000, contents $1,000.

CONCLUSIONS

The appalling loss of life was due primarily to the fire starting in a wood roof building where a great number of convicts were concentrated. The unbroken area of the building, lack of protection, and the combustible forms afforded ideal conditions for the rapid spread of the fire. The loss of life was further augmented by the fact that convicts were confined in cells having individual locks and that considerable delay arose in opening these locks due, it is said, to fear of mutiny among the convicts or lack of any definite procedure to follow in such an emergency. Although the fire department's response was prompt the headway which the fire gained before its arrival indicates that considerable delay occurred either in the discovery of the fire or in giving the alarm.

Additional hazards are frequently introduced during construction operation, and these become particularly serious in public institutions of this kind where large numbers of inmates are utterly dependent upon the diligence and carefulness of others. During such construction every precaution should be taken against fire.

With the exception of the large loss of life, the fire presents no unusual features. It again emphasizes the fact that combustible roofs and combustible material will burn rapidly and with intense heat. It is logical to conclude that the best means of safeguarding life and property in penal and similar institutions is by the use of fireproof construction. When such construction is not present it is particularly important to provide other safeguards. These naturally would include adequate fire division walls, adequate first aid equipment, and automatic sprinklers.
The deadliest prison fire in this country's history occurred on April 21, 1930, in the Ohio State Penitentiary. The fire, which is described in the following news wire excerpts, killed more than 300 men.

Hundreds of Prisoners Trapped by Fire Due to Incendiaries

Inmates Cut Hose and Hinder Firefighters

Troops Control—Fire Set in Several Places—Scene Is Appalling

Troops Drive 1,000 Out of Yards into Dining Halls

COLUMBUS, O., April 21 (AP)—More than 300 men, confined in an Ohio penitentiary here, met death tonight when a disastrous fire swept four cell blocks in the prison yards. Most of the dead were convicts, who were trapped in the tiers of cells. More than 150 others were affected seriously by smoke, and it is feared many more will die.

Regular army troops, national guardsmen, prison guards, and Columbus police were on duty in the prison late tonight trying to keep order among more than 1,000 convicts who were loose in the prison yards, and who, it was believed, had set several fires in the prison cotton mills, had cut fire hose, and had threatened firemen. Men who earlier in the excitement had pitched in and helped in rescue work, later made trouble. The troops were in control of the situation shortly before midnight.

The penitentiary yards were like an armed camp after a pitched battle.

Under the glare of flood lights, the scene was one of appalling tragedy. On the damp grass in the prison yard, covered by blankets, lay the bodies of several hundred men who, trapped in their locked cells, went to death like rats in a trap. Smoke suffocated a majority of the victims, but some were killed by fire.

Warden Preston E. Thomas was in consultation with state officials at midnight, planning his investigation. Practically all sources agreed that the first fire, as well as other blaze in the prison yards, was started by prisoners...

Stories Conflict at Inquiry into Ohio Penitentiary Blaze

Guard Says Capt. Hall Ordered Him Not to Give Up the Cell Key—Officer Declares First Thought Was to Let Men Out

Columbus, O., April 22 (AP)—Officers of the guard and members of the forces controlling the cell block in the Ohio penitentiary...were unable to agree on responsibility for the holding of prisoners in their cells, it appeared at the Governor's investigation today.

Capt. John Hall, in charge of the night guard, told the investigators that although he was not on duty, he rushed to the doomed cell block a few minutes after the first fire alarm was sounded and ordered guards to "hustle up" and prisoners to open windows.

This testimony conflicted with that of Guard Thomas Wathinson, who told the committee that Capt. Hall gave orders not to open the door to the cell block so that the others might help in freeing the convicts from their cells...

Eight Hundred Convicts Locked in as Smoke Poured Through Bars

Prison Fire Due to Short Circuit

Governor of Ohio Halts Suspension of Warden—Takes Over Case

Columbus, O., April 22 (AP)—With the death list swollen to 317, investigation of the disastrous Ohio penitentiary fire last night was marked today by a clash between county and state authorities over a proposal to suspend Warden P. E. Thomas before all the facts are known.

Refused to Give Up Key

The warden's testimony revealed that Thomas Wathinson, guard in the cell blocks housing companies G and H, where all the victims perished, re-

1921

1922
President Calvin Coolidge proclaims the first Fire Prevention Week, which is always observed during the week including October 8 to commemorate the anniversary of the Great Chicago Fire.

California passes a bill against wood shingles on roofs, but it's repealed as a result of industry pressure.

The National Fire Protection Association is formed.

The NFPA Committee on Visual Education reviews films on fire issues and starts a film library.

The Australian Fire Protection Association is formed.
fused to turn over his key to the cell ranges to the other guards. Watkinson was suspended, pending investigation.

It was also disclosed that Guards Thomas Little and W. C. Baldwin, just coming on duty, had to take the range key away from Guard Watkinson to get to the cells where some 800 prisoners were locked behind bars, suffocating in dense smoke that rose from the fast spreading fire.

(The warden) said he gave [his deputy chief] orders to take charge of the situation inside while he went outside to prevent any escapes. Prison fires usually are of incendiary origin and their purpose is to shield an escape plot, he said. (Warden) Thomas attributed Watkinson’s alleged failure to open the range door to lack of judgement. He said Little and Baldwin exercised common sense in taking the key from him.

Caused by Short Circuit
A positive statement that the fire was caused by a short circuited wire was made by William Noel, life-term prisoner from Cleveland, one of the witnesses at tonight’s session.

Noel said the defective wire was hanging from rafters above the cell block in which most of the victims died. He said the wire was hot and was visible through the dense smoke that engulfed the building.

This section of the penitentiary is the oldest section of the prison, having been constructed in 1890. The walls are of double brick and the roof was nonfireproof. Open wood rafters supported the roof, with a few steel girders to add strength. The fire started on the roof of this section near the extreme northwest wall. It swept across the roof toward the southeast. The roof and the upper rafters burned like tinder. The roof fire threw giant flames, while the rafter threw off dense clouds of smoke. As the roof and rafters burned through, the men in the upper cell tiers inside the structure were in the direct path of the heat and smoke. Other dense clouds of smoke were thrown off by cell bunk mattresses, pillows, and blankets.

318 Convicts Could Have Been Saved
Fire Chief Says There Was Time to Release Prisoners from Cell
Warden Faces Blame?
To Be Asked What Arrangements Were Made to Care for Emergency

Columbus, Ohio, April 23 (AP)—A. E. Nice, Columbus fire chief, told the board investigating the Ohio prison fire today that he believed none of the 318 prisoners who died would have been lost had they been released from their cells as soon as the fire was discovered.

Convicts Ready to Kill Warden

"...if Warden Thomas had stepped inside the walls during the pandemonium, he surely would have been killed," Father O’Brien said. "Those men had no thought of escape. They were thinking of those men perishing in the flames like moths. They were enraged because of the utter helplessness; because they were beyond the help of those gathered outside the wall."

When, for the first time since the fire, Warden Thomas ventured into the prison yard today, hundreds of cell mates of the men who died let loose a crescendo of jeers and catcalls.

Short Circuit Caused Fire?

...it was reported... Monday afternoon that electric lights used to illuminate the I and K cell block while under construction had been flickering. The trouble was eliminated at 3 p.m., but it was established that there had been difficulty with the wiring. The committee learned that woodwork used in the construction was soaked with paraffin oil to keep concrete from sticking to the molding forms. The rafters of the G and H cell were of wood and covered with wooden sheathing.

Ohio State Prison Idle
House Passes With Restoration

Roofs of Cell Blocks Where 322 Were Killed in Easter Blaze Are Fireproofed

Columbus, Ohio, Jan. 1 (UP)—The Ohio Penitentiary has been restored following the fire last Easter Monday, in which 322 convicts were burned to death.

New fireproof roofs cover the cell blocks which were destroyed or damaged. The "idle houses" where before the fire 700 prisoners were herded to pass the time as best they could is a thing of the past.

It is known the report will state the fire was incendiary and will accuse specific prisoners of setting it.

1923
Fire prevention education is required by 15 states.

A fire in Berkeley, California, destroys 660 buildings, causing a loss of $12.5 million.

1924
The NFPA begins its survey of wood shingle use in cities.

Factory Mutual’s FM Record begins publication.

1925
The NFPA electrical field service is established.

1926
This year's edition of NFPA 30, Flammable Liquids Code; costs $3.75.

U.S. fire losses reach a high of $600 million.
Columbus, Ohio, 1930

The Final Sentence

Prison Fire Kills 322

BY MELINDA WHEELER

Built in 1890 and originally designed to hold 1,500 prisoners, the Ohio State Penitentiary in Columbus became, through the years, one of the roughest and most crowded prisons in the history of state institutions. It was the end of the line for murderers and other hardened convicts who had spent their entire lives in one sort of prison or another. It was also a well-known firetrap: Warden Preston E. Thomas consistently refused to institute safety devices, drills, or regulations to prevent and combat fires.

The prison included criminals of varying notoriety. Embezzler William Sydney Porter spent three years there (1898-1901) writing a successful series of short stories under the pseudonym O. Henry. Charles Justice, another inmate, helped develop the electric chair as an alternative to hanging, only to find himself electrocuted when it was completed. And two members of John Dillinger's gang were imprisoned at Ohio Penn—and killed there in a failed escape attempt.

In 1930, the Ohio State Penitentiary, which housed 4,300 prisoners in small, cramped cells, gained world-wide notoriety when it became the site of one of the worst fires of the decade. The overcrowded prison had been undergoing an expansion and wooden scaffolding was in place by the six-story tiers of cells. On the night of April 21, an oily rag on the northeast corner of the prison roof caught fire. The blaze spread to the scaffolding and, within moments, the prison was transformed into a great, blazing oven with flames raging through four cell blocks. Three hundred men were killed in less than an hour.

April 21 was Easter Monday and the prisoners had taken their customary meal at 4:30, followed by exercise in the prison yard. At 5:30, when they had been locked in their cells for the night, one convict noticed smoke coming from the scaffolding. He let out a cry, but since he was known as a practical joker, the guards refused to believe him. "But a few minutes later," noted the Associated Press, "with the roaring flames spreading under a stiff wind, they saw the fire and mighty screams were sent up." The blaze now moved rapidly, eating its way clear to the southwest corner of the building.

As panic-stricken prisoners screamed for the guards to let them out of their cells, the fire was already reaching major proportions. Residents of Columbus reportedly heard the prisoners' agonized cries. Dozens rushed to the prison walls to see thick black smoke pouring into the sky.

Noted one witness, the operator of a gas station close to the southwest corner of the prison: "I was tending my
station when the fire broke out. When I saw the flames and heard the cries I ran to the [prison] gate. It seemed like a thousand men were yelling and beating on the bars. I could hear one voice that was very shrill screaming, 'For God's sake let me out, I'm burning, I'm burning!' It was too much for me and I ran away from the building. When I came back 15 minutes later, most of the cries had stopped.

"The prison was thought to be fireproof," reported one account, "but as the flames seared their way through cell block after cell block, this assumption was proved tragically false."

Warden Thomas, a hardliner who had stopped many escape attempts in the past, was afraid that the fire was part of an escape plan and that during the confusion large numbers of convicts would try to escape. Therefore, instead of releasing the trapped prisoners, Thomas went to the prison yard and waited for the arrival of National Guardsmen he had summoned. The convicts, meanwhile, "rattled their bars and screamed with terror as snake-like coils of heavy black smoke crawled into the cells through ventilators."

Firefighters had responded within minutes of the first alarm, but were not allowed into the prison until the National Guard had arrived. The warden's daughter, Miss Amanda Thomas, directed the outer office of the prison while her father was in the yard. She stayed calm through the confusion, calling in doctors and nurses, giving instructions to firefighters, and issuing machine guns and ammunition to National Guard Troops and the police.

Crowds of people had gathered in the streets even before the firefighters got there, and while the fire swept through the prison, at least 2,000 prisoners managed to get out of their cells and were milling around in the prison yard.

The streets on all four sides of the prison were now filled with armed National Guardsmen, standing at attention towards the prison walls. Prison guards, with machine guns pointed at the windows, were ordered to shoot on sight any escaping prisoners. The Columbus City Police were lined up on the pavement. Army troops surrounded the main gate with fixed bayonets.

Dazed prisoners, wandering about in the yard, made bitter accusations, saying that many lives could still be saved if the guards would unlock the cells. But the master key-keeper, guard Thomas Watkinson, refused to open the cells, citing orders he had been given to keep the cells locked in any emergency. (The warden later denied that he had given any such order and Watkinson was suspended.)
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Ohio State Penitentiary burns: a thousand beat on the bars.

Many prisoners fought to save their fellows. One, William Wade Warren, took a sledge hammer and broke the lock on a cell door, releasing 25 of his friends. Another, George Johnson, snatched a set of keys from a guard and began unlocking cells on the upper tiers. Leo Matlock, who was serving a life sentence for murder, seized a pair of keys and managed to free dozens.

"Wild Bill" Donovan, another convict, made repeated trips into the burning tiers, bringing his unconscious comrades into the prison yard. After rescuing 12, he was caught in the blaze and killed.

One inmate, unable to escape, scrawled a simple note before he died of suffocation: "Gus Socka. Notify John Dee, 93 Armory Avenue, Cincinnati."

In the meantime, two guards had managed to wrestle the keys from the master keykeeper. Fighting their way through the smoke-filled hallways, they unlocked as many cells as they could before being overcome by smoke. One of the two, Thomas Little, stumbled outside and handed his keys to prisoner Paul Gibbons. Gibbons continued unlocking cells until he, too, was overcome, barely escaping alive.

One convict who managed to distinguish himself uniquely was a black prisoner known as "the Deacon." While disorder reigned, the Deacon broadcast his own account of the fire over the prison radio station, which was affiliated with the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS).

"The campus of the prison is covered with men who have passed on," he said at one point. "This is a sight I shall never forget and after watching my fellow prisoners during the height of the horrors, I am glad to call them brothers. The morale of the men was excellent. Not one tried to escape. The dead are all lying in the yard and the newspaper photographers are now taking flashlights. Steaming hot coffee and meat sandwiches are being served."

(Deacon was later sent a check for $500 by William S. Paley, chairman of CBS. Wrote Paley: "At a time when the entire country was anxiously awaiting news of this worst catastrophe in American prison history you willingly, in the face of great danger, gave a sympathetic and accurate word picture of the holocaust.")

The fire was spreading through the upper tiers, burning through the wooden floors and killing many prisoners. Several committed suicide by plunging (continued on page 77)
their scorched faces into water basins. Noted the Cleveland News: "Two of the dead men had cut their throats, driven to suicide by the terror that grew on them as the flames mowed down their prison mates."

Firefighters continued fighting what must have seemed a hopeless battle. Reported one newspaper: "Frantic men suffocated like vermin behind their steel bars." Recalled a guard at the scene: "I saw faces at the windows wreathed in smoke that poured through the broken glass. With others I tried to get at them, but we could not move the bars. Soon flames broke into the cell room, and the convicts dropped to the floor. They were literally burned alive before our eyes."

A strong westerly wind hampered firefighting and fanned the fire, which continued for two hours. In addition, the hose pressure was not strong enough to force streams into the cell blocks where prisoners were trapped. Some firefighters also reported that convicts were trying to overpower them during the fire, cutting their hoses and setting fire to their engine. But by 8 P.M. the blaze was under control. Firefighters now entered the prison and were forced to use acetylene torches to open locked cells, sealed off by an electrical power failure.

Over 200 men died in the fifth and sixth ranges, the upper tiers of the older, wooden cell blocks. There had been such confusion at the beginning of the fire, with guards running back and forth from the penitentiary office to get permission to unlock the cells, that by the time the official word was given to unlock, many of the cells had become searingly hot. The men inside were dead.

In the weeks following the fire three separate investigations were initiated to determine its causes. The state fire marshal said that the blaze was not accidental but of incendiary origin. The prosecuting attorney’s office also investigated and the governor of Ohio formed a board of inquiry.

The board attributed loss of life to the delay in opening the cells, and Warden Thomas admitted that he was more concerned with a possible breakout than with the fire itself. But he blamed the state for overcrowding the prison. When asked why he didn’t provide general fire protection, the warden explained that the Columbus Fire Brigade could reach the prison in a matter of minutes and therefore prison fire protection was unnecessary. He admitted that he had never given instructions to the guards on what to do in case of fire and said he hoped that they would use their common sense. The fire chief, when testifying before the board, criticized by implication Thomas’ actions, stating unequivocally that firefighters always tried to save lives first; other considerations were secondary.

The prisoners who had survived the fire demanded the removal of Warden Thomas for what they perceived as brutality in his handling of the situation. Immediately after the fire a handful of them led the others in rebellion, first staging a hunger strike, then refusing to work inside the prison, and finally taking over four cell blocks (A, B, C, and D). On the night of April 30, the 1,050 convicts who had been involved in the takeover were dislodged by National Guardsmen, who temporarily relieved Thomas of command.

Many of the rebellious prisoners were placed in solitary confinement or transferred to other prisons. For those whose rage and bitterness against the authorities could not be silenced, the National Guardsmen built two stockades. One was an old automobile garage house and the other was a baseball diamond barricaded with barbed wire. Death was the threatened punishment for any prisoner who dared to cross the barricades.

Eventually, order was restored with-
in the penitentiary. The unruly prisoners surrendered themselves to the authority of the National Guardsmen and in a few weeks the guardsmen were taken off active duty. Warden Thomas and other regular prison officials were reinstated and with them the daily routine of prison life. Fire damage was estimated at $11,000 and rebuilding plans were begun.

Disputes continued, however, between the warden, the state of Ohio, and the governor’s board of inquiry as each sought to place the blame. The National Society of Penal Information called the Ohio Penitentiary a firetrap, saying it was one of the most overcrowded in the country. The board of inquiry found that a "significant amount of time" had elapsed between the discovery of the fire and the sounding of the first alarm. The Ohio attorney general asked for the removal of Thomas but the governor refused.

Noted the warden: "If I was to blame for anything, I’d like to know it. I did three things: called the fire department, ordered the release of the men from their cells, and sought the protection of the public. Those things I had in mind when the fire began, and those I attempted to carry out."

The state fire marshal was determined to support his original contention that the fire was not accidental. Quietly, he set to work on an investigation of his own. In August of 1930, four months after the fire, when confusion was still felt by many and emotions were still running high, the fire marshal obtained a statement from a man who claimed that the fire was premeditated and that he knew who the plotters were.

This man, who would not reveal his name, informed the fire marshal that the men who started the blaze were counting on their fellow convicts being outside in the prison yard or eating in the mess hall when the cell blocks caught fire. This way a major escape could take place while prison authorities were in a state of confusion. He also informed the fire marshal that a fuse, meant to light the oil-soaked cloth on the roof of the cell block, was timed for 4:30. The tragic miscalculation was that the fuse did not light the cloth until around 5:30, just when the prisoners were being locked into their cells for the night.

One Columbus fire department official recently commented on the historic fire. "One problem in a maximum security prison," he noted, "is that if a fire does break out there must be a quick and total release of the prisoners. However, prison officials are often reluctant to do this because they’re afraid that prisoners will try to escape."

He added that if such a fire happened today the prison guards would be prepared to meet the emergency with electrical or manual devices that would allow all the cell doors to open simultaneously. He also said that there are more sophisticated systems available to penal institutions now than in the 1930s, including sprinkler systems inside the cells that provide complete protection, smoke detectors, and heat-actuated alarms.

Today, Ohio Penitentiary is known simply as the Columbus Correctional Facility. Since 1972, it has been used mainly in a receiving capacity as a place where convicts are screened, processed, and sent on to other institutions.

But the legacy of the fire remains. Noted the Columbus Evening Dispatch in 1930: "The responsibility for the holocaust rests squarely upon the State. For many years successive legislatures have dawdled over the prison problem...while defenseless human lives remained in jeopardy." Added the Cleveland Plain Dealer: "The cries of men behind steel bars, held in a vise for creeping flames to devour, are ringing in Ohio ears. The State is more cruel than we believe if the cries are unanswered."

78

Firehouse/March 1980
The 1930 Ohio State Penitentiary Fire

On the evening of April 21, 1930, 322 men died in the most deadly prison fire in the history of the United States.

The Ohio State Penitentiary, built in 1890, was designed to hold 1,500 prisoners. By 1930, however, the prison held 4,300 and was undergoing an expansion under Warden Preston Thomas.

Like many other wardens, Thomas's main concern was to keep prisoners from escaping at any cost. While he bowed to the notion that a prison fire could prove fatal, he did not train his staff or the inmates how to respond to one. Thomas was not alone in his recalcitrance: At the time, the focus in correctional institutions was solely on keeping prisoners in jail, not getting them out safely in the event of an emergency. And Thomas knew he could rely on the nearby Columbus Fire Department as his ace in the hole in case of an emergency.

However, Thomas's ace in the hole offered little in the way of salvation to the 322 men who ultimately died in the blaze that ravaged the 40-year-old prison.

On the afternoon of April 21, shortly after the prisoners had stopped working on the expansion for the day, a fire started on the northwest corner of the six-story prison's roof and quickly spread to scaffolding surrounding the northwest end. The fire was first reported to the guards at approximately 5:20 p.m., but the guards did not take the report seriously, as it came from an inmate infamous for crying "wolf." Within minutes, however, the unprotected building became an inferno, and the guards rushed to report it to the warden.

Thomas, certain that the fire was part of an escape plot, called the National Guard and local law enforcement agencies before contacting the fire department. In the confusion, guards were given no clear orders to evacuate the prisoners from the burning cell blocks, and the inmates on the fifth and sixth tiers, who had been locked into their cells for the night, were trapped by the smoke, heat, and flames. When questioned later, the guard on the destroyed cell block told officials that he had been ordered to keep the cells locked during any emergency.

At 5:39 p.m., a considerable time after the fire was first reported, the Columbus Fire Departmen finally received an alarm from outside the prison. Firefighters arrived at the scene within minutes and were greeted with utter chaos, as guards and prisoners desperately tried to reach the upper tiers to free the trapped inmates.

According to the Associated Press, one witness reported that, "When I saw the flames and heard the cries, I ran to the gate. It seemed like a thousand men were yelling and beating on the bars. I could hear one voice that was very shrill screaming, 'For God's sake, let me out, I'm burning, I'm burning.' It was too much for me, and I ran away from the building. When I came back 15 minutes later, most of the cries had stopped."

Firefighters tried to train a hose stream directly on the fire, but the iron grilling in the windows broke up the water flow, causing the stream to be ineffective. By the time crews had hooked their hose up on the other side of the building and were able to apply water directly on the fire, it was burning fiercely, and the roof had collapsed.

Meanwhile, prisoners who had been released into the prison yard hampered efforts to contain the blaze by trying to wrestle the hoses from the firefighters to put out the flames blazing in the cell blocks of the inmates still trapped inside. At one point, firefighters had to be evacuated when a riot broke out. Once the National Guard quelled the uprising, firefighters, guards, and prisoners alike worked valiantly to rescue the trapped men, returning again and again to the holocaust to bring out more victims, until they, too, finally collapsed from exhaustion.

"I saw faces at the windows wreathed in smoke that poured through the broken glass," reported one guard at the scene. "With others, I tried to get at them, but we could not move the bars. Soon flames broke into the cell room, and the convicts dropped to the floor. They were literally burned alive before our eyes."

When the fire was finally extinguished, 317 men were dead, and 5 more died within days from injuries they had sustained in the incident.

The fire was determined to have been incendiary.

—Christine Points