

L. Ruins of Sacramento the November

Ruins of Sacramento, Oct. 5. 1852

My Dear, Dear Mother,

I am writing this letter under circumstances of the strangest character. The most awful and terrific event that I ever witnessed, or conceived imagined, has just transpired, and I am still laboring to a certain extent under the influence of the excitement that it caused. Sacramento, the proud & beautiful city, that has for the past two years been my home, and of whose beauty and prosperity I have so often written you with feelings of pride and gladness, is no longer in existence!! Literally, it has been blotted out: - swept from the face of the Earth - leaving nothing to commemorate its former existence but its name - the firm & solid ground on which it stood, and a wide spread chaotic mass of scorched and flaming ruins. Nothing that I ever read of the sacking of cities by a victorious and ruthless soldiery, or of the devastations of earthquakes, or the most desolating fire tornadoes, ever conveyed to my mind any image of the terrors of last Tuesday night.

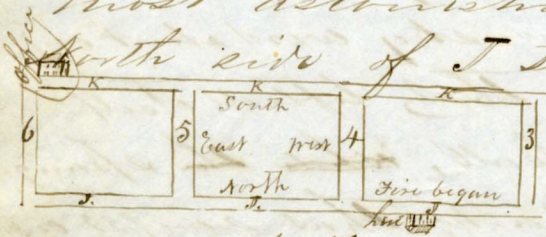
It had been the day of the Presidential election and political excitement reigned supreme. Tired out, with the tumult, I retired to my office and threw myself upon my bed without undressing. A friend soon came in and

we conversed until eleven. We noticed then
that the wind which had all day been blowing
strongly from the N. W. had now to almost a
gale; but the election was the all absorbing topic
as I was myself a candidate. Suddenly a thun-
derous shout rose over the night wind, borne from
the heart of the City. I supposed it to be the
huzzas of the victorious party, at the result of
the balloting; the announcement of which was
now awaiting; but the instantaneous clang of
an alarm bell ringing about the town, sent
a thrill of horror to my heart. We sprang to the door
and already - so rapid was the flame, a bright
light with thin columns of smoke was rising
about the roofs, about half a mile distant, direct
to the windward of my office. The alarm spread
like lightning. In ⁽¹⁰⁾ 100 seconds, a thousand
men were rushing madly through the streets, to-
ward the flashing light, shrieking the alarm
words, "Fire! Fire! Fire!!" Then the fire alarm-bell
the Sacramento Engine House, thundered out
its sonorous peals, waking the sleeping citizens for
and roar, to a sense of their danger. Soon the
clattering engine swept in quick succession down
the street, dragged by hundreds of wild & excited men
- and right and left on every side, the shouts and
cries rose higher and wilder till it seemed as though
all the fiends in Pandemonium had been let loose.
But it was not without cause: for in a much

shorter space than I have occupied in writing
this, the lurid flames went darting their fiery
tongues to the sky, and fastening in rapid and
fatal swoops, upon all surrounding objects. The
glittering stars and calm, blue sky were shut out
by a dense canopy of smoke that lifted itself
out high, like a huge, black pall, ~~and~~ ^{and} the space
led with myriads of bright sparks that swept on
wards and onwards in a fire and endless shower.
Even while I gazed, immovably fascinated by
the awful sublimity of the rising conflagration, the
towering dome of the Crescent City Hotel, (one of the
largest in the city) glittering with intense light ~~at~~
~~against~~ in strong relief against the dark and
sky, kindled into a blaze; - a moment, and a
thousand fiery tongues laughed & played in
fatal, fantastic forms around it from the base to
the lofty, Crescent which surmounted it; - another, &
it was a lurid mass of fire, falling upon the roof
and ~~extricating~~ with the rapidity of thought, the
whole body of the vast structure. Then I saw that
in power, save the hand of the Almighty, could avert
the destruction of the whole city, and I turned
to save the contents of my office.

James Mahan had been lying in my bedroom
seriously sick with bilious fever for two or three
days and was scarcely able to sit up. But he
rose & with my assistance dressed himself, and
was in readiness to fly, throwing my most valuable

able books and papers into a trunk, and rolling
up my bedding and clothing. I was but a few
minutes in getting them to the door. But in those
few minutes the flames had advanced with the
most astonishing strides. They broke out on the



North side of J street between 3rd and 4th - thus,
but before my goods were all removed
moved to the door, the fire had
consumed the East half of the block between 3 and 4,
the whole of the block between 4 and 5, and was
breathing its hot breath upon my position at
the corner of 6 and K. They had at the same time
been spreading laterally, westward and northward,
until a broad line of fire reached from H. to K
and driven onward by a wind which had
risen almost to a hurricane, carried desolation
and terror in its fearful footsteps.

All hopes of saving the buildings was now
abandoned; for the fire companies could not
stand a moment before the flames, - being
sometimes ^{driven} backwards for more than a whole
squad, by the heat & stifling smoke. To blow
up a sufficiency of those torpedoes that were
got unattached, in advance of the fire, was
the only means left, and soon the heavy
explosions that burst upon the ear announced
that the firmness were at their duty. But
it was only for a moment, that the sea of
flame was checked. Borne on the wind, im-
mense sparks, overlapped every vacant place

Kindling, in a thousand places at once, every thing combustible upon which they fell.

Within half an hour after the fire broke out, the City presented a scene, — ~~the~~ wild, terrific and sublime beyond all description. No representation, less vivid and faithful than a painting by Hogarth, could give you an adequate idea of the awful reality of that terrible night.

The streams of human beings that had rushed down the streets towards the fire at first, now came hurrying back with thousands of others, in dismayed, panic-stricken, & confused crowds. The streets now absolutely filled with the flying masses, bearing hasty burdens of their most highly prized effects. But now came the rattling of wagons, and drays loaded with merchandise which the merchants & men, in the few moments left to them, dragging from their burning stores. Ah, on they came in an endless stream that grew wilder & more confused as the fire glowed fiercer and more. The shouting of hundreds of frightened & insolate men, the shrieks of helpless and unprotected women, the curses of the hurrying and impatient draymen & waggoners, the heavy tramp of horses' hoofs, the incessant jar and rattling of wheels, but above all and around all, deadening all other sounds, the steady, dull low roar of the advancing flames, falling like

a Cavalry Knoll upon the ear, formed a scene of
terror and dismay, that I hope I may never again
be called upon to witness.

I waited till the last morning, ^{in the} hope that the wind
would drive the flames to the westward of my office,
but seeing it fated to destruction, I drag-
ged my trunk down the iron Stairway, that led to
the apartments, from my balcony, - threw my bedding
over the railing into the street, and let my chair
fall upon it. Throwing myself down against the west-
ward side of a huge oak, in 6th street, I returned to
assist Mahon, & carry our sled, whom I could save.
Mahon was safe, & I made another trip with goods, to
the oak tree. An empty wagon was standing near it.
A stranger proposed, that we should load it with
the goods of several, and jointly drag it to a place
of greater safety. No sooner said than done: it was
very quickly full, and we put our sleds at the
rears and rolled it slowly into 1st street. A man &
his wife passed us on foot, - she, with a young child
in her ~~own~~ arms, - he, carrying a heavy trunk. It
was too large - and he was exhausted & let it fall. She
tried to help him with her child, in her arms, but
could not, & burst into tears. I suppose it held all
they had saved. There was room for it on our wagon
~~and~~ when we placed it, and the husband helped to
drag it along, reaching 1st st. we followed it east, towards
the plain back of the city, but our load was heavy,
and we could move but a few rods at a time.

A pile of rubbish in the street would have checked us entirely, but another way, drawn by men crowded and we united all our force upon each and separately. We drew thro' our fire, & instantly returned for ours; but though not yet more than 200 yds from my office, the smoke that swept across the road nearly stifled us and almost compelled us to leave our goods. Sparks flew in showers, and soon my steam bed was blazing merrily; but we fortify reality & extinguished it and by another effort our wagon was in a place of temporary safety, at the corner of 7th & L. sts, where we stopped to breathe and look back.

The wind was blowing a hurricane, and clouds of dust swept up the street, and mingling with the smoke rendered it very difficult to breathe. The fire too, was raging with increasing fury, and the only thought of the multitude was for safety. As I looked back to my office, it was a mass of fire; but far above it, at the top of the Liberty pole which had just been erected ^{near} it, bravely streamed the folds of a Star Spangled Banner; now hid in clouds of smoke, now gleaming brightly, as the lurid flames vainly flashed upwards to devour it. And thus it streamed through the dark hours of that fearful night, mingled by the fiery tempest, until the hurricane's fury tore it into a hundred shreds and enviously tangled them in knotted masses, - a sad and humbling sight.

Taking breath, we rolled our wagons two square feet
on which I deemed things safe and left them to
assist any one who needed help. Entering the house
of a family with whom I was acquainted, I helped
them remove their goods and furniture to a place
of safety. As I was returning towards their house,
a young lady of my acquaintance, from New York
at, passed me, running at the top of her speed
down the street, towards the flames, entirely alone,
deeming her in great danger, I felt myself com-
pelled to follow & overtake her which I soon did.
Her father was a merchant, driving a heavy
team out of the city, but he had not been at his
dwelling home since the fire. She and her
sister were the only inmates able to do anything
towards saving their goods, and had actually
packed 8 or 10 trunks full of clothing and
other articles and with the aid of a friend
who was passing, had carried them into the
street. Having done all they could do, they
abandoned the house to its fate and were
now seeking a place of safety, when the young
lady's own recollection some valuable articles they
had been left and was struggling for it
when I overtook her. Under her directions I
re-entered the house from top to bottom
but without success: the missing article could not
be found. The flames were now so near that
it was dangerous to remain longer, and al-
though the house was strewed with valuable articles
and were just leaving, when the father came
back in half frantic with anxiety, he had lost

goods, did not think of the approach of the fire to his dwelling, till he saw them threatening it. Finding his family safe, - with my assistance the piano was dragged out and put on a drag that was passing. And or two mirrors, and some other light articles were brought out, and the happy home, was thus abandoned to its fate. The wind blowing with the utmost fury, carried the fire through every part of the house, and in a very short space of time it was level with the ground. Seeing the young lady in a place of safety, at the house of a friend on the N. E. outskirts of the City, I returned to assist others.

It was now two o'clock in the morning, and the fire went ^{still} raging and roaring with unabated fury. I found that they had again approached my wagon so as to endanger it, and we rolled it out, till we reached 12th st. - a mile from the river. Here the honey was so scattering that there was but little danger, and I looked about again for ~~some~~ those whom I might assist. I soon found a wagon loaded with household furniture standing in the street, evidently abandoned or forgotten by its owner, and with a stranger to assist we dragged it to a place of safety. Two ladies soon came up, claiming it as theirs, and thanking us for saving it. We drove it a little from the road, and left it in their possession, in the

midst of the cold and dreary plain, without
any small protector to care for them. Their
treasures are in the lower part of the City &
like hundreds of atoms not aware of the rapi-
dity with which the flames spread eastward.

Of the progress of time during that night
I had no definite idea. The moon which rose
as the fire broke out, was now riding high
in the azure heavens, occasionally gleaming
through the murky clouds of smoke & dust.

I had no time for other thoughts than that of assist-
ing those who needed it.

I soon met again the family whom I had
first assisted. Their moveable effects had been placed
on light wagons and dragged by hand to a spot
near my own where they were safe. The dwelling had
been at one time abandoned, ~~as~~ but as, by accident
~~the~~ it had escaped through the storm of fire, un-
til it had mostly swept by. With one or two others
I went back, and we protected it from the fly-
ing sparks until the danger was past and the
choise was safe. But clouds of smoke yet interpos-
ed between the family and their horses and
it was impossible for them to return until the
fire had burned lower.

As I had been moving Eastward continually
during the night, I had had no opportunity of
knowing the extent of the fire in the westward
part of the City, along the river. As it had

broken only three squares East, of the river, and the wind being steady from the N.W. I had but little doubt, that the buildings on first, second and third streets, would be saved. Judge of my surprise then when the fire broke out, came up in my office when the fire broke out, came up with the awful news that it had swept backwards with the utmost fury and consumed every building but two, on all three streets. The Fire Proof Banking House, Store and Hotel, which was supposed to be invulnerable, had crumbled into ashes like straw. A whole block of fire-proof stores on the south side of K. street just finished in the most approved and beautiful manner and filled with goods, burned up as though they had been children's toy houses.

It was about this morning that a sight of thrilling interest flashed upon my eye. The Methodists had just erected a spacious and magnificently brick Church - one of the finest buildings in the State. It stood on an elevation at the corner of J & L., and ~~was~~ its lofty and elegant proportions ^{was} visible from every part of the City and for miles around. It was an ornament to the City and an honor to its architects. For a long time it stood magnificent and many a hope was expressed that it would escape. But a stray spark, set fire to the Baptist Church - a wooden structure on the opposite side of the street, - and a storm

of fire swept against the wooden Cupola
and roof of this structure. But no visible effect
followed and when the Baptist Church sunk
and the flames were lessened, hopes revived,
But suddenly a faint gleam of light
flashed from the blinds of the Cupola,
As our moment and a bright blaze burst
forth - soon ^{it} flashed broad and high,
fastening upon the roof, spreading from
one end to the other, until the proud edifice
was mantled in ruddy robes of fire, that raved
and flanneted upon the wind, in fierce and
fatal gloe. In half an hour roof, Cupola &
dome fell crashing to the earth, leaving but
the scathed and disolate walls as monuments
of its glory.

As I stood with my friends on the plain
East of the City and gazed westward, the
scene was one of awful grandeur and terrible
sublimity. The whole city was on fire. An area
of nearly a mile in length by $\frac{1}{3}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ a mile
in width, was sending up to the serene heavens,
rolling billows of fire of all hues, from dazzling
white flames, to those of the most lurid, bloodred
~~the~~ cast - now half hidden by black, smoky
columns, - now gleaming forth anew with
redoubled fierceness. The Hurricane still contin-
ued, lashing this sea of fire into the wildest com-
motion and rendering the scene one that no
pen can describe, - no imagination can depict.

5. Immediately around us were other scenes,
no less striking. On every side were wagons, drays,
and piles of goods, ~~in~~ merchandise, household furniture
inter alia, in indistinguishable confusion, which
had, like mine, been driven before the flames into the plain.

Men, women and children were running about in
search of each other, of their property, at moments
fully sitting by their effects looking back with
sad hearts and tearful eyes upon their burning
houses which no human power could save,

My friends were comparatively fortunate. Though
having in prospect, a chilly bivouac for the rest of the
night, they had still a home to return to in the
morning; while ten thousand of their fellow citi-
zens were homeless, homeless, penniless! - at sunset,
rich, - at midnight, wandering beggars! Such is the
man's fortune!

It was now 4 o'clock in the morning. For 5
hours the flames had been raging with unchecked
fury and won, having nothing left within their reach
to prey upon, they began to die sink away, Human
efforts could do ^{no} more, and bidding my friends,
"good night", I found my way to my wagon, ~~fast~~
whence I dragged my bed, spread it on the
ground, and wrapping myself in my blanket
- beneath the gleam of the vertical moon
soon sunk into a sweet and profound slumber.

The sun was above the mountain tops
when I ~~was~~ was awakened by the tramping of
a horse's hoofs, and a friend rode up to my bed
side. I arose and ^{when} the sun had the day

before dawned out a beautiful and flourishing
city, it now gaped sadly over smoking, blacken-
ed and desolate ruins, covering Forty Squares!
Nine-tenths of the building was level with the
ground, or presented nothing but scorched, broken
and hideous-looking walls. Had a barrel of gun-
powder been placed in each house, and all simulta-
neously fired, the destruction would not have
been as fearfully complete.

But I must close these sad details, - though I
have written but a tittle of what fell under my
own observation. You will naturally be anxious
to hear how the fire affected my own interests.

Being a Candidate for office, my part of the ex-
penses of the election had borne somewhat heavily
upon my purse, and I awoke this morning after the
fire with \$1.25 of ready cash in my pocket, but
I was in no danger of physical want, for I was
made at once to feel at home at the house of my
friend. I was most provoked at the news of the
burning of the ballot-boxes, after it was known
that the Whigs had carried the City, - thus ruin-
ing the election a nullity. But I could not long
complain when there were thousands in a worse
condition.

Oct. 15. The mail comes at 12 to day and I
much rejoice this. The City is being rapidly
rebuilt, and in one year more, will be more
beautiful than ever! There is no doubt of this.

You cannot imagine the energy that Californians exhibit. And Yuba the burnt district is now covered with temporary houses and our merchants are doing more business than ever despite the terrible blow which has fallen.

I am still boarding with my friends - a very pleasant and interesting family from Cincinnati - and may do so all winter. Though I have been since the fire sleeping in a rickety hut with no floor nor window - admitting wind and rain freely, yet my health is first rate, and my spirits at their usual notch. The morning after the fire, when I learned that the ballots were burned, I had resolved to abandon the plan and go to San Francisco. But I have now given that notion up - for the simple reason that the report was false - the ballots were saved and I have the pleasure of announcing that I was duly elected Justice of the Peace for the City & Township of Sacramento for the term of one year. The office is worth \$4000 exp \$5000 per annum, and when I get over the immediate effects of the fire, I hope to be in smooth water again.

I took the Constitutional oath two or three days ago, and am only qualified already to act, but I shall do no business until a new building is finished in which I shall take an office. This will do in a day or two! - soon enough, for I haven't schooled myself to vote wise and important, yet, - nor have I got used 'yet' to the lofty subtriquity of "Judge Winchell."

Now, dear Mother, I must hastily close,
but will give yourself no uneasiness about me,
for I have given myself none, at any time, I am
afraid Father will consider himself slighted, for
I have not once mentioned his name in the whole
of this; but he will not think that he is to be
excluded from this share in it. I send him a
Paper containing a Disgrace of the Beaufort District
and full account of the fire.

Ben. has written but nothing since his mar-
riage - whereas I have half a mind to be very
indignant. But if he writes soon I shall forget
the party, as he is partially recoverable. I am
principally disposed to complain of him, principally
for that he has given me no introduction to our
sister - but in the absence of his usual gall-
antry and attentions, I shall consider my-
self authorized to send to her, through you, a
brother's greeting and high regard.

I send a letter or two to Joseph, and
one to Morris. - but I cannot do more than
to make the acknowledgments at this time.

I have left you in doubt about Nathan,
he was separated from me in the Confusion
and I heard nothing of him for two days
- when I learned that he had fortunately
made his way to Mr Hoyle's, a few miles from
the City, when he was doing well.

Shew these from home often, My kindest
remembrance to all, - and to you, Dear Mother
the constant love of your affectionate son
Elihu.