

Michigan Every Day

By Patrick Sullivan and Carole Eberly

Oct. 8, 1871
Fire ravages Michigan

The summer had been hot and dry. Wilted leaves fell onto sawdust, wood scraps and brush. For weeks, fires had burned out of control across the state. Residents of Detroit were used to a smoky haze that obscured their view of the sky. The scent of fire hung over the state from burning forests. However, the real crisis did not appear until Oct. 8, 1871, when hurricane-like winds pounded the state, stirring up the fires and spreading them with fury across the landscape. That horrific day in Michigan might be better known had it not been the same day as the Great Chicago Fire. Nonetheless, estimates of the dead in Michigan reached into the hundreds. Thousands or tens of thousands were left homeless.

So many fires consumed the state that day that a full catalog is impossible to recount in a short space.

In the Upper Peninsula, flames from the Peshtigo fire in Wisconsin, which killed more than a thousand in that state, jumped the Menominee River into Michigan, turning the sky red, wiping out forests and towns and killing anything in its way. Lumber camp towns were especially vulnerable, due to the excess sawdust and scraps of wood. Manistee was devastated by fire that day.

Holland was struck by a firestorm. The fires in those towns swept across the state to Lake Huron. Separate fires broke out in the Thumb and burned thousands of acres.

Students and faculty at the Michigan Agricultural College, the precursor to Michigan State, formed bucket brigades to save their campus. Contemporary accounts of the fire blame the drought, the strong winds, and the condition of the land after it had been clear-cut by loggers.