

Fiery Night
by Diane Riker

Sometimes the memories of a hellish night linger for more than a century.

So it is with the black stains on the walls of Chadwick's south dining room on the Strand near Prince Street.

At half past midnight on June 3, 1897, the crew of the tugboat Bremerton noted a bright light in the engine room of Herbert Bryant's mill, on the river side of the Strand at Duke Street, where buffalo bones and dried fish were ground into fertilizer. Bryant had a schooner at his wharf but they doubted he would be preparing to unload her at that hour.

Minutes later, George Doyle, the night watchman at the B & O freight house, a half block south, saw the flames, as did a woman a block away. All three sounded the alarm. By the time Police Lieutenant. Smith arrived, smoke was pouring from the original home of the Old Dominion Boat Club, and the clubhouse and all its boats were destroyed.

Fanned by a brisk southeast breeze, flames crossed the Strand via a tramway connecting Bryant's mill to his cavernous new frame warehouse. During the next three hours, they devoured all but one warehouse on the block between Prince and Duke, Union and the Potomac. Wharves and piers crumbled under the flames, leaving only charred timbers and stumps. At the foot of Duke, fire invaded the landmark six-story Pioneer Mill, now the site of Robinson's Terminal, reducing it to a broken brick shell. Spectators reported seeing hundreds of rats dart from the abandoned flour mill into the river.

With just one hook and ladder and one pumper in service, the firemen were outmatched. Remarkably, they prevented the fire from breaching Prince Street and consuming the blocks of flammable old warehouses to the north. At about four a.m., help arrived from Washington via the steamboat Columbia but it was too late.

The Washington Post described the crowds who came all day to gawk at the smoldering ruins of what were, in pre-Civil War days, "the largest commercial houses in the South." Bryant believed it was arson. He said he had checked his fires in late afternoon and seen them carefully banked.

Much of the block was rebuilt. Among the few standing walls sturdy enough to escape being chained and pulled down by the Southern Railway locomotive which ran along Un-



203 S. Strand, wall before renovation. Alexandria Library Local History/ Special Collections

ion Street, were those which bracketed a roofed “drive” for carts between two 3 ½ -story buildings. To its south had been Godfrey’s Steam Laundry, at the location today of the Potomac Riverboat Company; to its north, three grain warehouses, where Chadwick’s now stands.

When you enter the restaurant’s side dining room with its glass front, you will be in that passageway and you will see before you the scorched wall which bears witness to that night of chaos.