

**Grand Bang; Arsenal Hill Explosion Rocked Salt Lake in 1876**

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There had never been such an explosion in Salt Lake City! At precisely twelve and one-half minutes to 5:00 on the afternoon of Wednesday, April 5, 1876, the powder magazines on Arsenal Hill north of the city proper exploded. Some citizens at the time thought doomsday had broken forth. So powerful was the concussion that for a radius of two miles, an eyewitness said, "Houses tottered and shook, roofs, walls and ceilings were rent, windows innumerable were smashed, and hundreds of people suddenly prostrated upon the ground." Panic reigned. Frenzied cries of "Volcano!" and "Earthquake!" could be heard amid screams of terror and shouted prayers for forgiveness. A minute later, the sky rained boulders—and pieces of human beings.

John Nicholson, a newspaper writer, chanced to be looking in the direction of the magazines at the very moment. He glanced at his watch for the exact time. Though four people perished in the massive upheaval, Nicholson later marveled that, "considering the nature of the catastrophe, the immense shower of missiles from the size of small boulders to rocks weighing a couple of hundred pounds" did not claim more lives. His remarks took on particular significance because the city was playing host to the semiannual general conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that weekend.

From the pages of the *Salt Lake Herald*, readers would learn, "Many women fainted and fell in the streets; strong men were prostrated; their teams broke their fastenings and tore wildly hither and yon; houses swayed to and fro; doors were wrenched from their hinges, plaster crumbled from the walls, and ceilings fell; the sidewalks on East Temple [Main] from Third South to South Temple were strewn with glass. Day of judgment! was shouted by many tongues and...the prevailing impression was that the world had come to an end and the work of final destruction had commenced in Salt Lake City. Some dropped to their knees and earnestly began preparing for entry into the great hereafter, by attempting to make their peace with God."

Arsenal Hill in 1876 was that portion of land directly north of the city now known as Capitol Hill. It took its name from the territorial arsenal that Sir Richard Burton, the renowned English explorer who visited Utah in 1860, described as a large barn-like building whispered by anti-Mormons to contain "cannon, mortars and other...implements of destruction, prepared, of course, for treasonable purposes." It was south of today's Daughters of Utah Pioneers Museum, 300 N. Main, while the powder magazines—four individual buildings of stone and concrete—sat isolated a mile north and east of Temple Square, dotting the western lip of City Creek Canyon. (The arsenal, which had for some time fallen into disrepair, was destroyed by an arsonist in 1870.)

On the afternoon of the explosion, the magazines held at least forty tons of black powder and another ton or two of Hercules blasting powder and percussion caps. Hercules was considered among the most violently destructive explosives of its day. The first building was owned by the Hazard Powder Co.; the second, about 100 feet to the rear of the first, belonged to the E.I. DuPont Co.; and another 100 feet away squatted the two remaining

magazines, about eighty feet apart. They were the property of the California Powder Co. and Oriental Powder Co.

It was known that two youngsters—Charles Richardson, eighteen, and Frank Hill, sixteen—had been in City Creek driving cattle. They were returning by way of the magazines and were seen to shoot at some cranes flying overhead. The detonations followed almost instantly. At an inquest, it was brought out that since the magazines were built, the doors—like today's road signs—had become a favorite rifle and pistol target of vandals. That gave rise to the theory that a shot may have penetrated a magazine door and ricocheted into stockpiled percussion caps, in turn detonating sticks of Hercules powder. The initial explosion was followed by a larger blast when a second magazine blew; the remaining two erupted to complete the deadly chain of detonations and obliterate the buildings.

Some of the thirty or more boys playing on the Deseret Baseball field behind the old city wall and down the hill west of the magazines saw Richardson and Hill fire the gun. According to *The Salt Lake Tribune*, "They took the situation in at a glance, and about the time they were picking themselves up to run to a place of safety, the second explosion concussion knocked them down, showering them with rocks of all sizes. They had time to get behind the old city wall and lie down before the last magazine blew." A couple of the boys were unconscious for several minutes; the others fled in wild abandon, leaving their coats and hats on the field.

The detonations destroyed the storehouses, cratering the foundations and propelling rock and concrete fragments of the structures a mile or more. Young Richardson and Hill were blown to bits, identified only through tatters of clothing. A foot and portion of one leg nearly to the knee was discovered, as was another leg with a boot. These gruesome reminders of the disaster were taken to City Hall and put on display in hopes of making an identification of the victims. Richardson's father and brothers recognized shreds of the teen-ager's pants, as well as the feet, the boot, a twisted gun barrel and a portion of scalp and locks of hair.

Three-quarters of a mile away, Mary Jane Vanatta was pumping water at a well across the street from her home when a boulder smashed through her back, killing her instantly. Some blocks away, three-year-old James H. Raddon was fatally injured when a rock tore through his small body with the force of a cannon ball, tearing out the child's heart and lungs. An unidentified woman was said to have died of fright when a blizzard of stone fragments roared overhead. Several citizens standing on the corner of State and 100 South opposite the Salt Lake Theater were raked with debris when a canister of powder came screaming down and exploded on the corner.

An eighteen-pound boulder smashed through the adobe walls of a house at 400 South and 500 East; Brigham Young's fabled Gardo House at South Temple and State lost most of its windows, and his Empire Flour Mill in City Creek Canyon immediately below the magazines was all but destroyed. A worker, Allan Hilton, was loading a wagon when the explosions brought part of the flour mill crashing down on him—the horses bolted and he was pitched from the wagon over a wheel, yet escaped with only a few bruises.

In a letter to his son Arta in England, Young described the impact of the concussion at the mill: "Some pieces of glass forced out of a shattered window were hurled a considerable distance through the mill and imbedded a half an inch deep in the solid red pine joists." Farther down the canyon, the wooden roofing over reservoirs of the City Creek Water Works were crushed by falling rocks. Witnesses described the plumes of smoke and debris belching skyward from the powder magazines as a veritable Vesuvius.

A woman in the same neighborhood as the Raddons plucked her child from the cradle after the first detonation and rushed out of doors. When she again ventured into the home, the mother discovered the ceiling had collapsed and crushed the now-empty cradle. There were lighter moments, according to the *Herald*. "We cite the case of a deaf lady, who hasn't been able to distinguish sounds for many years. She was at work in her house when the last and loudest report occurred. Turning toward the door, the lady said, 'Come in.'"

A passerby who saw Captain William H. Hooper's elegant residence west of Arsenal Hill remarked that it looked as if it had gone through a threshing machine. A huge boulder struck the forks of a large locust tree within a few blocks of the still-to-be-completed LDS Temple, splitting the trunk twenty feet to the ground and leaving fragments of the boulder imbedded in the tree. Another rock estimated at 115 pounds hurtled like a meteor through the roof, floor and cellar of Shingleton's Saloon opposite the Salt Lake Theater, burying itself nearly four feet in the ground. In its downward arc, the missile came within inches of two men frozen with fear at a table.

The streets of the city were a mess. Shattered glass was everywhere. Windows and plate glass in the Eagle Emporium, C.R. Savage's photo studio, the Constitution Building, ZCMI, Deseret National Bank, William Jennings' store, G.F. Culmer & Co., W.F. Raybould store, Wasatch Drug Store, Walker Bros. and Dinwoodey's disintegrated in a cloud of shards as deadly as any gunfire.

Wilford Woodruff reported in his diary that nearly all the glass was blown out of the new Tabernacle on Temple Square on the eve of conference. It was necessary to hastily cover the shattered frames against the chilly April air, much to the discomfort of the general authorities and their audience. For the next day or so it was not at all unusual to shovel "wheelbarrow loads" of broken glass anywhere along Main Street, where most businesses were.

A Civil War veteran said Fredericksburg, after being bombarded by Confederate artillery for a month, did not look as devastated as did Salt Lake City "from the affects of the great blow up." Hundreds of homes were left with scarcely a whole pane of glass in them. Walls were cracked, chimneys toppled, doors shattered, furniture and crockery destroyed. The damage was enormous and widespread. At Sugar House, John D. Lee, languishing in the penitentiary awaiting his second trial on murder charges in the Mountain Meadow massacre, noted in his diary, "The explosion was Terrific. There were shotes of one after an other, shook the House & windows of the Penetentiary, distance six ms."

Fragments of stone weighing thirty or more pounds whooshed angrily through the atmosphere in their barrage of near death and injury. One, weighing fifty pounds, ripped through Mayor Feramorz Little's new house in the vicinity of 200 East and 100 South, crashing though three floors into the cellar. Once the public realized the world had not come to an end, rumors accused glaziers in the city of price gouging. That had G.F. Culmer & Co. fuming with an angry letter to the editor of the *Herald*: "We sell from a printed list that hangs in our store; and if anybody thinks he has been overcharged, he can come and refer to it. No one regrets the late catastrophe more than we do, and it had made us sick today when some fools have congratulated us on the increase in our business."

City officials meanwhile sent a squad of men to the arsenal grounds to gather up unexploded Hercules powder sticks. In the face of warnings to stay away, hundreds of

curious flocked to the scene. *The Herald* argued, "There is enough power in a stick of Hercules powder to literally tear in pieces an army and a slight concussion might cause it to explode...Despite the disaster parties picked up and carelessly handled the sticks of powder and some of it was carried to the city by men and boys. Keep off Arsenal Hill!"

In the aftermath of the tragedy, a damage estimate of \$26,000 in the loss of the powder and magazines was mentioned, but it was impossible to calculate the monetary loss to citizens in the disaster. An inquest by a coroner's jury composed of E.T. Mumford, Joseph Gorlinski and S.W. Sears listed to the testimony of powder-company representatives and handed down a verdict that the explosions probably were caused by "loose powder strewn in the vicinity of the magazine, being ignited by a burning paper wad from a shotgun, supposed to have been fired immediately preceding the explosions. No blame could be attached to any person or persons, the explosions being purely accidental."

The Tribune disagreed, commenting, "This is a most remarkable verdict, there being no evidence to show that there was any powder on the ground in the vicinity of the magazines." Joint funeral services were conducted for the two boys, Richardson and Hill, who were buried in the same casket. Representatives of the four powder companies requested Mayor Little to call an early meeting of the city council to consider a new site for magazines. It seems two carloads of explosives were en route and would arrive in a few days. After considerable debate, it was decided to locate new storage facilities a half-mile north of the Warm Springs at 200 West about 700 North on the western slope of Ensign Peak.

The Deseret News, in an especially contemplative mood, suggested that "years in the future, the time of [the explosion] will be referred to as an era, whence and which the happening of other events will be calculated and compared." The editorialist was somewhat off the mark, for in truth, none of the major histories of Salt Lake City even mention the "grand bang" of 1876.

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