

# April 1918 Fires

In this month's column, I present historic fires or significant events in the fire service from April 1918. A reminder: Readers are encouraged to share information from their departments

**April 1, 1918:** Atlantic City, New Jersey: An early morning fire swept the business district, destroying six buildings on the south side of Atlantic Street between Tennessee and South Carolina Avenues. Strong winds drove the flames from the point of origin in the Guttridge Hardware Company building filled with oils, paints, and varnishes. The smoldering fire spread rapidly when two tanks of turpentine exploded.

**April 2, 1918:** Toronto, Canada: The entire plant of the Thor Iron Works, located on the waterfront at the foot of Bathurst Street, was destroyed by a nighttime fire. The huge plant had been engaged exclusively in shipbuilding since the start of the war in Europe. A large vessel, almost ready for launch and waiting on the runways, was saved by the valiant efforts of firefighters.

**April 7, 1918:** West Somerville, Massachusetts: The car barns of the Boston Elevated Railway Company were destroyed by a spectacular Sunday evening fire. The alarm was received just after 6:00 p.m. The entire wooden part of the barns, with two tiers of tracks and containing 75 trolley cars and 16 snowplows, was burned to the ground. The 250-foot-long building was 150 feet wide and 40 feet high. A brick firewall helped the firefighters as they struggled to stop the advancing walls of fire. Chief Sewall Rich transmitted a general alarm and then requested mutual aid from Cambridge, Arlington, and Medford. Lines were still cooling the debris 24 hours later.

**April 8, 1918:** New York, New York: Just after 9:00 p.m., an explosion rocked the Hotel Pennsylvania, under construction at Thirty-Third Street and Seventh Avenue. The explosion followed a fire that started in the dynamo room of the hotel. Flames burst across Thirty-Third Street, breaking all the windows in the facing buildings. Battalion Chief Smoky Joe Martin arrived and transmitted second and third alarms. Flames spread to Gimbel's Department Store, a saloon, a barbershop, and a stable. All the power in the neighborhood was lost after the explosion, plunging everything into darkness and adding to the confusion.

**April 12, 1918:** Bowie, Maryland: A fire, apparently started by an oil lamp, destroyed the Calumet Stables and killed 17 thoroughbred horses valued at more than \$50,000. Despite the fire, the loss of the horses, and a muddy track, the racing card continued after the flames were extinguished.

**April 13, 1918:** Norman, Oklahoma: An electrical wiring problem sparked a fire in the State Hospital for the Insane shortly after 2:00 a.m. Discovered by the night watchman, the fire quickly spread through the first floor of the two-story wooden building. Despite the best efforts of the hospital staff, many patients could not be evacuated in time. The fire jumped to a one-story wooden structure, where all the patients were saved, before another two-story building ignited. The staff and firefighters encountered numerous violent and combative patients who refused to leave the blazing structures. In all, 33 people were killed by the flames.

**April 24, 1918:** Lima, Ohio: Three fires broke out simultaneously in the Lake Erie and Western railroad shops at 11:45 p.m. Chief John Mack transmitted a second alarm on arrival and had 39 men operating a first size Nott steamer, a 75-foot LaFrance aerial ladder, three combination chemical and hose wagons, three triple pumpers, and the chief's car. The pumpers, feeding a dozen streams, provided good service, but the steamer gave out after five hours. At the height of the fire, the water supply was cut off. Federal agents reported that a knife was used to cut the fire hose in two places. Officials took a man, believed to be involved, into custody. The loss of water further complicated the dangerous fire. Collapsing walls trapped a team of firefighters operating between a railroad coach and a building used as a paint shop. One unconscious man was quickly removed, Chief Mack was badly cut, and three others were pinned beneath the rubble. As this fire was being fought, another fire broke out in a distant part of town.



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