

The 1942 Daniels Hotel Fire

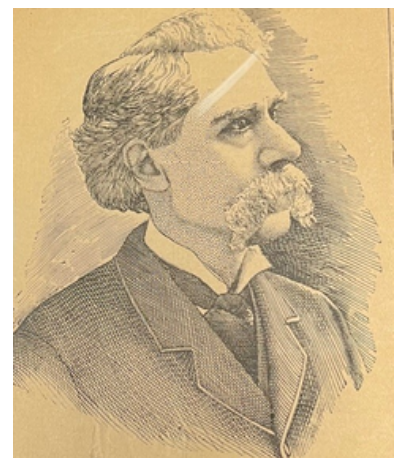
By The Prescott Museum & Visitor Centre

In the vast history of Prescott, few places have been as infamous in their legacy as the Daniels Hotel. First constructed sometime in the mid-1850s, the International Hotel was a three-and-a-half-story wooden inn on the south side of King Street between Edward and Centre Streets. It operated under this name for roughly a decade before being purchased by a young businessman named L.H. Daniels and his father, Phineas Issac Daniels, in 1864. Later that year, the Daniels Hotel was renamed after the family, a name which would stick until the businesses closer over a century later in 1987. Under the command of L.H. Daniels and his father, Phineas Daniels, the building went under several major renovations in the late 1860s to the early 1870s, with the inclusion of several adjacent stone structures used as both an extended wing of the hotel as well as commercial and long-term accommodations.

By the turn of the century, the building was one of the most state-of-the-art facilities in the area, being one of the first commercial buildings to receive indoor plumbing and internal electricity. Often described as one of the finest establishments in town, by the late 1900's the Daniels had built a reputation as the go-to spot for "first class" citizens who happened to be traveling through Prescott on the railway. With its spacious sleeping quarters, large private parlors, and booming billiards hall, the Daniels grew as a place for much socialization during WWI and WWII after L.H. Daniels departure in 1904, becoming a popular spot for both tourists and citizens of Prescott to dine, converse, and play games of pool and cards together. A reputation it would hold through much of the early 20th century through several ownerships. This story follows the downfall of the original Daniels Hotel, and the destruction that left the town devastated on a cold winter's night in 1942.



**The Daniels Hotel Circa
1920s**



L.H. Daniels

At roughly 4:00am on December 20th, 1942, the first alarm to the Prescott Fire Department was sent after a bellboy at the Daniels Hotel discovered smoke billowing from the furnace room into the main lobby. Although dated around the middle of Canada's involvement in WWII, the Daniels Hotel was filled with many guests during the holiday season, with several being temporary workers of the Dominion Lighthouse Depot and the Canadian Pacific Railway. With roughly 50 guests lodging at the time of the fire, the mass evacuation effort was kickstarted by the staff of the Daniels Hotel who individually knocked on the doors of each room escorting guests through smashed windows and fire escapes, with the fire department focusing on getting the individuals in the highest up rooms to safety with their specialized equipment (which were mostly temporary women workers at the DLD). Staying at the hotel that night, there were several members of the Ottawa Montagnards Senior Hockey Team, who, after escaping the blaze themselves, helped other patrons down the fire escapes.



The commotion of the blaze quickly drew the attention of many within the immediate blocks surrounding the Daniels Hotel. Many in the surrounding dwellings on King and Water Streets quickly emerged onto the scene to assist the fire crew in any way that they could. People brought blankets and warm clothing to the dozens of patrons of the hotel, whom were in their nightwear. The Alexandra Hotel on the corner of King and St. Lawrence Street quickly opened its doors to the hotel's common room areas, providing shelter, warm meals, and access for fire victims to call loved ones.



By 4:30am, roughly 30 minutes after the fire was initially reported, the blaze had quickly spread to the adjacent buildings on the eastern side of the Daniels. Described as a "flaming furnace" by eyewitnesses, lighting up the night sky with a red haze throughout a majority of the town. Although on scene within minutes of the initial report of fire going out, the Prescott Fire Department was severely hampered by the cold conditions, with frozen water mains and already present ice and snow accumulation. A call for assistance was sent to the fire departments in the surrounding municipalities. Responding to the scene about an hour after the blaze was initially reported was the Brockville Fire Department, which worked tirelessly to control the spread of the blaze. Upon the Brockville Fire Department's arrival at 5am, the blaze had further spread to the southern portion of the building, engulfing the neighboring buildings of the eastern portion of Water Street. With the blaze localized to the eastern portion of the hotel, businesses such as Thomas's Jewelry Store, Mrs. Lanes Millery Store, M. Pender's Dry Goods, Carey's Drug Store, Forsythe's Barber Shop, The Busy Corner Lunch Restaurant, and the Creamery Plant were unscathed from the blaze.

By the late morning on December 20th, 1942, the two fire departments had localized the fire to the easterly back portion of the building off Water Street. With water poured onto the front portion of the building in the early hours of the morning, beginning to freeze, efforts to reach the back portion of the building through the alleyways became treacherous, further extending fire relief efforts. By midafternoon, roughly 12 hours after the blaze was first reported, the fire on Water Street was finally extinguished.



The extent of the damage was quickly apparent to those who laid eyes on the mangled site. All that remained of the once lavish hotel was a charred shell of stonework covered in thick layers of ice, 1-2 feet deep in spots, further warping the already mangled exterior metalwork. Investigations into the cause of the fire and extent of the damage began shortly after drawing high-end officials from across the province. The damage soon exceeded \$100,000 (roughly \$1.8 million in today's currency). Mostly hurting then town councillor, James P. Doyle, and his business partner Nicholas Korsas, who co-owned the Daniels Hotel and most of the southern block of King Street from Centre to the old post office building.

Not only was the entire hotel destroyed beyond repair, but the blazes spread into adjacent buildings, resulting in the loss of commercial lots of Doyle's Men's Wear, Farmer's Barber Shop, Pender's Grocery Store, Perry's Barber Shop, Lee Ling's Laundry, and Len Ellis's Snack Bar. The private residences of Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Lamer, Lee Ling, and Mr. and Mrs. Ellis were also destroyed. Headed by Mr. J.A. Grant of the Ontario Fire Marshall's office, the investigation not only confirmed that the blaze started from the boiler room, but the massive fire resulted in the loss of one life. This was confirmed to be Henry St. Marseilles of Montreal, who was a temporary worker at the CPR docks in Prescott, and was boarding at the Daniels at the time of the incident. An inquest by the Coroner's Jury of Ontario was held the following month to determine both the cause of the disaster and the cause of Mr. Marseilles' death.

The 1943 Inquest

Reported in the January 21st, 1943, edition of the Prescott Journal, the inquest into the December 20th fire was a mess from the start. Heading the case was Crown Attorney H. Atkinson of Brockville, Dr. C.F. McPherson, Coroner, and E.A. Grant as representative of the Fire Marshall Department of Ontario. Members of the jury included: J. Newsome, G.M. Lyons, F.J. Greer, M. Willis, and R.L. McKendry.

First to the stand was the Daniels majority owner, James P. Doyle. Questioned about the state of the heating system, Doyle admitted that two years prior the building was fitted with a new chimney system and two new boilers, which resulted in the company switching to a soft coal heating system by early 1942. Re-admitted that he was not hands-on with the rekindling of the boilers and was not aware of the condition of the system for around a month prior to the incident occurring. Further complicating matters were the recounts from night clerk Charles Broedrick, who admitted he was not properly trained on the job.

His witness accounts, later confirmed by a guest from the hotel named Mr. Sykes, stated that Broderick was seen entering the boiler room around 3am, returning to the lobby around 5-10 minutes later. Around 10 minutes to 4am, fire was noticed billowing from the dining room. Mr. Broadrick then awoke Mr. Doyle and Mr. Korsa (who were both permanent residents of the hotel), prior to ringing the alarm for the fire department. Then, leaving the building to investigate the area of the fire, which was spotted on the eastern portion of the roof on Water Street beside the chimney. Later returning to the building to assist in the evacuation effort.



However, further testimonials by patrons of the building muddied the waters as to when the alarm was sent out. Guests such as Mr. McCartin reported that he did hear a physical alarm, while long-term lodgers Capt. Boivin and Mark Thomas stated that no one came to warn them; it was simply the commotion of the event that drew their attention to the fire. Mr. Korsa later confirmed that he himself did not go up to the top levels but instead sent an unnamed day clerk up to the third floor to wake residents. It was not just in Daniels itself where the alarm issue started to unravel, as residents in the adjoining buildings to the east were not made aware of the situation until the fire had begun to spread. First to wake up these residents was the night caretaker at the post office, Mr. F.L. Fortier, who noticed fire and smoke billowing from the Daniels. Springing into quick action, he ran to the neighboring small commercial block to the west of the post office, awaking residents and helping citizens evacuate. His efforts undoubtedly saved several lives.

Not only was the effect of the alarm system questioned, but so was the preparedness of the fire department. When Prescott Fire Chief Tom McNeil was called to the stand, the main topic of discussion was the delayed extinguishing of the blaze due to frozen water hydrants. Admitting that it wasn't until 4:20am, roughly 20 minutes after the first supposed alarm was sent out, that the fire department was able to start putting water on the blaze, as the closest fire hydrant was covered with ice. Mr. McNeil also further explained that the department had been without the necessary equipment for all employees, with only 10/16 of the firemen having the proper flame-retardant suits, and with 1800ft less of firehose than what was recommended by the Ontario government at the time. However, accounts from First Foreman Fred Hall state that by his arrival at the scene at 4:30am, a total of 5 hydrants on King and Water Streets were in operation, with firemen and volunteers actively attempting to extinguish the blaze.

Finally, came the testimonials of the Prescott Police Force. First to the scene, the night of the fire, for the Prescott Police was Night Constable John Murdock. In his testimony he stated that after speaking to Fire Chief McNeil, he went to the home of the Chief Police Constable, to inform him about the disaster. Upon returning to the scene past 5am, he noted that many guests of the Daniels had already made their way down to the Alexandra Hotel to warm up. Police remained present on the scene until the arrival of Mr. G.A. Grant of the Ontario Fire Marshals office.



The rebuilt Daniels Hotel Circa 1950s



The King Street Apartment Building Where the Daniels Once Stood

After brief deliberation, the verdict came back that both the fire and Mr. St. Marseille's death were ruled to be an accident. With Crown Attorney Atkinson stating that the mismanagement of the evacuation of the building and the early stages of the fire relief efforts was "A case of everybody's duty being nobody's duty".

After the fire, 10 permanent residents of the building were left homeless, while several more were left with extensive damage to their belongings and properties. With rebuilding slated to take several years to complete, the hotel staff of roughly a dozen were all left without work. Roughly 4 years after the disaster, the hotel was reopened to the public, this time on a much smaller and less extravagant scale. The building would go through several owners prior to shutting its doors for good in 1987. Once again getting torn to shreds by fire in 1989. In 2019, after three decades sitting vacant, the lot where the esteemed Daniels once stood was turned into a multi-story apartment complex.