

The Great New York City Fire of 1835

By Michael Weinberg

September 11 (2001) was not the first dramatic and horrific conflagration to hit New York's Lower Manhattan. One hundred sixty six years earlier, in December, 1835, a great fire ravaged Lower Manhattan. Driven by gale-force winds, the 1835 blaze burned 17 city blocks (approximately 50 acres, about 3 blocks east of what would become Ground Zero) and destroyed nearly 700 buildings in the commercial heart of New York adjoining Wall Street. Among the buildings destroyed were the New York Stock Exchange, the Mercantile Exchange and dozens of warehouses and dry goods importers in an area bordered on the north by Maiden Lane, on the west by Williams Street, on the south by Coenties Slip and on the east by the East River. Included in this path of destruction was a significant portion of Pearl Street, the address for a number of major New York importers of transferware (Townsend Harris, W. C. Greenfield & Co., J. Greenfield; note that Harris & Chauncey was located on nearby Wall Street, as well). One can only wonder how much Staffordshire was lost in these warehouses. Miraculously, only 2 people died in the 2-day battle against the flames.

December, 1835, was cold in New York City, and as was often the case, cold weather lead to building fires. On December 14, the entire New York City Fire Department (1500 firefighters) battled 2 major blazes that would leave the men exhausted and the City's water supply severely depleted. On the evening of December 16, a night watchman discovered the Comstock & Andrews Warehouse (dry goods) on Merchant Street on fire and within 20 minutes, the fire had spread beyond control. So strong was the

wind whipping the flames and scattering the embers that there were reports of roof-top fires in Brooklyn, across the East River. And so cold were the temperatures (approaching minus 17 degree F, according to some reports) that the firefighters had to chop holes through thick ice on the East River in order to get to the needed water, which then wound up freezing in the hoses.

A common method of fighting major urban fires at the time was to use gunpowder to level buildings, much in the same way that modern fire fighters use fire breaks to



Great Fire of New York Plates by an unknown pottery, c. 1836, showing the 3 views of the cataclysmic event in a variety of sizes and colors. In this composite image, the top 2 plates show the View from Coenties Slip; the Ruins, Merchants' Exchange is at the bottom left and Exchange, New York at the bottom right.

slow brush and forest blazes. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough gun powder in Manhattan on the night that the fire was discovered and it wasn't until Marines from the Brooklyn Navy Yard arrived with the explosive the next day that this technique could be implemented, successfully.

The "official report" after the fire traced its origin to a burst gas pipe, ignited by a coal stove at the Comstock and Andrews Warehouse. The economic impact of the fire was devastating: loss estimates ranged between \$20 million and \$30 million dollars (1835 dollars, remember) and 3 of New York City's 26 fire insurance companies went bankrupt as a result of their losses.

Yet "good" did come from this disaster: the Erie Canal had only recently opened in 1835, and that waterway created a vast market for imported goods (including transferware and other English ceramics), and allowed the warehouse owners and merchants in Lower Manhattan to rebuild their infrastructure with stronger brick and stone buildings. The Great Fire also led to the creation of New York's municipal water supply and the building of the Croton Aqueduct, bringing plenty of fresh water to the City from the North. And perhaps most importantly, the Great Fire led to an examination of and major improvements to New York City's fire fighting services, and the result was that the City has never since experienced a widespread catastrophe.



Brown transfer 10" dinner plate showing Exchange, New York burning out of control, with the printed mark.



Ruins, Merchants' Exchange on a green transfer, 10" plate, with printed mark.

At least one Staffordshire potter, perhaps because New York importers had been victims, or perhaps because it saw an opportunity to make money, was quick to immortalize the Great Fire of New York in transferware. An unknown pottery, c. 1836, created a series of 3 transfer views on plates (ranging in size from 6 3/4" to 10"). Produced in light blue, pink, green, purple, black and brown, these views include:

- 1) *Exchange, New York*: a dramatic image of the Stock Exchange building in flames, as firefighters stand helpless in the foreground;
- 2) *Ruins, Merchant's Exchange*: an image of the remains of the commodity market after the fire;
- 3) *View from Coenties Slip*: Coenties Slip was an artificial inlet of the East River, built to accommodate the unloading and loading of merchant ships. This scene shows firefighters on the river attempting to douse a burning warehouse.

All views in the series have a dramatic border showing fire pumpers (probably state-of-the-art equipment for the period) and eagles, separated by banners reading "Great Fire, City of New York." Most plates have a printed spread eagle cartouche with the name of the scene. Above the eagle's head is the letter "D" and "Stone Ware" is also printed in the mark.

The *Great New York Fire* series is unique among American Historical Staffordshire transfers in that it seems to have been produced for the American market and it portrays a disaster of cataclysmic proportions. All other American views celebrate positive events, locations or developments in the history of the new nation, even at the expense of the British (MacDonough's Victory, for example, or the Landing of Lafayette, which celebrates the Marquis' popularity for helping the Patriots' cause during the American Revolution). Yet at least one British potter felt that there would be a market for these transfer scenes, and even went to the trouble and expense to produce them in numerous colors. It would be interesting to find the source prints for these plate, the popularity of the Series and its distribution in mid-19th century America as well as whether they were sold exclusively in New York City, or found markets elsewhere. And perhaps these plates were the precursors to the public's fascination with disasters, both natural and man-made, as seen with the popularity of late 19th and early 20th books dealing with such calamities as the San Francisco Earthquake, the eruption of volcanoes around the world, and later with events such as the sinking of the *Titanic* and the torpedoing of the *Lusitania*.

The plates shown in the illustrations for this article were provided by Bill and Terry Kurau and the photographs themselves were taken by Lois Chase of Springfield, MA.



View from Coenties Slip. Note that the artist of the source print must not have been aware that the East River had frozen over at the time of the fire.



The common border on all three view from the *Great Fire of New York Series*, showing a “modern” firer pumper and the American Eagle, along with the banner identifying the Series.

