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Abstract

On October 8, 1871 a fire raged through northeastern Wisconsin burning over 1.5 million acres of land and killing between one and two thousand people. Because of the extent of the fire it is difficult to even determine how many people perished in the fire but it is considered to be the deadliest fire in American history. The fire is named after Peshtigo because the town experienced the worst but many other towns were affected. The circumstances surrounding the Peshtigo fire were unique for several reasons. In some areas the fire left nothing for miles. In addition, the on the very same evening a fire burned down much of Chicago. The paper focuses on the accounts of the witnesses and survivors and the state and nationwide relief effort.
Figure 1

The air was no longer fit to breathe, full as it was of sand, dust, ashes, cinders sparks, smoke, and fire. It was almost impossible to keep one’s eyes unclosed, to distinguish the road, or to recognize people, though the way was crowded with pedestrians, as well as vehicles crossing and crashing against each other in the general flight. Some were hastening towards the river, other from it, whilst all were struggling alike in the grasp of the hurricane. A thousand discordant deafening noises rose on the air together. The neighing of horses, falling of chimneys, crashing of uprooted trees, roaring and whistling of the wind, crackling of fire as it ran with lightning-like rapidity from house to house—all sounds were there save that of the human voice. People seemed stricken dumb by terror. They jostled each other without exchanging look, word, or counsel. The silence of the tomb reigned among the living; nature alone lifted up its voice and spoke. Though meeting crowded vehicles taking a direction quite opposite to that which I myself was following, it never even entered my mind that it would perhaps be better for me to follow them. Probably it was the same thing with them. We all hurried blindly on to our fate.¹

Introduction

This was the terror that the residents of Peshtigo and the surrounding area experienced on the evening of October 8th, 1871 as the deadliest wildfire in American history raged in northeastern Wisconsin. The Peshtigo fire, as it became known because the town of Peshtigo experienced the most damage, devastated the land on the western side of Green Bay and the southern part of Door County. The cities of Marinette, Wisconsin and Menominee, Michigan also suffered severe destruction but much less in terms of loss of life.

The Peshtigo fire was not like any fire the victims had experienced before in terms of intensity and extent, which in part led to the high death count. Many sought shelter or took measures that they knew to prepare for a fire, but many victims met their deaths in wells or root cellars, places that provided safety from most fires. The fire sprung up over such a large area so quickly that many were trapped by the time they

realized their danger. The fire was so intense that it was able to cross open fields, land already burned and bodies of water. Some victims described it as a tornado of fire capable of lifting houses into the air or throwing railroad cars several hundred feet from the tracks. The fire burned over 2,400 square miles of land, and while an exact count of victims is impossible, most estimate the death toll to be at least 1,200.2

If the Peshtigo fire was so terrible, why has it been so forgotten by popular history? While it is somewhat remembered as a part of Wisconsin history, there are few people outside of the region that are familiar with it.3 There is likely a reason for the fire’s obscurity, and that is because the Chicago fire occurred the very same evening. Through this ironic twist of fate, Chicago received much of the nation’s attention, sympathy and relief, though its death toll was less than one-fifth of the estimated death toll of the Peshtigo fire.

The contention of this paper is that the Peshtigo fire was indeed a major natural disaster, worthy of being part of common knowledge everywhere in this country. Also, I believe that the Peshtigo fire was indeed treated as a major national disaster at the time, while paradoxically becoming a secondary concern to the Chicago fire. The Chicago fire did destroy more value in terms of property, but the devastation of the Peshtigo fire created a much more urgent need for relief than in Chicago because there was nothing left at Peshtigo for the survivors. Many people felt that the Chicago fire was diverting attention and relief away from Peshtigo. Correspondence at the time makes this very clear. At the same time however, the national response to aid “the victims of the great

2 Pernin, The Great Peshtigo Fire, 12, 57.
conflagration” was great and urgent as recorded by relief committees. In the end, the special circumstances around the Peshtigo fire have given it a unique place in history.

A Brief Description of Peshtigo and the Surrounding Area

Peshtigo is located in northeastern Wisconsin on the west shore of Green Bay. In 1871 Peshtigo was a thriving lumber town with much potential. Lumber was seen as an endless resource in northern Wisconsin with the opportunity to provide immense wealth for lumber barons or opportunity for immigrant workers seeking jobs. In Peshtigo there was a woodenware factory which employed eight hundred men and claimed to be the largest in the world.⁴ The area around Peshtigo offered promises for new opportunity in other ways as well. The land that laid to the west of Peshtigo was known as the Sugar Bush. The Sugar Bush was home to about three hundred families who, for the most part, lived on homesteads or farms and worked on clearing their land and grew enough food to live on.

Peshtigo itself was home to about 1,700 people. Aside from the woodenware factory, Peshtigo had two sawmills, several churches, a new schoolhouse and a boarding house for newly arrived workers at the factory or sawmills.⁵ The constant influx of fifty to one hundred people looking for jobs or land creates difficulty ascertaining the exact number of individuals who perished in the great fire. Some of the arrivals were

⁴ Christine Gibson, “Our 10 Greatest Natural Disasters,” American Heritage 54, no. 2 (2006): 30. The factory produced items made from wood such as barrels, bowls, handles for various tools, and simple furniture.
⁵ Ibid.
immigrants who had no connections to anyone and their arrival in Peshtigo many times went unrecorded.\textsuperscript{6}

The other closest towns in population and location to Peshtigo were Marinette, Wisconsin and Menominee, Michigan which were separated by the Menominee River. These two towns were six miles to the north of Peshtigo. People often settled here for the same reasons as in Peshtigo. Between the two towns there were eight sawmills and two competing newspapers.\textsuperscript{7} This part of both states was undergoing drastic change. The region had been covered with a vast forest, mainly made up of the very valuable white pine, but now farmers were clearing new lands. There was a new railroad under construction. Wealthy industrialists such as William Ogden and lumber barons like Isaac Stephenson were expanding the lumber related industry.\textsuperscript{8} Engaging in these activities irresponsibly contributed to the possibility of a massive fire. At the time there were plenty of warnings about the dangerous direction this region was going, but many chose to ignore the signs and carry on with their lives just the same.

\textbf{“Suicide by Fire”}

The Peshtigo fire did not have a single spark that caused a large fire, as many forest fires do. The legend surrounding the Chicago fire involved a cow in Mrs. O’Leary’s barn that kicked over a lantern which started a fire in the heart of the city. The reality of the Peshtigo fire was that the area had essentially been smoldering since the later part of the summer in 1871. When the forest was still at night, the crackling of fire


\textsuperscript{7} Gess and Lutz, \textit{Firestorm at Peshtigo}, 10-11.

\textsuperscript{8} Gibson, “Our 10 Greatest Natural Disasters,” 30.
could easily be heard. In the dark it was possible to see little snakes of flame running along the ground.\(^9\) 1871 turned out to be a very dry year as the area experienced less than average snowfall during the previous winter. Besides a very light rain on September 5, there had been no rain since the early part of July.\(^10\)

The way the land was being used was also a major contributing factor. The logging industry cut down unimaginable numbers of trees, which led to the build up of highly flammable scraps such as branches, leaves, and bark, also known as slash. Also, logging camps had fires going for cooking food and typically left these fires unattended after they were finished using them. At this time the Northwestern Railway was being built through the area which meant mile after mile of forest had to be cleared for the path of the railroad. Fire was a very useful tool for clearing land. The crews also left a build-up of timber and scraps all along the cleared path.\(^11\) Many of the farmers in the area used fire to clear the land. The land, which had previously been a forest, required much work in order to be converted to farmland. Farmers often used lumber from their land to build their homes and sheds. The stumps and extra lumber would just be burned to clear the fields. The industries of Peshtigo and the other surrounding towns turned them into tinderboxes waiting to be ignited. The sawmills and woodenware factory created an incredible amount of sawdust, not to mention the products of these industries were made of wood. Wildfire expert Stephen Pyne describes this use of fire as “fire abuse.”

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 6, 93.
\(^{11}\) Ibid., 189.
According to Pyne, using fire for these things is not necessarily bad but they need to be done in limited, controlled amounts.\textsuperscript{12}

By no means was the Peshtigo fire a surprise. It may have been different than what people were expecting, but it is very clear that there were plenty of warnings of coming trouble. The air was full of smoke and ash for several weeks before the fire. As early as September 13 smoke in the air made breathing hard. But the smoke and ash became a normal part of life and the residents just grew accustomed to the need of covering one’s face and mouth. Part of the prologue to \textit{Firestorm at Peshtigo} reads:

Outside, one quick breath was all he needed before he plucked a handkerchief from his silk breast pocket to cover his nose and mouth. People passing each other on the wood-planked streets were doing the same. Mr. John Belanger, proprietor of the Dunlap House, was pushing a crate of wine through the hotel doors with one hand, leaving his other hand free to hold his apron up to his face. A new sound had drifted in with the familiar chorus of whirring saws from the mills and the irregular beat of wagon wheel bumping along the rutted streets: the sound of muffled human coughing.\textsuperscript{13}

On some days, the smoke was so thick over Green Bay that steamers needed to use their fog horns and depend on their compasses for navigation. There was no way for the captains to see the lighthouses, let alone the harbors. By October 4\textsuperscript{th} boats were relying fully on their navigational tools. In fact, on October 7\textsuperscript{th}, the day before the fire, Father Pernin, the parish priest for Peshtigo, Marinette and the surrounding area, was planning to board a steamer in the harbor in Peshtigo and leave for the church in Cedar River. He waited for the steamer for several hours but it never came because the captain had decided the very limited visibility made it too dangerous to come into the shore.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13} Gess and Lutz, \textit{Firestorm at Peshtigo}, 2.
\textsuperscript{14} Pernin, \textit{The Great Peshtigo Fire}, 23.
The town of Peshtigo had even faced scares of fire in the weeks leading up to the great fire of the 8th. On September 23rd, the piles of sawdust at the woodenware factory had ignited, and all of the men of Peshtigo reported to do what they could to help subdue the fires. After several hours the men were able to get the fire put out. The men figured the wind had picked up enough to carry burning embers from the forest to the factory.15

The very next morning, September 24th, while most of the town’s residents were attending church, another fire broke out in the forest right outside Peshtigo. The day was spent extinguishing any fires that started up in town because the wind kept blowing burning embers and hot ash into town. Many felt that a great fire was inevitable but they made it through the night. By the next day the wind changed direction and Peshtigo was out of immediate danger for the time being.16

Father Pernin described another close call. He had been out in the woods hunting with a child from one of his congregations. Eventually the daylight faded and the only sounds in the night were the constant cracklings of fire that ran along the floor of the forest. Finally, Father Pernin fired his gun and was able to raise the attention of the boy’s family who had started to look for him. After contacting the search party, this is what happened:

Directed to our quarter by our shouts and firing, they were soon on the right road when a new obstacle presented itself. Fanned by the wind, the tiny flames previously mentioned had united and spread over a considerable surface. We thus found ourselves in the center of a circle of fire extending or narrowing, more or less around us. We could not reach the men who had come to our assistance, nor could we go to them without incurring the risk of seriously scorching our feet or of being suffocated by the smoke. They were obliged to fray a passage for us by beating the fire with branches of trees at one particular point, thus momentarily staying it progress whilst we rapidly made our escape.17

15 Gess and Lutz, Firestorm at Peshtigo, 51.
17 Ibid., 17.
It is likely that fires such as this happened very frequently throughout the Sugar Bush. Aside from the loggers and farmers dispersed throughout the forest, the land was covered by dense, uninhabited forest or cut-over lands covered with slash and these fires went unnoticed and unrecorded.

Another circumstance that contributed to Peshtigo being caught unaware of the impending disaster was that as the conditions worsened, the area was becoming increasingly isolated from the rest of the country. With fires burning periodically throughout the region, people were less likely to travel to other towns. Father Pernin described an instance where he had to drive his horse and wagon over a part of the road where a fire was burning across. As mentioned earlier, the steamers were unable to make it to the Peshtigo Harbor. Perhaps the most significant part of the isolation was the fact that the telegraph lines were down. There was a telegraph office in Marinette which served as the main source of news for the area. The telegraph lines had been destroyed in September during smaller fires and had not been repaired. The telegraph lines were seen as the first line of defense against fires, being able to warn other cities of fires or conditions that could lead to fires. Although meteorology was still just developing, weather scientists, such as Increase Lapham who was based in Milwaukee, were making observations on movements of fronts and pressure systems that could help predict where fires would break out. In the days before the fire, Lapham did note the movement of a cold front toward Wisconsin, which would likely result in high winds. Most of his warnings went unheeded, and they never reached the area that needed them the most.

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“Wind Creates Fire, Fire Creates Wind”

It is difficult to determine the singular cause or start of the Peshtigo fire. According to the information in a book describing one hundred of the most devastating fires in history, the Peshtigo fire was started by lightning. Most experts agree, however, that there was no specific start to the fire since there were numerous places that were constantly burning. Of course the severe drought was a major factor, but experts say the wind caused by the arrival of a cold front is what fanned the existing fires into one massive fire.

Once the fires were fanned by the winds, they grew bigger, creating even more wind, which in turn made the fires even bigger and more intense. This process created what is called a firestorm. A firestorm literally creates a tornado of fire with winds reaching over a hundred miles per hour and temperatures in excess of two thousand degrees Fahrenheit. Firestorms are incredibly destructive. Normal fire prevention and fighting tactics are useless against the firestorm. In Peshtigo barrels of water were placed throughout the town while some residents tried to bury their valuables or dug trenches around their homes. In the Sugar Bush families used other methods because they had little access to water. Wells or root cellars were common refuges, but in this disaster these refuges were turned into tombs. Whole families died in root cellars from the extreme heat or suffocated in wells as the fire consumed all of the oxygen. Other families wrapped themselves in wet blankets and stood in open fields as depicted in the

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picture below. Many of the families that did this simply vanished with no trace because the wind blew away the ashes of the bodies.


The actual events of the Peshtigo fire are somewhat hard to trace. Though the fire was very deadly, there were thousands of survivors. Yet, there are very few first hand accounts of the fire. Lutz and Gess say that “all the survivors, injured and uninjured, were in shock, the injured from their wounds, the uninjured from losing friends and family, as well as everything they owned.” Some survivors never talked about it for the remainder of their lives, while others recounted the events of the evening to their families, but very few actually wrote about their horrific experiences. One of the few that did was Father Peter Pernin. He had his written account published in 1874 in order to

raise money to rebuild the churches that had been destroyed in the fire. His account is considered one of the most complete and descriptive by authors who have written about the fire. Much of the description of the actual fire in books such as *Firestorm at Peshtigo* was taken from Pernin’s account.

The fire hit the town of Peshtigo between 8:30 and 9:00 in the evening on October 8th. Within one hour, the entire town where 1,700 people resided was gone. The townspeople ran about in a mass of confusion. Many vainly tried to save some of their belongings. Others attempted to seek shelter in the Peshtigo River. It was here that survivors tell grisly tales about people being burned alive while running down the street. Parents tried desperately to save their children only to be consumed with fire as well. Others reached the river only to discover that their child had died in their arms or that the child they had saved was not their own. Once in the river their troubles were not over. This is how Father Pernin described what it was like in the river:

> When turning my gaze from the river I chanced to look either to the right or left, before me or upwards, I saw nothing but flames; houses, trees, and the air itself were on fire. Above my head, as far as the eye could reach into space, alas! too brilliantly lighted, I saw nothing but immense volumes of flames covering the firmament, rolling on over the other with storm violence as we see masses of clouds driven wildly hither and thither by the fierce power of the tempest.

In the river people had to constantly splash themselves with water because the heat was so intense that their hair, clothes, skin or anything exposed to the heat would start to burn. In one case a man found a baby whose parents had been killed. He took the child with him to the river but he expected the baby would not survive very long. Because of the heat, they had to submerge under water periodically. At first the man was sure the baby thought he was trying to kill it but after some time the man said that the baby started to

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25 Ibid., 34-35.
“hold its breath like an adult” when they would dip underwater. Both ended up living through the night.26

Other towns were victim to the flames as well, but none saw the destruction on the magnitude of Peshtigo. In Marinette, a town with about double Peshtigo’s population, miraculously no one lost their life, though a good deal of the city had been burned down. At the time of the fire there were several ships out on the water in Green Bay. Several of the steamers by Marinette were full and passengers decided they should not try to find safety on land because they thought they would be safer on the ship. They made it through the night safely, but they were very lucky their ship did not catch on fire from the falling burning debris, like other ships had during the night. If that had happened, they would have been forced to fight the fire or take their chances in the water.27

**Burnt District**

When morning came after the fire was over, those who were left alive still had plenty of horrors to face. Nearly everyone had been burned in some way. Many had most of their clothes burned as well. Those who had spent the night in water were now chilled to the bone. Previous to the fire, temperatures in Wisconsin were around eighty degrees Fahrenheit but with the cold front that came through, temperatures fell to below fifty degrees within a couple days.28 The grim fact now facing the survivors was that there was nothing left. Everyone had lost all of their possessions, but worse was that there was no food, no water, no supplies and no shelter for miles.

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26 Gess and Lutz, *Firestorm at Peshtigo*, 121.
According to an early report sent out by the governor, the area that comprised the burned district consisted of Oconto, Brown, Door and Kewaunee, and parts of Manitowoc and Outagamie counties. The number for the death toll according to this report was at least one thousand. Also, at least three thousand people were completely destitute, as they had lost everything and were likely wounded, and dependent on relief for food and shelter.29

It was not just the wounded who suffered from the horrors of the fire. There were literally hundreds of bodies lying around that had been partially burned or floating in water. Teams of able men set out to take care of the dead and give them a proper burial. A mass grave had been built for the unidentified bodies. Lutz and Gess described the scene as “loggers, who had seen men crushed by falling tree limbs and rolling logs, who had seen men rip an opponent’s eye out in fight, fell to the ground and wept, unable to pick up one more child.”30

On one farm a twelve year old boy was the only survivor of a family of ten. He had built nine coffins and was in the process of digging nine graves when one of the burial parties came across the farm. The men, thinking they would help the boy, put the remains of the nine family members into just a couple boxes and buried them. The little boy was not satisfied with this so he dug up the coffins and distributed the remains in all nine coffins and then carried each coffin to the cemetery a mile from the farm.31

For the people who had survived but had suffered injury, the morning of the 9th brought a new kind of suffering. There were many people who had survived the night but died in the next day or two, sometimes from starvation or dehydration. Lutz and Gess

30 Ibid., 168.
31 Ibid., 165-166.
said that “many of the burn victims died of renal failure before they could ever reach help in Marinette or Menominee. Because burns cause serious electrolyte imbalances in the body and many survivors had to wait three or four days without food or water to correct fluid depletion, they died before help arrived.” Others “died as the jolting wagons carried them the miles” back to Marinette where a couple homes and buildings had been turned into makeshift hospitals. The closest any aid could come from was Marinette and Menominee, which had also suffered greatly and were six to ten miles away. Luther Noyes, publisher and editor of the Marinette and Peshtigo Eagle, was one of the first people from outside Peshtigo to see the devastation. What he found when he arrived at Peshtigo on the morning of the 9th was that the town no longer existed. Immediately the leaders of Marinette organized some way to help the survivors later that same day. Wagons came down to take survivors back to Marinette to be cared for. Others brought what they could in terms of food and supplies. Several tents were set up to provide shelter mainly for women and children and those who were seriously injured and waiting to be taken to Marinette for medical attention. Marinette quickly found itself unable to meet the great demands of caring for the afflicted. Another hospital was set up across the river in Menominee and many more injured were sent to the hospitals being set up in Green Bay. The residents of Green Bay, being spared entirely by the fire, found themselves the focal point for the relief effort once aid began streaming in from across the country.

Two weeks after the fire, Luther Noyes led a group of reporters and others to officially ascertain the extent of the fire in the Peshtigo area at the request of the

32 Gess and Lutz, Firestorm at Peshtigo, 161.
33 Pernin. The Great Peshtigo Fire, 39
governor. They tried to recreate the events of the Peshtigo area on the evening of the 8th by following the path of the firestorm or “tornado of fire.” What they found defied any understanding they had of fires. Trees were not just burned down but blown down as well. The winds had pulled them out of the ground, roots and all. In other places they found sand that had been turned into glass by the heat of the fire. It takes temperatures of more than 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit to melt sand into glass.34

Response to an Urgent Plea

It was immediately apparent that Marinette, Menominee, and Green Bay would not be able to provide any measure of meaningful relief by themselves. Isaac Stephenson, owner of a lumber company in Marinette, was the first to send a request for aid to Madison. He sent a messenger by steamer to Green Bay on the 9th and from there a telegram was sent to Madison. His telegram was not received at the capitol until Tuesday, October 10th. The same destroyed telegraph lines that had isolated the doomed area before the fire now meant that there was no way of contacting the outside world. Once the news of the fire reached Green Bay, it was telegraphed to Madison and other major cities.35

As coincidence would have it, almost all of the state officials, including Governor Lucius Fairchild, were in Chicago by this time. A large part of Chicago had burned on the very same evening as the land in northeastern Wisconsin. Chicago was able to telegraph to all parts of the country as soon as its fire started asking for relief and the nation heard. As a result of the governor’s absence, Frances Fairchild, the governor’s

34 Gess and Lutz, Firestorm at Peshtigo, 165.
35 Ibid., 158.
wife, took matters into her own hands. The Frances heroically rerouted trains full of aid supplies heading for Chicago to Peshtigo. She implored the residents of Madison to send whatever blankets and warm clothes they could spare.36 The first relief supplies, a few train car loads of food, blankets and clothing, were on the way to Green Bay by the afternoon of Tuesday, October, 10. Though rather insignificant in terms of the total aid that was sent to the relief of Peshtigo, the initial relief supplies showed the urgency that this disaster would be handled with.

Governor Fairchild issued the following proclamation from the capitol on the 9th before he left for Chicago:

Throughout the northern part of this State fires have been raging in the woods for many days, spreading desolation on every side. It is reported that hundreds of families have been rendered homeless by the devouring element, and reduced to utter destitution, their entire crops having been consumed. Their stock has been destroyed, and their farms are but a blackened desert. Unless they receive instant aid from portions of the State not visited by this fearful calamity, they must perish.

The telegraph also brings the terrible news that a large portion of the city of Chicago is destroyed by a conflagration which is still raging. Many thousands of people are thus reduced to penury-striped of their all, and are now destitute of shelter and food. Their sufferings will be intense, and many may perish unless provisions are at once sent to them from the surrounding country. They must be assisted now.

In the awful presence of such calamities, the people of Wisconsin will not be backward in giving assistance to their afflicted fellow-men.

I therefore recommend that immediate organized effort be made, in every locality, to forward provisions and money to the sufferers by this visitation, and suggest to Mayors of Cities, Presidents of Villages, Town Supervisors, Pastors of Churches and the various Benevolent Societies, that they devote themselves immediately to the work of organizing effort, collecting contributions, and sending forward supplies for distribution.

And I entreat of all to give the abundance to help those in such sore distress. Given under my hand, at the Capitol, at Madison, this 9th day of October, A.D. 1871.37

36 Gess and Lutz, Firestorm at Peshtigo, 158-159.
37 Lucius Fairchild, October 9 request for aid, October 9, 1871, Governor’s correspondence and letterbooks, 1871, Box 25, Folder 1, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
This is early evidence of the shadow the Chicago fire would cast over the fires in Wisconsin. As he sent this, Fairchild had no way of knowing the extent of the devastation in his own state but had been informed of the fire in Chicago. Fires in the forests of northern Wisconsin had been normal news. Affected towns in close proximity to Green Bay were able to send telegrams concerning local conditions by the morning of the 9th, but there was no way for them to know the area the fire actually covered or of the suffering in Peshtigo and the Sugar Bush. In this initial plea for aid, the governor devoted as much attention to the Chicago fire as he does for the fires in Wisconsin. He made no mention of the number of dead or the number of injured being cared for.

On the 13th Fairchild issued a second plea for aid that detailed the devastation of Wisconsin. Between the 9th and the 13th the governor’s office was able to get a much better idea of what transpired on the night of the fire. The estimated death toll at that point based on reports coming from the burned area was around a thousand and Peshtigo was mentioned as having the worst of the damage. In the second request there is no mention of Chicago. The request contained specific items needed as well.\(^3\) From this point until the end of his term in January of 1872, Governor Fairchild was an integral part of the relief effort.

Governor Fairchild realized the urgency of the situation from the start and many people believe that he did a very good job handling the relief effort. A very controversial but important action Fairchild took was to authorize money from the state treasury for the relief effort without approval from the state legislature because the legislature was not in session. Many people felt the need for aid was so great that only the State would be able to provide enough funds for the relief required immediately. They suggested that an

emergency session of the state legislature would be the best way to have those emergency relief funds appropriated. Fairchild felt that the State needed to step in as soon as possible but he decided that an extra session of the legislature would take too long and require expenses that could instead go to the relief effort. It was not until Cadwallader Washburn, Fairchild’s successor, took office in January of 1872 that Fairchild’s actions without the approval of the legislature given official approval.

Before the end of the first week, Governor Fairchild had organized the state’s relief effort and was the face of the relief effort to the rest of the country. Within days of the fire, the State Treasury had purchased over two thousand dollars of supplies to send to Green Bay, which had become the center of the relief effort. As early as the 11\textsuperscript{th}, many orders were placed in Madison stores for supplies. Orders for twenty to forty pairs of boots were placed several different stores, likely because the stores only had a limited number of items in stock and Fairchild wanted to get as much delivered to Green Bay as quickly as possible. Other desperately needed items included jackets and blankets. Eight hundred blankets were ordered from Milwaukee alone on the 12\textsuperscript{th}. Food was also a priority. In the first week after the fire the Governor made orders for very large amounts of food, including orders for 498 dollars of meat and food, and another order for 939 dollars of meat. On October 12\textsuperscript{th} the relief committee made an order for three thousand pounds of flour for the cost of eighty-four dollars. By the beginning of the week after the fire, the state treasury had paid over six thousand dollars for relief supplies.

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39 Gess and Lutz, Firestorm at Peshtigo, 175, 176.  
40 Ibid.  
41 Receipts signed by Lucius Fairchild, Governor’s correspondence and letterbooks, 1871, Box, 25, Folder 1, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.  
42 Wisconsin governor’s office, Fire relief fund accounts, 1871, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
Aside from sending large amounts of supplies to the burned district, officials in Madison had to spend the first week learning new details of the devastation. Luther Noyes, one of the leaders of the community in Marinette, wrote Fairchild saying that what happened to Peshtigo “is no ordinary calamity, hour after hour as the details come in they appear more sickening and horrible.” On the 10th, one resident of Green Bay described Peshtigo as being “all burned out” with “not a building left” and in Door County “bodies of the dead by fire are lying about on the ground.” Overall “the distraut [sic] and suffering is beyond any ability to relieve by the local people.” Just one day later the same resident wrote Fairchild saying that the “suffering is far worse” than what he wrote in his previous letter. The estimate for the number of dead was constantly increasing. The initial reports of the death toll in Peshtigo sent out on the 9th, the day after the fire, were less than a hundred. The death toll had increased by the 12th according to one Green Bay resident. He reported,

I fear the worst has not been told. Three hundred and twenty five bodies have already been buried from Peshtigo alone and is believed that the woods and water are yet full of the dead and that 500 not cover the number that have perished in the flames on the West side of the Bay. From two to three hundred is the estimate of the number of those who have perished on the East side. Hundreds are being brought here badly burned and houseless. The committee here needs all the supplies they can get as so not so much for immediate relief as for something more permanent clothing women and children especially blankets, axes.

Even as the burned were being taken to the makeshift hospital, preparations had to be made for the upcoming winter. Winters in northern Wisconsin historically are very harsh and the winter of 1871 was no exception. Some of the first communities to respond to

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43 Luther Noyes to Lucius Fairchild, October, 10, 1871, Governor’s correspondence and letterbooks, 1871, Box 25, Folder 1, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
44 A. Eimbale to Lucius Fairchild, October 10, 1871, Governor’s correspondence and letterbooks, 1871, Box 25, Folder 1, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
45 Ibid.
46 Charles R. Gill to Lucuis Fairchild, October 12, 1871, Governor’s correspondence and letterbooks, 1871, Box 25, Folder 1, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
the request for relief were other towns in northern Wisconsin. Along with money for the relief effort, the town of Superior sent a letter saying that they could identify with the survivors suffering from the cold.47

In the early phase of the relief effort, many important government officials realized that this was indeed a major disaster that needed urgent attention. On the 12th Horace Austin, the governor of Minnesota, wrote a letter to Governor Fairchild offering any kind of assistance that the relief effort in Wisconsin needed. Austin was also concerned about the disaster at Peshtigo and the area around Green Bay not gaining any national attention because the Chicago fire gained so much attention. He urged Fairchild to do what he could to raise the nation’s attention.48 Fairchild certainly made efforts to do just that. On October 14th he requested one hundred wagons and one thousand army coats from William Belknap, the Sectary of War. In appealing to the highest level of government Fairchild wrote “I know that I need not urge the authorities to grant the aid, the President and yourself will I am confident respond to the cause if it is within your power.”49 The governor’s request for those supplies was granted a week later on October 21st. This was a clear example showing how quickly relief efforts were being made.

It took about two weeks after the fire for cities, organizations and individuals around the country to start sending in money and supplies, mostly in the form of clothing, to Wisconsin. Many of these cities were located in the Northeast in New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. The following is a message that was sent on October 47 Letter to Lucius Fairchild, October 16, 1871, Governor’s correspondence and letterbook, 1871, Box 25, Folder 1, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
48 Horace Austin to Lucius Fairchild, October 12, 1871, Governor’s correspondence and letterbook, 1871, Box 25, Folder 1, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
49 Lucius Fairchild to William Belknap, October 14, 1871, Governor’s correspondence and letterbook, 1871, Box 25, Folder 1, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
20th to the leaders of communities located in Erie County, New York by Alexander Brush, the mayor of Buffalo, New York:

The people of Michigan, Wisconsin and Chicago are suffering terribly for the want of clothing, bedding and provisions. We are doing all that we can in Buffalo for them. The joint committees have established their head-quarters at 257 Washington St, Buffalo, and will be happy to receive and forward all supplies to their destination from all the adjacent towns. We make the appeal through you to your towns and beg of you, in the name of God and humanity, to collect and send us all that you can. I would suggest that your main effort being favor of Michigan and Wisconsin.50

Starting around time this was sent, letters containing checks ranging from ten or twenty dollars to several hundred dollars were sent to the governor’s office. The types of groups that donated money were an interesting variety of organizations. While most of the letters came out of the northeastern part of the country, there were other parts of the country that responded. The U.S. consul in Quebec sent twenty-five dollars. An individual from Salem, Oregon sent $187.77 in late November. The U.S. coin mint in San Francisco sent five hundred dollars in the beginning of November. Fairchild even received several donations for two hundred fifty pounds from a London business that was partners with business based in New York.51

People across the country seemed to be dedicated to the effort of raising money to send to Wisconsin. In many schools across Pennsylvania and New York, school children were bringing in clothes to send to help survivors get through the bitter Wisconsin winter. Other groups, like the workers at Anchor Safe and Webbing Co., located in Massachusetts, scraped together a little money to send even though they “depend upon

50 Alexander Brush to town supervisors in Erie County, October 20, 1871, Governor’s correspondence and letterbook, 1871, Box 25, Folder 2, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

51 Wisconsin governor’s office, Fire relief fund accounts, 1871, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
their work from day to day for sustenance” and had very little to spare.52 One letter expressed disappointment in the writer’s town of Lexington, Kentucky when they only came up with twenty dollars. He felt that they “came up short in their duties.”53 Others cities came up with creative ways to raise money. Putnam, Ohio raised one hundred eighty-eight dollars by selling tickets to a dinner, each ticket costing twenty-five cents. M’Keesport, Pennsylvania raised $72.35 by holding a concert. By the middle of November the Governor was receiving checks not just for several hundred dollars, but many checks for several thousand dollars. Between just the dates of November 17th through 20th, the governor received about seventy letters containing checks for various amounts of money.54

It is impossible to separate the Peshtigo fire completely from the Chicago fire. Both fires started approximately at the same time on the same day. While there is some coincidence in this, many experts consider the Chicago fire to be part of what is known as the Peshtigo Paradigm.55 Many survivors and residents of the area affected by the Peshtigo fire felt it was unfair how much money Chicago was getting when their own suffering was being ignored. Joseph Harris, a businessman from Menominee, complained that Chicago would be receiving three to four million dollars and Wisconsin would only be receiving two hundred thousand dollars.56 While it is fairly clear that Peshtigo was not ignored, there were certainly times that Peshtigo did not receive the

52 Letter to Lucius Fairchild, October 21, 1871, Governor’s correspondence and letterbook, 1871, Box 25, Folder 2, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
53 W. Bright Ashley to Lucius Fairchild, November 16, 1871, Governor’s correspondence and letterbook, 1871, Box 25, Folder 4, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
54 Governor’s correspondence and letterbook, 1871, Box 25, Folder 5, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
55 Gess and Lutz, Firestorm at Peshtigo, 208-209.
56 Joseph Harris to Lucius Fairchild, November 16, 1871, Governor’s correspondence and letterbook, 1871, Box 25, Folder 4, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
money it would have if not for the Chicago fire. A business located in Lancaster, which is in southwest Wisconsin, sent $1177.35 to Chicago in relief of the “great calamity to the whole West.” It is not clear whether this was money from just the business or a collection from the community, but it is clear that when the business sent 135 dollars to Madison for the Peshtigo fire almost a month later, it was a collection from the entire community.\(^{57}\) One city in New York had sent Chicago twelve thousand dollars and then was able to raise another two thousand to send to Wisconsin.\(^{58}\) It was fairly common for people sending money to Fairchild to say that they wished they had heard about Peshtigo sooner because they had already sent money to Chicago.

Peshtigo was able to find sympathy in some communities and individuals. Rural communities around the country many times sympathized with Peshtigo, saying that they thought their money was more needed in Wisconsin. Also, several people who at one time lived in Wisconsin felt that their money should go to support the people of Wisconsin. One way that the Chicago fire did benefit the relief effort of Peshtigo was that communities had already organized relief effort committees. In some cases this did cause money to get sent to Wisconsin more quickly than it would have otherwise.

**Conclusion**

On the evening of October 8\(^{th}\) the residents of Peshtigo and much of the area around Green Bay experienced what could probably be best described as “hell on earth.” Many people lost friends, family, and everything they owned. The survivors must have

\(^{57}\) Addison Burr and Theodore Addison Burr, Records, 1858-1875, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

\(^{58}\) Letter to Lucius Fairchild, October 20, 1871, Governor’s correspondence and letterbook, 1871, Box 25, Folder 2, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
felt an added weight of despair when they heard about the fire in Chicago. Survivors may have felt ignored at first while they watched the story of Chicago unfold. In a situation where the suffering of Wisconsin could have been left to a regional issue, Fairchild was able to gain the nation’s attention. Thanks to the amount of relief, the area was able to rebuild for the most part, though it was not quite the same as before. It took some time for Peshtigo and the surrounding area to recover. The valuable natural resource that had fueled the area’s economic growth, the vast forest, had suffered large losses and the wealth industrialists and lumber barons were hesitant to rebuild what they had lost in the fire.

In an article ranking the top ten natural disasters in America, the Peshtigo fire came in number six, one behind Hurricane Katrina. The Peshtigo fire, being one of the deadliest natural disasters in American history, ranks as the deadliest wildfire in America.\(^{59}\) From the evidence I have found, it is clear that the Peshtigo fire gained national attention in its time. Through time, though, the memory of the Peshtigo fire has faded, leaving it to be taught in Wisconsin history classes and remembered by monuments and a museum in Peshtigo. The fate of the Peshtigo fire may be similar to one of its victims. When the body of girl, killed by suffocation and untouched by the fire, was left unidentified, John Bagnall clipped off a piece of her hair before she was buried in the mass grave. He kept the lock of hair so that every time he looked at it, the little girl was remembered.\(^{60}\)

\(^{60}\) Gess and Lutz, Firestorm at Peshtigo, 171.
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