PROJECT SCROLL RESEARCH NOTE 2026-51

The Studebaker fires of 17 June 1872 and 24 August 1874 in the reports of their day

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SUMMARY

The two fires that destroyed the Studebaker works at South Bend are usually given from C. A. Carlisle's account of 1907: a loss of $80,000 in 1872, and in 1874 a loss of $350,000 "including 2,400 wagons." The reports of the time give other figures. The *South Bend Union* of 19 June 1872 put the fire "Shortly before six o'clock Monday evening" (17 June), traced it to "friction engendered in the journals of the fans used in carrying the dust and shavings to the engine room," and put the company's loss at $70,000. On 24 August 1874 the fire was first seen at 4:45 in the morning, by the *South Bend Tribune*, and destroyed "over 2,000 finished wagons stored in the basement"; the Associated Press itemized the loss at a total of $300,000, "thought to be rather under the loss." The $350,000 is already in the county atlas of 1875. The "fire of 1872" in Anderson's history of 1901, and the great fire of 5 September 1872 in Howard's of 1907, are Mishawaka's fire, not Studebaker's.

THE RECORD

1. **"The Fire," *South Bend Union*, 19 June 1872, reprinted in the *Marshall County Republican* (Plymouth, Ind.), 27 June 1872, p. 1**

   > *"Shortly before six o'clock Monday evening the alarm of fire was sounded … The fire is supposed to have originated from friction engendered in the journals of the fans used in carrying the dust and shavings to the engine room." Losses: "Studebaker Bros. Manufacturing Co. loss $70,000"*

   Library of Congress, Chronicling America · See the record (https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84038034/1872-06-27/ed-1/?sp=1)

2. **Wire report, *Jasper Weekly Courier* (Jasper, Ind.), 28 June 1872, p. 2**

   > *"Studebaker Brothers' extensive wagon manufactory, at South Bend, Ind., was burned Monday, June 17. … Loss, $50,000."*

   Library of Congress, Chronicling America · See the record (https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84023963/1872-06-28/ed-1/?sp=2)

3. ***South Bend Tribune*, reprinted in the *Indiana State Sentinel* (Indianapolis), 1 September 1874, p. 6**

   > *the fire was first seen "at 4:45"; destroyed in the three buildings "were over 2,000 finished wagons stored in the basement."*

   Library of Congress, Chronicling America · See the record (https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn87056600/1874-09-01/ed-1/?sp=6)

4. **Associated Press, South Bend, 24 August 1874, in the *Memphis Daily Appeal*, 25 August 1874, p. 1**

   > *"The loss in detail, as near as can be approximately estimated, is, on the building, $120,000; stock in process of manufacture, $50,000; finished wagons, $100,000, machinery, $15,000; iron and fixtures, $15,000; total, $300,000. This is thought to be rather under the loss."*

   Library of Congress, Chronicling America · See the record (https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83045160/1874-08-25/ed-1/?sp=1)

5. ***An Illustrated Historical Atlas of St. Joseph Co., Indiana*** **(Chicago, 1875), p. 28**

> *"The loss by the fire of 1874 was about $350,000."*

Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/illustratedhisto00higg/page/n31/mode/1up)

6. **C. A. Carlisle, in Timothy Edward Howard,** ***A History of St. Joseph County, Indiana*** **(Chicago, 1907)**

> *"In 1872 their frame factory ... was completely destroyed by fire, entailing a loss of $80,000. ... In 1874 the works were again burned to the ground, the loss amounting to $350,000, including 2,400 wagons"*

Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/historyofstjosep01howa)

7. **Anderson & Cooley,** ***South Bend and the Men Who Have Made It*** **(South Bend, 1901), p. 406, in the history of Mishawaka**

> *"THE FIRE OF 1872. In 1872 a great fire occurred in this city ... thirty-two houses in the business portion of the town had been destroyed"*

Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/southbendmenwhoh00ande)

WHAT IT CHANGES

The Studebaker fires are dated and measured from the reports of their own week: 17 June 1872, a little before six in the evening, with a loss of $70,000 by the local paper; and 24 August 1874, at about a quarter to five in the morning, with more than 2,000 finished wagons and an itemized loss of $300,000. The larger figures repeated since 1907 are shown to have grown in the telling, and the "fire of 1872" of two South Bend histories is shown to be Mishawaka's.

LIMITS

The local and wire reports disagree with each other: $70,000 and $50,000 in 1872, and in 1874 the Associated Press has the fire discovered at “four o’clock,” the *Tribune* at 4:45. The reports were written within a day or a week of the fires, before insurance was settled.

WHAT WE SEARCHED BEFORE CALLING IT NEW

Chapman (1880); Anderson (1901); Howard (1907); Erskine (1918, 1924); the 1875 atlas; Goodrich and Tuttle (1875); the Smithsonian Libraries timeline; Wikipedia; Chronicling America for June 1872 and August–September 1874.

Our standard for calling a finding new is set out in How we research (projectscroll.com/how-we-research/), and how we weigh each kind of record in Scrollsigns (projectscroll.com/scrollsigns/).

“New” means new to print as far as we can tell. If you know of an earlier publication, tell us and we will credit it here and raise the note’s version.

WORKS CITED

Earlier work, catalogues and databases named in this note, besides the records quoted above.

1. A. R. Erskine, *History of the Studebaker Corporation, 1852–1923* (South Bend, 1924). https://archive.org/details/historyofstudeba0000albe

THE FULL STORY

The finding is set out in context, with the rest of its sources, in The biggest wagon works in the world (projectscroll.com/news/the-biggest-wagon-works-in-the-world/). In the discoveries register:

- `stude-fires-1872-1874` (projectscroll.com/discoveries/#stude-fires-1872-1874)

HOW TO CITE THIS NOTE

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BibTeX

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