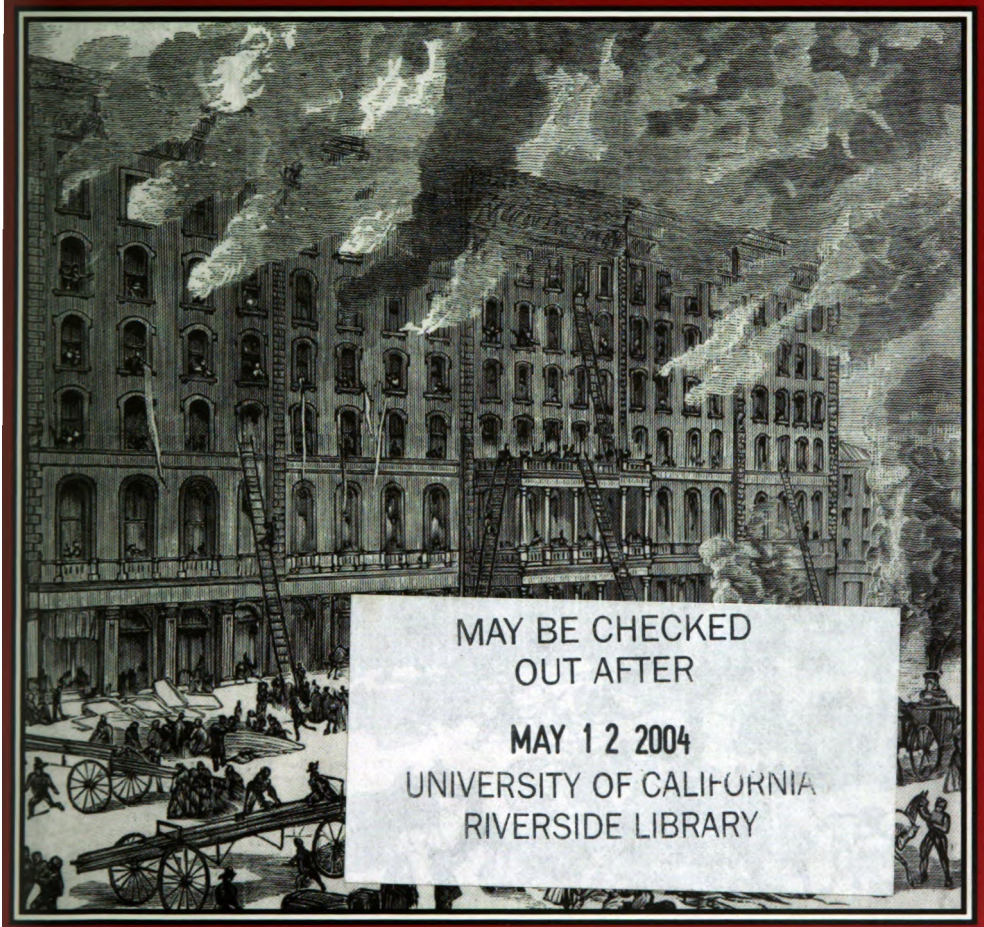
Missouri Historical Review



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COVER DESCRIPTION: The elegant Southern Hotel in St. Louis opened its doors in 1865. Twelve years later, despite its reputation as fire-resistant, the structure caught fire and burned to the ground early on the morning of April 11, 1877. Michael G. Tsichlis discusses the fire and the fire department's response to it in "Calamity and Glory: Phelim O'Toole, Mike Hester, and the Legacy of Heroism at the Southern Hotel Fire," beginning on page 223. The cover illustration, which shows the hotel almost fully engulfed in flames, appeared in *Leslie's Illustrated* on April 28, 1877. [Courtesy of Michael G. Tsichlis]

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Courtesy Michael Tsichlis

The Southern Hotel Engulfed in Flames

Calamity and Glory: Phelim O'Toole, Mike Hester, and the Legacy of Heroism at the Southern Hotel Fire

BY MICHAEL G. TSICHLIS*

In 1877, St. Louis resounded with political change and social upheaval. By April the separation of St. Louis City from St. Louis County, narrowly approved the year before, became a reality, creating a new political landscape whose impact on regional governance would be felt into the twenty-first century.[1] In July a general strike that had begun in the nation's railyards reached

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[1] *St. Louis Dispatch*, 19 April 1877. The paper noted that former county property, including the courthouse, jail, morgue, and insane asylum, had been officially "transferred" to the city on April 17. For more on this jurisdictional rift see William Cassella, Jr., "City-County Separation: The 'Great Divorce' of 1876," *The Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society* 15 (January 1959): 86-104.

St. Louis, sparking mass street demonstrations and shutting down virtually every major industry for a week.[2] Despite these profound events, the sensational story of the year belonged to the devastation wrought by fire.

Over a year before the Southern Hotel opened its doors in 1865, newspaper notices boastfully predicted that it was "sure to become one of the most popular public houses in the country."[3] Located two blocks south of the courthouse and taking up most of the block bounded by Fourth, Fifth, Walnut, and Elm Streets, the six-story hostelry lived up to expectations. Built at a cost of $1,250,000, plus an additional $200,000 for lavish furnishings, the Southern featured four hundred spacious, high-ceilinged rooms and could accommodate eight hundred guests. Local boosters compared it to the world-renowned Fifth Avenue Hotel in New York, and after the burning of the Lindell Hotel in 1867, the Southern assumed the mantle of the city's premier hotel. It was thought to be fire-resistant, with thick outer walls and numerous brick dividing walls. In early 1877 the owners equipped it with an "annunciator," a fire alarm device that responded to increases in room temperature. Water pipe outlets and sections of fire hose were available on each floor.[4]

But any notion that the Southern Hotel was impervious to fire was shattered on Wednesday, April 11, 1877. Shortly after 1:00 a.m., employees noticed smoke and flames emanating from the hotel's basement storeroom, which housed five-foot piles of hair used for mattress stuffing as well as other combustible material. With walls made of pine and the baggage elevator shaft a few feet away from the probable source of the fire, flames shot up to every floor in the building within minutes.[5] A thick, suffocating cloud soon permeated the entire structure, extinguishing the lights and leaving stunned boarders feeling their way in the dark.[6]

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[2] David T. Burbank, *Reign of the Rabble: The St. Louis General Strike of 1877* (New York: August M. Kelley, 1966).

[3] *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 9 September 1863.

[4] *St. Louis Dispatch*, 12 April 1877; *St. Louis Missouri Republican* 19 April 1877. Professor John Reese, a permanent boarder at the hotel, reported the presence of the fire protection equipment at the hotel.

[5] From the verdict of the coroner's inquest into the origin, progress, and management of the Southern Hotel fire, *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 28 April 1877. Hotel firemen (men who fed coal into the hotel's engines) first noticed a fire "under the elevator" (where the storeroom was located) probably no later than 1:10 a.m. Thomas Healy, testimony, coroner's inquest, ibid., 17 April 1877.

[6] Israel E. Russell, testimony, coroner's inquest, *St. Louis Daily Times*, 17 April 1877. Employed as an engineer at the hotel, Russell was asleep in his room when he was awakened, like many others, by the screams of women. He "crawled over and around twenty or more persons" on his way down the smoke-filled staircase.

Southern Hotel guest Kate Claxton, a nationally renowned stage actress performing in St. Louis, narrowly escaped the great blaze. Four months earlier while Claxton was performing at the Brooklyn Theater in New York, a fire had broken out that claimed two hundred lives. [Courtesy Michael Tsichlis]

One of the hotel's proprietors, George Darling, foolhardily attempted to reassure guests on the second floor that everything was under control and that the fire would be quickly put out. He advised them to return to their rooms, even though many lay choking on the floor! Sadly, some complied. Without hearing an alarm or even a rap on their doors, most guests were roused by the gagging smoke and the shrieks of other frantic lodgers. The "annunciator," which had been in use three weeks, did not sound an alarm until the fire was well under way. On the top floor at the rear of the building, dozens of mostly female employees who roomed at the hotel were instead awakened by the terrified screams of a fifteen-year-old black servant girl named Ella Jackson, whose cries were heard throughout the smoke-filled hallways.[7]

An alarm was not turned in for at least twenty minutes after the fire began. Unable to find the key to the building's fire alarm, a hotel clerk instead sent a call to the police through the district alarm telegraph.[8] This alarm was not part of the city's fire alarm telegraph system, so the fire department was not immediately notified. Instead, the Salvage Corps, whose principal job was to protect and remove property from burning buildings, arrived

[7] Isaac Cook, testimony, coroner's inquest, *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 18 April 1877; ibid., 23 April 1877; *St. Louis Dispatch*, 2nd ed., 20 April 1877. In the weeks just prior to the fire, the "annunciator" had triggered several false alarms in rooms that were very warm but not on fire. A repairman sent to adjust the device apparently reduced its sensitivity too much.

[8] George W. Ford, testimony, coroner's inquest, *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 18 April 1877.

on the scene. Funded by local fire insurance companies, Salvage Corps wagons carried small pressurized chemical fire extinguishers, but such equipment proved useless against the fast-spreading flames. A dozen police arriving early on the scene ran up the main staircase and through the halls shouting "Fire!" and hoping to rouse more than three hundred people rooming at the hotel.[9]

At 1:30 a.m. an alarm was finally sent through the fire alarm telegraph from box twenty-seven, located a half block north of the hotel.[10] Assistant Fire Chief John Lindsay and the men of Hook and Ladder Three were among the first to arrive at the scene, followed by six of the city's fire engines. By the time the steamers pulled up, flames were bursting through the roof of the building. "The firemen seemed to be unnerved," observed the *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, "as they realized the terrible responsibility that lay before them." Indeed, confusion and hysteria reigned on the ground surrounding the hotel. The *St. Louis Dispatch* noted that hundreds of onlookers scurried about, "directing everybody else as to the best mode of rescuing persons who appeared at the upper windows."[11]

Within ten minutes a second alarm went out, followed by a third alarm, which summoned every engine and ladder truck in the city. A lack of adequate water pressure rendered the streams directed at the top of the building ineffective; they dissipated into "little more than spray" before reaching their target.[12] Meanwhile a group of firemen rushed into the building and unsuccessfully attempted to squelch the fire by playing water into the blazing baggage elevator. Others tried running up the main staircase to reach people on the upper floors, but the thick, choking smoke forced them to retreat. Within a half hour the flames had become so extensive that Lindsay ordered his men to concentrate on saving lives rather than the building.[13]

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[9] *St. Louis Daily Times*, 12 April 1877. In addition to about 75 regular boarders, there were nearly 160 transient guests from twenty-seven states and several from England and Germany. Ibid., 14 April 1877. A large number of hotel employees, including about one hundred servant women and girls, also boarded at the Southern. Ibid., 6 May 1877.

[10] Silas Benedict, testimony, coroner's inquest, *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 19 April 1877. Benedict operated the fire alarm telegraph.

[11] Ibid., 11 April 1877; *St. Louis Dispatch*, 11 April 1877.

[12] Fire Chief Henry Clay Sexton, testimony, coroner's inquest, *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 26 April 1877. Sexton claimed that too many engines had drawn from surrounding plugs, resulting in inadequate pressure to reach the top of the 110-foot hotel. Ibid., 11 April 1877.

[13] *St. Louis Dispatch*, 2nd ed., 20 April 1877; Assistant Chief John Lindsay, testimony, coroner's inquest, *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 21 April 1877.

After the third alarm, Fire Chief Clay Sexton arrived and, within moments, knew the hotel was too far gone to save.[14] Sexton had witnessed many large-scale fires throughout his three decades in firefighting, and this was one of the worst. While he ordered the firemen to continue playing water, his main focus turned to rescuing lives, and his most valuable tool was the Skinner fire escape.[15] An early version of an aerial ladder truck, the Skinner escape was later derided in the local press as Sexton's "brag toy." Before its purchase three years earlier, the apparatus had been tested publicly, its ladders run up to the top floor of a six-story building while a ladderman ascended the apparatus and staged the rescue of a young woman hanging out a window. The building was the Southern Hotel, and the ladderman was a former sailor and Irish native recently recruited into the department named Phelim O'Toole. In a twist of fate, both the Skinner and O'Toole were now back at the test site, and the apparatus was to be used at a fire for the first time.[16]

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[14] Assistant Chief John Shockey, testimony, coroner's inquest, *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 21 April 1877. Sexton had garnered a national reputation as a pioneer in the growing field of urban firefighting. He began as a volunteer fireman in the 1840s and was appointed the first chief of the newly created St. Louis Fire Department in 1857, the second municipally operated fire department in the nation. After being removed by military authorities during the Civil War as a suspected Southern sympathizer, he was reappointed in 1869.

[15] Ibid., 11 April 1877.

[16] Sexton, testimony, ibid., 26 April 1877.

A former volunteer captain, Henry Clay Sexton was appointed the fire department's first chief in 1857, only to be removed in 1862 for alleged Confederate sympathies. He was reappointed in 1869 and built the department into a metropolitan force. He resigned in 1885 after being elected collector of revenue. [Courtesy Michael Tsichlis]

Despite the late alarm, most of the hotel's guests managed to escape with little or no injury. Among them was thirty-year-old Hungarian-born journalist and politician Joseph Pulitzer. After helping a number of people to safety, the future publishing giant and creator of the Pulitzer Prize quickly dashed down the smoke-filled staircase to the Fifth Street exit, "sans shirt, stockings, or anything else," according the *St. Louis Dispatch*. (Pulitzer later claimed he dressed before leaving the building.) Shaken and "nearly choked to death," he speculated to a reporter on the street that many people on the upper floors probably never heard an alarm and that "the loss of life . . . will probably be great."[17]

For awhile it appeared as though Pulitzer's ominous prediction might come true. Many lodgers became seized by panic. Dozens on the lower levels who had access to the large portico balconies above the front and side entrances shouted loudly for help, but they were relatively safe, as standard fire ladders could reach them. There seemed to be little hope, however, for the terrified souls stranded on the upper floors. With smoke and flames pushing at their backs, many hung out the windows, "wringing their hands, beg-

[17] *St. Louis Dispatch*, 11 April 1877; *St. Louis Daily Times*, 17 April 1877. Although Pulitzer reportedly told the *Dispatch* on April 11 that "he never returned to his rooms" and essentially dashed out of the hotel half naked, his testimony at the coroner's inquest was very different. He claimed he had helped two women down the stairs and then run back to his room to get dressed and retrieve his eyeglasses. The *Daily Times* somewhat supports his story, reporting on April 11 that Pulitzer "remained behind to ensure that all within his reach were out of their rooms."

Journalist Joseph Pulitzer testified at the coroner's inquest following the Southern fire that he saw no fire engines for a full forty minutes after the blaze was discovered, an assertion Chief Sexton strongly refuted. Pulitzer's losses and personal experiences at the fire likely influenced his decision to launch a press campaign against alleged fire department mismanagement four years later. [Courtesy Michael Tsichlis]

ging,—pleading—praying," reported the *Republican*. Faced with the prospect of death by suffocation and burning, numerous people either jumped or attempted to lower themselves by ropes made of bed linens hastily tied together. Nine plunged to their deaths.[18]

Firemen, police, and other rescuers on the ground scrambled to save whomever they could. A heightened sense of urgency arose when the rescuers discovered that a large group, mostly girls and young women employed by the hotel, were crowded around a sixth-floor window on the southwest side of the building, directly above Tony Faust's elegant one-story oyster bar.[19] One of the older women became panic-stricken and jumped, and another fell while scaling down a line of bed linens that ripped. Both were killed on impact, their mangled bodies lying side by side on the first-floor roof below. Two younger female employees followed. One miraculously survived the jump, but a twenty-year-old who dove from a fifth-floor window met her death on the Elm Street side.[20]

Access to the trapped girls using a standard ladder was impossible, so firemen and volunteers improvised by splicing together two of the department's longest ladders, raising them against the wall from atop the roof of Faust's restaurant. But they only reached the fifth floor. Mike Hester, a modestly built but nimble engine driver from the Tens fire company, stepped forward to ascend the shaky set of ladders. Hester bucked protocol to join in the rescue, for as a driver he was required to stand by his engine. No one, including the supervising assistant chief, sought to stop him.[21] As Hester climbed, Pat Conway of the Fours handed him a fifty-pound scaling ladder with a hook on one end.[22] From his perch on the top rung, Hester was still several feet

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[18] *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 11 April 1877. Those who met their deaths by either jumping or falling from the upper windows included five men and four women; three of the latter were hotel employees. A complete list of known victims' names can be found in the verdict of the coroner's inquest published in the *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, April 28, 1877.

[19] According to the testimony of Annie Noonan, who worked at the hotel as an "ice cream girl" and was in the room, nine servant girls were trapped together. She stated that fireman Mike Hester rescued eight and that Bridget Keefe had jumped just prior to Hester's ascent up the ladders. Ibid., 20 April 1877.

[20] *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 11 April 1877; *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 28 April 1877.

[21] *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 24 April 1877.

[22] Ibid., 13 April 1877. Thirty-eight-year-old Pat Conway, a native of Ireland and a former sailor, had been with the fire department nearly four years. *The Roster of Personnel of the St. Louis Fire Department* (1857-1943), microfilm roll 122, St. Louis City Archives, St. Louis City Hall.

short and slightly askew of the girls' window. In a feat of great strength and dexterity, he extended his arm up and anchored the hook on the windowsill, then swung over like a pendulum along the wall before he could climb up the ladder. Mary Kennedy, a hotel kitchen employee, looked down at the fireman in amazement. "He came up like a bird flying in the air," she later recalled.[23]

When Hester entered the room, he was immediately swarmed by the frightened girls, who grabbed hold of him and "[called] upon God to bless him for his courage." With smoke and flames pressing against the room, Hester quickly commanded the attention of the hysterical group, first swearing at them, then ordering them to be quiet and carefully listen to his instructions. Sitting on the windowsill, he methodically described the escape plan. He would descend the hooked ladder to the top of the spliced ladders. The girls would follow him, without looking down, and he would wait atop the long ladders to receive each of them and help her down to safety. Although they would be descending from a dizzying height, Hester told them "that they could accomplish the thing had they the courage."[24]

The fireman's tough talk apparently gave the girls confidence. One by one they came down the hooked ladder, which was two feet short of reaching the spliced ladders. Hester helped each of them make the transition, then handed them to Pat Conway and Charles Barry of the Tens, who ensured that the girls safely reached the ground. Marcus Wolf, a real estate agent among the spectators watching Hester scale the hotel wall and bring down the girls, later declared: "It was the bravest act of devotion and duty I ever saw in my life." The *St. Louis Daily Times* agreed: "It was one of the finest exhibitions of cool bravery ever seen." Chief Sexton boasted: "That Mike Hester would go where the devil wouldn't dare."[25]

Meanwhile, others cried for help from the top floors. The Skinner fire escape, praised several years before as a breakthrough in lifesaving technology, turned out to be extremely clumsy. It took ten men five minutes to raise the extension ladder, and when raised on uneven ground, it threatened to tip over, requiring at least four men to keep it steady.[26] It nevertheless proved indispensable.

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[23] Marcus A. Wolf, testimony, and Mary Kennedy, testimony, coroner's inquest, *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 19 April 1877.

[24] Ibid., 13 April 1877; *St. Louis Daily Times*, 12 April 1877.

[25] *St. Louis Daily Times*, 12, 19 April 1877; *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 13 April 1877.

[26] Lindsay, testimony, *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 21 April 1877.

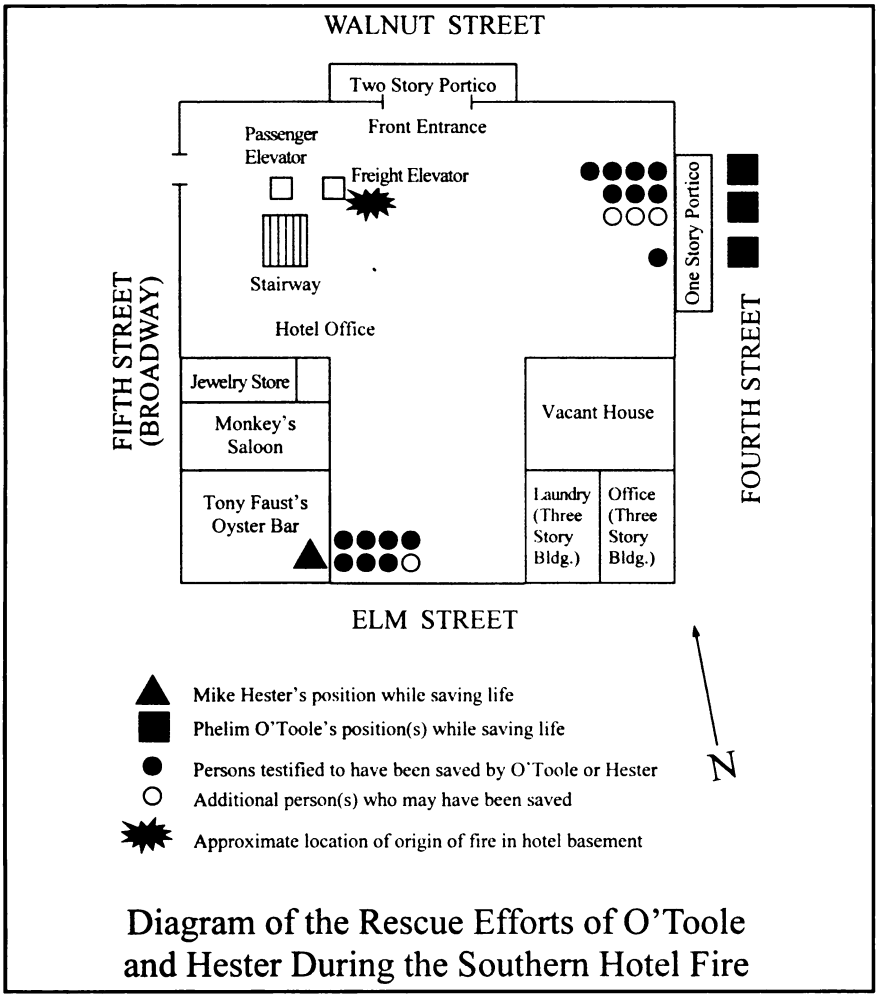

Diagram of the Rescue Efforts of O'Toole and Hester During the Southern Hotel Fire

Courtesy Michael Tsichlis

The Skinner escape arrived with the men of Hook and Ladder Three at the front entrance on the Walnut Street side of the hotel. After finding no one in the windows, Assistant Chief Lindsay ordered the Skinner moved to the east side of the building on Fourth Street, where the laddermen faced several problems. A wide sidewalk extending from the building, as well as two sets of rail lines in the street, made it difficult to balance the apparatus. The biggest obstacle, however, proved to be the one-story, columned portico that jutted out some twelve feet from the hotel.[27]

[27] Phelim O'Toole, testimony, coroner's inquest, *St. Louis Daily Times*, 24 April 1877.

Washington University physics professor John Reese, his ailing wife, and two hotel servant girls, Joanna Halpin and Julia Burke, stared down at the activity from a sixth-floor room. The flames that had begun in the hotel's cellar had quickly risen and were flaring out of the sixth-floor elevator shaft like a blast furnace. The intense smoke kept Reese and his wife barricaded in their room and lunging their heads out the window for fresh air. Halpin and Burke, roommates on the sixth floor, had been awakened like many by the shrieks of Ella Jackson. After grabbing a few clothes, the girls ran for the stairs but passed them in the darkness of the smoke. They were stumbling down the hallway, nearly dropping from suffocation, when Reese suddenly opened his door. The girls fell into his room, begging the professor not to put them out. "Certainly not," he replied, telling them to join him and his wife at the window to await help from below.[28] Meanwhile their position had become more precarious. Flames now rolled off the roof directly above them, sending down a shower of cinders and plumes of smoke so thick that it became difficult to see the firemen working to save them.[29]

Eventually the Skinner apparatus was fully extended, its ladders raised to a nearly perpendicular angle of eighty-five degrees, enough to nearly reach the fifth floor. The man who stepped up to scale it was the tillerman for the Skinner, Phelim O'Toole, a former sailor who possessed a nerve for doing extraordinary things that would cause others to hesitate.[30] After firemen pulled out several people from the fifth floor, O'Toole concentrated on the foursome hanging out of the window above.[31] The ladder had been adjusted so that it was braced against the portico, but it still fell about ten feet short of Reese's window.[32] As he went up the ladder, O'Toole called out to his comrades

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[28] Julia Burke, testimony, and John Reese, testimony, coroner's inquest, *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 19 April 1877.

[29] Reese, testimony, *St. Louis Daily Times*, 19 April 1877.

[30] *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 24 April 1877. O'Toole testified before the coroner's inquest that he served as "tillerman on the Skinner fire escape." The tillerman was an important position that entailed steering the rear axle of the long apparatus.

[31] Ibid., 19 April 1877. According to Burke, before the ladder got near their window there were "two or three others at a window almost under us, on the floor below." In his testimony, Reese stated: "The firemen came up rapidly on it [the Skinner], I think two first, and took out a man first and two other persons. . . . [T]hree persons, as far as I could see, were saved from that window, which was just diagonally below us, on the fifth floor." *St. Louis Daily Times*, 24 April 1877.

[32] Reese, testimony, *St. Louis Daily Times*, 19 April 1877. Apparently the Skinner was braced against the one-story portico, which left the ladder at a diagonal tilt below the Reeses' window and away from the wall by at least a few feet. Reese claimed the ladder was fifteen feet from their window, but O'Toole testified that he was "four or five feet" from Reese's window when he reached the top. Counting O'Toole's height and the length of a typical bedsheet, O'Toole's testimony is probably more accurate. See ibid., 24 April 1877.

for a lightweight rope, the same type he had once used at sea to set sails aloft. Unable to loosen the knots that bound the rope together, O'Toole called up to the group at the window and asked that they throw down a bedsheet. "What do you want with a sheet?" they responded incredulously. "Well," O'Toole replied with a hint of sarcasm, "if you pass me a sheet and hold on to an end of it, I will save you."[33] The agile ladderman twisted the sheet tight, tied it to his rope, and ascended it hand-over-hand into Reese's window.[34] "[It was] just like God had sent him to save us," Julia Burke recalled of O'Toole's entrance. Joanna Halpin likened the appearance of the intrepid fireman to "an angel sent for our deliverance."[35]

The group was elated and terrified at the same time. Working quickly, O'Toole loosened the coiled-up rope with a knife he apparently obtained from Reese.[36] First he made a life preserver out of it for himself, attaching a line to the center post of the window. He then tied a line around Professor Reese, who was hanging out the window with the three women, gasping for air. O'Toole lowered the professor to the fifth-floor window, not far from the top of the Skinner ladder, which still hung in the air. He then ordered the professor to untie himself and send the rope up, and within moments O'Toole lowered Mrs. Reese, who "seemed as helpless as if she were dead" from the traumatic experience.[37] The professor pushed his wife out to the ladder and into the waiting arms of fireman Ed Thorne, who carried her down to safety.[38]

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[33] O'Toole, testimony, *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 24 April 1877; *St. Louis Daily Times*, 24 April 1877.

[34] There are a few variations on the story of how O'Toole reached the Reeses' window. While O'Toole's testimony as published in the April 24 *Times* stated that he simply climbed up the twisted bedsheet, the testimony as it appeared in the April 24 *Missouri Republican* depicted him climbing the rope he threw up to them: "I let them have the rope, and they pulled it up." Professor Reese testified that O'Toole tied the rope to the bedsheet and as Reese pulled on it, the ladderman climbed up into the room. See the *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 19 April 1877, and the *St. Louis Daily Times*, 19 April 1877. The latter version seems more plausible, since O'Toole's rope was still partially tied together and was not loosened until he entered the room.

[35] Burke, testimony, and Joanna Halpin, testimony, coroner's inquest, *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 18, 19 April 1877.

[36] O'Toole stated in his testimony published in the April 24 *Missouri Republican* and *Times* that he cut the bound rope with a knife given to him by someone in the room (probably Reese). He admitted he thought the knots binding the rope were more rotted than they actually were, but while at the top of the ladder, he could not break them apart. Why he left the ladder and ascended into the room without a way to cut the rope loose is unclear. O'Toole stated that he kept the knife as a souvenir after the rescue. "I'm going to keep that as long as I live," he reportedly said. *St. Louis Daily Times*, 24 April 1877.

[37] *St. Louis Daily Times*, 24 April 1877; Burke, testimony, *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 19 April 1877.

[38] Reese, testimony, *St. Louis Daily Times*, 19 April 1877.

O'Toole treated the girls differently. Both were large (Burke weighed two hundred pounds), and the fireman feared that swinging them out to the ladder would be too perilous. Instead he lowered each to the roof of the first-floor portico, where they could safely be taken down to the street. First he sent down Halpin, handling her, as she later recalled, "as if I had been the most precious charge in the world to him."[39] Reese tried to push the girl out to the ladder, but when O'Toole saw what was happening, he cursed at the professor and told him to let her continue down to the portico. "I confess that I used an expression in telling him to let go that was not gentlemanly," he later admitted, "but [under the circumstances] it suited first rate."[40] Finally, the fireman began to lower Burke, but the girl's weight caused the rope to slip. When O'Toole saw that she was only about four feet above the portico, he let her go. He later admitted thinking to himself: "Old girl, ye may fall a little, an' it won't hurt ye much." Burke did not seem to mind the tumble. "[W]e owe our lives to him," she said of O'Toole. Within minutes Reese jumped out to the ladder and was helped down, followed by O'Toole, who swung out to it on his rope.[41]

But the Irishman's work was far from over. Firefighters moved the Skinner to another window on Fourth Street, where O'Toole took out an unidentified man and two women. The firemen continued to circle the building with the cumbersome ladder, looking for victims. They finally returned to the Fourth Street side, where Charles Kennedy, a traveler from New York, was standing outside a fourth-floor window and ready to jump.[42] Kennedy had been awakened from sleep by the pungent smell of smoke. When he opened his door, he found the hallway floor and walls covered in crackling flames. After first pondering whether he had come to St. Louis only to die, Kennedy gathered his senses and shut the door and transom to his room. He then opened his window and stepped out onto the tiny stone sill in his night-clothes, closing the window behind him. As he shouted for help, he looked back and saw flames burning through the door of his room, quickly devouring

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[39] *St. Louis Daily Times*, 18 April 1877.

[40] *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 24 April 1877.

[41] Ibid., 24 April 1877; Burke, testimony, ibid., 19 April 1877; O'Toole, testimony, *St. Louis Daily Times*, 24 April 1877.

[42] O'Toole, testimony, *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 24 April 1877. Little is known about the three people O'Toole pulled out on the Fourth Street side. Interestingly, when Assistant Chief Lindsay ordered the truck to the Elm Street side, O'Toole did not mention seeing anyone there, including the seven or eight servant girls that Mike Hester eventually rescued. In his testimony, Lindsay admitted to seeing the girls on Elm Street but did not mention taking the ladder to them. He may have seen that rescue efforts were under way. See the *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 21 April 1877.

Several weeks after the conflagration, Leslie's Illustrated featured portrayals of the Southern Hotel fire on its cover. The drawings depict the hotel guests' confusion and desperation.

Courtesy Michael Tsichlis

the carpeting and bed linens. The window became so hot that it burned his hand, at which point he decided to jump. The next moment Kennedy spotted the Skinner ladder rounding the corner, and suddenly his hope was revived.[43]

Once again the laddermen struggled to get the apparatus into position, but it remained too far away. O'Toole ran to the top of the ladder and threw Kennedy a rope, telling him to cling to it tightly. He then secured the line around several rungs of the ladder, knowing that if the New Yorker jumped, the lifeline would help break his fall and he might survive. With searing heat at his back, Kennedy shouted to the ladderman that he could hold on no longer. "I will jump!" he cried to O'Toole. "No, damn it, don't jump," O'Toole shot back, then explained to Kennedy that they would reposition the truck closer so he could come down.[44] O'Toole's firm, confident tone gave the frightened man the will to hold on.

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[43] *St. Louis Dispatch*, 1st ed., 14 April 1877. There is some discrepancy about which floor Kennedy was on. In his interview with the *Dispatch*, he stated, "I occupied room No. 238, on the fourth floor of the hotel, on the Fourth Street side." He reiterated this in a letter to the *St. Louis Daily Times* published on April 15. This contradicts O'Toole's testimony at the coroner's inquest, where the ladderman stated Kennedy was on the sixth floor. See the *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 24 April 1877. Because the Skinner escape fell short of the room by only several feet, rather than ten or more (as with Professor Reese's sixth-floor room), it is more likely that Kennedy was stranded on the fourth floor.

[44] O'Toole, testimony, *St. Louis Daily Times*, 24 April 1877.

Within minutes the firemen moved the Skinner closer, resting the top of the ladder against the wall five feet below the window. When O'Toole came back up, he wrapped his legs securely around the ladder and found he could reach Kennedy's feet. He then directed him to gradually step down from the sill and let go. At that moment the window glass shattered, followed by a burst of flames. Kennedy lunged forward and landed in the sturdy Irishman's arms, to the jubilant cheers of the crowd below. Overcome with excitement, Kennedy joyfully shouted: "Hurrah for the St. Louis Fire Department! My God, New York is not yet dead!" His first reaction was to hug his savior, but O'Toole had already rushed back to tend the Skinner ladder. As he coiled his rope, his hands severely blistered, the ladderman glanced back to see an awesome spectacle: half of the Fourth Street wall came crashing to the ground in a giant cloud of smoke, including the area where he had just rescued Kennedy. "I can never express my gratitude to that man," the New Yorker said of O'Toole two days later. "He is the bravest being I ever saw."[45] Charles Kennedy was the last person to get out of the Southern Hotel alive.[46]

By dawn the great blaze had burned down, leaving the hotel a burnt shell surrounding layers of smoldering, compacted debris.[47] "The ornamental pride of St. Louis and a triumph of Western enterprise succumbed to the devouring element," bemoaned the *St. Louis Daily Times*.[48] The loss of life related to the fire was estimated at fourteen, although several people remained unaccounted for and were thought to have been burned and crushed under the rubble.[49] Most lost everything they owned. The rescued servant women were left completely destitute and, as the *Times* pointed out, "entirely dependent upon the charity of the world." The public responded to the plea. A fund was set up to receive contributions, and within eight days, St. Louisans raised nearly $3,500 to be distributed among the victims.[50]

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[45] O'Toole, testimony, *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 24 April 1877; *St. Louis Dispatch*, 1st ed., 14 April 1877.

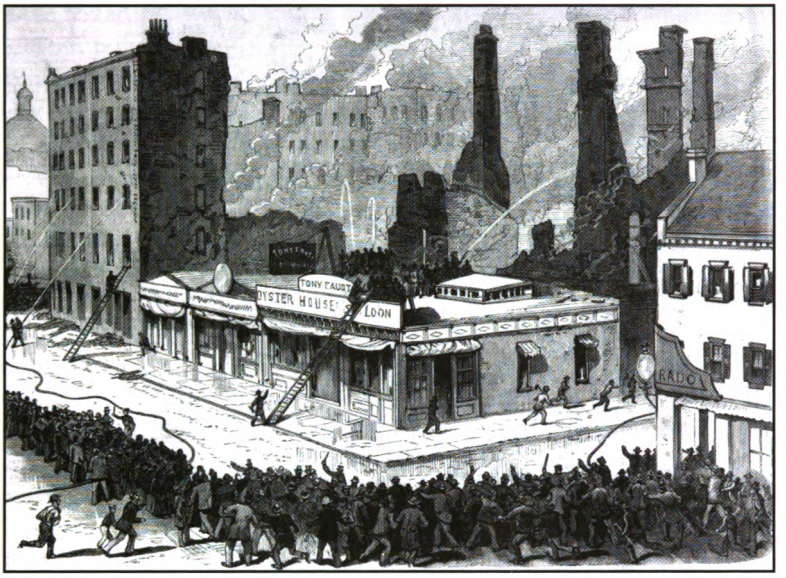
[46] O'Toole, testimony, *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 24 April 1877; *St. Louis Dispatch*, 1st ed., 11 April, 1st ed., 14 April 1877.

[47] *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 12 April 1877. The *Missouri Republican* provided the most detailed and eloquent description of the immediate post-fire ruins, noting ironies such as the two potted plants that survived the destruction and stood out as the last living things amid the desolation.

[48] *St. Louis Daily Times*, extra ed., 11 April 1877.

[49] *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 17 April 1877. More than a week after the fire, the *Times* reported that Charlie Kiefnicht, the headwaiter at the Southern, was among the missing. *St. Louis Daily Times*, 19 April 1877.

[50] *St. Louis Daily Times*, 16, 19 April 1877. Several theater performances were held to benefit the servant girls, and saloonkeepers proudly contributed a share of their proceeds.



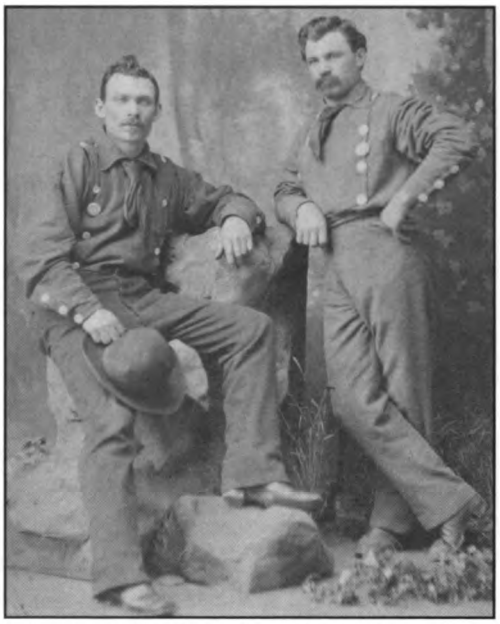
Courtesy Michael Tsichlis

This rendering shows the southwest corner of the Southern, where Mike Hester rescued a roomful of servant girls after scaling to the top floor on two spliced ladders braced on the roof of Faust's Saloon.

While the blaze was horrific, the number of verifiable dead did not exceed the twenty-two who had died in the Pacific Hotel fire two decades earlier, nor was the property damage as widespread as the Great Fire of 1849, which destroyed fifteen blocks along the St. Louis riverfront. Even the reported financial loss on the building and surrounding structures was less than the Lindell Hotel fire ten years earlier.[51] After two weeks of testimony by hotel staff and guests, as well as firemen, police, and onlookers, an inquest by the city coroner's office concluded that the fire's spread was due to the tardiness of an alarm, and that "the fire department did their duty with efficiency and promptness, as did also the police department and salvage corps."[52] The coroner's panel recommended that hotels and other large public buildings in the city be equipped with working fire alarms and extinguishing equipment

[51] Figures for losses come from the *Annual Report of the Fire Department of the City of St. Louis, Report of Fires in the City of St. Louis for the Year Ending March 31, 1878.* It is unclear why there is a large discrepancy between the cost of building the Southern ($1,250,000) and its after-fire insured loss ($417,500), but it is likely due to the high cost of labor and materials when the hotel was built during the Civil War. See *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 11 April 1877.

[52] *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 28 April 1877.



Courtesy Michael Tsichlis/The Robert C. May Collection

This photo of Phelim O'Toole (left) and Mike Hester (right) was taken shortly after the Southern Hotel fire.

and that staff be properly trained to use them. As is often true in the history of firefighting, it took a large-scale tragedy to spur reform.

While the coroner's inquiry exonerated the fire department from mismanagement during the great blaze, the St. Louis press was less than united on the subject. The *Globe-Democrat* quickly pointed out that there was a "seemingly interminable delay" in the arrival of the ladder trucks and that "the whole conduct of the department was a miserable failure, and a disgrace to the city." The *Dispatch* appeared to agree: "It is the prevailing opinion of eye-witnesses, that the whole management of the fire was tardy, deficient, and merits the severest censure." But the *Times* shot back at the "grumblers," noting that "every man, woman, and child who showed themselves at the window of the hotel that night was saved, except . . . [those] who jumped out and killed themselves." The paper pointed out that more than a hundred people had been helped from hotel balconies to safety by firemen, and at least as many had been guided or carried out of the building by policemen.[53] Indeed,

[53] *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 13 April 1877; *St. Louis Dispatch*, extra ed., 12 April 1877; *St. Louis Daily Times*, 15 April 1877.

given the hazardous situations they put themselves into, it is amazing that no firefighters, police, or salvage corps men had been seriously hurt or killed.

While the Southern Hotel fire was a tragic incident that prompted critical scrutiny, it also brought forth a celebration of the courage and heroism exhibited by those who risked their lives to save others. Two men in particular stood out for special adulation. Not since volunteer fireman Thomas Targee gave his life during the Great Fire of 1849 had St. Louisans been exposed to the extraordinary heroism of individual firemen. Although every member of the fire department on the ground at the Southern played a role in saving lives on that dreadful day, the spectacular actions of Phelim O'Toole and Mike Hester were elevated above all others and provided a halo effect for the fire department that no newspaper editorial could dislodge. One was hard-pressed not to admire "the plucky firemen," as the *Republican* referred to Hester and O'Toole.[54] Both possessed a genuine, honest, down-to-earth character combined with a brashness toward firefighting that commanded the awe and respect of civilians and fellow firemen alike.

Despite their common experiences on that fateful night, the two heroes came from vastly different backgrounds. Twenty-nine-year-old O'Toole (called "Toole" in the press) had been born in a small fishing village in Ireland, six miles south of Dublin. At the age of twelve he set off to sea as a cabin boy, where he climbed tall masts and tended to sails. As a seaman, he traveled the world from the Black Sea to Brazil, even finding work for awhile in St. Louis as a steamboatman. He returned to Ireland and married Annie Doyle, and after their first child was born, he moved his family to St. Louis, eventually finding work on the levee sewing tarpaulins and making sails. He was referred for a position in the fire department by Chief Sexton's brother, John, who "recommended him as a man who would be a credit to the department."[55] O'Toole began work on November 1, 1872, and was assigned to Hook and Ladder One at 216 North Seventh Street (which became Hook and Ladder Three in 1874).[56] He and his family moved across the street from the firehouse, an arrangement that allowed him to stay close to his wife and two young children.

Like O'Toole, thirty-five-year-old Mike Hester had been born in Ireland, but he immigrated to America with his family while still an infant.[57] As a boy

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[54] *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 19 April 1877.

[55] Ibid., 7 July 1880.

[56] "Phelim O'Toole," *Roster of Personnel*.

[57] Hester was born on July 4, 1841. "Michael Hester, Hero of the Southern Hotel Fire, Dead," *St. Louis Fire Department Journal* (May 1931): 8.

he acquired a love for horses, and several years later he took a job as a driver for the American Express Company. During the Civil War, he drove six-mule teams that pulled wagons loaded with Union army supplies deep into Confederate territory. After hearing of his extraordinary skill as a horse driver, in 1866 Fire Chief George Stevens sent for the young man and asked him to join the department. He was assigned to Engine Company Ten, located on the far western end of the city at Walnut Street and Jefferson Avenue. Hester's expertise with horses led to a position as the department's chief equestrian trainer. He screened horses under consideration by the department for purchase and weeded out those with lackluster performance. These evaluations proved critical at a time when the department's ability to respond quickly to fires depended on the health and training of its horses. Hester's position as engine driver required that he live in the firehouse seven days a week. Perhaps owing to this, he never married.[58]

In the weeks following the great blaze, O'Toole and Hester were deluged with accolades by the press and the public. A group of merchants initiated a subscription fund through the *Missouri Republican* that raised nearly $580, which was split between the city's new working-class heroes.[59] The awards amounted to over three months' pay. Other commercially motivated tributes included sheet music of a song dedicated to O'Toole and Hester that, for forty cents, came illustrated with "faithful portraits" of both heroes.[60]

Each received gold medals for their gallantry through funds raised by private citizens. A visiting "eccentric" Englishman who witnessed the Southern Hotel fire was so impressed by O'Toole's bravery that he had an ornate gold medal struck in the ladderman's honor. According to the April 18 and 19 *St. Louis Daily Times*, the inscription read: "Presented by an English gentleman to Phelim Toole for his heroic conduct at the Southern Hotel fire, St. Louis, April 11, 1877." O'Toole also received a gold badge from Professor Reese and his wife. The medal was inscribed: "For bravery in saving the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Reese, at the burning of the Southern hotel, April 11, 1877."[61]

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[58] "Hero of the Southern Fire 'Still Good as Ever,'" *St. Louis Globe-Democrat Magazine*, 20 February 1927; "Michael Hester," 8.

[59] *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 13 May 1877. The newspaper started the "O'Toole and Hester" fund at the request of five men who wrote a letter appearing in the April 17 edition. The fund raised $579.90. The letter stated in part: "Small enough is the pay of the fireman for his ordinary labors, and when he proves in an hour of great peril that duty is dearer to him than his own blood and breath, his heroism should be lauded and others should be incited to emulate it by better praise than the mere sounding of his name."

[60] Ibid., 30 April 1877.

[61] Ibid., 20 April 1877.

Several men who witnessed Hester's heroism quietly raised money to have a gold medal struck in his honor as well. Designed by the renowned Jaccard jewelry company, the medal was described by the *Missouri Republican*: "It is of pure gold about two and a half inches in diameter and very heavy. In the center is engraved a faithful drawing of the hotel in flames, with the ladders reaching from Tony Faust's roof to the window at which appears several figures. In the foreground is steamer No. 10 arriving on the scene. Surrounding the centre is an elaborate raised border of ladders, ropes, axes and other appliances of the service. At the top and linked fast to the medal is a ladder around which twines a driver's whip and over all is a fireman's helmet. On the obverse side of the medal is the following inscription: 'Presented to Michael J. Hester, driver of Engine No. 10, St. Louis fire department, for conspicuous gallantry in saving human lives on the occasion of the great fire at the Southern hotel, April 11, 1877, St. Louis, Missouri.'"[62]

A benefit was held for both firemen at the Theatre Comique. During a break in the show, O'Toole was invited onstage and presented with the gold medal the English visitor had made for him. Dressed in his drab fireman's garb, O'Toole was introduced as a man whose example should "inspire others to emulate his courage, his firmness, and his splendid efficiency in time of peril." The former sailor received his medallion amid thunderous applause. Now publicly celebrated for his fearlessness, O'Toole admitted that he was more nervous at that moment than he had been the night of the great fire. In a humble, self-deprecating manner consistent with his character, the ladderman remarked that although he was sincerely grateful for the public recognition of his services on that dreadful night, "there were other men connected with the department who merited as much recognition as himself for their courage and bravery."[63] He meekly departed the stage, it was reported, "with a very evident feeling of relief that . . . the most trying kind of an ordeal, was over."[64]

It is difficult to ascertain the precise number of people saved by Hester and O'Toole. No less than twenty-two accounts offering a variety of assessments appeared in the four English-language dailies published in St. Louis

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[62] Ibid., 27 April 1877.

[63] *St. Louis Daily Times*, 19 April 1877. The benefit was advertised as being held for both firemen, but only O'Toole appeared onstage. It is unclear whether Mike Hester was present. In all probability, his position as engine driver kept him tethered to the engine house.

[64] *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 19 April 1877. A second benefit to raise money for O'Toole and Hester was held on April 24. O'Toole made it clear to the sponsors that he desired "that his share of the proceeds of the performance, whatever it might be . . . should go swell the funds collected in aid of the servant girls of the hotel who lost everything by the fire." Ibid., 25 April 1877.

during the two-week period between the fire and the conclusion of the coroner's inquest. Because it appears he was involved in saving only a single group from one location, arriving at the total number rescued by Mike Hester is more straightforward. Although one account mentions he saved six girls and another "several," of the twelve accounts reported in the papers, three articles claim Hester saved eight, five stories declare seven were rescued, and two reports estimate Hester helped six or seven and seven or eight. While testimony at the coroner's inquest by two of the young women in the room differ at seven and eight, either of the two figures is plausible.[65]

Determining the number of people O'Toole saved is more complex. Called to testify at the coroner's inquest on April 23, O'Toole was asked under oath to tell everything he knew about the fire.[66] His comprehensive response covering everything that transpired from the time he arrived until he pulled out the last survivor was published in its entirety in the *Missouri Republican* and the *St. Louis Daily Times*. The tillerman disclosed that he was directly involved in saving eight people, all on the Fourth Street side. This includes the Reeses, Joanna Halpin, Julia Burke, Charles Kennedy, and an unnamed man and two women that O'Toole helped onto the Skinner.[67]

Interestingly, the five accounts specifically mentioning O'Toole (excluding his own testimony) published during the two-week period following the fire provide a wide variation of estimates of the number of people he saved. The day after the fire, both the *Globe-Democrat* and the *Dispatch* noted in identically worded reports that "Phelim O'Toole of Hook and Ladder Three is known to have rescued seven persons."[68] The following day the *Missouri Republican* reported that O'Toole rescued "three women and two men" as well as "a number of persons whom he had to take bodily from the apartments" (Kennedy is also mentioned), bringing the number to more than six.[69] The *Times* gave the most generous reckoning, stating four days after the fire: "Phelim Toole alone rescued ten persons from the fourth, fifth, and six story

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[65] Mary Kennedy testified at the coroner's inquest: "There were seven of us girls there [in the room]." *St. Louis Daily Times*, 19 April 1877. The following day, however, Annie Noonan testified: "Michael Hester came and took eight of us out." *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 20 April 1877. Hester was not called to testify.

[66] *St. Louis Daily Times*, 24 April 1877. The coroner is reported to have specifically asked O'Toole to "please tell us all you know about the fire." O'Toole reportedly responded, "Yes, I will tell you all I know about it."

[67] O'Toole, testimony, *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 24 April 1877, and *St. Louis Daily Times*, 24 April 1877.

[68] *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 11 April 1877; *St. Louis Dispatch*, 11 April 1877.

[69] *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 12 April 1877.

windows on the Fourth Street side." In another story on O'Toole's rescue efforts published by the *Times* the same day, the ladderman is said to have rescued nine people.[70]

Clouding the issue further is the degree to which other members of O'Toole's company took the lead in saving lives. The day after the fire the *Times* published a column titled "The Roll of Honor, Those Who Risked Life To Save Life." Among those the paper credited were Andy Kirk of Hook and Ladder Two and Ed Thorne, a driver of the department's chemical engine, who together reportedly rescued several people on the Fourth Street side of the hotel. Thorne had helped O'Toole bring down the Reeses and also received a medal from the professor.[71] Barney McKernan, another member of

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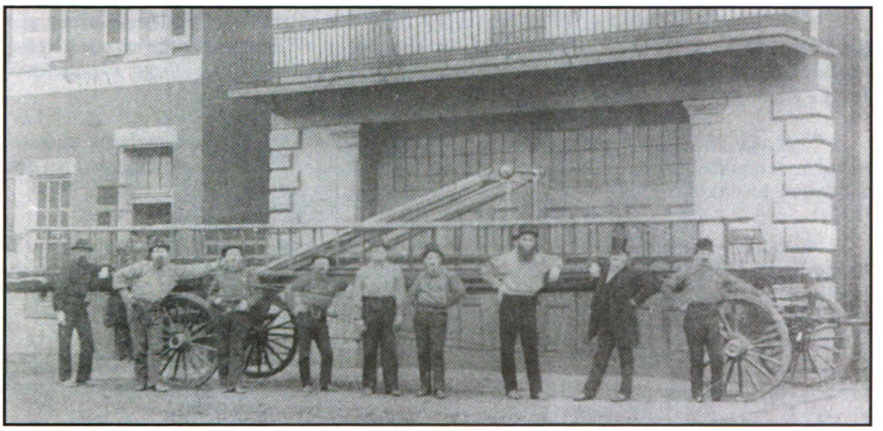
[70] *St. Louis Daily Times*, 15 April 1877. The second account published by the *Times* appears as a prelude to a letter to the *Times* from Charles Kennedy and states that O'Toole was "the fireman who rescued the Reese family and two servant girls from a sixth story window; Chas. P. Kennedy, the New Yorker, from a fourth story window, and Charlie Musser, Maggie Murphy, and two other persons from a fifth story window on the Fourth street side."

In his testimony at the coroner's inquest, Professor Reese stated that seven lives were saved on the Fourth Street side (four from his window and three from a window below). Since he had been removed to safety by that time, Reese did not mention the rescue of Charles Kennedy. See *St. Louis Dispatch*, 18 April 1877; *St. Louis Daily Times*, *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, and *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, all for 19 April 1877.

[71] *St. Louis Daily Times*, 12, 26 April 1877. The *Times* also recognized the lifesaving work of two civilians, actor George Grey and saloonkeeper John Davis. The fireman referred to by the paper as "P. Connelly" was probably Pat Conway, who belonged to Hook and Ladder Three. There is no P. Connelly listed on fire department rolls at the time of the Southern Hotel fire.

This 1874 picture features the newly purchased Skinner and what appears to be the members of Hook and Ladder Three, the company assigned to the Skinner at the time of the fire. Chief Sexton is second from right and Phelim O'Toole is second from left.

Courtesy St. Louis Fire Department Archives



Hook and Ladder Three, was credited with climbing into a room adjoining the Reeses', "occupied by Maggie Murphy and two or three other women and lower[ing] them in the same way [as O'Toole did] to the people below." The paper went on to note that "these two firemen [O'Toole and McKernan] also rescued several other unfortunates."[72] Professor Reese testified at the coroner's inquest that immediately before his party was rescued, "the firemen ran up [the Skinner] rapidly and took out . . . three persons" from a fifth-floor window below them.[73] Thus the number of people rescued by O'Toole remains an indefinite one: at least eight but probably no more than ten or eleven, a tremendous feat no matter what the number.[74]

Despite deserved praise, Hester and O'Toole were not the only heroes at the Southern. In a story headlined "The Rescuers" published by the *Times* four days after the fire, the paper refuted critics of the fire department's performance by tallying the numbers rescued by individual firemen. In addition to those taken out by O'Toole (ten) and Hester (eight), the piece stated: "Barney McKernan, Andy Kirk, and Ed Thorne rescued three or four each from the windows of the fourth and fifth stories on the Fourth street side."[75] The paper also noted that "[police] officers Tom Boyd and Ed Fenton rescued three persons from a fourth story window over the Monkeys' saloon on the Fifth street side."[76]

The point was not lost on fellow firemen. In a letter written to the *Missouri Republican* two weeks after the fire, a writer known only as "Justice" asked if all the praise heaped upon O'Toole and Hester might be inadvertently construed "as a rebuke to others of the fire department, whose duty did not require them to scale ladders and assist in the rescue of life? . . . [M]any of the brave fire-boys, I am informed, look at it in that light."

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[72] Ibid., 12 April 1877.

[73] *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 19 April 1877. These three unidentified persons may have been the ones that O'Toole testified to taking out immediately after he rescued Reese, rather than before. Julia Burke, however, also testified that "two or three others" were rescued from a window below before the Skinner reached Reese's window.

[74] A total of eleven people rescued by O'Toole can be counted, if the eight he stated he saved are combined with the three others taken out before he got to Reese's window. No corroborating testimony specifically links him to these three.

[75] McKernan, thirty-eight, was an Irish native and a bricklayer prior to joining the fire department in 1876. Ed Thorne, about forty-two years old, made brooms before joining the department in December 1874. Andy Kirk joined the department in June 1874. *Roster of Personnel.*

[76] *St. Louis Daily Times*, 12 April 1877. The paper recognized by name fourteen police officers (probably among the first to arrive at the scene) who ran up to various floors to awaken people and guide them out of the burning building.

Successful firefighting, the writer reminded the public, was founded upon the good work of many, and not just the extraordinary acts of a few.[77]

If O'Toole and Hester had come from vastly different backgrounds prior to their heroic deeds at the Southern Hotel, the remainder of their lives were divergent as well. Soon after the fire, O'Toole joined the department's new elite ladder rescue unit known as the pompier corps. For the next several years, the former sailor thrilled onlookers by scaling the dome of the Old Courthouse, as well as climbing the domed clock tower of the McClean Building, one of the tallest structures in the city, during fires. He even reportedly designed a unique device for raising fire hose to the upper floors of buildings using a set of pulleys.[78] A favorite of Chief Sexton, who fondly

[77] *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 24 April 1877.

[78] *St. Louis Dispatch*, 7 July 1880; *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 1 February 1879.

In the last known photograph of Phelim O'Toole, he appears in full uniform, wearing the two medals he received for his heroism at the Southern Hotel and a third he won at a national laddermen's competition.

Courtesy St. Louis Fire Department Archives

called him "Teddy," after the death of the Skinner ladder foreman, the chief promoted O'Toole to the position.[79]

O'Toole's superhuman exploits were tragically cut short three years after the Southern Hotel fire, when a pressurized fire extinguisher he was carrying at the scene of a small cellar fire exploded, shooting the top of the canister into his chest. His last reported words—"Oh murder, I'm killed!"—reveal a hint of incredulity by the daredevil ladderman at his own fate.[80] He was thirty-two years old. O'Toole was hailed for his extraordinary feats at the Southern Hotel as well as at many other fires, and thousands of St. Louisans lined the streets to view his funeral procession and pay homage to a civic hero, his remains borne atop the Skinner ladder truck. An emotional Chief Sexton referred to the fallen fireman as "one of the bravest men who ever lived—the bravest of the brave."[81] Through the appreciation and generosity of local merchants and common citizens, O'Toole's widow received nearly $7,700, part of which she used to purchase a house.[82] Interestingly, in the extended obituaries published by the local papers, the number of people O'Toole rescued at the Southern Hotel appeared significantly higher than in reports in the weeks following the blaze. Various stories placed the number he saved at eleven, twelve, and even thirteen people.[83]

Today a large portrait of the heroic ladderman, flanked by flags, hangs in the main lobby of St. Louis Fire Department headquarters, and in 1994 the department christened a fireboat the *Phelim O'Toole*.[84] In recent years a plaque was affixed to the Fourth Street side of the East Stadium Parking

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[79] *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 6 January 1879. Sexton reportedly called O'Toole "Teddy" while managing a destructive fire at the Beef Canning Company.

[80] *St. Louis Daily Times*, 7 July 1880. O'Toole's last words were recalled by two firemen near him when the accident occurred. These words also appeared in the *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 7 July 1880, and in testimony published in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 7 July 1880. In modern accounts this has been misinterpreted as "My God! I'm killed!" possibly because the phrase appeared as an attention-grabbing subheading to the story of his death in the *Globe-Democrat*.

[81] *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 9 July 1880; *St. Louis Daily Times*, 7 July 1880. In a statement that may not have endeared him to other men in the department, Sexton went on to say, "I could have spared any man in the department better."

[82] *St. Louis Daily Times*, 30 July 1880.

[83] The July 7, 1880, *St. Louis Daily Times* reported that O'Toole saved eleven people at the conflagration; the July 7 *St. Louis Dispatch* reported twelve; and the July 7 *Missouri Republican* and *Globe-Democrat* each reported thirteen.

[84] "The Christening and Blessing of The Phelim O'Toole Fireboat, October 8, 1994," Archives, St. Louis Fire Department Headquarters.

Garage, built on the site of the old Southern Hotel, acknowledging O'Toole's role as lifesaver at the fire. O'Toole's descendants still live in St. Louis and actively participate in events commemorating their storied ancestor.

In contrast to O'Toole, Mike Hester had a long career with the St. Louis Fire Department. Returning to his duties as a driver and horse trainer after the fire, in 1881 he became an assistant chief, one of five such positions in the department. In the spring of 1885, his name came up for nomination as chief of the fire department when Clay Sexton stepped down.[85] A crowd of Hester's politically powerful supporters from every ward in the city thronged into the office of Mayor David R. Francis, demanding their hero be appointed. Although Francis carefully replied that Hester "was a man he had known by reputation from his boyhood," the mayor instead chose Sexton's favored successor, John Lindsay.[86] Hester retired in 1895, after he was again passed up for the chief's position. The mayor appointed Charles Swingley, a man lacking Hester's experience but who had ties to city hall. Hester's love of horses continued long after he retired, and he could frequently be seen riding in public years after "horseless carriages" appeared on St. Louis streets.[87]

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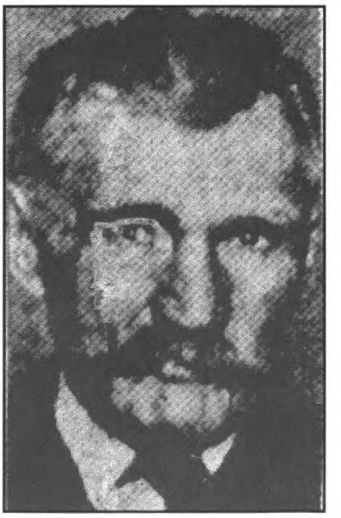
[85] *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 18 April 1885. In a letter to the editor of the *Republican*, printed on April 13, four of the women Hester had saved made a passionate plea "to those in power" to honor his bravery by appointing him chief.

[86] *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 19 April 1885. Francis's decision was likely based on his close political ties to Sexton, who had just completed a successful race for city collector on the same ticket as the mayor.

[87] "Hero of the Southern Fire."

Courtesy St. Louis Mercantile Library
at the University of Missouri-St. Louis



This photo of Michael Hester appeared with his obituary in the St. Louis Globe-Democrat. *More than fifty years after the Southern Hotel fire, the newspaper article remembered Hester's heroic efforts.*

Hester died of heart disease in 1931 at the age of eighty-nine. A lifelong bachelor, he left no descendants. Although his death occurred more than a half century after the Southern fire, the St. Louis Fire Department recalled his heroism in a lengthy obituary published in the department newsletter, referring to him as the "famous hero of the Southern Hotel fire" who was "known to every schoolboy following his valor in 1877."[88] The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* had not forgotten either. In an editorial at the time of Hester's death, the paper noted: "Long before the first aviator flew across the ocean, long before the birth of many of our modern heroes, Michael J. Hester performed an act of heroism that put his name on every tongue. He was one of two outstanding heroes of the burning of the old Southern Hotel on April 11, 1877, the other being Phelim O'Toole. This fire and the deeds of these two men are recalled whenever thought turns to the history of the St. Louis Fire Department."[89]

When Mike Hester died, his legacy went with him. Today there are no public displays acknowledging either his role or that of other lesser-known rescuers at the great conflagration. No portraits of Hester hang in commemoration, nor does any fire apparatus bear his name. He is interred at Calvary Cemetery in north St. Louis, at a gravesite marked by a monument bearing only his last name. Ironically, Phelim O'Toole is interred in the same cemetery, marked by a faded headstone with his name and the image of a cloverleaf. The once-celebrated heroes rest as they lived—near, yet far apart.

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[88] "Michael Hester."

[89] *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 23 April 1931.

Heartbroken Hope

Glasgow Weekly Times, March 8, 1849

"If it wasn't for hope, the heart would break," as the old lady said when she buried her seventh husband, looking anxiously among the funeral crowd for another.

News in Brief

Due to a change in the University of Missouri's website system, the State Historical Society's web address has changed. The new address is www.umsystem.edu/shs. This change affects all pages on the Society's site.

On display in the Art Gallery is *To Be A Witness: The Photographs of Edward Sheriff Curtis*. The exhibit focuses on the Native American cultures that lived along the Missouri River and in the Northwest. Curtis photographed these Native Americans between 1900 and 1930 to preserve images of what he thought was "a vanishing race." *To Be A Witness* will run through July.

The North-South Corridor exhibit is *Carl R. Gentry: Watercolors*. Known as "the master of distance," Gentry, an art professor at the University of Missouri, 1921-1932, emphasized light and color in his work. The display features more than forty of the artist's delicate watercolor paintings.

New displays were recently installed in the east foyer. The case exhibit, *African American Research Sources at the State Historical Society*, features examples of the wide array of materials available for research into the history of African Americans in Missouri and other states. The ongoing exhibit, *Main Street Missouri*, now includes images of business districts from LaGrange, Caruthersville, Sedalia, Columbia, Lamar, Washington, Long Lane, Maitland, Anderson, Willow Springs, and Aurora.

The Twenty-sixth Annual Mid-America Conference on History will be held in Springfield, September 30-October 2, 2004. Proposals for papers and sessions concerning all history-related topics are welcomed. The proposal deadline is May 15. For further information contact James N. Giglio at Department of History, Southwest Missouri State University, Springfield, MO 65804, or jng890f@smsu.edu.

AltaMira Press is launching a new journal, *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals*. The journal will provide theoretical and practical discussion on collections topics. For information, or to submit manuscripts, contact Hugh Genoways, editor, at hgenoways1@unl.edu.

The Missouri State Archives will sponsor the forty-sixth annual Missouri Conference on History, April 22-23, 2004, at the Capitol Plaza Hotel and Convention Center in Jefferson City. Professor Stephen Aron, associate professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, and director of the Institute for the Study of the American West at the Autry and Southwest Museums, will be the keynote speaker. For further information contact Laura Wilson at (573) 526-5326 or laura.wilson@sos.mo.gov.

Ara Kaye, senior newspaper librarian, attended the National Genealogical Society's Gen Tech Conference in St. Louis on January 22.

Laurel Boeckman, senior reference librarian, attended "Book Fakes and Forgeries" on November 6, 2003, in Ellis Library at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Amy Waters, reference specialist, presented a genealogy research project, "George Washington Steenrod: Andersonville Survivor," to the Daughters of the Union Veterans of Columbia, Missouri, on November 12, 2003.

Students from the University of Missouri-Columbia and Columbia College toured the Society's libraries in November.

During the winter semester, two students from the University of Missouri-Columbia Department of History are working on special projects at the Society. Lyndsay Anderson is compiling data for an information sheet aimed at fourth-grade students, teachers, and others interested in modern Missouri. Tom Hartman is repairing, inventorying, and organizing uncataloged German maps recently donated to the Society.