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Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

New Year's Fire 1903

The best New Year's celebrations include spectacular fireworks. But for Bucklesberry and La Grange, the New Year of 1903 rang in with a tragic fire:

1903, January 10: "La Grange was visited by fire both Thursday and Friday nights of this week. On Thursday night the gin house of Walters and Sutton with a lot of cotton seed was burned..." (*The Daily Free Press*, Kinston)

Alexander Richard Sutton (1860-1928) and John Daniel Walters (1858-1933) operated a cotton gin and dressed timber. Brothers-in-law, Alex married John's sister, Mary, which explained their business partnership. Alex was also a twice great-grandson of first Bucklesberrian, John Sutton who migrated from Bertie County, NC in the mid-1700s.

The Sutton and Walters gin was no stranger to fire. A similar disaster occurred twenty years earlier and required widespread help:

1883, December 13: "Wednesday evening about sunset the gin house of Alex Sutton and J. D. Walters in this place was found to be on fire. The fire company, the entire male population of La Grange, was on hand in less than five minutes with buckets, and the fire was soon put out. The cotton caught from a match passing through the gin and at once went to the lint room, and nothing but cool judgment and hard work saved the gin from being burned up. Capt. Davis' School, professors and all, were on hand and rendered good service." (*New Berne Weekly Journal*)

Compounding his 1903 loss, Alex saw another fire in less than a month to his general store, located in Falling Creek:

1903, February 7: "The stock of Mr. A. R. Sutton, of Falling Creek was destroyed by fire yesterday morning and the building which was owned by Mr. J. A. McDaniel. No one knows how the fire originated, but it is the general opinion of people around there that it was caused by rats in the store. About 2 o'clock yesterday morning Mr. Sutton's son, who was sleeping in the store, was aroused by a crackling sound and looked out of his room and saw the building on the inside a complete mass of flames and his mode of egress nearly shut off. He grabbed up his pants and shoes and ran from the store just in time to save his life. In a few minutes the building and contents were a mass of ruins. While the fire was in progress some cartridges and powder that were in the store began to explode, and it seemed like a war on a small scale. Nothing at all was

saved of a stock of over \$3,000. Mr. Sutton carried \$1,500 insurance on the stock, and Mr. McDaniel had the building insured, which was valued at \$400. It is said that Mr. Sutton will continue business as he has leased another store house near the old stand and will probably put in a stock there." (*The Daily Free Press*, Kinston)

Homes and buildings were at much greater risk for fire back in the day. Government-operated fire departments did not exist until around the time of the Civil War, and they served only larger cities. Rural areas, including Bucklesberry and La Grange, were at an obvious disadvantage and leaned largely on volunteer firefighters called bucket brigades.

Fire departments today respond to a structural fire about every twenty-four seconds. The top five causes of fires are cooking, heating, smoking in bedrooms, electrical, and candles. All were prevalent to a greater degree in nineteenth and early-twentieth century America except electrical.