

After battling the flames, Trenton had to battle Newark for the honor of being the Garden State's Capital City.

The 1885 STATE HOUSE FIRE

by Gordon Bond

“This morning at quarter to three o'clock as Special Officer Kennedy was patrolling his beat on West State Street he discovered a bright flickering light shining through the windows of the office of the Quartermaster General, in the State Capitol," reported the *Trenton Evening Times* on March 21, 1885. The smell of smoke had also attracted the attention of the Capitol watchman, Daniel Platt. Together, Kennedy and Platt managed to break down the door to discover a growing blaze inside the north wing of New Jersey's State House.

Kennedy ran to the corner of Willow and State Streets to activate fire alarm telegraph box number 23 before dashing on to the nearby home of the State Comptroller, Major E. J. Anderson. Soon firefighters, officials, and Trentonians descended on the terrifying scene. Two explosions fueled rumors that there were "several live shells which had been kept as curiosities on the mantelpiece of the [Quartermaster General's] office." (Though it was later said there had been no live ordinance and "it is supposed the explosions were from confined gas in the vault and room."). Within ten minutes, the entire north wing of New Jersey's State House was engulfed in flames. "The woodwork burned up like so much tinder," the *Trenton Evening Times* described, "having been dried by the steam heat, and the flames caught up everything within their reach. The elegant furniture and private desk of Clerk George S. Duryea were soon reduced to ashes."

Flames followed the steam pipes up into the second floor Clerk in Chancery's office, and then on up further into the third story, where the historical and geology artifacts of an early incarnation of the State Museum were housed. By good fortune, much of the collection was in New Orleans, representing the Garden State at the World's Fair that ran from December 16, 1884 through June 2, 1885. Nevertheless, there were still cherished relics facing incineration. "On the south side of the museum in glass cases were the old Jersey [Civil War] battle flags," the newspaper described, "under which so many brave sons of the State fought, bled and died . . . [Adjutant General William S.] General Stryker and his clerks with the assistance of the firemen and a number of old soldiers, dashed through the smoke, broke open the cases and rescued the treasured relics."

Their heroic efforts were not, however, able to save the sword and saddle of General Philip Kearny, hero of the Mexican-American War and American Civil War.

By 5:00 A.M., the roof had caved in. "The flames then extended to the front," the report went on, "and burned up the cornice of the peak of façade, in the front of the building, so that the goddesses of Liberty and Prosperity were framed with fire."

It would be another two hours or so before Trenton's firefighters got the upper-hand with the blaze. "The firemen are deserving of the highest meed [sic] of praise for their untiring



The saddle and sword of New Jersey's Mexican American War and Civil War hero, Philip Kearny, were lost to the flames.

exertions," the *Trenton Evening Times* praised. "Half suffocated by smoke, half roasted by fire and covered with ice, they worked actively and bravely fighting the flames."

Comptroller Anderson was reported to have "sent an order to the proprietors of the State Street House to provide at the shortest notice a liberal supply of hot coffee and sandwiches for the fire laddies."



New Jersey Governor Leon Abbett

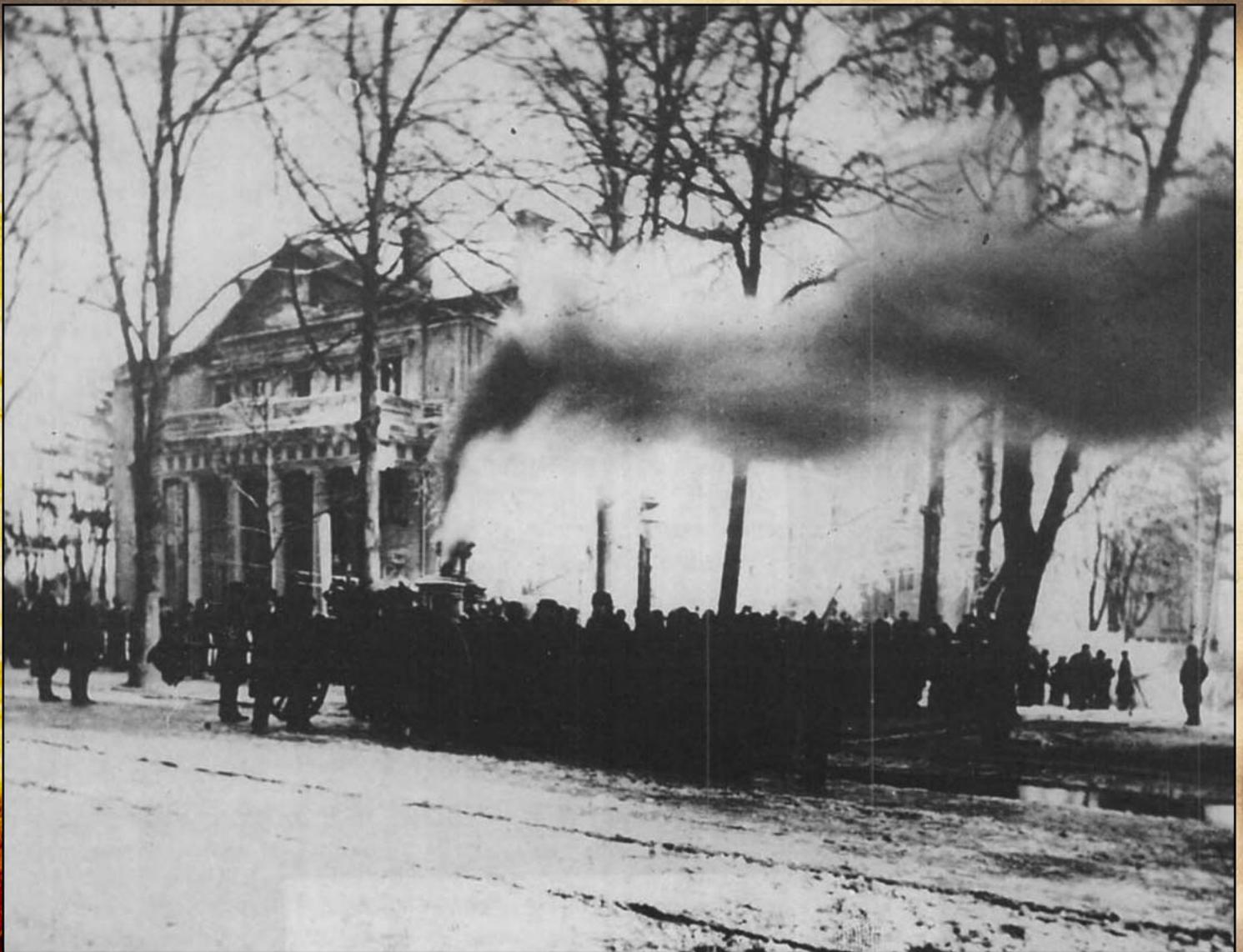
While everyone had nothing but praise for the work of the firemen who answered the alarm, Trenton's *Daily True American* newspaper, in their March 23rd edition, had nothing but scorn for city's water department. "The fire on Saturday demonstrated two things: 1st. The perfect efficiency and devotion of the Fire Department; and 2^d. The equal inefficiency of the Water Department of the city. It is true that the winter has been more than usually severe, but that fact only demanded extra precautions on the part of the Water Board, or their officers, to see that the city was in perfect condition to meet the demands which the severity of the season would be more likely to make upon it. And yet when the Fire Department responded promptly to the call they were balked for nearly half an hour by finding every plug frozen. In all that time the work of destruction went on, with the firemen anxious but powerless to act."

The *Trenton Evening Times* of March 21st had noted how water mains were exhausted on State Street, depleting steam heating systems in homes, "and when fires were lighted several water-backs and boilers of ranges burst." Fortunately, no one was injured.

"If the fire plugs in front of the State House and vicinity had not been frozen," the *Evening Times* concluded on the 26th, "the firemen say they would have been able to contain the fire to the Quarter Master General's office."

As it was, the entire northern wing was destroyed. Fortunately, there were no reports of injury or loss of life, and many important documents within the safe vaults were protected. That part of building itself, however, was ruined, with five-inches of standing frozen water. "The foundations of the building have been undermined by water and the walls affected by the fire," the *New York Herald* reported on March 24th, "so that the entire northern portion of the State Capital will have to be rebuilt."

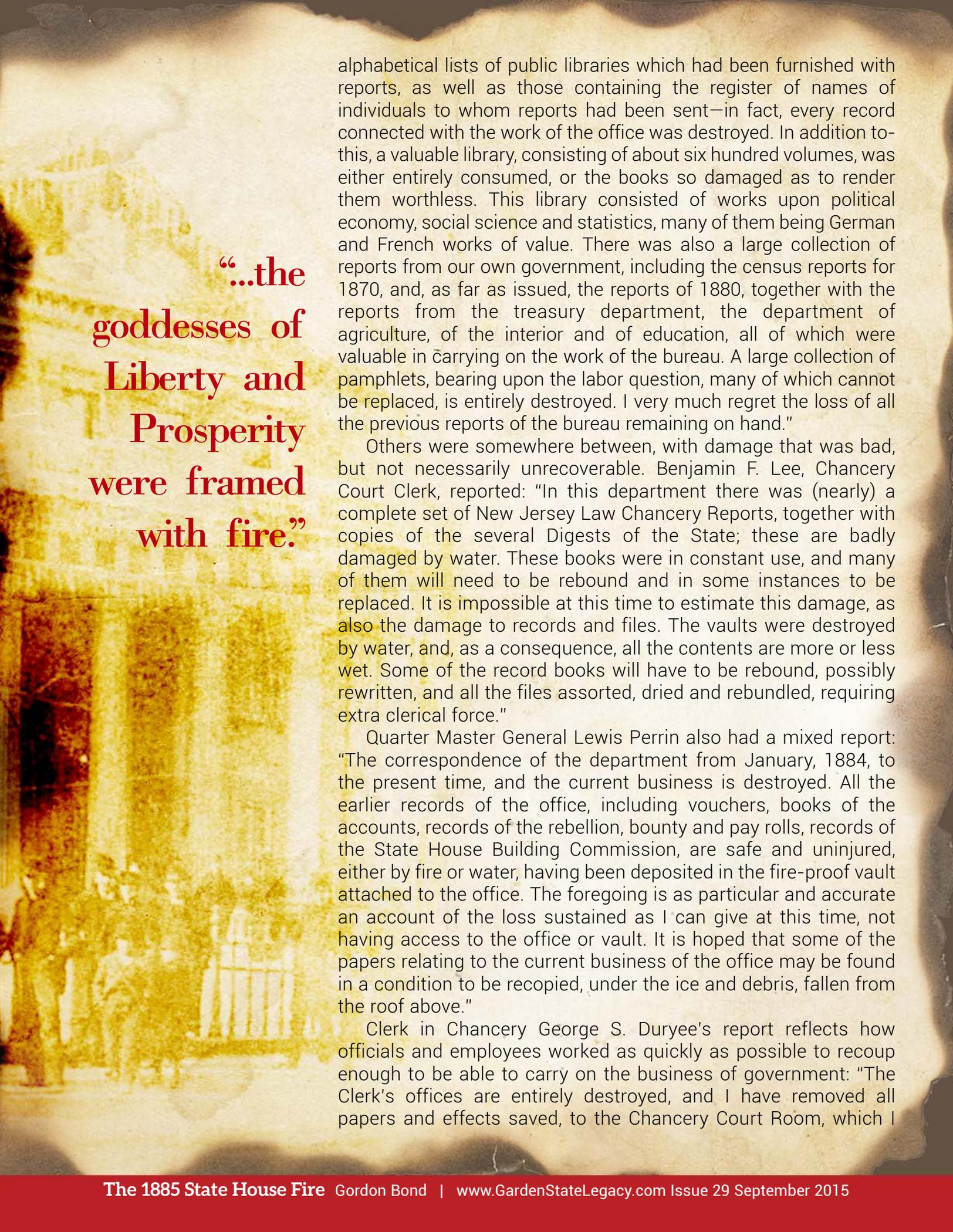
Exactly where the conflagration began became a bone of contention with a slightly petty quality. Quartermaster General Perrine insisted that the fire started in office of Clerk in Chancery, Duryes; Comptroller Anderson has no doubt it began in Quartermaster General's office. It seemed as if both offices wanted to blame the other. Regardless, temporary offices had to be established for the Secretary of State, Treasurer, Quartermaster General, Clerk in Chancery, Chief of Bureau of Labor and Statistics, and Supreme Court Clerk. Early estimates of the cost of the



damage reached \$100,000 on a building valued at \$500,000. It was assumed that that \$175,000 insurance policy on building and another \$5,000 on furniture and fixtures would cover the cost of rebuilding, though that assumption would come into serious question later.

Governor Leon Abbett called for reports from the various departments of government affected as to what the extent of the damage had been for each. State Treasurer John J. Toffey was able to report that "the records of the office are, as far as ascertained, also safe," though the carpeting and furniture had been damaged by water.

Not every report would be so positive. James Bishop, Chief of the Bureau of Statistics of Labor and Industry rendered a heartbreaking account: "I will state that everything in the office of the Bureau of Statistics of Labor and Industry was consumed by the fire which occurred at the State House on Saturday morning last. All the records of the office, the accumulation of seven years, consisting of the books of account, together with the vouchers of bills paid, the office correspondence, the books containing



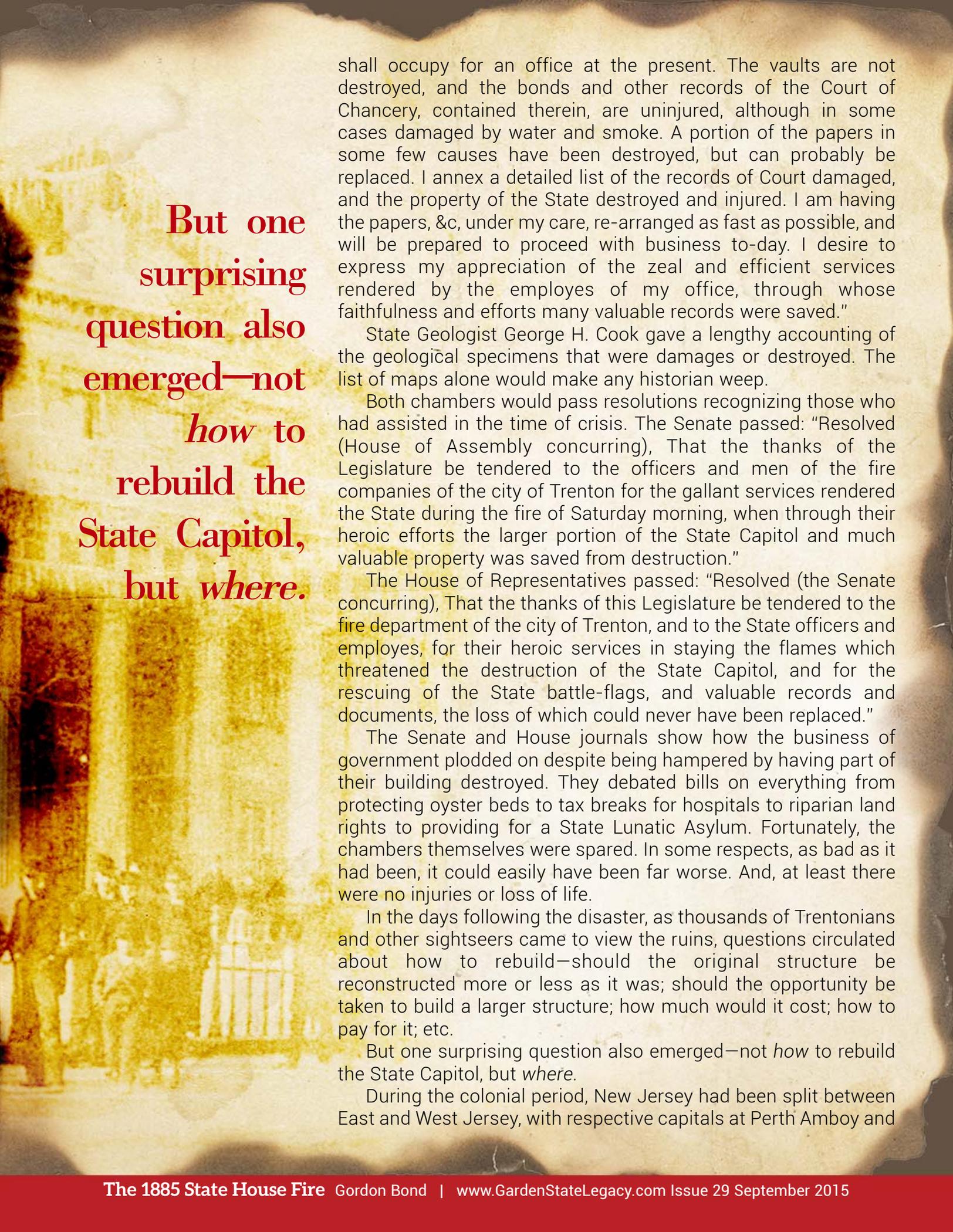
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alphabetical lists of public libraries which had been furnished with reports, as well as those containing the register of names of individuals to whom reports had been sent—in fact, every record connected with the work of the office was destroyed. In addition to this, a valuable library, consisting of about six hundred volumes, was either entirely consumed, or the books so damaged as to render them worthless. This library consisted of works upon political economy, social science and statistics, many of them being German and French works of value. There was also a large collection of reports from our own government, including the census reports for 1870, and, as far as issued, the reports of 1880, together with the reports from the treasury department, the department of agriculture, of the interior and of education, all of which were valuable in carrying on the work of the bureau. A large collection of pamphlets, bearing upon the labor question, many of which cannot be replaced, is entirely destroyed. I very much regret the loss of all the previous reports of the bureau remaining on hand.”

Others were somewhere between, with damage that was bad, but not necessarily unrecoverable. Benjamin F. Lee, Chancery Court Clerk, reported: “In this department there was (nearly) a complete set of New Jersey Law Chancery Reports, together with copies of the several Digests of the State; these are badly damaged by water. These books were in constant use, and many of them will need to be rebound and in some instances to be replaced. It is impossible at this time to estimate this damage, as also the damage to records and files. The vaults were destroyed by water, and, as a consequence, all the contents are more or less wet. Some of the record books will have to be rebound, possibly rewritten, and all the files assorted, dried and rebundled, requiring extra clerical force.”

Quarter Master General Lewis Perrin also had a mixed report: “The correspondence of the department from January, 1884, to the present time, and the current business is destroyed. All the earlier records of the office, including vouchers, books of the accounts, records of the rebellion, bounty and pay rolls, records of the State House Building Commission, are safe and uninjured, either by fire or water, having been deposited in the fire-proof vault attached to the office. The foregoing is as particular and accurate an account of the loss sustained as I can give at this time, not having access to the office or vault. It is hoped that some of the papers relating to the current business of the office may be found in a condition to be recopied, under the ice and debris, fallen from the roof above.”

Clerk in Chancery George S. Duryee's report reflects how officials and employees worked as quickly as possible to recoup enough to be able to carry on the business of government: “The Clerk's offices are entirely destroyed, and I have removed all papers and effects saved, to the Chancery Court Room, which I



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shall occupy for an office at the present. The vaults are not destroyed, and the bonds and other records of the Court of Chancery, contained therein, are uninjured, although in some cases damaged by water and smoke. A portion of the papers in some few causes have been destroyed, but can probably be replaced. I annex a detailed list of the records of Court damaged, and the property of the State destroyed and injured. I am having the papers, &c, under my care, re-arranged as fast as possible, and will be prepared to proceed with business to-day. I desire to express my appreciation of the zeal and efficient services rendered by the employes of my office, through whose faithfulness and efforts many valuable records were saved."

State Geologist George H. Cook gave a lengthy accounting of the geological specimens that were damaged or destroyed. The list of maps alone would make any historian weep.

Both chambers would pass resolutions recognizing those who had assisted in the time of crisis. The Senate passed: "Resolved (House of Assembly concurring), That the thanks of the Legislature be tendered to the officers and men of the fire companies of the city of Trenton for the gallant services rendered the State during the fire of Saturday morning, when through their heroic efforts the larger portion of the State Capitol and much valuable property was saved from destruction."

The House of Representatives passed: "Resolved (the Senate concurring), That the thanks of this Legislature be tendered to the fire department of the city of Trenton, and to the State officers and employes, for their heroic services in staying the flames which threatened the destruction of the State Capitol, and for the rescuing of the State battle-flags, and valuable records and documents, the loss of which could never have been replaced."

The Senate and House journals show how the business of government plodded on despite being hampered by having part of their building destroyed. They debated bills on everything from protecting oyster beds to tax breaks for hospitals to riparian land rights to providing for a State Lunatic Asylum. Fortunately, the chambers themselves were spared. In some respects, as bad as it had been, it could easily have been far worse. And, at least there were no injuries or loss of life.

In the days following the disaster, as thousands of Trentonians and other sightseers came to view the ruins, questions circulated about how to rebuild—should the original structure be reconstructed more or less as it was; should the opportunity be taken to build a larger structure; how much would it cost; how to pay for it; etc.

But one surprising question also emerged—not *how* to rebuild the State Capitol, but *where*.

During the colonial period, New Jersey had been split between East and West Jersey, with respective capitals at Perth Amboy and

Burlington. The State Legislature met at Perth Amboy and a few other places before settling on Trenton in 1790 as being more or less central, offering water navigation via the Delaware River, and being the site of a critical victory during the late Revolutionary War. Philadelphia master-builder Jonathan Doan was hired to construct the new State House in 1791 and the General Assembly

convened in the still-unfinished building the following year. The first major expansion of the structure was necessitated by the additional responsibilities given to the governor and a revised court system created by the state's second constitution in 1844. By 1848 there were added porticos, two extra buildings, a new rotunda, shade trees, and landscaping that cost \$27,000. Before the fire, it had been further expanded in 1863, 1864, 1865, 1871, 1872, 1873, and 1875.



The original New Jersey State House

As awful as the fire had been, the *Trenton Evening Times* seemed to console the city in their March 26th edition that “the portion burned was never in keeping with the remainder of the building. It was older and poorer.” Some saw it as an opportunity to rid the State

House of the least-attractive part and replace it with something more worthy of the great Garden State.

Governor Abbett was among those who called for a larger building to house expanded departments of state. As always, the issue came down to one of money—should the state's taxpayers be expected to foot the bill for a more extravagant structure, or would it be more fiscally prudent to reconstitute the original plan that was lost?

While this was being debated, however, a third and far more radical option had been gaining ground—to remove the state's capital from Trenton altogether and move it to Newark. Had the entire building been destroyed, the idea might have made more sense, since rebuilding a portion of the existing State House would still have been cheaper than moving the entire seat of government to the other side of the state. “Trenton should congratulate itself that the State House was not entirely destroyed,” the *Trenton Evening Times* quipped. “If it had been, 'twould have been nip and tuck whether the next Capital building would have been erected here.”

What motivated Essex County to seriously consider such a bold—some would say foolhardy—move isn't readily apparent, but it would seem to fit Newark's mood in the mid-19th century. Up to the time of the Civil War, Newark was a rough, hardworking place of breweries and shoemakers. Civic development had been slow, blamed by some historians on a tightfisted Whig government. It had been founded in 1666 but wouldn't be incorporated as a city until 1836 and wouldn't have a permanent police or fire department until the 1850s. The postwar period, however, generally saw greater wealth from an influx of heavy industry.

Industrialists like Edward Weston, John Wesley Hyatt, Thomas Edison (for a time), and others were attracted by the proximity to Manhattan and the navigable Passaic River. When Prudential Insurance Company of America opened in Newark in 1877, it was the start of the city's role as a center of the state's insurance industry. The economic growth fueled the ambitions of the city's mover and shakers to assert Newark as a proper center for commerce, industry, and even culture in the state and metropolitan region.

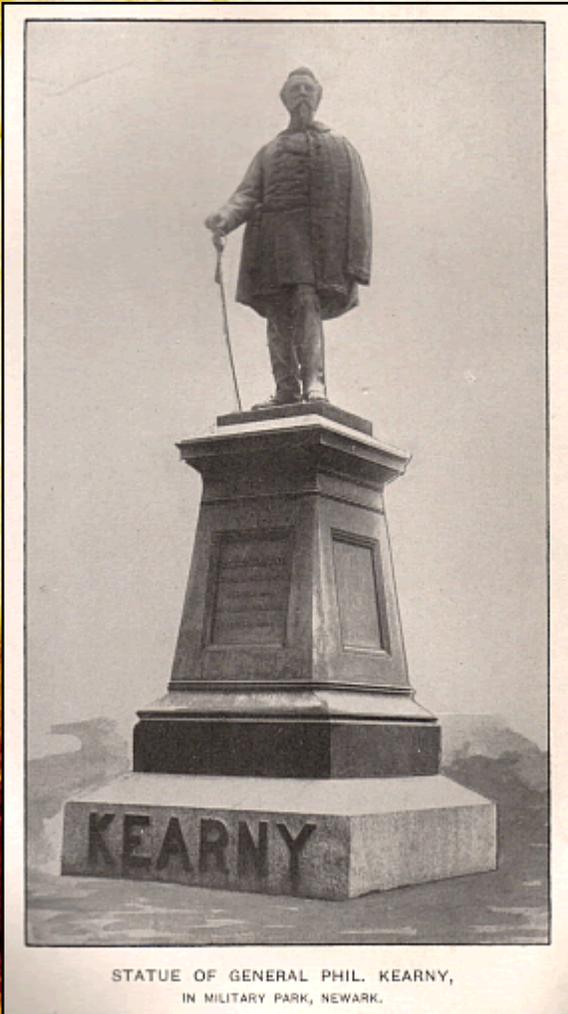
When news of the State House fire reached Newark, it evidently set some, especially in Newark's Board of Trade, to thinking—if the government had to rebuild anyway, the moment seemed right for a scheme to steal the honor of being the “state capital” from Trenton. The Board of Trade and Common Council offered the state \$500,000 and a plot of land on Clinton Hill for the new structure. The neighborhood had become home to established, well-to-do families of Dutch and English Protestant stock transplanted from Manhattan in the mid-19th century. By the 1880s, the perceived “encroachment” of immigrant communities was causing some to move into mansions in North Newark while others had been ruined by an 1871 stock panic. Perhaps some saw having the State House as a way of maintaining Clinton Hill's high-end status. An 1885 map also shows a proposed canal leading from Newark Bay up into the area, reflecting further commercial and manufacturing ambitions.

If the notion seemed a little less crazy to some in Newark, it seemed wholly absurd to many in Trenton. Local newspapers openly mocked Newark's ambition and belittled the place as a dirty backwater to Manhattan. “The benefit which Newark would derive from the presence of the capital,” *The Daily True American*, of March 26, 1885, asserted, “would be very greatly neutralized by the proximity of New York, whose attractions to the average legislator would draw the entire body to that city, at all events, during the nights, and would leave it as at present a city without a decent hotel, theatre or place of public resort.”

On the 30th, the paper put down Newark as a place “where the overflow population of New York has become sufficiently acclimated to mosquitoes and malaria, water impregnated by Paterson's sewers, and air poisoned by Newark's open ditches to imagine themselves residents of Jersey's metropolis.”

“They want the capital as they wanted the Kearny statue,” they quipped, “because somebody else had it, and if they should get it would treat it about in the same way—wrap it up in some high-pitched oration and then neglect it.”

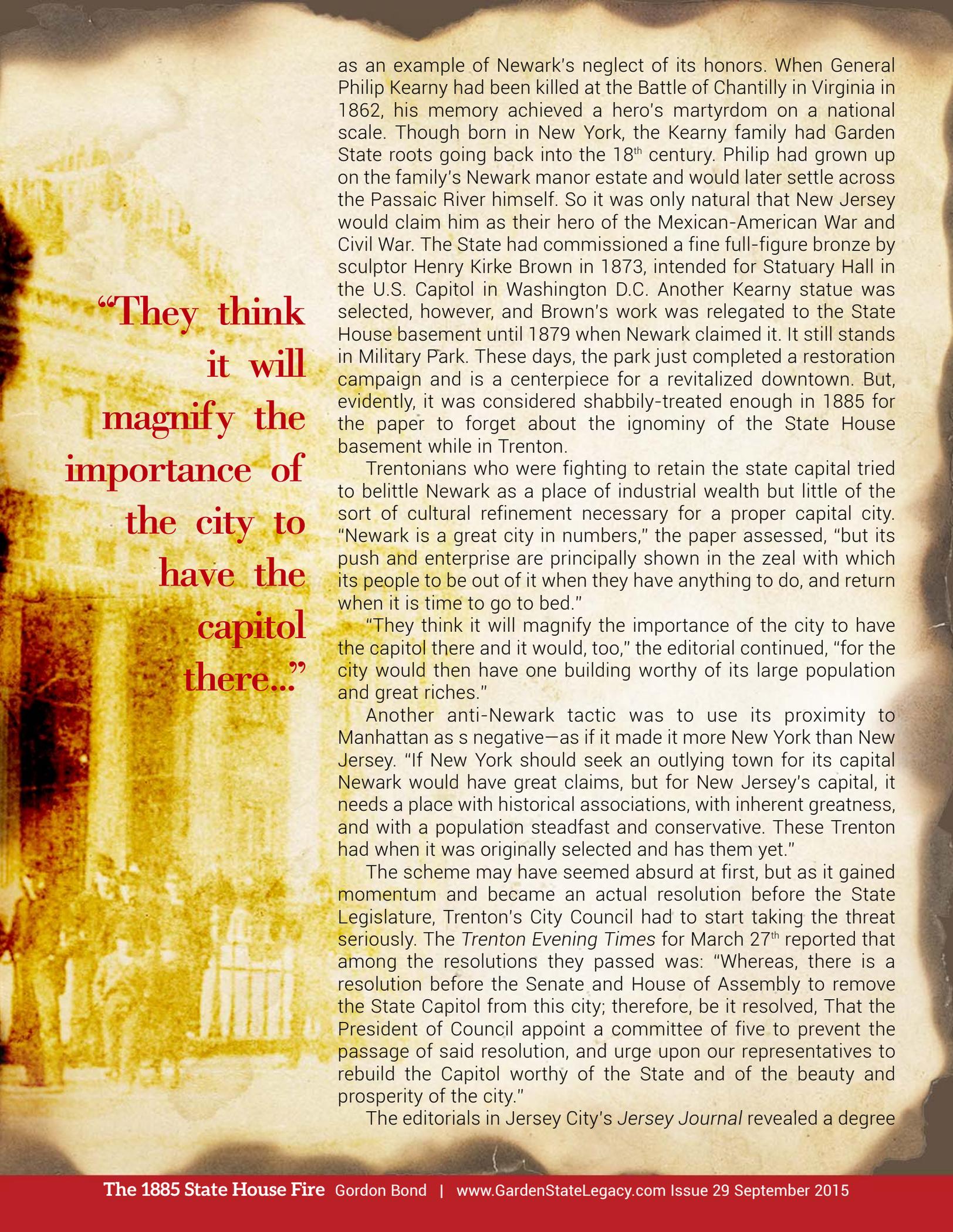
There is no small irony to the paper selecting the Kearny statue



STATUE OF GENERAL PHIL. KEARNY,
IN MILITARY PARK, NEWARK.

The General Philip Kearny statue at
Newark's Military Park, 1901

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as an example of Newark's neglect of its honors. When General Philip Kearny had been killed at the Battle of Chantilly in Virginia in 1862, his memory achieved a hero's martyrdom on a national scale. Though born in New York, the Kearny family had Garden State roots going back into the 18th century. Philip had grown up on the family's Newark manor estate and would later settle across the Passaic River himself. So it was only natural that New Jersey would claim him as their hero of the Mexican-American War and Civil War. The State had commissioned a fine full-figure bronze by sculptor Henry Kirke Brown in 1873, intended for Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C. Another Kearny statue was selected, however, and Brown's work was relegated to the State House basement until 1879 when Newark claimed it. It still stands in Military Park. These days, the park just completed a restoration campaign and is a centerpiece for a revitalized downtown. But, evidently, it was considered shabbily-treated enough in 1885 for the paper to forget about the ignominy of the State House basement while in Trenton.

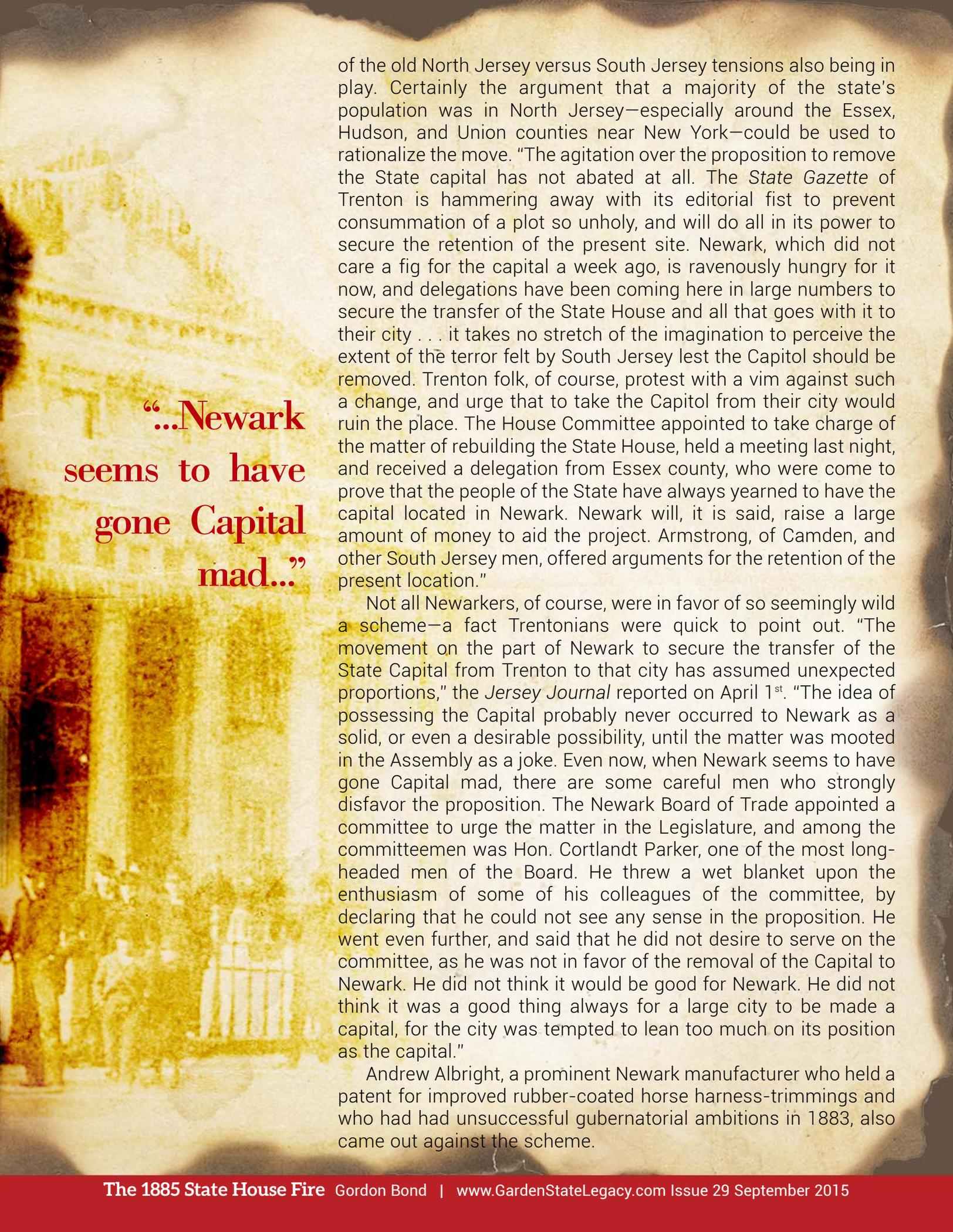
Trentonians who were fighting to retain the state capital tried to belittle Newark as a place of industrial wealth but little of the sort of cultural refinement necessary for a proper capital city. "Newark is a great city in numbers," the paper assessed, "but its push and enterprise are principally shown in the zeal with which its people to be out of it when they have anything to do, and return when it is time to go to bed."

"They think it will magnify the importance of the city to have the capitol there and it would, too," the editorial continued, "for the city would then have one building worthy of its large population and great riches."

Another anti-Newark tactic was to use its proximity to Manhattan as a negative—as if it made it more New York than New Jersey. "If New York should seek an outlying town for its capital Newark would have great claims, but for New Jersey's capital, it needs a place with historical associations, with inherent greatness, and with a population steadfast and conservative. These Trenton had when it was originally selected and has them yet."

The scheme may have seemed absurd at first, but as it gained momentum and became an actual resolution before the State Legislature, Trenton's City Council had to start taking the threat seriously. The *Trenton Evening Times* for March 27th reported that among the resolutions they passed was: "Whereas, there is a resolution before the Senate and House of Assembly to remove the State Capitol from this city; therefore, be it resolved, That the President of Council appoint a committee of five to prevent the passage of said resolution, and urge upon our representatives to rebuild the Capitol worthy of the State and of the beauty and prosperity of the city."

The editorials in Jersey City's *Jersey Journal* revealed a degree



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of the old North Jersey versus South Jersey tensions also being in play. Certainly the argument that a majority of the state's population was in North Jersey—especially around the Essex, Hudson, and Union counties near New York—could be used to rationalize the move. “The agitation over the proposition to remove the State capital has not abated at all. The *State Gazette* of Trenton is hammering away with its editorial fist to prevent consummation of a plot so unholy, and will do all in its power to secure the retention of the present site. Newark, which did not care a fig for the capital a week ago, is ravenously hungry for it now, and delegations have been coming here in large numbers to secure the transfer of the State House and all that goes with it to their city . . . it takes no stretch of the imagination to perceive the extent of the terror felt by South Jersey lest the Capitol should be removed. Trenton folk, of course, protest with a vim against such a change, and urge that to take the Capitol from their city would ruin the place. The House Committee appointed to take charge of the matter of rebuilding the State House, held a meeting last night, and received a delegation from Essex county, who were come to prove that the people of the State have always yearned to have the capital located in Newark. Newark will, it is said, raise a large amount of money to aid the project. Armstrong, of Camden, and other South Jersey men, offered arguments for the retention of the present location.”

Not all Newarkers, of course, were in favor of so seemingly wild a scheme—a fact Trentonians were quick to point out. “The movement on the part of Newark to secure the transfer of the State Capital from Trenton to that city has assumed unexpected proportions,” the *Jersey Journal* reported on April 1st. “The idea of possessing the Capital probably never occurred to Newark as a solid, or even a desirable possibility, until the matter was mooted in the Assembly as a joke. Even now, when Newark seems to have gone Capital mad, there are some careful men who strongly disfavor the proposition. The Newark Board of Trade appointed a committee to urge the matter in the Legislature, and among the committeemen was Hon. Cortlandt Parker, one of the most long-headed men of the Board. He threw a wet blanket upon the enthusiasm of some of his colleagues of the committee, by declaring that he could not see any sense in the proposition. He went even further, and said that he did not desire to serve on the committee, as he was not in favor of the removal of the Capital to Newark. He did not think it would be good for Newark. He did not think it was a good thing always for a large city to be made a capital, for the city was tempted to lean too much on its position as the capital.”

Andrew Albright, a prominent Newark manufacturer who held a patent for improved rubber-coated horse harness-trimmings and who had had unsuccessful gubernatorial ambitions in 1883, also came out against the scheme.

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“Notwithstanding all this,” the *Journal* still had to admit, “several active spirits, among them Judge Frank Fort and Senator Fish are pushing the project for all they are worth.” When an early vote on the question of removal resulted in a tie in the House, supporters redoubled their push, while opponents seemed surprised it was all being taken that seriously. “Our correspondence from Trenton,” The *Jersey Journal* said, “shows to what large proportions the matter has grown. From being a joke at first, it has bloomed forth into a full-fledged fight in the Assembly.” Despite the close vote in the House, the paper asserted that “the odds, if there are any, are against Newark.” They pinned their hopes on the Senate, “where the influence of Middle and South Jersey largely preponderates.”

The matter had indeed grown from a joke to a serious proposal subject to all the expected political maneuverings and sniping. When Republican Assemblyman David A. Bell from Orange, NJ, voted against removal, his Essex County colleagues accused him of selling his vote in return for Senate support of his pet legislation to carve a new county out of Essex to be called Carteret (not to be confused with the Middlesex County town of that name established later in 1922). “In order to punish Mr. Bell, [Assemblyman] Harrison, of Essex, introduced a resolution to recall from the Senate the Carteret bill,” the *Jersey Journal* reported on April 2nd, “which was adopted at once by the angry faction who favor the State House bill, and it is safe to say that the Carteret bill will never see daylight again.”

Newark wasn't the only New Jersey city to get in on the act. Elizabeth expressed their interest in the capital as well, though it did not appear to get quite as far as Newark's proposals. Trenton Assemblyman John Caminade accused Elizabeth of just wanting the State to bail them out of bankruptcy.

The pro-Trenton side was stronger, yet it exhibited a weakness caused by a schism that the pro-Newark faction tried to exploit. There were two ways of approaching the idea of retaining Trenton as the capital. One was to simply rebuild what has destroyed, more or less as it was. Assemblyman Wildrick summarized that more frugal perspective when he argued: “Let the insurance money pay for the repairs, and that's more money than is needed. Just make the house as good as it was, and that's good enough for anybody.” The second approach was what Governor Abbett advocated—to use the opportunity to build an expanded structure to suit the needs of an equally expanded government. Abbett likely also had in the back of his mind his desire to call for a convention to revise the state constitution—something that would fail to materialize and become a chief disappointment for his administration. This second approach was more realistic, but would also mean that the \$250,000 estimated cost for repairs would be far too small. This potentially open-ended budget left the pro-Newark side a crack to exploit.

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Assemblyman Jewett favored removal and, coming from a background as a builder, criticized the notion that rebuilding could be done for \$250,000. If the State was going to spend the money to build an expanded State House anyway, he argued, than the option of moving it ought to remain on the table. Countering that assertion was Caminade, who estimated it would cost New Jersey taxpayers over \$2-million to move the capital to Newark. Even an expanded State House would not cost that much. “If the Capitol had been entirely destroyed by fire the Trentonians might be compelled to make a desperate fight to hold it,” *The Morristown Banner* explained, “but under the circumstances there is little or no doubt that the geographical center of the State will still prove the ‘Hub’ around which the political spokes will revolve.”

At the end of the day, the notion of moving the capital began to run out of political steam. “The Newark members are no longer a unit, as before, upon the proposition to remove the capital,” concluded the *Jersey Journal* when Cortlandt Parker introduced a bill on April 3rd “to cause the burned portion of the state house to be restored in the same external form as it was before the late fire,” with a small budget of \$30,000. That would be expanded to \$55,000 when the bill was passed, effectively ending Newark’s hopes of becoming the new state capital.

Much of the argument in support of that ambition rested on a principle that if the State was going to have to spend a lot of money anyway, removal ought to be at least considered. Yet if estimates of moving the capital costing \$2-million—or even a quarter of that—were to be believed, it was hard to justify, at least on economic grounds, when rebuilding might be done for \$55,000. Cost overruns, however, seem like a normal feature of government projects, then as now.

“Since the Legislature adjourned it is said to have been discovered that the amount appropriated, \$55,000, for the repairing and rebuilding of the State Capitol building will be altogether inadequate to the work, and it is even suggested that an extra session of the Legislature may be called for the purposes of making a more liberal appropriation,” the *Trenton Evening Times* explained on April 13th. “This should have been thought of before the Legislature adjourned. We thought, and said, when the fire occurred, that it was the best policy to make a full and generous appropriation—say \$350,000—for the purpose of building a capitol which would be a credit to New Jersey and ample in its accommodations for all time to come.”

What had caused the Legislature’s misstep? According to the paper, it had been fear of Newark’s advances. “But the question of the possible removal of the capitol from Trenton, was suddenly sprung in the Legislature; the Newark people made a frantic plunge to secure the removal and get the location for themselves; the Trenton and South Jersey folk got frightened, lost their heads



and hurriedly agreed to an insufficient and petty appropriation , for fear that, if they asked for, or insisted on more, the capitol would be moved northward—of which, however, we do not believe there ever was any real danger. The opponents of the removal made a big blunder in agreeing to be satisfied with the \$55,000, and now it is too late to rectify the mistake.”

When all was said and done, the House would appropriate \$225,000 to complete the rebuilding project. Plans for new building were drawn up by Lewis H. Broome of Jersey City and built by William H. Burton of Trenton.

It is perhaps tempting to speculate at what difference it might have made in the respective cities' fortunes during the 130 years since had Newark been successful in grabbing the capital from Trenton. In some ways, the answer is probably “not much.” Being the seat of state government, after all, did not save Trenton from the effects of broader late 20th century deindustrialization that had also hurt Newark and other similar cities in the United States.

The State House fire of 1885 is part of the history of the capitol mentioned on their website, yet the fervor and political theater inspired by Newark's unsuccessful bid has faded from most Garden State memories.

