

“Disaster Strikes Palatka!”

The following are excerpts from a two volume unpublished manuscript by Allan A. Swanson in the Putnam County, Florida Public Library.)

“Disaster struck Palatka in the form of fire for the second time on the night of November 7, 1884. Flames were seen to be bursting through the roof of a warehouse, formerly the office of the defunct Putnam County Journal, then used by *DEVEREAUX, ROGERO and Son* as a storeroom for oils and spirits.

The firemen turned out immediately and attempted to confine the blaze under the direction of Fire Chief MANN and GEORGE ZEHNBAUER, the engine operator. The fire engine was started, but for some unexplained reason it refused to pump water through the hoses.

When the firemen broke open the warehouse they were confronted by a flaming holocaust that threatened to explode. Then the engine began to act, but too late. Bravely, the nozzleman poured a full stream at short range. But, a fierce wind drove the high flames across the intervening space, and the main building occupied by *DEVEREAUX, ROGERO and Son* caught. Then the blaze leaped across Lemon Street and attacked Graham’s Hotel while explosion after explosion came from the stores.

Captain BEN DEAL and a man named MCLARTY were blown over bales of goods by exploding barrels of kerosene while attempting to remove some goods from a warehouse.

It was readily determined that this situation could only become more serious, and a call for assistance was issued. Captain FITZGERALD brought his steamer *CHATTAHOOCHEE* close to the blaze and began pumping water from the river. Other steamers fighting the fire were the *MARION* and *WISTERIA*, among others.

Preparations to remove valuable property commenced; all the stock on the pier was moved back to safety and the mail was taken from the post office. Temporary quarters were later established in the Warren Printing office on Reid Street.

The flames then jumped Water Street and attacked Griffin’s block and the Kennerly Building. The crew of the *CHATTAHOOCHEE* was successful in preventing the latter from being consumed, but the former was lost.

Suddenly both sides of Lemon Street were ablaze, and Moragne’s store ignited; the fire intensified and jumped across Front Street to the Putnam House which was completely destroyed, including the recent addition to the building.

Both sides of Front Street were blazing, and everything all the way to Reid Street was in flames. Reid served as a barrier because there was not enough fuel to attract the flames; Colonel HART’S property was directly across the street, and the corner of Reid and Front Streets was vacant because of the recent demolition of the old Smith building.

To the South, on the corner of Lemon and Front Streets, a brick building owned by FRY offered another point of resistance. Great efforts in saving MURRAY’S store prevented the flames from progressing any further to the West and protected the block south of Lemon and west of Front Streets.

In the area bounded by the river on the East, Reid Street on the north, Front Street on the west and the Presbyterian Church on the south, everything was destroyed except the furniture store of B.L. LILIENTHAL. A person could stand at Fry’s corner yesterday and count twenty-five safes lying in the ashes.

After the fire, which was widely published in the Eastern United States, a rumor began to circulate that the fire was the work of an arsonist; a Negro arsonist, who was striking back at the white domination of the South, reputedly perpetrated the disaster.

The New York Herald on November 9, 1884, reported that a telegram had been received from Palatka which stated that the city had been set afire by Negroes and a 'race war' had started. *The Gem City Guards* were reported to have been called to arms by the mayor and it was expected that a massacre was imminent.

The citizenry of Palatka were shocked. They assembled almost immediately, so as, to draw up a complete refutation of the *Herald's* story. Other papers received the anonymous telegram as well. The denial read in part: 'In this season of difficulty, some anonymous hand sowed slanders throughout the country which injured the community more than the fire.' The gist of the refutation denied charges that there was, etc."

(Another account of the big fire is entitled "PALATKA III: GEM CITY OF THE ST. JOHN'S." – Chapter 16)

DEVEREAUX, ROGERO and Son was later known simply as *CHARLES J. ROGERO*. Mr. Rogero, born in 1863, was the 2nd. of five children OF MANUEL JULIAN ROGERO and MARY ANTANACIA ZEHNBauer. His grandparents were RAMON JUAN ROGERO, II and MANUELA NICOLICHY.