Most of downtown Abbeville rebuilt after 1903 blaze

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ABBEVILLE — A century ago last week, a devastating fire swept through downtown Abbeville and destroyed 14 buildings, many owned by families whose names remain prominent to this day. The fire began in the Court House Exchange Saloon at the corner of Concord and State streets, where the Schexnaider & Associates civil engineering firm is now. Media accounts of the day do not state the cause.

Elray Schexnaider, managing partner of the firm, has a historic photograph of the inside of the saloon before the fire. "There's a shot of the room with a vent pipe that runs up through the ceiling," he said. "If I'd been a fire investigator at the time, I'd probably have started there."

The Feb. 19, 1903, blaze broke out while about 200 residents were enjoying a stage performance at nearby French Hall, according to historian Ken Dupuy, who has tirelessly documented the city's past. "The final damage was estimated at more than $100,000 — a huge sum then," Dupuy said. "It was reported at 9:15 p.m. and claimed every building on the south side of Concord and several buildings on State and Jefferson streets as the flames spread to the west and south, evidently aided by a north-easterly wind."

Fifteenth Judicial District Court Assistant District Attorney Richard J. Putnam Jr. said on Wednesday's anniversary of the fire that the hectic timbers of his law offices at 118 S. State St. still bear scorched marks. "I went up in there to check things out before I got the building and you can clearly see the burn marks," he said.

Period newspaper accounts published in The Abbeville Meridional report that one of the buildings destroyed was the office of cotton broker Emmet P. Putnam, grandfather of current resident Emmet P. Putnam III. "Yes, the cotton broker was my grandfather," he said. "It is interesting to note that many of the old buildings downtown have evidence of the 1903 fire in their attics."

The corner of State Street, left, and Concord Street, foreground, pictured recently, was rebuilt after a fire in 1903. The entire city block, which at that time made up most of the town, was destroyed in the fire.

Another office lost to the blaze was that of Judge W.W. Edwards, grandfather of Vermilion Land Corp. property manager W.P. "Judge" Edwards III of Abbeville. "That's how I got my nickname," Edwards said.

Dupuy said the heroic efforts of firefighters who battled the two-hour blaze kept it from spreading to numerous other buildings. The historian said the town post office on South State Street fell victim to the flames, but all of the mail, postal records and furniture were saved. Many town residents pitched in as impromptu volunteer firefighters to help douse the blaze and salvage valuables from threatened buildings in its path — some of which eventually burned down.

Dupuy said history tends to transform the character and look of downtown, bringing new architectural styles that contribute to Abbeville's reputation as one of the most picturesque cities in Acadiana.

"How different our downtown would look if not for the 1903 fire," Dupuy said. "One can only imagine."

According to historical accounts compiled by Dupuy, the post office relocated to the town's Masonic Temple after the fire. The Bank of Abbeville, whose distinctive twin towers are a downtown landmark today, moved its offices to the parish courthouse on the courthouse square from the burned saloon.

Dupuy said he can imagine the sounds that filled the night 100 years ago: "the hissing of burning wood being drenched by water, sounding like angry serpents protecting their nests; the shouts and swearing of desperate men fighting a losing battle, and the sounds of walls that fell precipitously or in slow motion."

He said the fire transformed the character and look of downtown, bringing new architectural styles that contribute to Abbeville's reputation as one of the most picturesque cities in Acadiana. More than 100 commercial buildings and homes in the heart of the city are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.