

THE PEQUOT HOUSE: A BURNING QUESTION

Two days after the Pequot House burned to the ground in a spectacular blaze, several young men in motorboats arrived in New London Harbor, despite the heavy rain and choppy water, to view the hotel's smoldering remains. Were they merely curious spectators or was their presence on the scene a clue to the fire's mysterious origins?

Beginning in 1850, with the opening of the luxurious Pequot House hotel at the harbor's mouth, New London emerged as one of the preeminent summer playgrounds of the nation's social elite. An August 3, 1855 article in the New York Times proclaimed, "New London is fast becoming popular as a summer resort and will, in a few years, no doubt rival some of the celebrated places such as Newport, Cape May, etc." The article attributed this rapid rise in New London's popularity to the Pequot House, which it described as, "exceedingly convenient, airy and comfortable, and withal well kept; so that guests who visit it once return again almost invariably the succeeding season." The waterfront location allowed guests to arrive directly at its dock via private yacht or steamship. Links to the downtown New London train station were also available via carriage and later by auto and bus. The resort counted many New York millionaires as well as presidents Ulysses S. Grant and Chester A. Arthur and their families among its high profile guests.

After a half-century of success, primarily under the management of New London businessman Henry Crocker, the Pequot House began to experience a decline in profitability as the 20th century dawned. By that time, Crocker had sold out his interests in the hotel and surrounding "Pequot Colony" cottages and grounds. A notice in the January 31, 1901 New London Day reported that the corporate owner, Blanchard and Hager Corp., was unable to meet its obligations and that the New London Superior Court had appointed a receiver for the corporation. The court ordered the receiver to sell the property at public auction. A review of the New London land records reveals that at this time the property was heavily mortgaged. These mortgages included notes to the Savings Bank of New London totaling \$37,000, notes to the New Market National Bank of New Hampshire in the amount of \$10,000, and a note to New London lawyer Walter Noyes in the amount of \$7,000. Under Connecticut foreclosure law, any buyer of the property at auction would have to assume the balance of these mortgages. This debt burden dissuaded investors and reduced bidder activity. The property was ultimately sold at auction to United States Senator Frank B. Brandegee, the law partner of Noyes, for a mere \$500. Brandegee and his sister Helen Brandegee Zalinsky formed the Pequot Hotel Corporation as the ownership entity with Frank Brandegee retaining the controlling interest. The Pequot Hotel Corporation immediately engaged the former owner, William H. Hager, as hotel manager, despite his having just taken the hotel into receivership. Hager had for years been a well-respected executive working for several prominent hotels, but his retention as manager ensured that the slow decline of the Pequot House would not likely be reversed.

Frank Brandegee was a New London native whose father, Augustus Brandegee, was a tremendously popular lawyer and politician. When Frank Brandegee was born in 1862, his

father was serving Connecticut in the U.S. House of Representatives and was a confidant of President Lincoln. Frank Brandegee graduated from New London's Bulkeley High School in 1881 and then attended Yale. Brandegee joined his father's law firm and launched a long career in public service. In 1888, he was elected to the Connecticut General Assembly and served as speaker of the state House of Representatives. In 1903 he was selected to fill the seat of U.S. Representative Charles A. Russell upon Russell's death. In 1905 he was selected to fill the U.S. Senate seat that became vacant upon the death of Connecticut Senator Orville Platt.

Brandegee was an excellent speaker and debater. He was a staunch Republican. Seen through the lens of time, however, his political beliefs tended to be on the wrong side of history. Brandegee was a vocal opponent of women's suffrage. He also fought against the passage of laws intended to reduce child labor.

As a businessman, Frank Brandegee was ambitious but frequently in financial distress. Although some have suggested his 1924 suicide while still serving in the United States Senate was a reaction to failing health, the consensus was that unyielding pressure from his creditors caused him to take his life. A June 9, 1927 article in the New London Day reported that among Brandegee's creditors at the time of his death were the United States Secretary of the Treasury, the Secretary of War, a former ambassador, eight past or present fellow United States Senators, two former Connecticut Governors, and a former United States District Judge.

Immediately after the fire, it was widely speculated in local and national newspapers that the cause of the fire was arson. Despite these early suggestions, neither the press nor law enforcement officials made much of an effort to determine the cause of the blaze or the culprit. In its afternoon edition published the same day as the fire, the New London Day noted, "The general opinion of the origin of the fire is that it was incendiary, but who started it is a mystery which will probably never be solved. There is no possible clue to work on." The Day's lack of enthusiasm and effort to get the scoop regarding the cause of a spectacular fire with a devastating impact on the New London summer economy is curious, to say the least.

There is little doubt that the fire was intentionally set. In fact, the general consensus of New London citizens was that the Pequot House was past its prime and that arson might be the best thing that could happen to it. A June 17, 1908 editorial in the Day noted that before the fire it had been the fashion of local citizens to voice the opinion, "I hope someday that the old Pequot House will burn down." So nobody seemed to be surprised when it did.

The probable reason for sweeping the matter under the rug is that the most likely culprit in any arson case is the owner of the property, and in this case, the owner of the property was Senator Frank Brandegee, a favorite son of the of the City of New London. The New London Day had several times endorsed the candidacies of Brandegee on its editorial pages. Today, the New London Day is recognized as an unbiased voice and a steady protector of the public interest. But in its early days, the Day was acknowledged to be the "mouthpiece of the local Republican

party.” See, Our History (<https://www.theday.com/history-of-the-day>). Senator Frank Brandegee was an unwavering Republican.

The members of the several New London fire companies also held Senator Brandegee in high regard. There are reports of the members of the New London fire companies serenading Brandegee at several public events including the annual Winthrop Day celebration. The Day reported on May 9, 1908, in an article bearing the headline, “Sen. Brandegee Sends His Check” that Fire Chief John Stanners received earlier that day a check from Senator Brandegee. The check was reported to be in appreciation “for the good work done by the New London firemen” fighting the blaze two days earlier. Perhaps it was customary at the time to compensate fire companies for the effective performance of their volunteer duties, but a substantial check from the most likely suspect in an arson case to the primary investigator should have at least raised an eyebrow.

A review of available newspaper archives, particularly articles in the New London Day on the day of and the day following the fire (May 7 and May 8, 1908), reveals the following facts about the crime. On the evening of Wednesday May 6, 1908, prior to the opening of the hotel for the summer season, a caretaker named Richard Greene walked through most of the hotel and noted nothing out of order. Greene was adamant that he did not smoke during his inspection. At approximately 3:10 am on Thursday May 7th, Patrolman Timothy P. Sheehan of the New London Police walked by and looked into the hotel as part of his regular beat. He noted nothing out of the ordinary. At 3:20 am, J. Dempster Sistare, a Groton Constable who was also employed as a watchman at the G.H. Watson residence directly across the harbor from the Pequot House, observed four lights that he first thought were on some vessel in the harbor but ultimately realized they were in the Pequot House. By his estimate, he saw the lights twenty minutes before he heard a fire alarm. At 3:42 am, Officer Sheehan’s regular nightly beat had brought him to a point in front of the Pequot Chapel on Montauk Avenue. At this point, Sheehan reported noticing a heavy smell of smoke in the stiff east to west breeze coming off the harbor. He immediately ran to the Chapel and rang the bell. Hearing this, Charles Harris, the Company Steward of the Pequot Independent Hose Company, rang the bell in the tower of the station at about 3:45 am. In the meantime, Officer Sheehan ran to Glenwood Avenue and pulled the fire alarm at fire box number 54. Sheehan and Mrs. Kirkland, the wife of Pequot Independent Hose Company foreman Eugene Kirkland, ran to the hotel and began removing axes from a shed that they anticipated would be needed to fight the blaze. They were the first to arrive on the scene and did not report seeing others in the area at that time. The fire raged and at one point, thirteen cottages in the vicinity of the hotel were also afire and all efforts were concentrated on saving these other buildings. The Pequot House burned uncontrollably and collapsed completely at 4:10 am. Two adjacent cottages were also destroyed.

Subsequent articles concerned Brandegee’s payment to the fire department (May 9 and June 1, 1908), Brandegee’s decision not to rebuild the hotel but rather sell the remaining property (May 9 and June 4, 1908), and a report that the hotel was insured for \$20,000, that it would

require \$100,000 to rebuild a modern hotel on the site, and that the resale value of the property and surviving cottages was \$150,000 (May 9, 1908). With one curious exception, no follow-up articles appeared and there were never any reports of fire chief or police investigation efforts. One follow-up article that did appear was published by the Day on Monday May 12, 1908 regarding a group of young men who arrived in New London Harbor in motorboats the prior afternoon to view the remains of the hotel. The entire article is as follows:

“Several enthusiastic motor boat owners on Jordan took a pleasure trip down the little river of Jordan Sunday afternoon and rounded Magonk Point into New London Harbor and viewed the ruins of the old Pequot House. The trip was taken to New London in rough weather for such small boats, but nevertheless the young men running the boats claim they had a pleasant time on the return trip despite the rough weather. The boats had a head wind and tide and the sea was rolling high and every wave that the little craft went into wet the occupants all over. The young men looked as though they had fallen into the sea as they went through the streets of the village after their return.”

One must wonder why this event warrants mention in the local newspaper. What is newsworthy about young men getting splashed by rough seas? The reporter mentions that the young men “claimed” to have enjoyed the trip. The use of the word “claim” implies that the reporter doubted that the men really did enjoy the trip and their purpose was therefore unknown and possibly suspicious. Given the seeming desire of The Day’s ownership and editors to sweep the issue under the rug, was this article a veiled effort by the staff of The Day to advance the story? Perhaps these men in motorboats had been involved in setting the fire. Recall that the witness across the harbor stated that he first thought the lights were on some vessel in the harbor. It should also be noted that the Pequot House was most easily accessible by water and its docks were directly across from the ballroom where the fire started. As motorboat operators, these men had ready access to gasoline, something that was not widely available in that era, except to the few people who owned an automobile or a motorboat.

Eventually, in later articles, The Day identified this group of young motorboat owners and enthusiasts as the Jordan Boat Club. The “Commodore” of this club was 20-year-old William A. Brooks. Brooks had moved to Jordan Village with his older brother Charles H. Brooks in 1901 when Charles purchased the historic Jordan Mill. The Jordan Mill had been in continuous operation since 1712 and was the second oldest grist mill in the state behind New London’s Town Mill. William worked with Charles at the mill. As the 20th Century dawned, the era of people bringing their corn and grain to local mills for processing was coming to an end as large, modern, regional mills were becoming the norm. As a result, Charles Brooks’ tenure at the mill was not profitable. In the early morning of February 5th, 1905, the venerable Jordan Mill was destroyed by a fire “of mysterious origin.” The mill was well-insured and with the proceeds Charles Brooks was able to complete the much larger, brick, three-story building that forms a

part of the building that remains on the site to this day. Like the Pequot House, arson was assumed but never proven.

The surf-soaked boat trip by William A. Brooks to view the smoldering remains of the Pequot House and his connection to the Jordan Mill tie him, albeit remotely, to two well-known, unsolved, local arson cases. The Day seems to have noticed this coincidence. During the remainder of 1908 and through the first half of 1909, The Day reporters maintained a keen interest in William A. Brooks and provided regular updates as to his activities. On September 11, 1908, the Day reported that William Brooks was building a 20-foot launch, built with Mahogany from West India, trimmed with African teak, and powered by a top of the line 22 horsepower Grey Motor Company gasoline engine. On October 5, 1908, the Day reported on the celebratory launch of Brooks' new boat recently built by him at his boathouse and proclaimed it, "one of the finest boats of its type afloat in local waters." In addition to his work in the Jordan Mill, the Day reported that William worked as a clerk in the grocery store of William C. Saunders. Saunders was also the local postmaster, and Brooks worked as a substitute mail carrier when the regular carrier was unavailable. The series of Day articles gives no indication as to how a 20-year-old grocery clerk and part-time mail carrier could afford a boathouse on Jordan Cove and a watercraft of such distinction. If William A. Brooks was in any way involved in the Jordan Mill or Pequot House arson, he did not have to hide his secrets for long. Shortly before noon on July 7, 1909, William A. Brooks drowned after falling off his new boat as it made a sharp turn just below the railroad bridge on Jordan Cove.

Having a connection to a building that is intentionally burned is not proof of involvement in the crime. But even if it is assumed that William A. Brooks was involved with the Jordan Mill fire, without evidence of any connection of Brooks to Senator Frank Brandegee, there is no way to tie Brooks to the Pequot House fire. However, there is evidence of a strong connection, and it is through Postmaster William C. Saunders. Not only did William A. Brooks work as a clerk in Saunders' grocery store and work for Saunders as a substitute mail carrier, but he married Saunder's niece, Mabel "Maude" Darrow, in July of 1907. Saunders then sold his grocery business to Brooks in February 1908. Saunders also had a close connection to Brandegee. Saunders was the Chairman of the Waterford Republican Town Committee and was a regular delegate to the Republican State Convention. As such, Brandegee needed the political support of Saunders. In towns the size of Waterford, the position of Postmaster was appointed and reappointed by the Postmaster General, upon the recommendation of one's local Senator or Congressman. Thus, the continued service of Saunders as Postmaster relied on the political patronage of Brandegee. With the support of Brandegee, Waterford Republicans also endorsed William C. Saunders to serve as the Waterford Town Clerk simultaneously with his Postmaster duties.

In addition to the duties for which William C. Saunders relied on Frank Brandegee's support, The Day also reported in June of 1908 that Saunders had taken up the fire insurance business earlier that spring.

At this time, 115 years after the Pequot House was destroyed, there is no direct evidence to prove that Senator Frank B. Brandegee orchestrated its burning. By virtue of his ownership of the hotel, Brandegee was the beneficiary of the insurance policies upon it and the recipient of the proceeds of the sale of the property. For those reasons alone, he should always have been and should to this day remain a primary suspect. The revelation following his suicide that he had for decades been overburdened by personal debt tends to shine the light of suspicion even more brightly upon him. Whether William A. Brooks was involved in physically carrying out the crime is another aspect of the matter that has not been conclusively proven. His connection to two local arson cases and his ties, through William Saunders, to Brandegee have been established. Though uncertainty remains, the combination of circumstantial facts, when viewed as a whole, allow modern reviewers to develop a plausible theory of the case. That theory focuses on Brandgeee and Brooks as the primary suspects responsible for the destruction of the Pequot House.

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