COLLECTIONS

ON THE

HISTORY OF ALBANY,

FROM ITS

DISCOVERY TO THE PRESENT TIME,

WITH

Notices of its Public Institutions,

AND

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF CITIZENS DECEASED.

VOL. II.

ALBANY, N. Y.:
J. MUNSELL, 82 STATE STREET.
1867.

THE CONFLAGRATION OF 1793.

Sunday, the 17th of November, 1793, was a day long remembered by the inhabitants of this city, and the few who still linger among us retain a vivid recollection of the scenes enacted during that night. The greater portion of the then quiet church-going people of that day had retired to rest, and were slumbering upon their pillows, when they were awakened by the alarming cry of fire. Speedily the flames lighted up the city, and in a short time the inhabitants were out in large numbers to assist in quenching the flames, for then every citizen able to do duty, was a fireman. The fire originated in a barn or stable, belonging to Leonard Gansevoort, in the centre of the block then bounded by Market, State Maiden and Middle lanes, in the rear of the store on State street, now occupied by Hickcox & Co. There was a slight breeze blowing when it was first discovered, and but little attention was paid to the alarm by those residing in the immediate neighborhood. They thought that, as it was only a frame building, the flames would be speedily quenched, and without their assistance. But, instead of being subdued, the flames spread so rapidly that in a short time they had reached most of the adjoining property, and in a few hours the heart of the city was enveloped in smoke and flames. The fire laid waste all that portion of the city previously described, from the dwelling house and store of Daniel Hale, northerly to the dwelling house of Teunis T. Van Vechten, on the corner of Maiden lane and Market street (now Broadway), destroying on that street the dwelling houses and stores of D. Waters, John G. Van Schaick, E. Willet, John Maley, James Caldwell, Caldwell & Pearson, C. Glen, P. W. Douw, Maley & Cuyler, and Mrs. Beekman. On State street, there was consumed the dwelling house of T. Barry (then a new and considered an elegant brick building), the store house of G. W. Van Schaick; the house of C. K. Vanderberg, partly occupied by Giles K. Porter, merchant tailor; the dwelling of Leonard Gansevoort; the drug store of Dexter & Pomeroy, and the dwelling of Mrs. Hilton. In Middle lane, there were a large number of stables, all of which were consumed, greatly aiding in the spreading of the fire by the intense heat made by the burning of pitch-pine timber, which was used for building in those days. In Maiden lane the dwelling house of Mrs. Deforest and the new and spacious store house of Maley & Cuyler were destroyed, the latter firm being by far the heaviest losers by this calamity.

Soon after the fire had obtained the mastery and baffled all human efforts, a cold rain storm set in, which, soon after turning to sleet, greatly tended to check its progress. In those days, every man, woman and child, able to handle an empty leather fire bucket, was pressed into service. Every house was required to have three leather water buckets hanging up in its halls; and, in case of fire, the inmates were required not only to bring them to the scene of the disaster, but were compelled to go into the bucket ranks and assist in passing the buckets to and from the wells or pumps to the fire. These ranks were formed in two lines, opposite each other, the one to pass the water to the fire and the other

to return the empty buckets. In the latter, it was no uncommon occurrence to see both male and female, old and young. A fire engine was a novelty in those days; and yet Albany, with 5,000 inhabitants, boasted of two. But one of them could scarcely be called an engine. The largest was about as powerful as our present garden engines, and the other, which was called the house engine, was so light as easily to be carried about by one man. Hose and suctions were then unknown. The engines were filled by buckets and the water thrown from a pipe fixed on the top of the engine. At the fire previously alluded to, the largest engine stood at the corner of Market and State streets; the gutter was dammed up and the engine supplied by the water which ran down the hill and which was gathered up in leather buckets.

It will be recollected that all the stables on Middle lane were destroyed. They were constructed of very combustible materials, and contained the usual winter stock of hay and straw. The heat was so great as to endanger the dwellings on Pearl street. Domine Ellison (as he was then familiarly called), rector of St. Peter's Church, and a man beloved by all who knew him, was quite active throughout this emergency. It was mainly through his exertions and good management that they were saved. He directed mops to be made of woolen fabrics, which were kept wet and constantly applied to the shutters and woodwork upon the houses most exposed to the heat of the fire.

The progress of the flames was checked in Maiden lane by Capt. Willett, who fortunately was here with his vessel. He rallied his hands and directed them to chop down a frame building midway between Pearl street and Middle lane. This act checked the progress of the flames in that direction. While this was going on, by the aid of blankets upon roofs kept moist by the bucket gang, the progress of the fire was checked on State street, but it was not before morning that it became evident that the fire had reached its farthest point. The citizens devoted the greater part of the following Monday in raking and extinguishing the burning embers.

The fire was so plainly the work of an incendiary, that not only were several slaves arrested upon suspicion, but subsequently a meeting of the common council was held and an ordinance passed forbidding any negro or mulatto, of any sex, age or description whatever, from walking in the streets or lanes after 9 o'clock in the evening, or from being in any tavern or tippling house after that hour, under penalty of twenty-four hours confinement in the jail. At the expiration of such confinement they were to be brought before the mayor, recorder or an alderman, when they were at liberty to show, by their master or mistress, that they were out upon lawful and necessary business. If they established this fact, they were discharged upon paying the jail expenses; but if they failed, they were further punished by fine and imprisonment. The municipal authorities were active in ferreting out the perpetrators of this high crime which, according to the English law, was punishable with death. It was then the law of this land, and as punishment was more summary than it is now, the guilty parties knew that hanging would follow conviction. The proceedings in court which followed this fire attracted much attention, particularly among the colored population, in consequence of several of their number having been arrested upon suspicion of being implicated in the arson.— *Evening Journal.*

The sun had sunk beneath the western horizon and many of the then inhabitants of the city were seeking sweet sleep when the shrill cry of fire! fire! caused them to leap from their couches. It was on Sunday night, about 10½ o'clock, on the 17th of November, 1793, that the demon spirit caused a fire to be kindled in a stable, in the heart of the city, by which property to a large amount was destroyed. That it was the act of an incendiary, was never questioned, instigated by unrequited love and revenge.

Tradition asserts that a young man named Sanders, residing in Schenectady, had been paying marked attention to the only daughter of Leonard Gansevoort, and that, from a just, real or imaginary cause, he had either been jilted by that young lady, or been quietly informed by her father, that his visits to his house were unsolicited and very annoying. This, as it might naturally be supposed, came with crushing weight upon the feelings of a young man, proud in spirit and exalted in his future expectations. His whole mind appeared to have been centered in that direction, and the unexpected bursting of his high hopes and expectations, caused him to become a viper and to return the sting. Sanders had a warm friend in this city, by the name of McBurney, who kept a jewelry shop in State street. McBurney proved to be not only a true but cunning friend, as the sequel will show, for he not only carried out Sanders's design, but so managed the affair as not only to escape detection, or in any way criminate himself or his friend. It appears from the tale of our relator, that McBurney called in the negro Pomp, to assist him in carrying out his plan of revenge. He held out to the gazing eyes of Pomp, a toy of great value, a massive gold watch, to any one who would, on a certain night, fire the stable of Mr. Gansevoort. It appears that Pomp, either lacked the moral courage to commit the act, or through selfish motives, entrusted two wenches with its commission, over whom, it is said, he had almost complete control. The one was named Bet, and she was a slave to Philip S. Van Rensselaer, who was subsequently mayor of this city, from 1799 to 1814; and the other, named Dinah, a slave belonging to Volkert Douw. Bet was only about 16 or 17 years of age; she was a handsome wench, and was a great favorite with Mrs. Van Rensselaer. She came from Peekskill, where she was born and brought up in the family of Mrs. Van Rensselaer's mother; and, soon after the latter was married, she was brought to this city by Mrs. Van Rensselaer, as a gift from her mother. Dinah was about the same age, and both were looked upon as giddy, thoughtless, but not wicked girls. After Pomp had concluded the negotiations with the girls, to commit the arson, he apparently became alarmed, and fearing the consequences that might ensue, endeavored to prevail upon them to relinquish the thought of committing the fiendish act. The same evening, Pomp was seen in his master's stable, in company with the girls, endeavoring to persuade them from doing it, and a short time previous to the breaking out of the fire he was seen with them in Middle alley, talking to them in a supplicating tone of voice. In fact he was overheard to say, that he would not give them the watch if they committed the deed. Upon the alarm being given, Mrs. Van Rensselaer immediately thought of Bet, and, going to her room, found that she was missing. All the next day she was absent from home, and the next time seen by her mistress she was in jail. While

there she revealed to Mrs. Van Rensselaer the crime she had committed and the manner she accomplished it. In an old shoe she carried live coals of fire from the kitchen of Mr. Gansevoort to his barn and threw them upon the hay. The fire not igniting as speedily as she expected, she went again to the stable, and upon finding the coals dead returned immediately to the kitchen and the second time carried coals in the same manner into the stable. The conflagration speedily ensued, and resulted as previously stated.

The very next day after the fire of the 17th these same girls set on fire the stable of Peter Gansevoort, in the rear of his house, on the corner of Market street (now Broadway) and Maiden lane, which was also destroyed, and the same evening visited the house on the opposite corner, and attempted to set it on fire by putting coals of fire in a bureau drawer containing clothes. In this they did not succeed for want of air.

Soon after the burning of Gen. Peter Gansevoort's stable, Bet and Dinah were arrested for the arson on the 17th, and on the following day acknowledged their guilt, and also implicated Pomp, who was subsequently incarcerated in jail. While there they were treated with the utmost kindness. They were furnished daily with food from their respective mistresses' table, and Bet was frequently visited by Mrs. Van Rensselaer, who felt a motherly affection towards her unfortunate slave. The three were tried, convicted and sentenced to be hung. They were confined in separate rooms in jail, but by means of a stove-pipe hole they were enabled to converse with each other. Possessed, as they must have been, with the spirit of a demon, these girls entertained some feelings of honor. A few evenings before the day fixed upon for their execution, the jailer overheard a conversation between the trio, in which the wenches exonerated Pomp from all blame, and regretted that they had not heeded his advice. The following morning they went so far as to tell the jailer that Pomp was innocent and that they alone were guilty. About this time, Pomp was a great favorite among the leading citizens, and upon his being pronounced innocent by the wenches, strenuous efforts were made to save his life. Judge Robert Yates and his daughter, Mrs Major Fairley, took a lively interest in his behalf, as did also John Van Ness Yates, Sebastian Visscher and others. The matter was brought before Gov. Geo. Clinton, who was prevailed upon to grant a temporary respite. Pomp was subsequently, unknown to his friends, prevailed upon to make a confession. He revealed what was known to be true, in regard to the origin of the fire, but he also acknowledged having robbed the mail, which at that time was punishable with death. The girls were executed in the following spring on Pinkster hill, which was then a few rods west of the Academy, or about on the corner of Fayette and Hawk streets. The revelations made by Pomp were given to Gov. Clinton, and a few months after the execution of the wenches, Pomp suffered the extreme penalty of the law upon the same spot. Sanders and McBurney were not arrested, for there was no evidence against them except the assertions of Pomp, and he being implicated in the crime his evidence could not be taken.

Before closing this sketch we cannot refrain from noticing a fact of rather uncommon occurrence in these days and one well worthy of reflection: The daughter of Mr. Gansevoort was subsequently married, and is now living in affluence near this city, in the enjoyment of the society of

the early partner of her joys and of her sorrows Although she has outlived the scriptural term of life, she is still in the enjoyment of comparatively good health, with the proud satisfaction of being surrounded by her children, her grand children, and her great-grand children.

CHARACTER AND ECCENTRICITIES OF THE SLAVE POMP.

Before and for a long period after the revolutionary war, almost every family in this city had its slaves, to do the drudgery work in and about the house. Every family raised its own vegetables, in gardens, either adjoining the house or upon what was called the hills, and it was also the duty of the colored people to till these grounds. Among the colored inhabitants of this city was a youth of about twenty-five years of age, who, by his acts of wickedness, not only cost his master much anxiety of mind, but also large sums of money. His name was Pomp, and he belonged to Matthew Visscher. Where he came from is not known, but it is supposed that he emigrated from the city of New York. Among some old papers recently overhauled, the bill of sale of Pomp was found, which we copy, verbatim, for the benefit of those who are curious in those matters:

"ALBANY 30 January 1788.

Received of Matthew Visscher Esqr. the sum of ninty pounds, New York currency it being for a negro boy named Pomp of about the age of eleven years sold him this day, and I do hereby warrant the said negro boy Pomp, against all claims and demands that may be made against him.

Present JACOB ROSEBOOM Jr

HENRY WENDELL."

In his youthful days, Pomp was not looked upon as a bright, or even an intelligent boy; but was honest, trustworthy and a faithful servant. As he grew older, he became more and more indolent, and courting the company of females of his own complexion, he became a frequent truant from home and unreliable as a servant. When near the age of manhood, he became independent in feeling but was not impudent. Those who remember Tobias Morgan, of a more recent day, can picture to the mind's eye Pomp. Tobias, from 1834 to the time of his death, always paraded with the Burgesses corps, when they were called out for duty. Tobias was in his glory when he was decked out in his gayest apparel, and so was Pomp. Tobias, however, was not a favorite among the females, while Pomp was a gay fellow among the wenches (as they were then called), and in dress he was frequently foppish. In his efforts to imitate in dress those who mingled in a different society, he became a thief. Having the freedom of his master's house, he, upon several occasions, stole large sums of money belonging to his mistress, and after obtaining what he desired in the way of dress, he would place the remainder where it could be found. Although he frequently deserved the application of the birch rod upon his back, he was never whipped by either his master or his master's son, but was always treated, after he reached the age of manhood, much better than his conduct merited.

During the revolutionary war the inhabitants of this city were mainly

dependent upon their own resources in obtaining wearing apparel — the stock of woolen and cotton goods imported previous to the declaration of independence having been bought up and held at such prices that home manufacture was resorted to, and it was then no common occurrence to see a spinning wheel whirling around daily in almost every house, and the younger members of the family were engaged in making yarn.

Soon after the close of the war, business revived, importations were resumed, and speedily rich silks, satins and broad-cloths took the place of linsey-wolseys and home-made woolen cloths. Extremes in everything usually follow each other, and in this respect the change of fashion was not an exception to the general rule. The gayest colored fabrics were selected by both males and females for dresses and garments. Colors of the rainbow took the place of the sombre brown and the heavy black previously worn by females, while blue, pea green and scarlet broad-cloths were selected by the males for dress coats. Then the *bon ton* (as even some do now) must needs go to New York to purchase their garments, for each and every one must have something different from his neighbor. Sail vessels were then the only means of conveyance to that city, and a trip to New York and back occupied from a fortnight to a month, as captains then in command of vessels dropped anchor at nightfall and seldom caused the oars to be plied during a calm. A passage to or from New York in less then a week was considered a great feat; and the captain who was so fortunate as to bring a copy of a New York paper containing the news by a foreign arrival, was welcomed by the proprietors and editors of the *Albany Gazette*, for then they were enabled to regale their readers with columns of news from the old country. The negro Pomp, upon seeing his master return from New York, at the close of a legislative session, decked out in a pea green colored broad-cloth coat, short collar and gilt buttons, took such a fancy to it that he was again tempted to resort to his old tricks to gratify his wishes. He stole a large sum of money from his mistress, and with his ill-gotten treasure he fled to New York, laying for several days in the hold of a vessel, unknown to the captain, until it was too late to put him on shore. The first tidings of the whereabouts of Pomp were received by his master from the captain of the vessel in which he fled. He left him in New York, and on the day the vessel left that port he discovered Pomp parading in Broadway, wearing a bright red cloth coat, cut in the prevailing fashion, adorned with gilt buttons. Pomp's conduct previous to this occurrence had been so annoying, both to his master and mistress, that this act settled his doom. His master then concluded to get rid of him forever, and accordingly directed a friend in New York to arrest and sell him to the highest bidder. This brought Pomp to his senses, for the negro was conscious of having a kind and indulgent master. Upon his knees he implored the agent in New York not to sell him, but to write home to his master and tell him that if he would forgive him this time he would never again offend or give him any trouble. The letter was sent, but a reply was not received until after Pomp had been sold. The bill of sale, however, had not been signed, and the purchaser, hearing of his previous pranks, was easily induced to yield him up, and Pomp returned home to commit a greater crime and to receive a severer punishment — the forfeiture of his life as an incendiary.— *Evening Journal.*