Room Three: A Firestorm From Hell

Burned Districts of San Francisco

The "Great Fire" that scorched 508 city blocks, or 4.7 square miles of San Francisco had its origin in two separate fires, one in the poor South of Market neighborhoods, and the other on the north side of Market Street near the waterfront. These two fires began shortly after the quake and quickly overwhelmed firefighters who found the two districts lacking enough water to fight the fires.

On Wednesday, these fires were joined by a new blaze to the west in Hayes Valley where a damaged chimney flue caused a stove to set a home on fire. Thanks to a strong westerly wind, the Hayes Valley fire stretched west, bridging ground between it and the other fires. That same evening, three fires became four when the French restaurant Delmonico's, located one block south of Union Square, caught fire from a soldier's campfire.

Over the succeeding days, these fires struggled north toward Russian and Telegraph Hills, reaching those areas only on Thursday and Friday. Prepared for the fire, San Franciscans held their ground on both hills, only to see most of the surrounding territory consumed by fire.

The wooden docks, so important to getting supplies into the city and people out of it, survived three days of fire until the wharf on the city's north side caught fire on Friday. With the aid of fireboats, the wharf fire only destroyed a portion of the docks before being contained. The fire lost intensity through Friday night, and by Saturday morning, April 21, the city still smoked, but the fire was finished. A 360 degree silent film of the downtown area shows vividly the unbelievable scope and extent of the destruction.