



0. FIRE IN PESHTIGO: A COINCIDENCE? - Story Preface

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4. FIRE IN PESHTIGO: A COINCIDENCE?

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On the 25th of November, 1871, *Harper's Weekly* published this two-page illustration of the disaster in Wisconsin. The drawing has this caption: "Forest Fires In The West—The Burning of Peshtigo."

Although Chicago received most of the publicity, the fire in Wisconsin was much more deadly. Peshtigo (and its environs) lost about 1200 people; Chicago lost around 300. Property damage in Wisconsin was \$169 million; Chicago's losses were about the same. To this day, Peshtigo's fire ranks as the worst American forest-fire disaster.

Peshtigo itself was gone in an hour. Eight hundred of its citizens died, including many children. 1.2 million acres of forest burned.

The town's river was the only haven from the fire, but even there people died. Father Peter Pernin's first-hand account describes mass confusion at the bridge as people tried to pick the direction that would take them farthest from the flames.

I resolved then to cross to the other side, though the bridge was already on fire. The latter presented a scene of indescribable and awful confusion, each one thinking they could attain safety on the other side of the river.

Those who lived in the east were hurrying toward the west, and those who lived in that west were wildly pushing on to the east so that the bridge was thoroughly encumbered with cattle, vehicles, women, children and men, all pushing and crushing against each other...

The tale would get worse. Much worse.

The local paper - called *The Marinette and Peshtigo Eagle* - reported the story with these headlines:

- Holocaust of Flame
- Peshtigo Annihilated!
- The Farming Country Ruined!
- Whole Families Burned to Death!
- Hundreds Starving and Dying

- Heart-Rending Detail
- We Must have Help

Despite this staggering disaster in Wisconsin, most of the national aid went to help people in Chicago.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/FIRE-IN-PESHTIGO-A-COINCIDENCE-Great-Fire-of-1871>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/FIRE-IN-PESHTIGO-A-COINCIDENCE-Great-Fire-of-1871>

Questions 2 Ponder

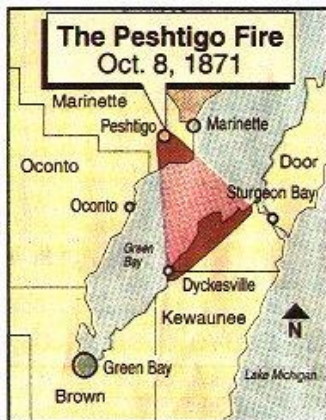
Why Do Events in Major Cities Tend to Overshadow Similar Events in Smaller Towns?

When the Great Chicago Fire occurred, in 1871, an even deadlier fire occurred, at the exact same time, in Peshtigo, Wisconsin. Then, and later, Peshtigo's fire was overshadowed by Chicago's fire.

Even today, many people know about Chicago's great fire but not about Peshtigo's. What could explain this?

Far more people died in the Wisconsin fire than in the Illinois fire. How could it be that most of the national aid went to help Chicago?

Media Stream



Press-Gazette graphic



Bird's-eye view of Peshtigo as it appeared in 1871 shortly before its destruction. The sites indicated by circled numbers follow the order in which Pernin witnessed them in the town: (1) is the Catholic church; (2) along the dam to the right; the bridge to the left, with the sawmill directly above the number; (3) where the Company warehouse and factory on the left side of the river; (4) situated on the hill in the Company building facing across the site of the saw mill; probably the house; (5) is the Forest House, also pictured on page 256; and (6) marks the location of the Congregational church and the sawmill. Pernin is pictured in greater detail on pages 256 and 264 respectively. Flames leaping between the sawmill (2) and the landing house (4) prevented Pernin from going downstream after he had crossed the bridge.



Artist Mel Kahner's conception of the terrified populace fleeing down Ottawa Avenue toward the protection of the river.

Peshtigo Wisconsin

Map online, courtesy NOAA's (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) National Weather Service [forecast office in Green Bay, Wisconsin](http://www.noaa.gov).

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Peshtigo-Wisconsin>

Aerial View of Peshtigo

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Peshtigo Fire - Illustration Depicting Flight to the River

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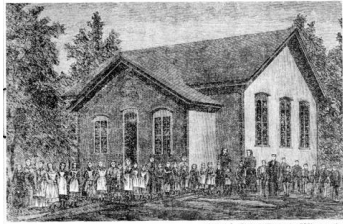
<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Peshtigo-Fire-Illustration-Depicting-Flight-to-the-River>



Peshtigo Fire - Fleeing to the River

Image from October 1871 *Harper's Weekly* issue. Online, courtesy U.S. Library of Congress.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Peshtigo-Fire-Fleeing-to-the-River>



Tilton, Great Fires in Wisconsin
Wood engraving of the Peshtigo Schoolhouse prior to the fire.

Peshtigo Schoolhouse - Before the Fire

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Map adapted from Tilton's Great Fires in Wisconsin, and used in Robert Falls' Fire as Evidence to Show the Actual Extent in Wisconsin and Michigan. The dotted line indicates the approximate extent of the devastation, as do the shaded areas in the insets.

Peshtigo - Map Depicting the Burned Areas

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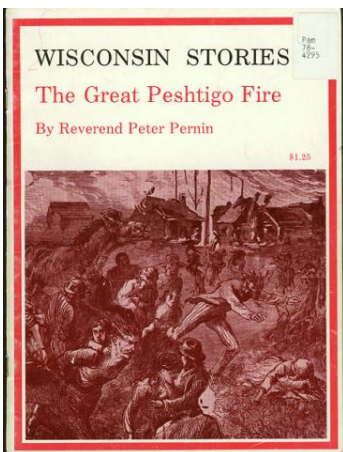
Society's Iconographic Collections

Wood engraving of Father Peter Pernin, about 1874.

Father Peter Pernin

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Wisconsin Stories: The Great Peshtigo Fire

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