

"The Lumber Piles Must Go" Ottawa's Lumber Interests and the Great Fire of 1900

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Article abstract

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"THE LUMBER PILES MUST GO"

OTTAWA'S LUMBER INTERESTS AND THE GREAT FIRE OF 1900

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Jon Fear

ABSTRACT/RESUME

Ottawa's great fire of 1900 destroyed much of a lumber manufacturing and working class area. The conflagration also revealed a set of tensions that pitted public safety against both the workers' need for cheap homes, safe from fire, and industry's needs for piling grounds for lumber. Politicians and the public agonized at length over the problem, but they achieved only deadlock and changed nothing.

A Ottawa, le grand incendie de 1900 détruisit la plus grande partie d'une zone manufacturière de bois où habitaient de nombreux ouvriers. Suite à cette conflagration, des tensions s'allumèrent qui opposèrent la sécurité publique au besoin qu'avaient les ouvriers de maisons peu chères et protégées du feu et aux besoins de l'industrie, à la recherche de terrains où empiler son bois. Les politiciens et le public débattirent féroceement cette question, mais ils ne parvinrent qu'à une impasse et n'apportèrent aucun changement à la situation.

* * *

When one of Ottawa's major industrial and working class districts was destroyed by fire in 1900, city council's responsibility for the provision of public safety from the danger of fire was escalated beyond the mere technical problem of fire-fighting. Such a conflagration was clearly beyond the capacity of any fire department. In some way both the fire-ravaged district and in turn the larger community had to be immunized from the threat of fire in the vast piling grounds of the lumber industry. One way was to deal with the cheap, wooden, tinder-box, houses of the mill-workers, either by prohibiting their construction in the lumber district (a strategy never seriously considered), or by requiring improvements to make them flame-resistant. To do the latter would be costly, and on working class incomes, unaffordable. A second way of ensuring safety from fire was to drive the lumber piles from the city. To do that implied a major public intrusion into the affairs of the business community. It also meant destroying one of the city's major tax bases. City council, then, was neatly compromised on a matter that pitted the general security against the rights of both the working and

entrepreneurial classes, a matter that, in addition, threatened to shake both the financial and industrial viability of the city.

If a definite cause could have been cited for the ease and rapidity with which the 1900 fire had swept across the city the problem might have been easier. But even that was in dispute. The lumbermen were blamed for the huge piles of wood they stored in the city; the workers for the wood shingles of their rough cast houses. The most obvious solution--forcing the lumbermen to move their piles outside the city--also seemed the most difficult. The city was still significantly dependent on the industry that had meant the most to its growth. If lumber exports to the United States were falling off, the pulp and paper industry was only beginning to develop. Nor was it likely the council could turn its will against John R. Booth, the aging "Chaudiere Carnegie" whose enterprise had made him a living legend by the turn of the century.

In rejecting the first solution however, the council was also rejecting the second. If the lumber piles remained in the city there was little logic in forcing the workers to build fire-proof houses for safety's sake. The council never really considered the worker's housing problem in a fuller context. The workers were needed to run the city's industries and they did represent a significant portion of the population, but the attitude seemed to persist that they didn't really deserve the proposed safety measures. Even the aldermen who did show concern for the workers stressed that any legislation should be "fair."

It was never questioned in post-fire discussions why working class housing was so poor. The predominant business attitude of the day was that the employer's responsibility to his employees ended with their jobs. If the workers had unsafe houses it was through some failure of their own. To some extent the council concurred with this view.

The Ottawa city council that had to deal with the problem was made up of a nondescript collection of small businessmen. Under the Council-Committee system of municipal government it had the duty of handling most of the details of the city's administration. Each alderman was in some way part of the executive. The system was cumbersome, repetitive and involved time-consuming work at low pay which many believed discouraged the ablest men from holding office.

The fire seemed to represent a gap in the city's development between the old times and the new. On the one hand there was a push for reform, a desire to clear up the city's financial situation and wipe out an increasing civic debt. There was also a push, more from the outside, to improve the capital as a whole, to make it as Wilfrid Laurier had proposed, "the Washington of the North." The Ottawa Improvement Commission had just been created in 1899 and several new government buildings were planned for construction in the near future. But in 1900 the city's business interests still ruled the day. The city council not only listened to the Board of Trade but acted in the light of the Board's recommendations.

When the great fire struck the city the initial response was to demand the removal of the "unsightly" lumber from the capital. There was, as the Hon. George Foster said, a "virgin soil" there. It was time for the government to step in. It was a tempting idea but it got nowhere at city hall. When the vested interests came into conflict with public safety the vested interests prevailed. "The lesson had not been burnt in."

The fire began innocently enough as a small blaze in the defective chimney of a house in Hull. It was not to remain small for long. A wind to the south was blowing in gusts up to thirty miles per hour and the flames spread quickly from the first roof to others. In the space of an hour several blocks were burning and it was clear most of the city would be destroyed. Hull had suffered from two serious fires in recent years but past experience was of little help to the inhabitants who first hung sacred pictures outside their doors and finally, when all was lost, made their way to the river and safety in Ottawa.¹

News of the fire in Hull spread rapidly throughout the capital and from across the city there was a rush to the best point of observation on the bluffs westward from Parliament Hill. "By half-past twelve [noon] the entire border of the cliff was packed black with people,

¹Ottawa Free Press, April 26, 1900 (lengthy descriptions of the fire's progress also appear on this date in the Ottawa Evening Journal and Ottawa Citizen).

in fact, thousands stood there for hours and watched the devouring elements destroying the homes of the poor people in Hull..."²

Later those who had watched from the Hill were to argue as to how the flames had first spread to Ottawa. For when the fire reached the river, it did not stop. Blown directly across the wooden bridge at Chaudiere Island, the flames fuelled themselves on the drying piles of lumber in Ottawa's "Flats" and pressed on across more than 400 acres of the city's west end, finally burning out just north of the St. Louis Dam at Dow's Lake.

That the fire did not spread east beyond Division Street in Ottawa (now Booth Street) was considered almost a miracle, a freak chance determined by the direction of the wind. As it was a group of citizens spent most of the day using buckets of water to prevent the flames from scaling the cliff at the north end of Cambridge and Concession Streets (now Bronson Ave.).³ The fire did destroy the residences of several of Ottawa's well-to-do on Wellington Street, but it was the city's working class population that suffered most. More than 8,000 people--14 per cent of the city's population--were left homeless and forced to seek temporary shelter until new houses could be built.

The buildings in the burnt district had, for the most part, been wooden structures, many with wood shingle roofs that caught fire quickly from sparks blowing overhead. The area near Wellington Street had contained several stone and brick veneer buildings but most of these were gutted in the fire as well.⁴ A significant portion of the burnt district consisted of huge lumber yards that roughly followed a crescent shape within the city limits from the Ottawa River to Dow's Lake.

Early estimates were that 100 million feet of drying lumber was destroyed in the fire, its value more than \$3 million.⁵ Hardest hit

²Ibid.

³Journal, April 27, 1900.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., April 28,, 1900.



*The Ottawa Fire of April, 1900. Residents of the "Flats" removing effects to the platform of the Broad Street Railway Station.
(Photograph: Royce. Courtesy: Ontario Archives).*

among the lumbermen was 72-year-old John R. Booth who lost not only most of the lumber in five of his yards, but his fine home at the corner of Wellington and Preston Streets.

Booth had called his men from their work to fight the fire in its early stages, but when the flames reached Chaudiere Island he concentrated on saving his big sawmill. After a disastrous fire four years earlier the lumberman's second son, Fred, had rigged the mill with a sprinkler system of his own invention that now paid off. Before it could catch fire the building was drenched with water inside and out and at the end of the day it was one of the few that remained standing in the area.⁶

The rest of the business community was not so lucky. Lost to the flames were the mills and offices of several establishments, among them the Bronson Lumber Co. and the McKay Milling Co. The Canadian Pacific Railway station on Broad Street was gutted. The Ottawa Electric Light Co. lost several of its powerhouses and the city was without light for several days. In all close to 1,900 buildings, including houses, were destroyed by the fire. The loss financially totalled more than \$6 million, about half of which was covered by insurance.⁷

The immediate response in the city was the provision of relief for working class families who, in many cases, had lost everything. "He who gives, giveth twice," the Free Press headlined its front page the day after the fire.⁸ An advertisement by the C. Ross Co. department store called for public assistance.

Help - a national disaster demands national succour. . . .
It behouves the wealthy and affluent to give not by a dollar where it should be ten, or five dollars where it should be fifty, or a hundred dollars where it should be a thousand, but according to the divine injunction - "every man according to his means." This includes women also.⁹

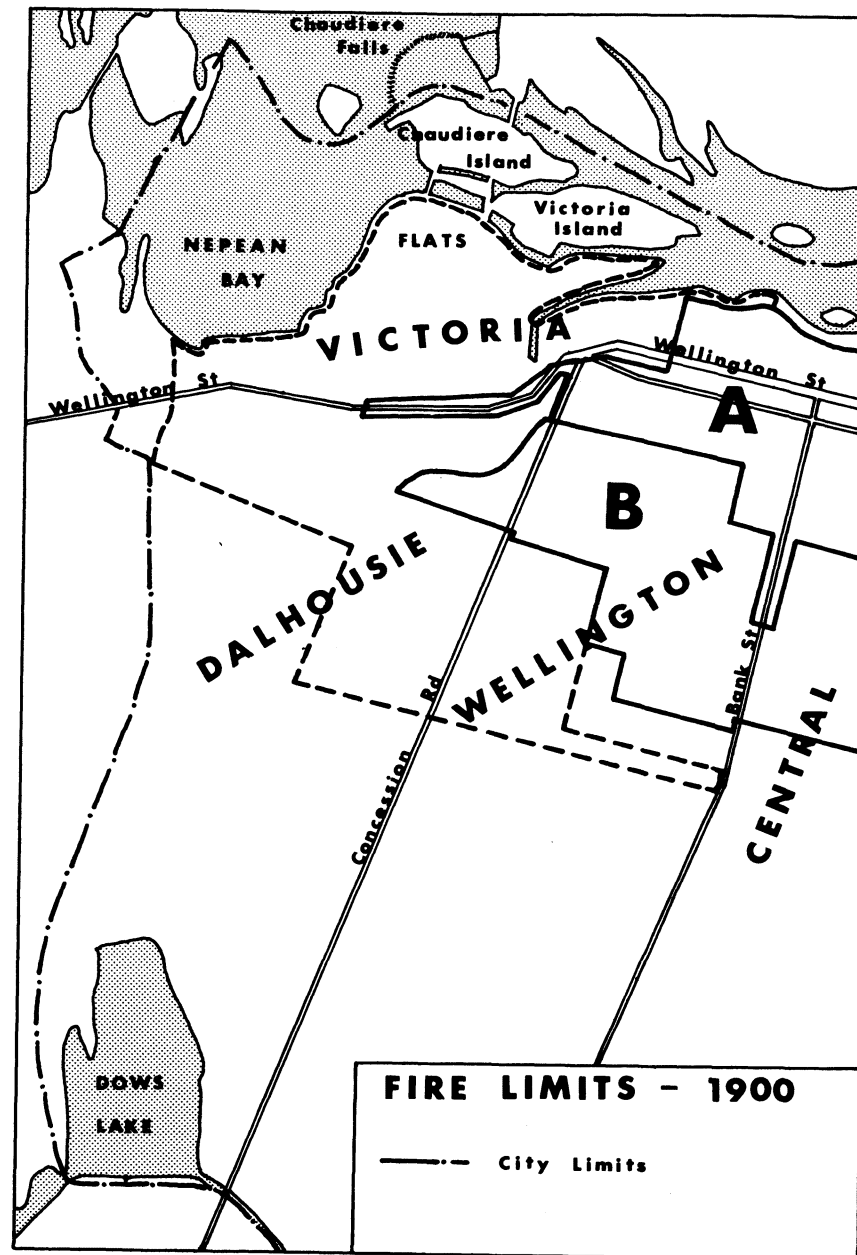
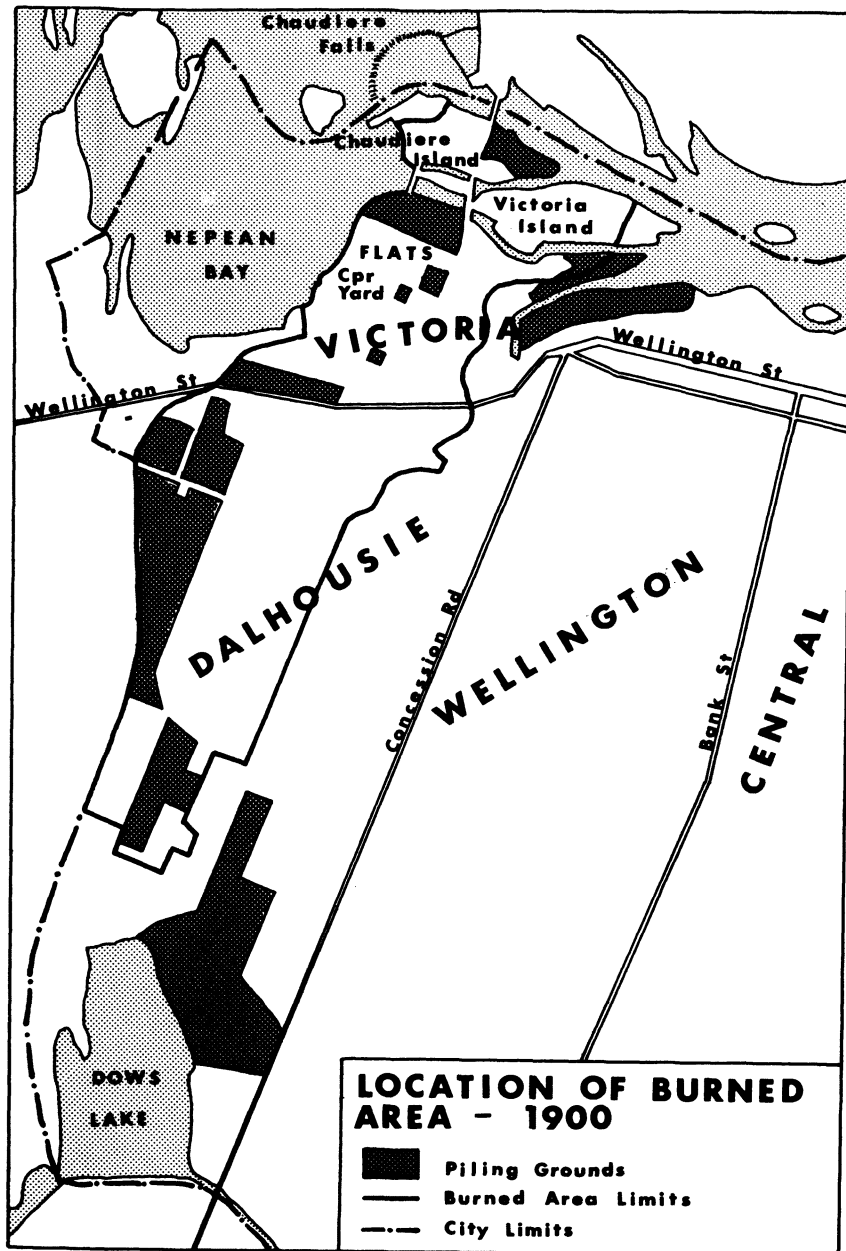
Even the "Marchioness," author of the weekly Free Press society

⁶Citizen, April 26, 1900.

⁷Journal, April 27, 1900. (estimates by G. W. Shorter, Division of Building Research, National Research Council)

⁸Free Press, April 27, 1900.

⁹Ibid.



notes, felt compelled to begin her April 28 column by recognizing the relief role played by the wealthier citizens:

Not social notes, surely? That portion of the community known as society and popularly supposed to put in its time going to, or giving dinners, luncheons or teas, riding, driving or playing golf, living in fact for the sole purpose of amusing itself, has ceased to exist in that sense since the fire broke out in Hull Thursday morning.¹⁰

At the city hall on Elgin Street a group of citizens met the night following the fire and instructed the city council to petition the Ontario legislature for authority to issue debentures for a sum not exceeding \$100,000 to aid the sufferers. The homeless who had not found accommodation with friends or relatives were camped at the By Ward Market and at Lansdowne Park.

The initial concern for relief did not long obscure the deeper concern by many that some action be taken to prevent a recurrence of the conflagration. The focal point of criticism was the lumber piles that had so dominated the burnt district. If the fire had not started in the lumber, it was argued, the piles were responsible for the way in which it had spread. Actually, the potential danger of the lumber piles had been recognized by many people for several years. In fact, reported the Evening Journal, the April fire had been predicted years earlier by Mr. Fred Perry, an underwriter and inspector for the Royal Insurance Co. in Montreal.

Mr. Perry had warned the city about the danger of the lumber piles at the Chaudiere. In a report to his company he said that some day Ottawa would be visited by a destructive fire. It would start in Hull, cross into the Chaudiere, extend up into Rochesterville, aided by the continuous piles of lumber and if the wind was not in the right direction the best part of the city would be swept.¹¹

The Free Press however was quick to discount any criticism directed at the lumber piles:

¹⁰Ibid., April 28, 1900.

¹¹Journal, April 27, 1900.

. . . the croakers who have so long been prophesying some disaster of this kind in consequence of so much dried lumber will no doubt be congratulating themselves on their prescience. But the conditions which prevailed yesterday were such as would have enabled the flames to gain headway in any place, whether there was lumber or not.¹²

The debate that was to preoccupy the city and confound its aldermen for the next several weeks was only beginning.

When the Canadian Senate met on April 27 there was near unanimous agreement among its members that the lumber piles were a menace to the capital.¹³ Senator Clemow, an eminent Ottawan, and others described how from Parliament Hill they had watched the flames follow the "fire trains" of lumber across the city. "The city itself ought to take steps to protect its dwellings," said Sen. Clemow.¹⁴

Five days later, with light restored to Parliament Hill, the House of Commons reconvened and approved a relief grant of \$100,000 for the city, but not without some members suggesting the money be conditional upon municipal legislation that would restrict the lumber to areas beyond the city limits. The Hon. George Foster, whose residence on Wellington Street had been destroyed in the fire, observed that, "the city seemed to allow these piles to be set up in almost every quarter of the city."¹⁵

On the first Sunday following the fire Father Whelan told his congregation at St. Patrick's Cathedral that there was now too much valuable property in the city to allow it to be menaced by lumber piled within the limit. At the Unitarian Congregation's service Reverend Walkly told his parishioners the city, "must not let the desire of a few to accumulate wealth destroy every other right and consideration."¹⁶

¹²Free Press, April 28, 1900.

¹³Journal, April 28, 1900.

¹⁴Free Press, April 28, 1900.

¹⁵Ibid., May 2, 1900.

¹⁶Ibid., April 30, 1900.

When the fire broke out on April 26 Ottawa's city council was not in the best shape to respond with effective legislation. The 24 aldermen representing eight city wards were noted for the bickering and trading of insults that accompanied council meetings. When druggist Thomas Payment had begun a second term as mayor in January the Evening Journal described his re-election as "about as low a blow to decent and dignified government as could be conceived."¹⁷

The city was badly in debt.¹⁸ A deputation of aldermen had been sent to Toronto earlier in the spring to seek provincial approval for a Royal Commission into Ottawa's financial situation, but the request had been turned down and the venture only added to the council's problems when the deputation was accused of reckless spending in the provincial capital. A council meeting just a week before the fire was described as a "bear garden" by the Evening Journal which lamented Mayor Payment's apparent inability to keep order.¹⁹ Of course in the Mayor's opinion, the problem was not his leadership but the conduct of the aldermen. "There are men here who would not be tolerated at a dog show," he had scolded at the April 18 meeting. "I am sorry to see men who haven't manhood enough to control themselves. The meetings of this council are getting to be a positive disgrace and I'm ashamed of you."²⁰

The problem of fire was not new to the city but the disaster in 1900 was beyond the scope of anything previous. In 1890 city council had approved By-law No. 1079 which established a fairly comprehensive set of regulations, "respecting buildings and for the prevention of fires."²¹

The intent of the statute was clearly to protect the most valuable areas of the city from fire. The most developed streets

¹⁷ Journal, January 2, 1900.

¹⁸ Ibid., April 3, 1900.

¹⁹ Ibid., April 18, 1900.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ By-law 1079, Revised By-laws of the City of Ottawa (1890), p. 160.

downtown were enclosed in what was called Fire Limit "A"--the brick and and stone district--in which no new buildings or additons were to be constructed, "unless the same shall be built with main walls of brick, iron or stone and roofing of incombustible material...."²²

Fire Limit "A" stretched west across the city from the area near Rideau Street, taking in Parliament Hill and most of what is now Centretown as far south as Maria Street (now Laurier Avenue). Further west a narrow arm of Fire Limit "A" extended on Wellington Street to Broad Street, encompassing some of the city's finest homes.²³

Just beyond Fire Limit "A" in most cases was Limit "B", where regulations were less strenuous. Wooden buildings were allowed but had to be "encased on the outside with brick or iron, or plastered on the outside with at least two coats of mortar not less than half an inch in thickness."²⁴ Wooden sheds and outbuildings were permitted, but not within 60 feet of any street.

With the exception of Wellington Street, however, the fire in 1900 swept through an area for which few or no regulations existed. The only stipulation concerning lumber piles, for the whole city, was in clause 51 of the By-law, that "no lumber or wood in any wood or lumber yard shall be piled within a distance of ten feet from any wooden building...."²⁵ This particular regulation had no meaning for Fire Limits "A" or "B" since no lumber was piled within them, with the exception of a small area at the north end of Bay Street along the river.

The burnt district south of Wellington Street had only become part of the city when Rochesterville was annexed in 1889. In 1900 it was part of Dalhousie Ward, one of the city's eight electoral districts. The area north of Wellington Street was in Victoria Ward which extended east into the downtown area. The lumber industry was based in Victoria Ward

²²Ibid., p. 165.

²³Courtney Bond, City on the Ottawa (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1965).

²⁴By-law 1079, p. 172.

²⁵Ibid., p. 180.

but great amounts of wood were stored in Dalhousie Ward, next to its houses and schools.

The situation after the fire was also a touchy one for the city council because of the considerable tax revenues it received from Victoria Ward and the lumber business. In 1899 Dalhousie Ward with 8,195 people had been assessed for \$1,606,725 in property taxes while Victoria Ward with just 3,825 residents was assessed for \$4,428,500.

In 1897 after a series of bad fires the city had retired Fire Chief William Young and his senior officers, hiring a new chief from the Montreal Fire Department, Peter Prevost. The Ottawa force had been improved at that time. The city council might have considered bolstering the department again in 1900 but the great fire had clearly been beyond any size the most modernized department could handle.

On April 30, the first Monday after the fire, city council's fire and light committee met to hear the recommendations of its chairman, Ald. James White, a building contractor. "The plain apparent causes of the spread of the fire were the lumber piles and wooden buildings within the city." Ald. White told the committee:

Starting with the lumber piles at the edge of the river in Hull the fire had leaped from pile to pile and following the lumber to the St. Louis Dam carried a ring of flame half around the city. . . . It is apparent that while these huge piles of lumber continue to be permitted within the limits of the city, the danger of a repetition of the recent conflagration remains.²⁶

The chairman proposed that legislation be drawn up requiring the lumbermen to move their wood beyond the city limits, but the suggestion was not acceptable to several of the other members. It was clear such a step might seriously hurt the lumber industry and even Ald. White said it was not desirable that any measures proposed, "be so stringent as to prohibit the profitable carrying on of these businesses."²⁷

²⁶Free Press, May 1, 1900.

²⁷Citizen, May 1, 1900.

The dilemma was that no half-way solution would work. As Ald. W. D. Morris pointed out, the city might extend Fire Limit "B" and force the workers to construct better houses, but only if the lumber piles were removed. It would not be fair to the workers otherwise.²⁸ A sub-committee that included four aldermen and the president and vice-president of the Board of Trade was appointed to study Ald. White's proposals further. In the meantime, the committee decided, no building permits would be issued in the burnt district unless the proposed structures conformed to the requirements for Fire Limit "A".

The Ottawa Board of Trade met the next day, Tuesday, and discussed the different alternatives facing city council, in particular what should be done about the lumber piles. "The general impression," reported the Free Press, "was that the question should be left to coolest judgements. There were large vested interests involved and it would not do to disturb them as to drive them out would mean driving away a portion of the population of the city."²⁹

C. Jackson Booth, eldest son of the city's most important lumberman, warned the Board against the feeling of hysteria towards the lumber piles that was developing in the city. The greatest threat to Ottawa, he said, was the City of Hull.³⁰

When the fire and light sub-committee met on Wednesday, John Booth and Denis Murphy, a prominent city businessman, were present to state their case in support of the lumber interests. Murphy said the fire would have been equally disastrous had there been no lumber in the city. Booth, for his part, blamed the extent of the fire on the wood shingles of the houses in the burnt district which, he said, were a far greater hazard than the lumber. Booth also pointed out that even if he did move outside the city, Ottawa would only expand again to follow its labor population.

²⁸Evening Journal, May 1, 1900.

²⁹Free Press, May 2, 1900.

³⁰Ibid. Civic officials in Aylmer, Quebec also called Hull a fire-trap and said the courthouse and gaol should be rebuilt in Aylmer so as to no longer endanger city records.

The fire and light sub-committee, however, was intent on forcing the lumber piles out of the city. It made plans to extend Fire Limit "B" to include much of the burnt district and also to prohibit iron-clad buildings within it. Lumber piles would be permitted, but restricted to piles of no more than half a million feet in any one yard, a restriction that would, in effect, allow only enough for the needs of manufacturing and retail businesses, but not the key business of export. The sub-committee's feelings were not representative of all the aldermen, and when the complete fire and light committee met again on Friday its report was returned, unapproved. "The aldermen are apparently afraid to take a decided stand one way or the other on the matter," reported the Free Press.³¹

Ald. W. D. Morris said it was not fair to force the workers to build brick houses but allow the lumbermen to pile half a million feet of wood against them. Ald. White countered that 500,000 feet was such a small amount it would only allow the sash and door factories to pile wood.³² Other aldermen were afraid the sub-committee's proposed by-law would force most of the mill workers to leave the city.

When the meeting adjourned Ald. White accused the committee members of being afraid to attach their names to any amendments that would restrict the lumber interests. He said they were shirking their responsibilities as councillors.³³

In the meantime a great argument concerning the proper policy for the city was developing outside City Hall. The Free Press staunchly defended John Booth and the lumber piles in an editorial on May 5 that recommended the city council, "pause for a minute to consider what 'the lumber piles must go' cry means to this city if it is carried beyond the arena of theory into that of practice."

They can be assured that there are other places which would give much to obtain a transfer of what Ottawa possesses. And let Ottawa reflect for a moment on what the withdrawal

³¹Free Press, May 5, 1900.

³²Evening Journal, May 5, 1900.

³³Ibid.

of Mr. Booth's interests in the capital would mean to it. He and other enterprising men such as Mr. [E. B.] Eddy have made the place.³⁴

The Evening Journal meanwhile had begun a blistering attack on the lumber interests and those who defended the piling of wood in the city:

What common sense is there in saying to a poor man, "you shall not erect a wooden hut because it is dangerous to your neighbors," while we say to the lumberman, whether broker or miller, "put your lumber pile anywhere you like among your neighbors." It must be either or both.³⁵

Succeeding editorials went further:

The lumber piles and yards in Ottawa have possibly been not a stimulant, but a barrier to rapid growth in the city. It seems likely that their prohibition, far from being a business injury to Ottawa, is a thing necessary to promote a great industrial community here.³⁶

The differing arguments never really touched on reality. In calling for opposite extremes the newspapers were calling for the impossible. The city could not afford to turn away the lumber interests. The poor could not afford better houses.

On May 5 in a letter published in all three Ottawa newspapers, John Booth described how, when a similar outburst against the lumber piles had occurred in 1885, he had moved his wood outside the city limits to land purchased on the Sparks estate and also near the St. Louis Dam:

As soon as I got the property in good condition the city saw it would help the revenue a good deal as the population was following the labor. The city fathers, who have always had a keen eye to business decided that the lumber piles were a good thing in the city and they should no longer be out in the cold.³⁷

The result, said the lumbermen, was that the city had annexed his yards in 1890 despite his protests, "and as a result they have taxed me 25

³⁴Free Press, May 5, 1900.

³⁵Evening Journal, May 3, 1900.

³⁶Ibid., May 8, 1900.

³⁷Free Press, May 5, 1900.

times higher than I was taxed by the county."³⁸

If forcing the lumber out of the city was unrealistic, it was equally unrealistic to expect an extended Fire Limit "B" to result in better working class houses, as the Evening Journal's labor columnist, J. W. Patterson, wrote:

It would seem as though Providence had taken this means of bringing to the public attention the condition of the industrial masses and perhaps what is now learned will awaken the consciences of the people to a full realization of the true condition of things existing. . . . Extending the brick area simply means that a great majority of these people will have to move further out, only in time to be annexed to the city, shacks and all, and the way paved for another blaze on a larger scale. Why not get designs of model workingmen's dwellings of a uniform kind and build them and let the workers buy or rent them in accordance with their means . . . it is sheer nonsense to expect men earning from 90 cents to \$1.25 a day about 200 days a year to sustain a home in the brick area. . . .³⁹

When the full city council met on Monday, May 7, Ald. White introduced a proposed fire by-law. Since the fire and light committee had refused to attach their names to the proposals, White had produced his own by-law that the council would have to pare down, if it would.⁴⁰ The key part was Clause 51 which, as expected, would have forced the lumber piles out of the city. The by-law's major terms were as follows:

- Fire Limit "B" would be extended to include about half of the burnt district.
- All buildings in both Fire Limits "A" and "B" would require non-combustible roofing.
- No iron-clad buildings would be allowed in Fire Limit "B" within 60 feet of any street.
- No more than half a million feet of lumber was to be piled in any one yard in the city by any firm.⁴¹

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹J. W. Patterson, "The Working Men and the Fire," Evening Journal, May 5, 1900.

⁴⁰Ibid., May 8, 1900.

⁴¹Free Press, May 8, 1900.

Ald. White originally hoped to get quick approval for the by-law so new construction could begin in the burnt district, but several aldermen balked at the idea of haste, the consensus being that the by-law should not be discussed until the Board of Trade considered it. "I do not intend to take the lumbermen by the throat without an intelligent discussion by the businessmen who are interested," said Ald. Thomas Raphael.⁴²

More than eighty members were present the next night when the Board of Trade met to discuss Ald. White's by-law. The first step was the appointment of a committee to advise the board "on the best policy to be adopted in defining the fire area that will conserve the city's interests and at the same time will protect as far as possible the vested rights of the lumber merchants and others having capital invested in the manufacturing interests of the city."⁴³

P. D. Ross, editor of the Evening Journal, told the Board that the true test as to which was more dangerous--lumber piles or shingles--was the insurance rates. Stone or brick houses with "practically fire proof roofs," he said, could be insured for \$100 over three years at a cost of 65 cents. Brick veneer dwellings with wood shingles were 75 cents and completely wooden houses were \$1.00. The lumber piles on the other hand, he said, were insured at a cost of \$1.50 to \$2.50 each year, clearly making them the greater hazard.⁴⁴

The Board members would accept that argument. "If Mr. Booth went, the Edwards Co. would be in the same boat," said W. C. Edwards, the city's second largest lumber merchant who piled wood on Green Island and in New Edinburgh. "Instead of Ottawa being protected from the danger of lumber, lumber should be protected from the danger of Ottawa."⁴⁵

The floor then gave way to John Booth who had declined to

⁴²Evening Journal, May 8, 1900.

⁴³Free Press, May 9, 1900.

⁴⁴Evening Journal, May 9, 1900.

⁴⁵Free Press, May 9, 1900.

speak at the outset because, he said, he felt like a convict on trial waiting to hear the verdict. Of all the Ottawa lumber kings, John Rudolphous Booth was probably the most important. Born in Shefford County, Quebec, he had arrived in Hull in or about 1850, as the story goes, with nine dollars to his name. Despite several setbacks by fire he proceeded to become Ottawa's biggest lumber merchant. His business ventures extended beyond the capital. In 1875 he established a large sawmill in Burlington, Vermont, that was later gutted by fire. In 1879 he came to the assistance of the Canadian Atlantic Railway, a feeder of the Central Vermont, and by 1896 had extended its track as far west as Parry Sound.

He had two sons and one daughter by his first and only wife who died in 1886. One of his granddaughters was to marry a Danish prince. He was not a socializer. His appearance was characterized by his short, slightly stooped figure and his long white hair. While his sons drove cars Booth preferred the horse and buggy to his death in 1925.

The lumber king was also known as a fair employer. In 1895 he reduced his workers' day from 11 to 10 hours with no cut in wages⁴⁶ and in 1910 he was to pay \$12,000 in unearned wages rather than lay his men off during the Grand Trunk Railway strike.⁴⁷

In 1897 Ottawa's Board of Trade had given a testimonial dinner to Booth in appreciation of his enterprise⁴⁸ and now, three years later in 1900, it was unlikely they could think very seriously of destroying his business. As he took pains to point out during the hour he held the floor, John Booth in 1900 was paying the city of Ottawa taxes that amounted to \$10,000 a week for eight months of the year and \$5,000 a week for the other four. When his wages to Ottawa residents were included he was giving the city and its people close to \$5,000 a day.⁴⁹ Even the

⁴⁶Toronto Star, December 9, 1925 (Canadian Press obituary).

⁴⁷Michael Bliss, A Living Profit (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 68.

⁴⁸Henry Morgan, Canadian Men and Women of the Time (1898).

⁴⁹Free Press, May 9, 1900.

Evening Journal swallowed hard after the speech, conceding that Booth's value to the city was "a benefit greater than many, including the Journal, supposed."⁵⁰

When the Board of Trade's special committee met three days later on May 11 to consider the city's problem, the lumber interests had already begun to work out their own solution. "A great yellow city of lumber piles is rearing itself with marvellous rapidity over large sections of the burned area of the city,"⁵¹ the Evening Journal had reported on May 10. There were 100 piles of new lumber and John Booth's sawmill was operating again.⁵²

The special committee actually made few changes in Ald. White's proposed by-law; the most significant concerned the piling of lumber in Fire Limit "B". Where Ald. White had suggested a limit of half a million feet in any yard in the city, the committee decided that in "B" an unlimited quantity of lumber should be allowed, provided none of it was within 60 feet of a building, excluding those owned by the lumber companies.

In its report to the full Board, and later city council, the committee exonerated the lumber piles of any special blame in the fire:

Having carefully considered the origin and progress of the recent conflagration in Hull and Ottawa, your committee is of the opinion that the lumber piles which existed in the burnt district did not contribute to the fire to any greater extent than buildings would have done had the portion of the burnt district covered with lumber piles have covered instead by buildings similar in character to those destroyed.⁵³

It was soon clear, however, that the committee's revision was not enough. John Booth was expected to lose piling ground for 35 million feet of lumber if the measure went through. C. Jackson Booth, a member of the special committee, had refused to sign the report and said the

⁵⁰ Evening Journal, May 10, 1900.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Minutes of the Council of the Corporation of the City of Ottawa, May 15, 1900, p. 264 (report dated May 12, 1900).

lumbermen were being cut down piecemeal and forced out.⁵⁴

On Monday, May 14, the city council met but adjourned to await the recommendations of the Board of Trade which also was in session. There was really no point in waiting. Where the special committee had tamed Ald. White's proposed by-law, the full Board of Trade killed it with two amendments. The first was a clause that permitted rough cast buildings in Fire Limit "B" as long as the roofs were incombustible. The second change was a stipulation that the city would have to provide half of the 60 feet of property it was to require between the lumber piles and buildings.

The Evening Journal, in particular P. D. Ross who had been on the special committee, seemed furious with the amendments and charged that the Board was only demanding that which it knew the city could never afford to give. Since city streets were in most cases 60 feet wide, it argued, the lumber piles could generally remain where they had been except where the yards bordered on other property. The lumbermen's costs in providing the 60 feet where required would be minimal, it said, "for a proposition conveying a great measure of safety throughout Ottawa."⁵⁵ "This seems to illustrate the absolute unreasonableness of the lumbermen," the paper concluded. "And the Board of Trade has shown its incapacity to do anything in the public interest where the lumber interest is concerned."⁵⁶

If the Board of Trade was pushing city council in one direction, there were also pressures in the other. On the same Monday the Ottawa Electric Co. forwarded to the city council a motion that the lumber piles be restricted as deemed necessary by the Board of Fire Underwriters to protect the companies new arc and incandescent power plant.⁵⁷ Canadian Pacific Railways also promised Ottawa a spectacular

⁵⁴Evening Journal, May 14, 1900.

⁵⁵Ibid., May 15, 1900.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Free Press, May 14, 1900.

new train station on Broad Street, but only if the lumber piles were prohibited inside the city. There seemed to be at least some merit in the Evening Journal's earlier suggestion that the lumber was a barrier to new industrial development in the city.

Still, when the city council did meet again the next night, May 15, there was no longer any talk of completely driving the lumber piles out. Even Ald. White had by now compromised on his earlier stance. It had become a question now of how the piles would be restricted. The by-law was debated clause by clause. The extension of Fire Limit "B" was approved over eight objections so that the burnt district from the Ottawa River south to Somerset Street was now included. Also approved was the clause prohibiting iron-clad buildings within 60 feet of streets in "B".

The real test as everyone knew was the amendment to Clause 51. John Booth had told the council that the requirement of a 60 foot space around his yards would deprive him of space for one-third of his annual cut. Ald. White, however, was not yet ready to completely back down. His newest proposal had three main features:

- No more than half a million feet of lumber was to be piled in Fire Limit "A."
- Lumber piles in Fire Limit "B" could exceed half a million feet but were not to be within 60 feet of any building and were to be divided by street 30 feet wide and not less than 150 feet apart.
- No lumber was to be piled beside the property of the CPR on Board Street north of Wellington.⁵⁸

The second and third stipulations were new and fairly strict, especially for John Booth who had two piles near the CPR property. The feeling of several aldermen was that the CPR was overcrowding Booth who apparently had offered not to pile in these yards if the railway company would provide him with other land.⁵⁹ The third stipulation however probably had more to do Ald. White's sudden interest in the CPR's welfare. The reason became apparent more than a month later on June 22

⁵⁸ Free Press, May 16, 1900.

⁵⁹ Evening Journal, May 16, 1900.

when the CPR announced the contract to build its new station had been awarded to John J. Lyonds and one Ald. James White.⁶⁰

The debate continued on May 16 and, according to the Free Press, something of a compromise was effected. Again the first clauses of the proposed by-law were approved, although not without opposition from Ald. W. D. Morris. At 44, William Morris was the Ottawa council's biggest trouble-shooter, probably the closest thing it had to a "reformer" and without doubt its most unpopular member. He had led the demands for a Royal Commission to investigate the city's finances, led the charges of excessive spending against the deputation to Toronto and had also sought a commission to investigate the cause of the April fire.⁶¹ His political style seemed to be despised by the other councillors but it did him no harm with the voters for in January of 1901 he was to become the city's new mayor.⁶²

Morris seemed less concerned with Dalhousie Ward's working class families than with the principle that they should be equal with the lumber interests before council. When it was clear the lumber would remain in the city he fought to keep the status quo in building regulations, opposing the extended Fire Limit "B", "so that a great many poor people who could not afford to build in brick veneer would not be taken in."⁶³

Clause 51 again was the problem this night but when Ald. Joseph Davidson made some amendments it was carried by a vote of 18 to 4. The second reading of the complete by-law was then approved, but it was obvious the so-called compromise would only last the night. Davidson's amendments had struck out the requirement of 30 foot streets through the lumber yards. It also removed the clause prohibiting lumber beside the CPR property. And finally it also made an exception to the 60 foot space requirement by proposing that thirty feet instead would be

⁶⁰Free Press, June 23, 1900.

⁶¹Ibid., May 8, 1900.

⁶²Evening Journal, December 31, 1900.

⁶³Ibid., May 17, 1900.

acceptable on the eastern border of the piles that stretched from Elm Street to Young Street in the city.

The futility of the compromise was immediately apparent when the council met again on May 21 to attempt a third reading. The proposed by-law was again debated clause by clause in a committee of the whole. When the amendment to Clause 51 was reached, Ald. White moved for the same restrictions he had at the previous meeting with the requirement of 30 foot streets dividing the piles and the provision that no lumber was to be piled in the CPR area. The motion was defeated, 13 votes to nine, but then carried when the wording was changed so as to require 60 feet between the lumber piles and any "property" instead of between the wood and any "buildings." The reasoning was that with the original wording any person could erect a building within 60 feet of a lumber yard and unfairly deny piling space to the lumber companies.

Again, however, the approval of the clause did not seem like a lasting decision. When Ald. Morris moved that rough cast houses should be allowed within 60 feet of streets in Fire Limit "B", his motion was approved, supported by aldermen who strongly backed the lumber interests and those who didn't want to hurt the poor. If neither side could completely win the argument, neither was going to be hurt.

When the council had returned from the committee of the whole, Clause 51 was defeated. Ald. White attempted to modify it by removing the requirement of the 30 foot streets. He denied to the council that the by-law would be in the interests of the CPR and said the lumbermen had to make at least some concessions to the city. "There were not enough restrictions in the by-law," he said, "but half a loaf was better than no bread. If the lumber was to be piled all over, then the council might as well go back to the same state of affairs."⁶⁴

It was a cue for the rest of the council. The amendment was rejected 14 votes to nine and the third reading of the complete by-law was defeated 12 votes to 11. Ald. White voted nay.⁶⁵

⁶⁴Free Press, May 22, 1900.

⁶⁵Ibid.

"It means Ottawa has done what she ought to have done," said Mayor Payment after the meeting. "You cannot restrict one class without restricting the other. You cannot restrict the poor without the rich and compel them to build buildings which they cannot afford to do. The by-law is lost. Lumber can now be piled in any old place."⁶⁶

The Evening Journal, for once, found some merit in the Mayor's sentiments, reasoning itself, "that it was not fair to protect the lumber piles by compelling the small interests to build brick veneer houses with fire proof roofs in the area and have these buildings threatened by the existence of the lumber piles."⁶⁷

Ottawa has frequently had councils which have done strange things in the light of general public interest, things which have been hard to harmonize with the general welfare of the city. The present council and its dealings with the large issues that have arisen since the recent great fire, it is felt, will probably go on record as the most outstanding of all.⁶⁸

But the Journal directed its harshest criticism elsewhere:

The majority on council may be wrong but they are not as wrong as the big lumber interests. Better nothing than injustice and discrimination favoring one class of the community, and that a wealthy class, whose unjust selfishness was backed by the Board of Trade.⁶⁹

The Free Press, as expected, was not upset at the defeat of the by-law. "While it may have possessed certain features of meritorious nature," said the paper, "it cannot be forgotten that it was the outcome of a scare and laws based on scares are apt to be too sweeping in their provisions and possibly calculated to be oppressive and harrassing."⁷⁰

The debate was not yet over, but for the time being it would simmer down. "It is not probable an effort will be made [to change the

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Evening Journal, May 22, 1900.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Free Press, May 22, 1900.

situation]," said the Free Press. "One section of the aldermen blames the other for the final overthrow of the by-law and vice versa. There the matter rests."⁷¹

Individual tempers were still hot. When the fire and light committee met on May 28 to discuss the purchase of new hose for the fire department, Ald. Morris protested that he had not been invited to witness the different tests Ald. White had carried out on brands of hose. The end result was a fist fight between the two in the council chambers that ended with Ald. Morris doubled over, Ald. White with a bloody nose.⁷²

On June 5 Ald. Hopewell of Dalhousie Ward introduced the fire issue to council again with a proposed by-law similar for the most part with the one that had been defeated. In this by-law, rough cast houses would be allowed in Fire Limit "B" [the extended "B"] within 60 feet of the street. In short, any type of building could be erected as long as the roofing was incombustible. Lumber piles could be of unlimited size in "B" but had to be separated from any other "property" by 60 feet. An exception was made, basically the same one proposed earlier by Ald. Davidson. The area west of the Rochester property, from Elm Street in the north to Young Street in the south, would only require a 30 foot space along its east border.

The by-law, like the one defeated earlier, involved only token restrictions against the lumber men. In most cases the streets surrounding the yards were 60 feet wide already. In the one major area where the lumber piles bordered on property the requirement was cut to 30 feet.⁷³

The feeling on the council now seemed to be that to save face at least some measures of safety had to be taken. It now seemed too difficult to remove the lumber that had been piled in the burnt district since the fire. "It was unlikely the city could introduce legislation that was retroactive," said Ald. Rogers. "The lumbermen were aware of

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid., May 29, 1900.

⁷³By-law No. 2031.

this in piling lumber immediately in places where it thought the city wanted to get rid of it."⁷⁴

On July 2 the remains of Ald. White's once "stringent" by-law were ratified by the council in a 16-5 vote. The fire and light chairman again voted nay.

The fire by-law had now been amended, but aside from the stipulation that buildings in Fire Limit "B" would now require fire-proof roofs, little change had been effected. For the most part the lumber would remain where it had been and if Fire Limit "B" had been extended it still failed to take in the outskirts of the city.

The need for legislation had been based on the interests of public safety. The danger of the lumber piles had been apparent for years. Three years later the fire insurance companies were to apply a surcharge to Ottawa rates specifically because of the lumber. For every \$1,000 of assessment the Ottawa rate would be 60 cents more than in Montreal.⁷⁵

"The first thing that impresses a stranger to Ottawa [is] the great danger arising from the lumber piles," said the Free Press after the fire. "And they are equally surprised when they are told that the community is so closely allied that no one likes to meddle with his neighbor's interests. But we must remember that this is Ottawa and no longer Bytown."⁷⁶

In a very real sense, however, it still was Bytown in 1900. The lumber interests were dominant. The city had a vested interest of its own in protecting the lumber piles. John Booth employed 2,000 residents and contributed greatly to the tax revenue. If Booth went, his money and his workers would also.

For the city council, money was nothing to be joked about. On July 3, 1900 Ald. White proposed to city council that a new steamer be bought for the fire department to replace "the Conqueror" which had been

⁷⁴Free Press, June 19, 1900.

⁷⁵Canadian Annual Review, 1903, p. 502.

⁷⁶Free Press, May 2, 1900.

destroyed in the fire. Water pressure from street hydrants, he said, could not surpass 80 pounds and with four or five streams attached, the water would not go higher than the second storey of most buildings. The motion was defeated by one vote, largely because the purchase would have required a \$25,000 overdraft.⁷⁷

But the city's problems were also in its system of government. The aldermen were not politicians, but community businessmen who acted sometimes in the public interest, more often in their own. But perhaps even more important in 1900 was council's attitudes to the city's working class. Everyone conceded that the poor people must not be hurt, but nobody questioned why they were poor. Several aldermen supported the principle of equal treatment for the workers and the lumber interests, but the attitude was, 'we will not legislate safety for one without safety for the other.' The public safety could only be served in 1900 by both removing the lumber and improving the working class housing. In choosing half a loaf instead of the whole, the council accomplished nothing at all.

Although they were written before the by-law was finally approved, the words of press gallery writer Frank Gadsby retained their relevance:

The lesson has not been burnt in. It is easy to conceive that the city council meets in the upper town of Ottawa which is stone and brick and which moreover is safeguarded because it lies on a natural bastion of rock, terminating at the end of Sparks Street. At very few points can these ramparts be escalated and the heart of the city may always be saved if fire companies are stationed at strategic spaces.⁷⁸

The burnt district of the city grew again quickly. By the end of 1900, 445 houses had been erected and 29 more were going up. Several shops, four hotels and the new CPR station were under construction. John Booth had a new machine shop in operation and several smaller

⁷⁷ Free Press, July 3, 1900.

⁷⁸ Frank Gadsby, "The Hull-Ottawa Fire," Canadian Magazine, Vol. XV (July 1900).

businesses were starting up.⁷⁹ A year later according to the 1901 Canada Census, there were 1,487 families in Dalhousie Ward and 1,338 houses. More than two-thirds of the ward's population was French or Irish.⁸⁰

On May 11, 1903 a fire in the lumber piles along the city's western limit blew into a rage and spread north across the area that had been similarly destroyed three years earlier. At a crucial moment midway through the fire's progress the fire department's water pressure gave out. A faulty valve had broken at the pumphouse. When the flames were controlled 300 people were homeless and \$600,000 damage had been done. John Booth lost 18 million feet of lumber in the blaze, its value estimated at \$150,000.⁸¹

Again the initial cry was, "the lumber piles must go" and this time city council seemed to be serious. A Board of Trade letter asking the aldermen to defer a decision was ignored. Within 11 days of the fire, amendments to the fire by-law were approved prohibiting the piling of lumber anywhere in the city and giving the lumbermen six months to move their piles out.⁸²

Again, however, the initial response did not last. On June 27, 1903 the fire and light committee listened to John Booth and W. C. Edwards and agreed to reconsider the by-law. By the end of July nine areas in the city had been designated as suitable for piling in. Two of the areas and part of a third were to be emptied by December 31, 1904 but unlimited piling would be allowed in the others providing the wood was fenced in, not within 100 feet of any building and patrolled regularly by a watchman.⁸³ On September 21 the amendments were approved by council and the prohibition was lifted.

⁷⁹Report of the Ottawa and Hull Relief Fund (Ottawa, 1901).

⁸⁰1901 Census of Canada, vol. 1, p. 78.

⁸¹Ottawa Evening Journal, May 11, 1903.

⁸²Ibid., May 22, 1903.

⁸³Ottawa Free Press, July 25, 1903.