

The Spark that Turned Kingston into Ashes

A fictional story by Catherine Raby

Kingston, Upper Canada
Good Friday, April 17th, 1840

The American steamer, *Telegraph*, creaked and groaned under the pressure from the waves as it slammed hard against the wharf. Moored in Kingston harbour, the steamer withstood the tremendous beating as gale force winds blew in from the south-west.

“Fire up the boilers” the captain shouted over the hammering of the waves.

“Sir?”

“Fire up the boilers we’re heading out.”

“But, would it not be safer to haul around to leeward and weather the storm here?”

“No, Mr. Jeffries, it would not. We need to find calmer waters—and in future, I advise that you keep your opinions to yourself. Now, I want those boilers fired up!”

As the firemen hurriedly fed wood into the furnace of the boilers, the ship’s crew scrambled on deck to release the ship from its moorings. In the haste to move away from the wharf, sparks from the *Telegraph*’s funnel streamed out unnoticed and were whisked away by the heavy winds.

The sparks traveled to a nearby unfinished warehouse. The sparks nestled in among shavings from the new wood and caught alight.

Squinting into the darkness, a cook from the steamer, the *Cataraqui*, which was also moored in Kingston harbour, frowned at the sight of a flickering light in one of the warehouses. His eyes widened.

“Dear Lord! It’s on fire!”

“The warehouse is on fire!” he cried as he woke the crew. Scrambling back on deck he aided the deck hands as they frantically tried to loosen the ship from its moorings. The blaze greedily devoured everything combustible that lay in its path. Fueled by the south-westerly winds which acted like a huge bellows, it grew in strength.

Now a raging inferno, the fire spread to the wharves. Smoke filled the lungs of the crew and their eyes watered from the smoke that now engulfed the wharf. Finally the ship was freed.

Anxious to leave the cook yelled. “Why aren’t we moving?”

“The wind — it’s holding us fast,” one of the crew shouted. “Unless it shifts we’ll soon be alight.”

As if his words served as an omen, the crewman spotted flames licking along the ship’s side.

“The ship is on fire!”

The crew fought to extinguish the fire. But it was no use. The malevolent flames spread ruthlessly across the ship.

“Abandon ship!” the captain shouted.

The crew was safe and free of the ship. The winds shifted. The *Cataraqui* was still ablaze. No longer trapped, it floated out into the harbour.

As the *Cataraqui* drifted away, another ship came into view. The crew stared incredulously.

“Look. It’s the *Lord Nelson*. It too is aflame.”

“They’re drifting toward the Penny Bridge”, the captain said. “If they set the bridge on fire Fort Henry will be cut off from town.” He rubbed his soot-covered forehead. “How did this happen?”

The two ships were spotted from Point Frederick. The alarm was immediately raised. Colonel Henry Dundas, commander of the garrison, upon being informed called for Captain Sandom.

Before too much damage could be wrought onto the bridge Captain Sandom’s men towed the *Lord Nelson* out to deeper water. Meantime in the town itself, residents frantically fought the flames spreading from the wharf area.

Without warning an explosion rocked the town. Shards of glass and burned debris flew through the air. Fanned by the gale force winds flames raced westward – the calamitous conflagration was bent on consuming everything.

Author’s note: The explosion was caused from nearly one hundred kegs of gunpowder, improperly stored in Fraser’s warehouse on the wharf. In the early morning of April 18th, the flames were finally quelled leaving all the buildings on the market square and most of the ones along the waterfront in ashes. Though there were numerous injuries, no one was killed.*