

Today in Columbus History:

On Tuesday, September 20, 1881, the *Columbus Enquirer-Sun* ran a story on the new fire alarm bell tower. The tower was a landmark in downtown Columbus for over twenty years. The story talks about the confirmation from the Moseley Iron Bridge and Roofing Co. to Mr. M. M. Moore, clerk of the City Council, that they would indeed build the fire alarm bell tower for the city of Columbus. Its construction would commence shortly at the corner of Oglethorpe and St. Clair streets, now known as First Avenue and 11th Street.

Talk of a fire alarm bell tower went back to at least 1860. At that time, the Presbyterian Church at the same intersection agreed to house the bell in the southwest tower of the church. Later, the city installed an alarm bell in a tower over the nearby market house, which proved to be inadequate for the growing city.

The Great Fire of January 3, 1879, that destroyed the Rankin House, and several other businesses also lit a fire under the city to do something to improve its fire readiness. Two days later, a story describing the city's alarm system as a "great humbug," struck a nerve. According to the author, no one could hear the alarm because the bell was behind several taller buildings.

In April of 1879, the Board of Control of the Fire Department held a meeting to express support for the idea of a new iron tower. The City Council debated the merits of a new tower a few days later. The decision to approve a new tower, however, languished until the summer of 1881. After a fact-finding trip to New York City by Alderman Shingleur, in July and August, the City Council approved the tower and selected Moseley Iron Bridge and Roof Co. on September 7, 1881.

Once Mr. Moore placed the order, it took several months for work on the tower to commence. The Moseley Iron Bridge Company shipped the tower on February 4, 1882, while the question of its location remained unsettled. Initially, the tower was slated to be placed at the intersection of Oglethorpe and St. Clair, like the previous bell tower. However, the City Council met on February 15 and, after some discussion, they voted to erect the tower at Broad and St. Clair, instead.

Moseley dispatched Mr. P. Norton to supervise construction and he arrived, along with the tower on February 15, 1882. A local crew laid the tower's foundation the next day. Construction followed quickly and the papers gave almost daily reports on the progress. On February 18, the *Columbus Daily Enquirer* reported on the completion of the base and corner posts for the first ten feet. It also took the liberty of asking for advice from the citizenry on Mr. Norton's behalf. They claimed he was hesitant to ask himself, being a stranger in town and he had received less than a hundred suggestions the day before. It was hard to tell if the sarcasm intended to harass Norton, or his volunteer advisors.

The *Daily Enquirer* kept this joke running for the better part of a week. On the 19th, it reported that an elevator was necessary to take the host of advisors up to the second section of tower. On the 21st, they reported that Mr. Norton requested their suggestions be in writing and hoisted up on a rope, as the tower was now above talking distance. On the 22nd they said a telephone was necessary as Mr. Norton was anxious to receive suggestions from the citizens. Finally, on the 23rd, they reported that the tower was now far beyond the advisors, and they were unhappy.

The city moved the four-thousand-pound bell to the new tower on March 4, however the tower itself remained unfinished until March 15. It didn't take long for the bell to ring its first alarm after that. A faulty

stovepipe caused a fire on the roof of Miss Arelia Miller's house on Baldwin (now 8th Street) on March 20, 1882. A few buckets of water put out the fire without requiring the services of the Fire Department. The ninety-foot fire alarm bell tower remained in service until its decommissioning in 1906.

Compiled by Daniel A. Bellware, Muscogee Genealogical Society

Clipping from Georgia Historic Newspapers (GALILEO).44

Our weekly snippets of Columbus history are usually based on a few days-worth of searching through the most popular sources for Muscogee County history. Meant to inspire readers to explore more about Columbus history, they are not exhaustive dissertations on the topic and may contain mistakes. If you have corrections or additional information, feel free to share them with the group.



Photo of the Fire Alarm Bell Tower, courtesy of the Columbus Museum,
<https://columbusmuseum.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/213870CD-42E3-418B-92DA-228341059490>

Fire Alarm Bell Tower.

Yesterday Mr. M. M. Moore, clerk of council, received a letter from the Moseley Iron Bridge Company stating that they would build the fire alarm bell tower. The work, it is thought, will begin at an early date. The tower is to be of iron, ninety feet in height, with a lookout for the watchman, ten feet above the bell. It will be located at the intersection of Oglethorpe and St. Clair streets, and just north of the market house.

Article on "Fire Alarm Bell Tower" from the *Columbus Daily Enquirer-Sun*, September 20, 1881. Notice the thick black lines on either side of the story. The outline appeared between every column. This was to mourn the death of President James A. Garfield, the previous day, <https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/>.



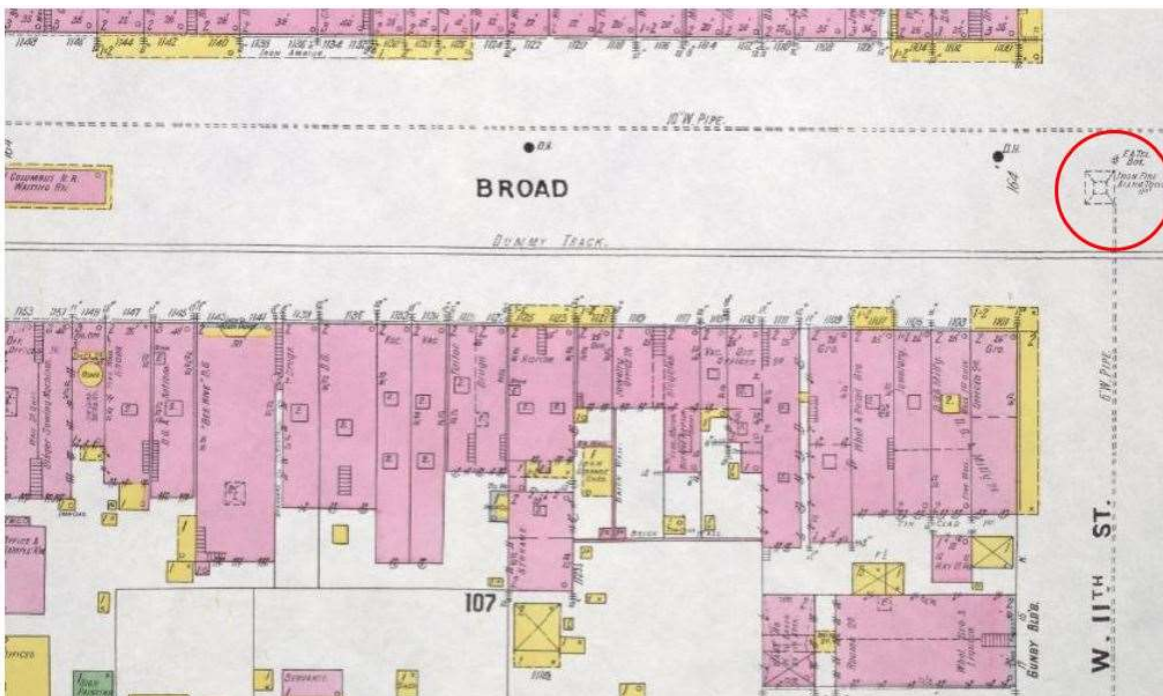
Another view of the tower from Ken Thomas' book *Columbus, Georgia in Vintage Postcards*, that was shared previously by John Brescia on the Early Columbus Georgia and Chattahoochee Valley Facebook page from a post by Historic Columbus, on September 3, 2021. Notice the Iron Bank on the right.

The Bell Tower.

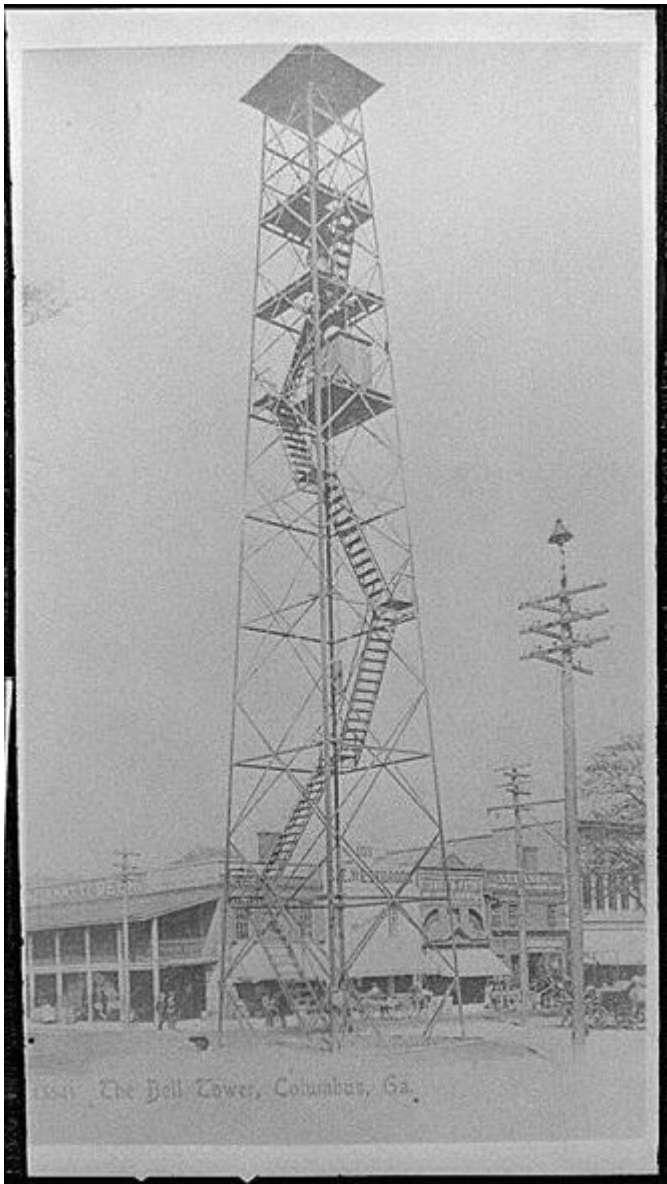
Yesterday the base of the bell tower was completed and the corner post erected for the first section of ten feet. The work will be pushed forward as rapidly as possible to have it through.

In order that the work may be properly done, and that the workmen may not fall into error, Mr. Norton would be glad to receive suggestions from all who may feel inclined to offer them. Advice is generally a free thing and it would be gratifying to him if a large number of our most useful and respectable citizens would constantly visit the work and offer suggestions. He feels a little hesitancy in asking advice, being a stranger in the city, and yesterday he did not receive more than a hundred that he could use to advantage. This is a big contract he has undertaken, and as many of our citizens are perfectly familiar with the manner in which such things should be done, they should not hesitate to give their advice.

Article soliciting advice from the community to assist Mr. Norton in constructing the tower from the *Columbus Daily Enquirer-Sun*, February 18, 1882. It's hard to tell if the paper was trying to harass Norton or the citizens of Columbus. <https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/>.



1900 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Broad and 11th St. showing the iron fire tower in the middle of the intersection of Broad and 11th Street (the red circle is mine), courtesy of the Digital Library of Georgia, https://dlg.usg.edu/record/dlg_sanb_columbus-1900#item



Another view of the Fire Alarm Bell Tower from the Digital Library of Georgia.
<https://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/vanga/photos/mus/jpg/mus101.jpg>