

Cannon explosion caused Independence

BY GEORGE ADAMS PARKHURST
INDEPENDENT COLUMNIST

June 20, 1996

Day tragedy in 1889

When Chelmsford residents celebrate our nation's birthday on Independence Day, we can hope for the safe and sane Fourth we have usually enjoyed.

The exception was July 4, 1889 when the people of this small farming community were shocked and saddened by an accident in the early hours of the morning.

The story of the unfortunate event was carried in the former *Lowell Weekly Journal* the next day with headlines that read, "A Dreadful Accident — Premature Explosion of a Cannon in Chelmsford —

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

One Young Man Killed — Another Maimed for Life."

As reported by the *Journal*, "About half past 12 o'clock, three young men, Walter Simons, Jr., Fred Santom and Hanson Thurston, having obtained permission to fire a salute with an old cannon which for many years has been stored at various places in the village, proceeded to the common for that purpose and discharged the piece twice without accident.

"While Simons and Santom were ramming home the third cartridge, Thurston, who had his thumb upon the vent, probably involuntarily withdrew his hand on account of a sharp burning sensation and an explosion immediately followed. Young Simons was struck by the rammer on the left side of the lower jaw, which was badly shattered and the muscles and blood vessels on the same side of the neck were completely severed. The force of the explosion threw him some 10 feet from the cannon and death was instantaneous. Pieces of the rammer were afterwards found many rods from the accident. The deceased was 22 years old.

"Fred Santom, the other victim of the explosion, was terribly mutilated but was expected to survive.

With assistance he was able to walk to the house of Dr. Howard, [Dr. Howard lived at 21 Chelmsford Street.] who dressed his wounds, and then accompanied him to the Lowell City hospital, where it was found necessary to amputate his right arm about four inches below the elbow. He also lost the thumb and forefinger of the left hand and his face and eyes were severely burned, imperiling the sight of the right eye. Santom, who was 18 years of age at the time, was an orphan living with his aged grandmother."

The present writer will always remember the first time he saw Fred Santom. It was in 1918, or possibly 1919, that I was with my mother as she shopped in Pat Haley's market in what is now the Fleet Bank building. At that tender age, I found it startling to see that the man ahead of us at the counter was missing some fingers on his left hand.

But it was when I saw that a wooden "arm" with a large hook protruded from his right sleeve that I became frightened and ran around the back of my mother and clung to her shirt. Perhaps it brought to mind pictures of Captain Hook.

Other than a few instances of youthful vandalism in the 1890's, Chelmsford's celebration of the Fourth has been in the spirit expressed by former President John Adams in a letter to his wife in 1776: "It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations ..." [Incidentally, several cousins of John Adams were living in Chelmsford in 1776.]

The parades and associated celebrations of 1895, 1907, 1923, 1924 and those of recent years have been particularly memorable. This year's parade will be the 29th since the revival of the celebrations in 1968.

— George Adams Parkhurst writes a monthly historical column for the *Independent*.