

BROOKLYN EXPLOSION ENGULFS A SCORE

Men, Women, and Children Go
Down Under Flood, Fire, and
Earth in Gold Street Sewer.

MAYOR DIRECTS RESCUE

Victims Buried Under Tons of Debris
Fifty Feet Down, While Many
Slide Into Death Pit.

Accompanied by an explosion of gas which shook the neighborhood, the walls of a huge sewer trench in Gold Street, between York and Front Streets, Brooklyn, caved in yesterday morning, burying, it is believed, at least twenty persons fifty feet below the surface. The victims met death either by suffocation, fire, or drowning. Blazing woodwork and a flood of water from broken mains added to the impossibility of their escape.

With Mayor McClellan and other high officials of the City Government looking on, big forces of firemen, policemen, and employes of other municipal departments ready and eager to do rescue work, were forced to stand idly by until the possibility of a spread of the calamity could be removed by the shoring up of undermined buildings, which seemed in danger of toppling over into the horror pit. Although the accident happened soon after 9 o'clock in the morning, it was not until early this morning that the actual work of digging out the unfortunates supposed to be entombed there could be begun.

Just how many workers in the trench or persons who were passing in the street at the time of the cave-in were missing was hard to learn last night, and was still in doubt at midnight. It is believed, however, that at least ten workmen, a woman, and three children were buried under the great mass of earth, stone, and debris. The only body recovered was that of Samuel Abrams, who was burned while trying to rescue the woman. He died in full sight of scores of persons who were unable to get to him. His body was found near the surface.

Police List Shows 24 Missing.

At midnight the list of missing compiled by the police of the Fulton Street Station from reports made to them showed twenty-four persons missing. Here is the list:

ABRAMS, SAMUEL, blacksmith, Gold and Front Streets.
ANDERSON, GUS, foreman of carpenters.
ARMANDO, FRANCESCO, laborer.
ARMANDO, JOHN, laborer.
BACHMAN, EMIL, laborer.
BRADY, CLARICE, 7 years, 107 Gold Street.
CORSINE, CHRISTOPHER, laborer.
CRANE, JOHN, 107 East Ninth Street.
DALTON, WILLIAM, 6 years, 109 Gold Street.
DOHERTY, VINCENT, 6 years, 107 Gold Street.
FARRELL, CHARLES, foreman.
——, FRANCESCO, laborer, No. 56.
GREEN, FELIX.
GREEN, HENRY, laborer, 107 East 109th Street.
JOHNSON, ALEXANDER.
LANE, GUS, laborer.
NELSON, CHARLES, laborer.
O'GRADY, JOHN, 6 years, 107 Gold Street.
SCHIFFMEYER, FRED, Borough Inspector of Sewers, 1,425 Bushwick Avenue.
WALLER, GUS.
Woman, name unknown.
Three children, names unknown.
——, ——, laborer, No. 52.

Confusion Till Mayor Came.

The presence of Mayor McClellan at the scene of the disaster was in a measure due to a confusion as to authority which arose among the heads of various departments who were on the spot. The Police, Fire, Sewer, and Building Departments each asserted its right to take charge, and there was an argument between Deputy Fire Commissioner Wise and Building Supt. Moore. Further confusing matters, Police Inspector Schmittberger's men refused to pass Supt. Moore's subordinates through the police lines on their badges. While this tangle prevailed, practically nothing was done toward rescuing the victims of the disaster.

Word of the situation reached the Mayor, who earlier had been before the Grand Jury in Brooklyn, and he hurried to the scene. As soon as he arrived he read the riot act to his subordinates and quickly brought order out of chaos by announcing that Sanitary Superintendent Bensel was to be in charge of the work of getting out the bodies and that the heads of other departments present should take orders from him.

To insure that there should be no further confusion Mayor McClellan issued this formal order:

Nov. 20, 1908.

Hon. Thomas Darlington, President Board of Health:

Sir: I hereby direct the attention of the Board of Health to the accident in the excavation at Gold Street, Borough of Brooklyn, and request the board to take such measures as in the opinion of said board are proper and necessary. Respectfully,

GEORGE B. McCLELLAN, Mayor.

The Health Board has extraordinary powers in emergencies, and the Mayor directed the Police, Fire, Street Cleaning, and Bridge Departments to co-operate with the board and render Dr. Bensel all the assistance he required. The result was that fifty policemen and four of the mounted Traffic Squad were kept at the scene throughout the night. There were also many laborers of the Bridge Department on duty, and a platoon of firemen, four of whom assisted at the suction pump which was worked at the foot of Front Street to draw off the water and sewage which had flooded the excavation.

With Dr. Bensel in charge, the work of shoring up the abutting houses was pushed rapidly forward. It was a big and difficult task, however, because of the fact that the street had dropped away into the trench almost to the very doors of the buildings on either side, and at a late hour the work of rescue had not progressed to a stage where it was possi-

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ble to determine with any certainty what the loss of life had been.

Cause Not Determined Yet.

Just what caused the disaster may never be determined exactly. Various theories were advanced, but all lacked proof. A question which puzzled those who examined into the matter was whether the cave-in occurred before or after the explosion. An idea which received consideration was that the falling in of the trench walls caused the gas main, which had been temporarily placed on the surface, to sag and break, permitting the gas to escape. According to this theory, the gas came in contact with a smith's furnace or a worker's torch, or the simultaneous breaking of the electric light conduit in the street released electricity, which ignited the gas. Officials of the gas company who investigated asserted that there was no leak in the main until it was broken by the cave-in. People living in the neighborhood, however, declared last night that there had been a leak in the gas main for days.

There were twenty-five men at work in the trench between York and Front Streets when the accident happened. The excavation there was about fifty feet deep and thirty feet in width. It had been dug for a trunk sewer thirteen feet six inches in diameter. The buildings on either side of the cut are mostly two and three-story frame tenements, and nearly all old structures. In the work of building the sewer many tons of sand had been piled up; but Chief Engineer A. J. Griffin of the Sewer Department in Brooklyn expressed the opinion last night that the cave-in was not due to any carelessness on the part of the contractors. Engineer Griffin said that he had carefully inspected the construction work and had found it to be excellent. The sheathing was well placed, and every precaution against accident had been taken, he added.

The sewer, a concrete construction with a brick lining, was fast nearing completion. Those who insist that the cave-in was due to an explosion of gas say that the workmen had been complaining for a week that gas was collecting in and around the sewer main and under the "false work" in the trench. These theorists point to the fact that both walls of the trench fell in and the sewer construction and the "false work" were blown out simultaneously to prove their theory that an explosion of escaped gas caused it all.

Seemed Like an Earthquake.

The collapse of things came without warning to the workers in the trench. There was first a deep, dull explosion, and then it seemed as if an earthquake had occurred. The concrete and brick work of the sewer main, the "false" woodwork, and the sheathing were blown up into the air or through the trench and down upon the stunned and helpless men in the cut there descended a double avalanche of earth and rocks, heavy timbers, and machinery, as both the walls of the excavation caved in. Tons upon tons of sand, stone, bricks, and wreckage rushed down into the deep cut, but how many persons were buried alive under the mass no eyewitness has been found who can say. One man, Timothy O'Shea, of 252 Pacific Street, who was standing on the corner, says he saw a woman and three children go down with one of the sidewalks. Samuel Abrams, who lived at Front and Gold Streets, according to O'Shea, made an attempt to save the woman, but fell under a pile of blazing timbers in the middle of the trench. None of the horror-stricken people who rushed to the scene seemed able to get to poor Abrams through the fire and flood, and the man was burned or smothered to death while they looked helplessly on.

From out the broken sixteen-inch gas main there was roaring a great flame, which fired everything inflammable around it, while from gaping breaks in the two-foot water main there was issuing a torrent which was fast flooding the trench. Following the explosion the people in the surrounding tenements rushed to the street doors, to find that the sidewalks had fallen away into the cut. Frightened, many of them made their way out through rear tenements, while others, with more nerve, remained to pack up their most valued possessions.

The first policemen to reach the scene found the neighborhood in an uproar. They saw at a glance that a calamity of great proportions had happened, and lost no time in sending in calls for the firemen, police reserves, and ambulances. When the reserves from the Fulton Street Station arrived they found themselves utterly unable to handle the situation, and forces of policemen were ordered to the scene from the Adams Street, Flushing Avenue, Amity Street, Butler and Bergen Streets Stations. News of the disaster had traveled swiftly, and crowds were soon hurrying to the spot. Inspector Schmittberger took command of the police, and later Deputy Commissioner Bugher arrived to direct the work. In the meantime fire engine and truck companies were rushing to the scene from the different districts in the lower section of the borough and preparing for work, with Deputy Commissioner Wise and Deputy Chief Lally in command. When the gravity of the situation was communicated to them, Supt. Moore of the Building Department and Chief Engineer Griffin of the Sewer Bureau hastened to Gold Street with forces of men.

500 Rescuers at Work.

In a short time there were more than 500 firemen, policemen, and other city employes at the scene ready for action, but held back from work by the danger of being buried under buildings which threatened to fall.

The police first drove back the fast-growing crowds of onlookers and then went through the weakened tenement houses, forcing out the tenants who still remained in them. One woman barricaded herself and her two children in a room on the top floor of a house, and the door had to be forced to get the panic-stricken family out. The excitement in the neighborhood was increased by the outpouring of hundreds of children from St. Ann's Parochial School and Public School 7, in York Street. When the explosion occurred the teachers decided that it would be best to get the children out, and they marched to the street in fire drill and in good order.

At first it was thought that forty or fifty men had been buried in the trench, but some who were said to be missing turned up later. The only thing which the firemen could do was to put out the blaze in the woodwork in the cut. Like the police, they could make no effort to get to the victims supposed to have been buried under the mass of earth and debris.

Lucky Escape of Four Workmen.

A wise man among the sewer laborers, thinking that some of the workmen might have escaped into the completed part of the main, went down the street and opened the manholes. His thoughtfulness resulted in guiding to safety four men who had managed to get into the finished portion of the main. They were John Green, Abel Johnson, Frank Sohnwald, and Arthur Strand, all employed by the sewer contractors. The four had been

working at a spot somewhat removed from the place where the explosion occurred. Hoping to find an outlet, they ran through the sewer, pursued by the water which was rushing into the main. Light from two of the opened manholes guided them to the river and safety.

With half a dozen officials each trying to take command of operations, practically nothing to any end was done for several hours. Deputy Water Commissioner Cozler ordered the water shut off from the broken main and the flood in the trench gradually subsided. Then somebody got word to the gas company and, after a long delay, men arrived, who succeeded in stopping any further escape of gas. With various officials disputing as to authority and other things, the rescue work remained at a standstill until Mayor McClellan dashed up in his automobile. He had been in telephonic touch with the scene and started right in to straighten the tangle out.

Learning that a number of bodies were supposed to be buried in the big trench the Mayor decided that the Health Department should have charge of the work of getting them out. He remained on the spot for some time after placing Dr. Bensen in charge of the work. The shoring up of the weakened buildings was then begun. Arrangements were made for the placing of electric lights and gasoline torches in the street that the work might be continued during the night. A big force of men worked all night shoring up the houses and the trench, and making ready for the digging. It seemed at a late hour that the actual work of removing the earth and stone and wreckage from the trench could not be started until early this morning. It is believed that the bodies of those supposed to be buried are at least twenty feet down.

Besides the electric lights which were placed in the street, two searchlights of the Fire Department were played on the scene last night. Big shoring frames were erected early in the evening, and the plans were to shore and prop up every building in the block. After the quicksand which had formed in the trench had hardened, an exploring party composed of firemen of Truck Company No. 153 went down into the cut, but were unable to reach any of the bodies. Father William McGronin, one of the Chaplains of the Fire Department, remained on duty at the scene most of the day and night, that he might be near in case his services should be needed. There was no hope, however, that any of the persons supposed to be pinned or buried under the wreckage would be taken out alive. Inspector Titus was placed in command of the police at the scene last night.

Arrest Delays the Work.

The police arrested John J. Haggerty of the firm of Haggerty & Rogers, the contractors who were building the sewer, and Peter McEvoy, a foreman employed by the Brooklyn Union Gas Company, on charges of criminal negligence. The charges against the two men were not very clear. McEvoy was arrested while he and his men were trying to stop the leak in the gas main on the theory that the gas company had been negligent. Gen. James B. Jourdan, President of the company, was indignant at the arrest of McEvoy. He asserted that the accident was in no way due to negligence on the part of his company. The arrest of McEvoy while he was at work caused a further delay in the work of shutting off the flow of gas. It was charged against Haggerty that his firm had not made proper provision for the protection of the men in the trench. Haggerty denied this, and statements made by Chief Engineer Griffin of the Sewer Department seemed to support him. Both Haggerty and McEvoy were held in \$2,000 bail each in the Adams Street Court, bonds being furnished for them.

Agnes McNamara, 6 years old, of 109 Gold Street, was reported missing up to 3 o'clock last night. Her parents had almost given her up at that time, when she walked into her house and asked for something to eat. She told her parents this story, which was afterward verified by the other persons concerned:

Her mother had sent her to the grocer's for some coffee and sugar, and on the way there she stopped at the house of Kate Curry, 96 Gold Street, 7 years old, who consented to go with her. The two set out, but had only gone a few steps when there came a tremendous explosion. Everything slipped from under them. They fell, slid a few feet, and clung to the dirt on the edge of an abyss.

Brave Girl Saves Two Children.

Miss Margaret Hickey, who was in the Curry girl's house, looked out of the window at the time of the explosion and saw the two girls sliding down in the debris. She rushed out, lay flat on her stomach on the sidewalk, and pulled up the Curry girl easily. The other had slipped further down. Miss Hickey leaned far over, caught her hand, and finally, though all was sliding under her, pulled her up, too.

The McNamara girl was too frightened to go home immediately and walked about the streets till 9 in the evening.

It is believed by the police that some of the persons reported as missing will yet appear.

An interesting story of the flight through the sewer and escape of himself and three of his fellow-workers was told last evening by Arthur Strand of 166 East 127th Street, Manhattan, who is employed by Haggerty & Rogers, the contractors. With Frank Sohnwald, John Green, and Abel Johnson, all of whom live in Harlem, Strand was at work in a portion of the trench nearest to Front Street.

"We heard a loud explosion," said Strand, "and saw the shoring twist and fly upward and inward. A sheet of flame shot out just beyond us, and there was a grinding noise as things began to come down and close in on us. Our foreman, Gus Anderson, who was a short distance away from us, yelled warningly and then disappeared behind the wall of flame. We did not see him again. Realizing that something dreadful was happening and that our escape by way of the trench was cut off, the four of us dashed into the completed section of the sewer. There was a rush of water behind us, and we saw that the main was fast being flooded as a result of a break in the water mains.

Water Up to Their Chins.

"With the water gaining in depth under us we ran for dear life through the big main in the direction of the river. Stumbling over things which had been left in the main by workmen, we made our way, with a fear of being drowned like rats upon us, to the river, three blocks away. When we reached the outlet the water in the main was up to our waists. We found a bulwark which had been built to keep the water out of the sewer while the main was building, and climbed to the top of it. When we reached it the water had risen almost to our chins, and we thought we were goners. From the bulwark we climbed to the pier and were safe. It was an experience I shall never forget, and one I would not care to repeat for anything."

Warnings Sent by Telephone.

The Brooklyn Union Gas Company informed the New York Telephone Company at noon of the disaster, and requested them to tell subscribers in the danger zone of the necessity, in view of the accident, that all those who used gas should turn off the gas cocks until the great break in the main had been repaired. This was immediately done.

A call was sent to reserve employes of the Burrige, Flatbush, Bedford, Eastern, and other telephone districts to report instantly at the main office. Sixty telephone girls were requisitioned. As fast as the gas company could prepare lists of the subscribers in affected districts the telephone operators informed them over the telephone that there had been a serious break in the gas main, warned them that it might affect the gas supply for the night, and urged them to turn off all gas cocks in case the gas failed to light. In this way, it is estimated, they reached 10,000 persons direct through the emergency telephone boards, and the word was probably transmitted verbally to 3,000 more.

JOBS FOR THE UNEMPLOYED.

Forty-one Got Work Yesterday—Committee Elects Officers.

Permanent officers for the reorganized local branch of the National Committee for the Relief of the Unemployed, which did not agree with National Committee-man J. Eads How in methods resulting in the latter going to St. Louis, were elected yesterday at a meeting in 20 Duane Street. H. T. McCormack was elected Chairman and J. W. Calhoun Secretary of the local committee, and it was decided to change its name to that of the Brotherhood Welfare Association of New York.

New clothing was supplied by the committee yesterday to seventy-five unemployed men, whose clothes were worn, and forty-one of them were supplied with places. Of about 600 men who have secured jobs through the new committee, about 300 were sent to work for the Erie Railroad, principally as laborers. Others got work in the city and vicinity as laborers or porters.

Chairman McCormack of the committee said that a number of mechanics who had been idle and got work as laborers, have since obtained work at their own trades.