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Feb. 3, 1916 The Parliament Building Is Burning Down

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 by Ronald Wolf

While the First World War raged on in the European



countries, on the home front Canadian's were battling their own battle. The enemy was flames and the victims were seven people and Ottawa's \$1.8 million (CND) Parliament buildings.

This historic day started on Feb. 3, 1916 at 8:37 p.m. when a fire started in the Centre Block. Unlike the news headlines of the day which stated "Parliament Buildings Destroyed by Fire" and "Parliament Buildings Gone" not all was lost. In fact, the library and departmental buildings were spared the licking flames of destruction.

You remember the old saying *an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure*? Well, this was never so true. It was Alpheus Todd (1821-1884) who insisted that the library had iron fire doors and clerk Connie MacCormac's quick thinking when she slammed the doors shut before running to safety.

Almost immediately, speculation of a spy swept through the land like a wheat fire. It was a good assumption but such was not the case. The Royal Commission concluded that it was an accidental fire and careless smoking in the House of Commons Reading Room.

Unfortunately, the lives of seven people perished in this historic fire. They include two guests of House Speaker Albert Sévigny and his wife returned to get their fur coats and was found dead in a corridor. A policeman and two government employees were crushed by a fallen wall. Bowman Brown Law, the Liberal Member of Parliament for Yarmouth, N.S., died near the House of Commons Reading Room. The body of René Laplante, Assistant Clerk of the House of Commons, was found in the building two days after the fire.

The timing of the fire simply couldn't have happened at a worse time. The library was littered with old newspapers and magazines while the Centre Block's wooden walls were just oiled and the floors just varnished.

The Parliament Buildings burned while members debated on the fish marketing's. Canada's 8th Prime Minister Robert Borden (1854-1937) escaped by crawling on his 62 year-old hands and knees along smoked filled corridors. With a tremendous crash, the House of Commons roof collapsed followed by the Victoria Clock Tower's demise at 1:21 a.m. The cost of the fire is unknown but the fire will never be forgotten as it is carefully preserved in Canadian history. When people ask why is this event important? You tell them, it's our history, our country.



*According to the inflation calculator on <http://www.westegg.com/inflation/infl.cgi>, \$2 million dollars (US) in 1851 was worth \$50 (US) million dollars in 2007.
<http://parliamenthill.gc.ca/histoire-history/1916-eng.html>
<http://canadaonline.about.com/od/parliament/p/paribldgsfire.htm>
http://ottawa.ca/residents/heritage/archives/virtual_exhibit/building_en.html