

News from Senator Catharine M. Young 57th Senate District

Representing Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, and portions of Livingston County



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PLAQUE HONORING SAMUEL ABBOTT UNVEILED AT NEW YORK STATE CAPITOL

*Senator Young championed law to recognize night watchman lost in catastrophic
Capitol Fire on March 29, 1911*



Officials participating in the unveiling of the plaque to honor Samuel Abbott included (left to right): Assemblyman Jack McEneny, Senator Neil Breslin (44th District), Assemblywoman Patricia Fahy (109th District), Senator Catharine Young (57th District), OGS Commissioner RoAnn Destito and Albany Fire Chief Warren Abriel. Not pictured, Assemblyman John McDonald (108th District).

Albany, New York – Marking the culmination of a year-long effort, Senator Catharine Young (R,C,I – 57th District) joined OGS Commissioner RoAnn Destito, Assemblywoman Patricia Fahy and other public officials to formally unveil a plaque memorializing Samuel Abbott, the night watchman who was the sole fatality of the Capitol Fire on March 29, 1911. Senator Young sponsored and spearheaded the law, along with Assemblywoman Patricia Fahy, to create the plaque in tribute to Mr. Abbott, who perished on the fourth floor of the Capitol, adjacent to her legislative office. The unveiling marked exactly 107 years since the fire.

“My determination to honor Samuel Abbott began in October 2016 when I heard a tour guide leading the Capitol’s popular ‘Ghost Tour’ stating that Samuel Abbott died a few steps outside my door in the Capitol Fire of 1911. He said the dedicated night watchman who guarded the State Library was said to still roam the Capitol, making his rounds and keeping the building safe. Yet, when I did more research, I discovered that Samuel Abbott was an individual of sterling character and dedication whose actions that evening were valiant and selfless.”

“Like many people who do extraordinary things when duty calls, Samuel Abbott found himself in catastrophic and unforeseen circumstances on March 29, 1911. Instead of fleeing, accounts indicate he selflessly delayed his exit from the fiery hallways to ensure no others were trapped. A decorated Civil War hero and long-standing public servant, his actions on that night were in keeping with the devotion to duty that had always guided him. Sadly, that delay cost him his life.”

“From today forward, Samuel Abbott will be justly recognized and honored for his service and sacrifice to the people of New York State. No longer a mere ghost story or legend, this permanent tribute affirms Mr. Abbott’s place in one of the turn of the century’s most devastating fires and in the permanent historical record of the Capitol,” said Senator Young.

Heralded as an architectural tour de force when Governor Theodore Roosevelt declared it complete in 1899 after more than 25 years of construction and \$25 million dollars, New York State’s Capitol was a showplace designed to reflect the state’s status as a leader in population and industry. Constructed of a granite exterior with extensive marble interior, it was regarded as fireproof at the time and, consequently, without fire prevention measures.

On March 29, 1911 at 2:42 a.m., Fire Box 324 was pulled, notifying the City of Albany Fire Department of a fire at the state Capitol. Investigators would later determine that the fire originated in the third-floor Assembly Library, spreading quickly to the adjacent State Library, before engulfing the building’s fourth and fifth floors. Documents at the time stated that the Capitol had been burning without impediment for at least thirty minutes prior to the alarm. Firefighters, operating with horse-drawn pumpers, found a roaring inferno when they arrived on scene.

An account in the *Albany Evening Journal* indicates that at approximately 3 a.m., Mr. Samuel J. Abbott, a 78-year-old watchman in the building, “was seen by an orderly opening some windows. Mr. Abbott had worked at the Capitol since 1895 and his territory as watchman comprised three floors of the State Library.” He was known to “leave home about 9 o’clock each night, go to the library, lock himself in and remain until 6 a.m. when he returned home.”

The fury of the fire was so powerful it twisted metal framing in the iconic skylight above the Great Western Staircase, sending the glass panels raining down on the stairs below. The stairway’s carved sandstone filigree melted, and at the top of the “Million-Dollar Staircase,” prized archaeological objects, including the State’s world-famous Iroquois collection, were consumed by flames. When extinguished, the fire had decimated the entire collection of the State Library, with more than 800,000 books and manuscripts being lost, earning it the distinction of being the most destructive library fire disaster of modern times.

Two days after the fire, on March 31, 1911, Mr. Abbott’s body was found in a narrow passageway on the fourth floor, his silver-handled cane just a short distance away. In his pocket remained a key to a locked door just a few paces further through which he might have escaped.

His funeral service, held at St. Peter's Church in Albany on April 1, was "one of the most largely attended funerals ever held in this church," according to the *Times Union*. In August 1912, the Legislature allocated \$280.16 for "George W. Abbott, son of the late Samuel J. Abbott, an employee of the department of education, who lost his life in the Capitol fire, for funeral and burial expenses."

Mr. Abbott's life and service has long been an overlooked aspect of the historic fire which was the second catastrophic fire within one week. Just four days prior, on March 25, 1911, 600 workers, the vast majority of whom were women, were working at the Triangle Shirtwaist Coat factory in New York City when a fire began in a rag bin, quickly growing into a raging inferno. Neglected safety features and locked doors within the building contributed to the disaster which ultimately claimed 145 lives within 18 minutes. Together, the two fires spurred a wave of workplace safety laws, including the Sullivan-Hoey Fire Prevention Law.

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