

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: Great Thumb Fire	Incident Date & Time: 09/05/1881
Incident Location: Thornville, Michigan	Incident Size: 1,000,000 acres (estimated)
Types of resources involved: Civilians and the American Red Cross	# of Fatalities/injuries: 282 fatalities / Many unknown injuries
Reasons this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fire is historically significant ➤ Civilian mass casualty event 	
Conditions leading up to the event:	
<p>During the 19th century logging operations had been a main economic driver in the Great Lakes region. The resulting environmental impacts had left a tinderbox of slash primed, and ready to explode. As dry conditions and drought persisted through 1881, farmers continued to burn crops and slash despite not having had rain since April. These factors, as well as a burn scar from 10 years prior, resulted in one of the largest and deadliest fires of its time.</p> <p><i>“In September no penetrating rain had fallen for almost two months. Almost every stream was dry. Many wells had become empty. The swamps had been burned to hard clay by the sun, fiercer in its heat than it had been for years before. The vegetation of the fields and woods had become tinder. The earth was baked and cracked; the heat having penetrated to an unusual depth. Ten years before, a great fire had burned over the country, and had left standing acres of dead timber, and the sapless trunks and dry branches made splendid food for the flames. Some of the old trees had blown down, and the forests were full of ‘windfalls’ and of great piles of dead timber which are called ‘slashings’ by the people of the settlements. Everything was ready to feed the fires when they finally came. Old roots, pine tops, branches, brush heaps, timber, and the parched earth made the fuel for the burning.”</i></p> <p>Signal Service Notes NO. 1, 1882, Washington: Office of the Chief</p>	
Brief description of the event:	
<p>On September 5 a southwest wind swept across the Michigan Thumb. Local farmers burning slash and crops, soon were running for their lives as one of the deadliest wildfires in United States history erupted. A mid-Atlantic Cyclone forced hurricane strength winds inland, fueling flames and drastically increasing the rate of spread. 10,000 people were displaced from their homes, causing mass panic. Some stated they thought the world was coming to an end; and for many it did. With a death toll of nearly 300, many perished trying to save their crops and homes, as bodies were recovered days later in fields and wells. After three days, one million acres had burned in Tuscola, Huron, Sanilac and St. Clair counties, destroying 20 townships, burning 51 schools, and 3,000 barns. The Great Thumb Fire had ravaged the landscape and caused 2.5 million dollars in damages (76 million dollars today), leaving many hopeless and homeless. A massive relief effort was launched to supply people with essential resources, setting the stage for the first American Red Cross deployment. With many in need, the urgency to deliver resources was critical. But conflict between two cities receiving goods, Port Huron and Detroit, had left distribution at a standstill as each city was looking to corner the market in distribution. The federal government continued to pour money into disaster relief, sending wagon loads of food to divided districts that separated burnt areas. Some of the relief supplies included seed stalks of wheat for farmers to replant their crops. Local news sources even attempted to put a positive spin on the disaster by stating that burnt land was ready to be farmed and the land was now worth more.</p>	
Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:	
<p>Abundance of logging slash added to available fuels Snags from fires 10 years prior Hurricane force winds Wind changes pushed the fire into multiple directions Extreme drought</p>	
Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:	
Not applicable	
Notable impact or historical significance for the wildland fire service from this incident:	
<p>This was the first deployment for the newly founded American Red Cross. This event forever altered the landscape of Michigan’s Upper Thumb, some effects are still seen in the area today. The U.S. Army was summoned to the area and tasked with assessing damages and seeking a cause to the fire.</p>	

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Links to more information on this incident:

[1881 Michigan Fire Forever Changed The Thumb \(thumbwind.com\)](http://thumbwind.com)

[Signal service notes : United States War Dept, United States Army, Signal Corps : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

Books:

- *Michigan's Great Thumb Fires of 1871 and 1881* ~ by Alan Naldrett
- *Fiery Trial* ~ by James H. Lincoln and James L. Donahue

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UNITED STATES (OF AMERICA) - *Signal service.*
WAR DEPARTMENT.

SIGNAL SERVICE NOTES.
No. 1.

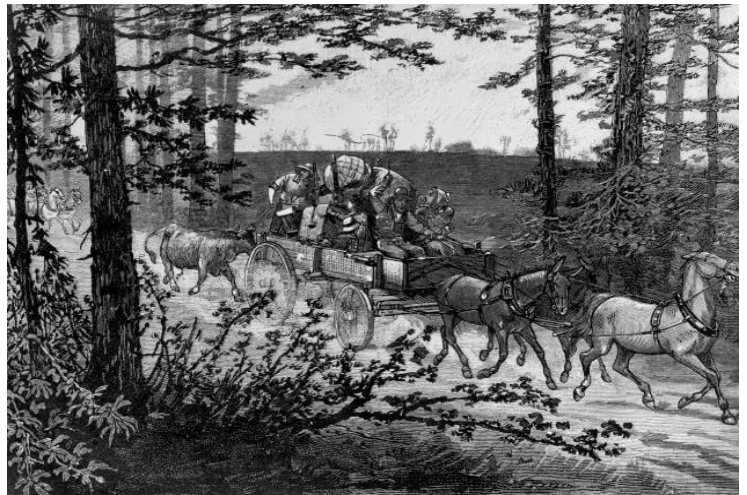
REPORT
ON
THE MICHIGAN FOREST FIRES
OF 1881.

PREPARED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF
BRIG. & BVT. MAJ. GEN'L W. B. HAZEN,
CHIEF SIGNAL OFFICER OF THE ARMY.

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1882.



A family fleeing from the advancing flames
(American Red Cross Archives)

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