



Bill & Bonnie Daniels Firefighters Hall & Museum - Minnesota Fire Museum

Line of Duty Death Honorarium

Ladderman John Toohey – Minneapolis Fire Department

Line of Duty Death #2, December 4, 1881

Ladderman John Toohey and Assistant Fire Chief Cornelius Fredericks were the first recorded Firefighter Line of Duty Deaths in the State of Minnesota. They died in action fighting a blaze that destroyed four flour mills on 1st Street and 6th (Portland) Avenue South. Flames starting in the Pillsbury “B” Mill had spread to the Excelsior Mill south of it and were threatening the Minneapolis Mill to the north. Toohey and Fredericks were on 1st Street when a violent dust explosion in the Minneapolis Mill blew out its walls, burying them in the debris.

John Toohey (Jr.) was born in England on October 1, 1860 to John and Mary Toohey. John Sr. and Mary were born in Ireland and the family immigrated to the United States circa 1880 first settling in St. Albans, Vermont, before relocating to Minneapolis. The 1880 United States Census details John was 19, worked as a clerk in a dry goods store and his family lived at 1008 Fourteenth Street South. John was the oldest child of 6 with sister Jane (17), brother Eddie (13), sisters Mary Ann (12) and Lily (6) along with brother Willie (5).

He became a volunteer member of Hook and Ladder No. 3 which was manufactured by the Fire Extinguisher Manufacturing Co. with delivery in 1880. The Company was housed at Station G. (pictured right).

The gas on the platform was put out by the explosion, it being supposed that the shock ruptured the main. It is estimated that nearly two and one-half millions gallons of water were thrown on the fire Sunday morning.
Two caps were found in the ruins yesterday, one of which belonged to John Toohey, while the ownership of the other has not yet been discovered.

Minneapolis Tribune December 8, 1881





The Scenes and Incidents Peculiar to Times of Excitement.

CASUALTIES

The Killed.
CORNELIUS FREDERICHSEN, assistant chief engineer of the fire department.
JOHN TOOHEY, member Hook and Ladder No. 3.
ALEXANDER BJORK, laborer.
R. R. ROBINSON, millwright.

Missing.
JOHN MURPHY, a single man, who boarded at the Falls Hotel, and was employed as a brakeman on the Minneapolis & St. Louis road. When last seen was coupling cars on the platform track.

The Wounded.
DANIEL HORRACH, Hose No. 4. Bruised and cut about the head.
FRANK L. COULTER, Hose No. 4. Left arm broken and ear cut in two.
FRED BELKE, Hose No. 4. Bruised on the legs and arms.
HIRAM SNYDER, miller in Pillsbury B Mill. Gash on the head two inches long and bruised about the head and face.
JAMES RAFFLES, Hook and Ladder No. 3. Head and hands bruised by rock.
THOS. W. MULLER, assistant miller. Left hand cut and arm bruised.

THE LOSS.

Excelsior mill.....	\$115,000
Empire mill.....	150,000
Minneapolis mill.....	125,000
Pillsbury B mill.....	145,000
Cotton mill.....	30,000
Minneapolis Eastern railroad.....	10,000

SUNDAY'S CATASTROPHE.

The Finding of John Toohey's Body—Sparks From the Fire.

Shortly before noon yesterday the body of John Toohey, the gallant fireman who was crushed between the falling walls of the Minneapolis mill, was found by the men engaged in the removal of the debris. The body was badly mutilated and death must have been instantaneous. The remains were removed to Hose House No. 5, but subsequently were taken to the late residence of the deceased on Western avenue. The funeral takes place at 2 o'clock this afternoon, the different companies being represented by delegations.

The funeral of Alexander Bjork, the employe of the Pillsbury B mill who was killed by the explosion Sunday morning, will take place on Thursday morning from Warner's undertaking establishment, the expenses being borne by C. A. Pillsbury & Co.

The loss on the cotton-mill is reported at \$12,000, on which there is an insurance of \$2,000 in the Queen Insurance Company.

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SPARKS,

Gathered from the Debris of Sunday's Conflagration—The Funeral of the Victims.

The funeral of John Toohey, the brave fireman who perished in Sunday's conflagration, took place yesterday afternoon from his late residence on Western avenue. The remains had been placed in a very elegant casket, and the funeral was attended by an immense number of people. All the members of Hook and Ladder No. 3, of which the deceased was a member, were present, in addition to two members of each company of the department. After the services of the Catholic church had been gone through with the remains were escorted to their last resting place in the cemetery on Chicago avenue.

The funeral of R. R. Robinson, the millwright who was killed by the explosion of the Minneapolis mill, will take place this afternoon from Vail's undertaking establishment. Deceased was a single man, well spoken of by all who knew him, who had resided here some five years. He has no relatives in this city.

Alexander Bjork, the sweeper in the Pillsbury B mill, who was killed Sunday morning in the catastrophe, will be buried to-day from Warner's undertaking establishment, Messrs. C. A. Pillsbury & Co. assuming the expense of the same.

Minneapolis Tribune Articles December 5 (left), December 6 (middle), December 7 (right)

Ladderman Toohey was buried at the Cemetery on Chicago Avenue (St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery) in Minneapolis.

Fatal Incident:

At 3:55 AM, Companies responding to an alarm from Box 252 found flames roaring through all floors of the five-story stone Pillsbury "B" flour mill on 1st Street between 6th and 7th Avenues South. Firemen concentrated on preventing fire spread to the four-story Excelsior Mill to the south and the five-story Excelsior Mill to the north, both directly adjoining the burning Pillsbury Mill. About 4:20 AM, flames broke through unprotected windows of the Excelsior Mill, forced firemen from the building, and soon totally involved that mill also.

Chief Bracket felt confident that the windowless exposed wall of the Minneapolis Mill, covered with several streams, would prevent further fire spread. At 5:12 AM, however, without prior warning, a terrific dust explosion tore through the Minneapolis Mill. Its stone front wall fell straight out, crashing through the platform bridging 1st Street over the power canal and carrying four fireman and the mill hand with it. Fellow firefighters immediately pulled two of their comrades, both painfully injured, from the debris, but 1st Assistant Chief Cornelius

Fredericks, Ladderman John Toohey, and the mill hand remained buried in the rubble filling the canal. All were dead when reached much later, as was another mill employee when it blew up. Several other firemen suffered injuries from flying debris, two firemen on the roof escaped death when the blast deposited them unhurt on the roof of an adjoining mill.

By 9:00 AM, brave and tenacious firefighting brought the blaze under control. Four large flour mills had been destroyed with a loss of \$298,168. Firefighters mourned the first Minneapolis Fire Department fatalities in the line of duty. The blaze underscored the fearful hazards of the flour milling district, which had prompted Chief Fredericks to predict, with grim accuracy, after an earlier mill fire, "I shall die down there on that platform yet."

Mill City Firefighters – The First 100 Years – 1879-1979 by Richard Heath

- It was claimed that the force of the explosion was felt at Anoka, eighteen miles away.
- The fire drove numerous rats from the mills; they were crushed by the feet of the multitude.
- One of the employees of the Pillsbury mill lost \$70 in money and watch, which were in his clothing in the building.
- Large numbers of pigeons, blinded by the sudden glare of the flames, flew hither and thither about the mills and finally dashed into the fire.
- The discovery of the fire was made by Chas. Oliphant, fireman in the boilerroom of the Washburn B mill. He saw the light and gave the alarm to the six men who were at work in the mill.

Minneapolis Tribune, December 6, 1881



Pillsbury "B" Mill – 1885

Photo Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society

Funeral:

No details detailing the funeral have been discovered.

Interment:

Ladderman Toohy is buried at Lakewood Cemetery in Minneapolis.

Section 5 Lot 100 Grave 4



Timeline/Documents/Records/Articles:

1880 - US Census Record

1880 – U.S. City Directory – Residency and Occupation

1881 – December 5 – Minneapolis Tribune Article

1882 – January 10 – Death Certificate – December 4, 1881 – Mill Explosion, Crushed by Falling Wall

1882 – January 11 – Find a Grave for Mrs. J. Toohey, mother of John Toohey

Fire Chief:



Chief Frank Stetson
1882 to 1891