

EXTRACTS FROM MINUTES OF BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
OF INSTITUTIONS OF THE STATE OF FLORIDA.

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The Board of Commissioners of State Institutions met in the executive office, The Gov. State Treas. State Supt. of Publ Instruction and Commissioner of Agriculture being present. The minutes of the last meeting were read and approved.

The Gov. stated that the meeting had been especially called to consider the recent fire at the Fla. Ind. School for boys near Marianna in which several lives were lost and to discuss the duties of this board with respect thereto and this boards duties relative to rebuilding the burned structure and to the future management and welfare of the Institution.

After discussion it was resolved that on Thursday Dec. 3rd a Committee to consist of as many members of this board as could go should visit the said school for the above mentioned purposes and the Secy. was instructed to invite each member of the board of managers of the school to be present at the institution on said date to confer with the members of this board. It was resolved that the committee which goes to the school shall investigate carefully the arrangements which have been made since the fire for housing and caring for the inmates and should also give careful consideration to the best manner of rebuilding the burned structure.

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The Gov. submitted to the board a written report of the Board of managers of the Fla. Ind. school for boys upon their investigation of the fire and fatalities which occurred at that Institution Nov. 18- 1914 and also had read to the board that portion of the final presentment of the Grand Jury for Jackson County, Fall Term, 1914 making reference to the said fire and containing certain criticisms of the management of said Institution.

The said report of the board of managers and the said excerpts from the Grand Jury's presentment are as follows.

Excerpt from final presentment of Grand Jury for Jackson County, Fall Term, 1914.

It has been our duty to investigate one of the most awful affairs which has occurred in this part of Fla. within a great number of years, that is the burning of building No. 1 of the Fla. State Ind. School for boys, which building was occupied by the white boys there and the employees having supervision of the boys.

From our investigation we do not believe that there is even ground to suspicion that this fire was of an incendiary origin, but it was the result of Gross carelessness, negligence and mismanagement which reaches from the people of the State, through their Legislature, to the board of managers,

from the board of managers to the Supt. and from the Supt. to each employee of that institution, whose duty required him to have charge, custody and control in any wise of the boys confined at building No. 1. In this building the white juvenile delinquents and violators of the law are housed.

They are deprived of their Freedom presumably for the purpose, not of punishment but of effecting their reformation, the confinement is no mistake, children of this class should be segregated from law abiding and well behaved children, and they should have a chance to reform, but we find that the legislature has been scanty in its provision for the welfare and maintenance of these children, we find that they have not been provided with adequate clothing to make them comfortable, we find that punishment which has been allowed to be inflicted, and which has been inflicted has gone to the extent of being cruel and inhuman, we find that the board of managers have accepted such position under the law requiring them to meet at the school at stated periods, we believe that this board of managers is composed of good men, but they have neglected their duty to those boys, some of whom are now past the possibility of help. The main criticism that we make of the board of managers is that it did not take the time and use the diligence necessary to know how and in what manner the school was being conducted. We also find that the employees were men who were not settled in life who have had no experience in raising boys of their own or any body else's and who know nothing about the science of bringing up children in the way they should go, we find that the young men having direct supervision of the boys were immoral and not proper persons to lead wayward boys toward reformation, we think that every man which was employed at building No. 1. when the same was burned should be discharged and should be superseded by men who have had sufficient experience to know something about the methods which should be used in bringing up boys. Men who have reached the age where it is not necessary for them to wander about over the country at night when they should be at their post of duty. Men who are no longer attracted by Red Light districts, and such other places as we have found upon investigation employees now there are prone to do. We find that this fire started some where after mid-night probably from a stove which had been put up on the afternoon preceding the fire and which the evidence shows to have been broken and dilapidated condition and which was put up on three legs and two bricks over the naked floor, and which had a fire burning in it at the last time it appears to have been seen by any one that night, probably it caught from an oil lamp carelessly left burning somewhere near the eastern stairway. It is possible that it caught from spontaneous combustion of litter, oil, paint, Disinfectant and trash which is shown to have been reposed on a locker under the stairway, but it is practically sure that it was not intentionally set afire. We find that the acting Supt. Mr. W. H. Bell was in town on this particular night until after twelve o'clock, evidently paying a social call, His duty called him to be in that building ready to care for, protect and if necessary restrain the boys confined there. We find that he disregarded his duty, and if he had been where he should have been, that it is possible he would have discovered the origin of this fire before damage was done and that the lives of the boys and men who perished there would have been saved. Not only was he absent, but during the early part of the night three out of four men whose duty it was to care for these boys,

were in town upon some pleasure bent, and each of them may well consider that if he had been at his post of duty, these lives might have been saved. In this connection, we also feel it necessary to say that the board of managers made a serious mistake to place a man with recent record of Mr. Bell for a moment in the position of Supt. of an institution of this kind.

We wish to say that we consider the law making any citizen of the County where this school is located, ineligible to the position of Supt., an unjust law. We believe that no better man could be found any where for the management of this school than C. J. Vickary who has had charge of building No 2 for years past, and has conducted thereof in a manner acceptable to the public and with kindness and justice to the boys under his control, we hope that the next Legislature will repeal this provision of the law. We also wish to say that in our opinion the Caldwell boy should be pardoned and should not be required to remain at the school.

From our investigation, we do not believe that the act for which he was sent to the school was of sufficient magnitude to require his confinement there and besides this, we think for him to be there after false rumors which have gone out in this County and which have been current at the school to the effect that his father was implicated in the burning of the building would be unjust to him.

We thank your Honor for the clear directions given us upon our organization, and for the courtesy extended to us during the time which we have been in the discharge of our duties, we also extend our thanks to States Atty. Rivers H. Buford, for his diligent service in assisting in the investigation of matters given us in charge, and for his help in rushing forward the business before us in such manner as to make our investigation thorough, and at the same time expeditious. We thank the other Court officials who have been exceedingly prompt in rendering us every service required of them in procuring the attendance of witnesses and avoiding any delays in the deliverance of our body. We ask that a copy of this presentment be forwarded to our Governor Park Trammell for his consideration, and that it be published.

Respectfully Submitted

The Grand Jury
J. W. Fussell
Foreman.

Report of Board of Managers

Hon. Park Trammell, Governor
Tallahassee, Florida.

(date as above)

Sir:

As requested by you and as required by its duties the board of managers has investigated the cause of the calamitous fire occurring on the night of Nov. 17-18-1914 at which fire the building known as No 1 of the State Ind. School for boys was completely destroyed.

This building was constructed with solid brick walls, but the floors, partitions, sills and ceiling were of wood, while the outer walls were fire proof nearly every thing else about the building was of material easily burned, the main part of the building was erected about 17 years ago and was was 3 stories in height, it was 150 feet long and 50 feet in width, and faced North. To this building had been added two wings about 50 feet by 50 feet which were built on the South side and at the East and West ends, on the first floor were the offices, the Dining Room and Kitchen, the lockers, Wash-rooms, toilets and assembly Room and the school room. On the second floor were several small rooms used by the officers and three Domitories in use and a fourth Domitory not in use. On the third floor of the main building (the wings were only 2 stories High) were officers quarters, Hospital quarters and some unused rooms.

At the time of the fire the wind was blowing strong from a Northerly direction into the front of the main part of the building, there were in the building 93 boys and 10 officers and employees of the Institution, the morning of the 18th Inst. As nearly as it can be ascertained. The fire was first discovered on the first floor of the main building in front of the entrance to the assembly room which contained lockers for the boys.

These rooms were in the Eastern end. There were two stairways, one near where the fire originated and a second stairway near the dining room and kitchen were located in the Western end of the building on the ground floor.

The fire was discovered by O. G. Marston an employee. Mr. Marstons room was on the second floor, near the center of the main building. He had been on the first floor within 10 feet of where the fire was first seen not more than 15 minutes before he had returned to his room and before falling asleep heard a roaring sound, he returned to the first floor saw the fire and immediately gave the alarm. In the locality of the fire there were no burning lamps to explode, there was no burning stove, there was no stored kerosene or gasoline, there was strong evidence offered tending to show that the fire was of incendiary origin, this evidence has been submitted to the coroner's jury and to the Grand Jury the results of their deliberations will be made public shortly, and until this is done, this board will properly refrain from any expressions of opinion, except only that this board discovered no natural or accidental cause of the fire.

As soon as Mr. Marston gave the alarm, one of the watchmen on duty began to awaken the boys, he visited each of three domitories aroused the boys and called to them to fall in and march out. The doors of the domitories were thrown open and no effort was made to restrain the exit of the boys for fear any of them would escape. The smaller boys were in the domotery called No 1 and the domotery nearest the fire and eastern stairway.

These boys were marched or rushed to the Western stairway, all the boys in this Domotory escaped except one, a demented boy who after reaching a soft place ran back for a blanket the boys in this domotory did not even have to go through smoke in order to escape. In the other domitories equal chances of escape existed, and except for the boys who returned to the building there appears no reason why every boy should not have escaped unharmed.

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The ninety odd boys were roughly divided among three dormitories, eight of the boys are missing, one, Earl Morris, was reported to have been seen after the building was in flames outside the building, and is supposed to have run away, one lost his life in an heroic effort to save life, of the remaining six, one lived in dormitory No 1 none in dormitory No 2 and five in dormitory No 3.

After the fire was discovered it spread with marvelous rapidity. This rapidity was due in part to the nature of the building in part to the direction and velocity of the wind and possibly in part to the fact that the interior of the building had been recently painted and the oil and turpentine in the paint had not had time to thoroughly dry out.

The fire escapes were located on the ends of the wings, they were not locked, but the approaches to them from the dormitories had to be kept locked as otherwise they would be easy means of escape to any body desiring to leave the institution. It must be remembered that frequently boys with very vicious inclinations are committed to the institution. The keys were kept in the office in a particular place and their location known to each officer, when the fire was discovered there was ample time to open the doors and get every inmate of the building out through the hallways and by the western stairway, all efforts of the officers were directed to this consequently, there was no need of the keys subsequently, when it was found that all the inmates were not out, the officers were in flames. The approach to one of the fire escapes were opened by knocking off the lock and through this escape one boy was rescued, the lock on the approach to the other fire escape was knocked off, but when this was done the flames had progressed so far that the door could not be opened, while it can never be known whether the presence of the keys would have saved life, it will always be a source of infinite regret that they were not present. It may be said that this system on the other buildings has been changed, and keys are now not only kept in the office but each watchman and several officers carry duplicates.

The most regrettable incident of the fire was the loss of two Messrs. Evans, father and son, each seems to have lost his life by remaining in or returning to the building to save the other. It is sad, indeed, that such heroic conduct and devoted affection should have proved fatal to both, Joe Weatherbee of Jacksonville a boy of seventeen, evidently lost his life by returning to the third floor of the building thinking that the acting Supt. Mr. Bell, had not been aroused. Joe truly died a hero.

It is peculiarly fortunate that all survivors escaped with out harm from burns or other wounds.

The conduct of the officers is much to be commended, there was much presence of mind shown, much coolness and much courage. There was also much done to demonstrate that the closest of true affection and devotion on the part of the boys and officers among themselves existed. The board wishes especially to commend them for coolness and bravery. In addition to those mentioned, the following boys, Severina Vinterrez of Tampa known among the boys as "To To" Walter Tucker of Bowling Green, Robert Booth of Tampa and Perry Jones, of West Palm Beach.

One Lesson and a Vital one is that no buildings of the character of the one destroyed should ever again be built.

Respectfully Submitted,
The Board of Managers.

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After careful consideration and discussion the Secy. was instructed to write a letter to the chairman and Secy. of the board of managers of the Fla. Ind. School for boys as follows; and to send a copy of such letter to each member of the board.

Hon. W. H. Milton Pres.
Hon. Ira A. Hutchinson Sec.
Fla. Ind. School for boys

Gentlemen:

At a meeting of the board of Commissioners of State Institutions held late yesterday afternoon, the board took up for consideration the report of the board of managers of the Fla. Ind. School for boys upon its investigation of the fire fatalities which occurred at the school Nov. 18th 1914 and in connection there with also considered the presentment of the Grand Jury for the Fall Term 1914 of the Circuit Court for Jackson County referring to the said fire and fatalities and making certain criticisms regarding the conduct and management of the school.

I was instructed to transmit to each member of the board of managers of the school a copy of that portion of the Grand Jury's presentment referring to the school and request that the board of managers meet as early as practical, carefully consider the criticisms contained in the said presentment and submit to the board of commissioners of state institutions without unnecessary delay such comment or report as is deemed proper as the board of managers may desire to make.

I was also instructed to advise the board of managers that the board Commissioners of State Institutions desired to be conferred with regarding any contemplated plans which the board of managers have for rebuilding or for improvements at the Fla. Ind. School for boys.

2 I was also instructed to advise the board of managers that after careful consideration, the board of Commissioners of State Institutions deems it advisable for the best interest of the school that the services of Mr. W. H. Bell, as an employee of the school be dispensed with on account of the comparatively recent unfavorable record of Mr. Bell. ✓

I was further instructed to request that the board of managers of the school submit to the board of Commissioners of State Institutions a statement of all public moneys which the board of managers have on hand, where all of said moneys are located or deposited and for what purposes said moneys are contemplated to be used.