

Theodore Crowninshield Browne Salem Fire Letter Transcription:

I'm at my Summer School so my address is Westmorely 126r, Cambridge

Thursday Night.

Dear Lewis

Its all over, including the shouting that is if there were ever any shouting to do. Class Day it rained fitfully; before that our track team was in utter failure Minor sports were almost uniform defeats. We lost at Hockey, lost the Base Ball series, lost the crew race and thusly amidst a mess of disemboweled streets, half-baked bridges, yawning subways, discordant music buildings, spiderlike High Tension laboratories, ruin-like Freshman Dormitories and the crust of a Library, Harvard 1914 A.D. departed this life. A ghastly-deathly stillness is the only noise. All the profs have fled. Scores of closed blinds testify this fact. Massachusetts avenue is slimy with melted tar; it is just as hot in the yard where Holworthy, naked and lonely glares like a factory dwelling house out on "Death Valley" "1914 is the first class to have no Shady recollections", so says the Ivy orator O! Weh, too true. All of which goes to say no one in Cambridge is worth seeing till September 15th. If we're out of Cambridge see us by all means. Some instructor of the Social Ethics department told me you had won a Fellowship for next year. I'm most exceeding glad. I'll be in Holworthy 22 so you can chase right around there the first chance you get.

As for me, well I'm no ΦBK [Phi Beta Kappa] genius. I did work this year which was not good nor bad, but I did spend an enormous amount of time in my dramatic work. I managed the H.D.C. [Harvard Drama Club] shows but concentrated my work on one play. I couldn't work for Baker because all the year I was on probation. You know that Pretoria [transatlantic ocean liner]

was most a week late hence I didn't get here in time to register for my oral. Mind, I got here three days before the exams started. It is ~~Tuesday~~ Wednesday night now. Your letter ~~has~~ lain on the desk and crumpled ~~on my desk~~ in the wind. At the word Exams I glanced around for a new sheet. A strange glare attracted my attention. I looked closer. Great swirls of red were belching upwards. It was a fire. "Where is the fire?" I asked Central. "In Salem. The whole city is burning." Was the reply. I tried to telephone to Salem. "There is no communication to the city" I was told. I called up the Transcript [newspaper] – "What part of Salem is burning." I asked "Almost all" – "Do you know exactly?" "No" "Are trains running?" "No, the railroad burned long ago." I dove into my motorcycle suit, took to the back roads to avoid the crush of automobiles and tore thru the sand. The whole sky was a withering mass of orange – red. It wavered from light to dark, but always the great flame-lit pall of smoke twisted and throbbed. I tore on. As the street lights flashed past I could catch a glimpse of my speedometer figures at 45 or 50 or 45 again. On high ground, great flames lay dead ahead. They were not withering as they smoke but shot seawards, bending and rising as reeds in the wind. As I dropped into the valleys, the flames disappeared, while the orange pall, growing brighter, shot up out of the North and seemed to cover me. The night was terribly hot. The air, as I rushed by was warm. By Lynn, I smelt smoke; at Floating Bridge my eyes were stinging and then as I came up on the bow of a great hill a whole city, burning, lay before me. I looked for churches, schools, buildings that I knew. What was blanketed rushing cloak of orange smoke and brands. What had gone was wrapped in a hellish glow. The sight told me nothing. I came by a back road and tore into the fire unchallenged by a sentry. My home street was the first thing I saw. A wilderness of chimneys glowing white, stretched over the hill and on. The roar was cyclonic. It roared like a thousand plumbers torches, each as big as a cathedral or ten thousand mogul engines panting at once. Cinders like paving stones were rushing by; timber brands a yard long, turning end

for end shot by overhead. The smoke was stifling. A Malden engine was pumping from a little pond. "How far back is burned?" I asked. "How far? All – clear t' the river 'n North 'r that th'y say it's goin like hell." I thought the fire man ought to know and strained to see where my home was. It was useless. The smoke was blinding. It was sickening. I watched a great brick factory catch, burn and the walls fall in. It was twenty-three minutes, the fireman said. I saw he was timing it. I felt too sick t do anything. Mill Hill was leveled while I watched. Often a shaking roar told me of dynamiting somewhere. We had to guess where, for the freight yards were now on fire behinds us and cut off all approach. The firemen were deluging three small houses and the freight house. In that little refuge I stayed. I never felt so lonely, so helpless, and forsaken as I felt then. I could only stand and watch flames sweep the hill on which our house stood – only stare at white hot chimneys thru the murk – only stare. To the west, the ruins were pretty well burnt out; cinders didn't sweep the road behind me so much. I plunged back on my motorcycle, taking my chances with tangled wires and burnt telephone poles. That machine would go thru Hell – could you do it fast enough. It wasn't a bad imitation that it and I thru that night.

I never looked back, but a creepy reflection told me somehow that the soft coal wharves were afire and the cotton mills ablaze. At Cambridge, I tried to sleep but couldn't. I spent most the time calling Boston newspapers asking for limits of the burnt territory. All lines were busy, but at half past four when I had been back two hours, The Transcript gave me the limits which for included my house. I rushed out to Bridgewater just to see some of my family and was back in Salem again by eleven. The militia lines were now tightly drawn. 2000 men were patrolling the city. The night before only the Salem companies were on duty. The ruins were burning fiercely. No one without a pass was allowed within a quarter mile of the burnt area. I got a pass and coming thru the lines, I saw my house. A little cemetery had broken the main rush, which swept in a half circle

around our property. Three hundred feet away houses were burnt to powder, but the flames did not cross the street. The paint had been heated to lifelessness the house was smuted and filled with a horrible nauseating smoke, but it stood.

[Two hand drawn maps showing the burned area of Salem. One of the Broad Street neighborhood, showing Browne's house and another of South Salem and the South River.]

This second map must mean nothing to you. It should be turned upside down and joined to the other. Over 265 acres of buildings are flat. Over 15,000 people were burned out. Property damage amounts to about \$13,000,000. Insurance about 12 million. Practically every factory has been wiped out. About half the city's area is in ruins. You ought to see the relief camps. The order is wonderful. Salem has lost nearly all its tenement districts and almost all its industries. The poorer people have neither work nor home. But much money, plenty of food and lots of clothing, Thousands of tents and warm weather have reduced the suffering to a minimum. The relief fund is nearly half a million now. Our church has been turned into a hospital. The vestry is a maternity ward. I'll write you about the other things soon, but I've been in Salem almost constantly and can think of very little else. Note, as for orals I passed first crack in June. I was on pro a half year just because the boat was late as ever.