Fires at St. John’s
“In the early spring of 1868, a saw mill was erected on the bank of the north fork of Watab Creek... This mill, located east of the present course of Watab Creek, was destroyed by fire on February 16, 1873.”

*Scriptorium* 1953 v.13 n.2 p.75

Sketch by Alexius Hoffmann, OSB

http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SJUArchives/id/3659/show/3617
The night of March 22, 1877, was a night I'll never forget. Cries of "Fire! Fire!" resounded through my halls and through the rest of the buildings. I remember that the fire started in one of the sawdust-filled wooden spittoons in one of the seminarians' rooms.

The fire soon got between the interior and exterior walls, thereby making it harder to extinguish. A disaster was averted because the first water works had been installed the previous autumn.

As usually happens during a fire, some people got panicky. Students started throwing books, furniture, and clothes out of my windows. Some even dragged their trunks and suitcases from the top floor, down the steps, and to a safe place far from the buildings. Father Aloysius Harrasota, O.F.M., was rather out of place when he arrived on the scene with a rifle yelling, "Where are they?" You see, he thought the abbey was being burglarized.

From *Scriptorium* Dec. 1954 v.14 n.1 p. 20
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SJUArchives/id/3538/show/3429
Bottom photo LP068.1883.Quad.StoneHouse in Ascheman Sesquicentennial collection
After the first sawmill had burned in 1873, a larger one with a gristmill had been erected closer to the banks of the Watab. One waterwheel did service for both.

The mills, although of simple design and construction, operated efficiently. It appears that during the winter one of the Brothers used to sleep there, most likely in order to keep a fire going. On the morning of December 16, 1880, Brother Dominic Hoffmann, O.S.B., came up to the chapel for prayers at about four, and shortly afterwards, fire broke out and destroyed the entire structure. The loss amounted to about $3,000, since a considerable quantity of grain and timber was on hand at the time.

From Father Alexius’ notes, it appears that many members of the community put the blame for the fire on Brother Dominic, but Father Alexius attributed it to an over-heated wood stove.

http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SJUArchives/id/3538/show/3451
On December 16 [1882], before sunrise, the saw and grist mills on the Watab were burnt to the ground together with a considerable quantity of grain and timber. Since that time no effort has been made to rebuild the mills, but the dam remains and the boisterous waters rush down the rocks as they did a quarter of a century ago.

Hoffmann, SJU: A Sketch of Its History, 1907, p. 70
The excitement caused by the destruction of the mills had scarcely died down when another fire broke out. In the evening of January 18, 1863, someone noticed that the sky was red in the direction of Collegeville. Further investigation revealed that the old buildings formerly occupied by the community were ablaze.

Since 1867, when the community moved to the present site, these buildings, one or two log structures, had been serving as barns and temporary shelter against storms for those working in that locality.

In January, 1863, the old college buildings on the farm near Collegeville station were destroyed by fire. This was no appreciable material loss, yet it was a matter for regret that the venerable landmark disappeared, leaving not a trace of buildings of any kind.

St. John’s in the Indian Bush, 1864-1867 – drawing by Alexius Hoffmann in the SJAA
From Scriptorium Dec. 1954 v.14 n.1. “The Brothers of Saint John’s Abbey, the Building Era, Part II” article by Br. Thomas Whitaker, p. 43
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SJUArchives/id/3538/show/3452
p. 44 http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SJUArchives/id/3538/show/3453
Mary’s shrine enticed many pilgrims to the island among whom were numbered both Faculty and students. For 31 years this little oratory weathered the winters’ ice and snow and only in the month of April 1908 was it destroyed by fire. During the last twelve years Chapel Island has remained almost a deserted spot. Dame Nature kindly covering the ruins of the former chapel with a rich growth of vegetation.
The Blacksmith-Carpenter Shop Building is a two-storey brick building. When constructed in 1903-04, it had ample room for the following shops: blacksmith facilities, woodworking area, paint room, and bookbindery. It served many useful purposes in providing for the maintenance needs of the institution.

From the National Register of Historic Places Inventory/Nomination Form, 1978
Woodworking Shop Fire – January 29, 1939
Photos from Abbey Archives

The fire started in the bindery on the second floor.
The Record January 1951

Ski House Burns

That wasn't a friendly bonfire on the ski hill last Sunday. It was a full-fledged blaze that reduced one of the cabins on the snowy slope to a heap of ashes, and although Brother John and crew put out maximum effort to stop the fire, it was levelled.

What was it that burned? Why, the warming house, naturally.

THE NEW SKI TOW on Mount Carmel is now in operation. The tow, installed by the Ski Club and athletic department, highlights a program designed to improve skiing facilities here. Shown making the long trip up are Leo Wolf, Bob Zdechlik and Father Conrad Diekmann.

The Record 1951 Jan. 18 p.2 Diekmann, Conrad
Notice of fire in The Record Jan. 17, 1964, p. 1
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/CSBArchNews/id/33383/show/33379
“Saint John's Sugar Bush: Still Full of Sap, Still Green” *Abbey Quarterly* vol. 3 n.2, April 1985, p. 6-7

http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SJUArchives/id/19443/show/19437
Tommie: 1984 Oct. 18 p.1
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/CSBArchNews/id/36375/show/36355
Rat Hall: 1988-05-05 p.01 Old Gym (roof)
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/CSBArchNews/id/37404/show/37384
Sexton/Bernie: 1993 Feb. 18 p. 4
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/CSBArchNews/id/38245/show/38228
Upper left photo from Abbey Archives; 2014 photos by Nick Moe, OSB
Fire destroys most of SJU Paint Shop

Cause of blaze still unknown, under investigation

By Colleen Provenzano

On Tuesday, Jan. 16, smoke could be seen rising from the SJU Paint Shop on the corner of the parking lot and the nearby residence. The shop was destroyed by a fire that started at around 2 a.m. The cause of the blaze is still unknown.

The SJU Paint Shop was destroyed by a fire on Jan. 14. The cause is not yet known and the rubble will be removed following an insurance investigation.
Fires at St. John’s

1873: First Mill
1877: Old Stone House
1882: Second Mill
1883: Indianbush
1903: First Chapel
1927: Cow Barn
1939: Woodshop
1964: Ski Hill Shelter
1969?: Maple Sugar Shack
1984: Tommie basement
1988: Old Gym roof
1993: Sexton
2014: Paint Shop