

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TEANECK FIRE DEPARTMENT

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The first known organized fire protection in Teaneck was provided by the Hackensack Township Protection Society, a part-paid, part-volunteer police organization which also provided organization and equipment for citizens to use in their own rudimentary fire defense. Prior to 1888, the equipment consisted of leather buckets, ladders, lanterns and axes stored loose. In 1871, Hackensack organized an engine company with a hand-drawn, hand-operated pumper. They responded to what is now Teaneck, but with astronomical response times due to poor roads and steep hills. The Englewood Fire Department also responded to nineteenth century fires in Teaneck, with similar response time problems. Both fire departments operated at the acetylene explosion and fire that destroyed the massive Phelps mansion at Cedar Lane and Teaneck Road on April 1, 1888. They removed art treasures ahead of the main body of fire in the mansion and effectively protected the Phelps stables west of the main fire building. One Hackensack volunteer firefighter was injured in a fall from a ladder at the stables.

The first organized fire company in Teaneck was Defender Hook and Ladder Co. quartered at about 722 New Bridge Road, providing first due fire protection in New Bridge, lower New Milford and the Cherry Hill section of River Edge. This company was formed on August 12, 1895, in response to the lack of organized rescue service during the Cherry Hill tornado. This company did not join the other four Teaneck Fire companies when the municipal fire department was organized in 1915. Instead, it helped supply the nucleus for New Milford Fire Company 2, although it continued to respond in Teaneck until 1933.

In 1904, residents of the Manhattan Heights and Selvage developments formed the Upper Teaneck Volunteer Fireman's Association, taking possession of a 500 foot hose reel, a 900 foot hose reel, 4 nozzles, some lanterns and a life net loaned to Teaneck from Englewood Township due to the municipal break up of 1895. They also purchased a village style ladder truck from Ladder Company 1 in Ridgefield Park. They were quartered in a two story flat roofed, white concrete block fire station at 1188 Teaneck Road. The hose reels were both hand drawn and operated from the recently installed fire hydrants through two and a half hose through smooth bore nozzles. The men were all volunteer, but the horses for the ladder truck were paid on call. When the gongs hit, the milk team, ice team and mail team would all head for the fire station. The first team to connect to the ladder truck would get the run and 50 cents. In 1907, this company ran into a major disagreement with their landlord, Walter Selvage. He stated that the firefighters only had the right to be in quarters for alarms and scheduled meetings. The firefighters stated their need for training and administrative time. As an answer, they abandoned the beautiful fire station, which became Kobbe and Flannery's garage. Instead, they purchased a barn on Lafayette Place in Englewood, cut it in half, hired 20 mules and cut a

corduroy road through the future Argonne Park to drag it to 14 through 18 Fairview Avenue. They also obtained a touring car, donated by the widow Phelps, did their own body work and built a German style Dividor hose reel car, capable of laying hose on the fly or of easily dismounting the reel and rapidly laying hose by hand across fields, lawns, etc. This was Teaneck's first motor fire apparatus. This station remained as fire headquarters until 1920. It is now a multiple dwelling.

Meanwhile, in 1907, residents of the Bogota Park section instituted the Cedar Hill Volunteer Firemen's Association, also equipped with a hand drawn hose reel. From 1907 to 1913, they responded from a member's barn on Linden Avenue. They then relocated to a new fire station at 513 Kenwood Place, which remained a fire station until 1953. This building is now the Chabad House. In 1908, Teaneck firefighters from Fairview Avenue helped save Englewood from conflagration when gale driven fire devoured a lumberyard, a livery stable and the Hygiea Ice Works on South Van Brunt Street. When the ice works burned, a tank of anhydrous ammonia was released. This was the first known hazardous materials incident for the Teaneck Fire Department. The fire was stopped when Teaneck got a powerful hand line to work.

In 1911, the residents of southern Teaneck formed the Teaneck Hose Company 1, responding a hand drawn hose reel from a member's barn on Teaneck Road until 1913, when the unique fire station at 395 Morningside Terrace was built in kit form by the members. The station was unique because for runs west of the station, the hose reel on the main floor was dragged out onto Morningside Terrace, then called Elm Terrace. For runs east of the station, another hose reel came out of the basement, down a driveway to Fenimore Road. Also, this outstation had its own outstation. This station was used until November 1990 and it now being converted to a two family dwelling. A garage at the Damrau greenhouses at 375 Queen Anne Road was rented to store yet another hose reel and a very heavy three section forty five foot wood extension ladder designed to serve the burgeoning south Queen Anne Road business district.

Also in 1911, the Glenwood Park Volunteer Fireman's Association was started, using a well designed, four wheel, hand drawn "spider wagon". For two years, they were quartered in Kennedy's blacksmith shop at Glenwood and Fabry. Then they relocated to their new quarters at Glenwood and Railroad (now Hemlock Terrace South). This station remained in service until 1948, when it was converted into the Ronald's Furniture Warehouse and burned in a spectacular fire in November 1961.

In 1915, four of Teaneck's five independent volunteer fire companies were combined into the official municipal Teaneck Fire Department. Kenlock V. Ridley of East Forest Avenue, an engineer with the New York Telephone Company became Chief of Department. All members remained volunteer, but the Township started paying for various expenses including rent on the four fire stations. The Fairview Avenue fire station became Fire Company 1, Kenwood Place

became Fire Company 2, Morningside Terrace became Fire Company 3 and Glenwood Park became Company 4. Defender Hook and Ladder in New Bridge remained independent until disbanding.

During the period from the turn of the century to World War I, the Ayers and Lozier partnership developed the residential area north of West Englewood Avenue between Windsor and Essex. A private fire station, with hand drawn hose reel, existed at Rugby and Rutland to provide protection during construction. Construction workers were supposed to man this rig, but local tradition is that they rarely turned out. Instead, volunteer firefighters from the other four companies, working their jobs as ice men, mailmen and DPW workers in the area usually took the reel to fires.

During this period, a very tough basement fire occurred on Maitland Avenue. Future Deputy Chief Harry Davis, then a DPW worker, made numerous entries, without breathing apparatus, manning a 2 ½" line, passing out repeatedly, being revived by the back pressure, arm lift method, then going back in until the house was saved. Teaneck has always been an aggressive attack inside fire department.

In 1920, major improvements were made in the Teaneck Fire Department. A new fire headquarters was built at 1217 Teaneck Road, now the Sunrise Vulcanizing Company. Reo speedwagon hose trucks with chemically powered water tank systems were issued to companies 2, 3 and 4. A gasoline driven triple combination pumper built by American La France was assigned to the new fire headquarters. The Chief, K.V. Ridley was granted an annual salary equal to half that of a police patrolman. A paid driver was hired to work an eight hour day for the new pumper. The plan was to add one paid firefighter a year, all to headquarters.

The fire alarm system also had a major upgrade. Until 1920, a citizen or police patrol discovering a fire went to one of about forty fire gongs located in prominent street corner locations. A bent, discarded locomotive tire hanging from a wood frame would be struck by a hammer according to an enameled sign posted at each location. For instance, the user of the fire alarm at Glenwood and Railroad would be told to hit the gong five times, then three, then once and repeat this complete signal, Box 531, four times. Other people throughout Teaneck who heard this signal, were obligated to hit the nearest fire gong in the same way, alerting all volunteer members and the paid on call horse teams.

In 1920, two fire phones were installed to receive phone calls from the public in fire headquarters. Leased lines were connected to sound World War I surplus air raid sirens at the four firehouses. Residents, then as now, were instructed to call the Fire Department, not the police, to report fires. Dedicated phone lines were established to the four firehouses and eventually to police headquarters. Red oaktag signs, 4" by 5" were printed telling residents

how to report a fire. Three of the volunteer companies willingly distributed these door to door, but unfortunately Company 3 refused to do so. A fire broke out in a house during a week day at Hickory and DeGraw. Callers in that neighborhood did not know how to report the fire so calls were mis relayed to Bogota Police and Hackensack Fire Departments before being correctly routed to Teaneck Fire Headquarters. A very obese woman was trapped at a second floor front window. Floyd Farrant, local businessman and volunteer firefighter, happened by and ascended the porch roof. He struggled by himself to pull the huge woman through the window, but the room flashed over killing the screaming woman and burning Farrant's eyes, permanently blinding him. The nearest Fire Company, # 3, never responded. When headquarters, 2 and 4 arrived, it was too late. Support for the volunteer fire department went into a nose dive.

The 1920's saw several other disastrous fires in town. In 1922, ashtrays carelessly dumped into a garbage can after a PTA meeting caused a late night fire in Longfellow School. Chief Ridley was on sick leave. The assistant chief took over, but was later accused of serious lack of leadership that was partly to blame for near fatal injuries to volunteer firefighter Henry Dohrmann, who went down with a floor collapse while doggedly pressing an interior attack. Other problems resulted when a ladder was ordered moved, cutting off a party of Hackensack firefighters attempting to open the roof. Since pumping power available to Teaneck and surrounding towns was slight compared to the size of the fire, a mutual aid call was placed to New York City. FDNY Engine Companies 58 and 36 responded via the 130th Street Edgewater Ferry. Since New York does not use national standard fire hose thread, they could not use a hydrant. Instead, they drafted from a flooded gas company excavation at Teaneck and Oakdene. The school was destroyed.

Three woman using gasoline to clean rugs in a corn crib were killed by fire at Teaneck and Blauvelt. Illegal alcohol distilleries exploded and burned on Carlton Terrace, Sheppard Avenue, Palisade Avenue and New Bridge Road. A fire in staff quarters at Nelden Sanitarium, a private hospital on Englewood Avenue and Nelden Road, killed the elderly mother of the proprietor and horribly burned her sister and a young doctor who bravely entered to rescue them. On March 10, 1927, a "wildland urban interface" conflagration started from a legal rubbish fire behind the Blue Bird Inn restaurant (and speak easy) at 789 Teaneck Road, Dry northwest winds drove the fire eastward across open fields, jumping Lindberg Blvd. Hose Company 4 made a valiant attempt to stop the raging brush fire at Fycke and Grant, but the 900 ft. hose stretch uphill at only hydrant pressure with nozzle facing into a gale wind results in an ineffective stream. Teaneck's only pumper tried to drive through deep mud from the Lewis farm on East Cedar Lane across open fields to reach Hose 4s hydrant to boost pressure on their defensive line. The slippery, ubiquitous mud caused an accident and by the time the pumper reached the hydrant, three houses and three barns had been incinerated. Clearly, stronger fire

defenses were needed. Teaneck was growing with a major lumberyard installed on Water Street in 1927 as well as four and five story apartment houses going up in northeast and southwest Teaneck.

Different answers came from different sectors. In 1929, the Teaneck Chamber of Commerce and the Teaneck Times newspaper launched an eventually successful campaign for a municipal fire alarm system, with fire alarm boxes available to the public and Township owned wires and cables to bring dispatch messages to the fire stations. A coded whistle signal sounding the box number nearest the fire replaced the unspecific sirens. These major improvements came to fruition between 1932 and 1937. The first box alarm was from Box 35, then at Fort Lee and Queen Anne for a working fire in the Rexall Drugstore. This was pulled one hour after the box was placed in service. The store was saved. This excellent system survives in advanced form today and hopefully far into the future.

In 1926, a “city service” ladder truck with hand raised ladders, but no aerial ladder, replaced the horse drawn truck. In 1929, instead of adding just one paid man, six were hired and a newer, powerful pumper was purchased. To some, this was not enough. Councilman Fred Andreas stated, “the day of the volunteer fire department was done”. In 1930, the Council hired Francis X. Murray as Deputy Fire Commissioner, with the duties of providing fire training and setting up a stronger fire prevention program. Chief Ridley was vulnerable in both areas. While he was credited with excellent leadership at fires, he was accused of delegating training solely to the officers of the individual companies, never holding multi unit drills. Likewise, Teaneck had a Fire Prevention Code since 1920, but the Chief was the only designated enforcer, with enforcement upon complaint only, with no proactive inspections. Some volunteer firemen, using their own time and money, had attended the New Haven Fire Department drill school and had used their advanced knowledge to save the multiple dwelling at 17 West Englewood Avenue the night the Conrad Jordan mansion at 1380 Teaneck Road burned. Murray, a former traveling salesman for the American LaFrance Fire Engine Company, brought his traveling fire school to permanent roost, bringing similar big city fire training to the local volunteer and paid firefighters. Now nightly classroom and drill school work was applied to the whole department. More paid men were added until the department reached its present form in 1940.

In 1933 and 1934, a series of disastrous fires struck newly built, Tudor style, expensive dwellings west of Garrison Avenue between Cumberland Avenue and Route 4. The Meszick homes burned night after frigid night from failure to provide eight inches of solid masonry between the brand new fireplaces and the wood wall studs above the mantel. Women and children leaped from upper floor windows pursued by flames. A recently renovated six unit multiple dwelling burned at 262 DeGraw Avenue due to insufficient clearance between the boiler breeching and wooden floor joists. The public was rightfully outraged. The Building

Department was accepting permit fees, but was obviously not providing competent inspections. Realizing that firefighters whose lives are on the line were unlikely to be so lax, in 1933, the Mayor and Council ordered Deputy Fire Commissioner Murray and the Teaneck Fire Department to be proactive in plan reviews and inspection of new construction; an aggressive life saving program that thrives to this day despite continued opposition from special interests. Maintenance inspections of existing buildings also became a part of Teaneck Fire Department's routine, with on duty members detailed to walk the business districts with violations books from the 1930's onward. With strict fire prevention, the endless parade of fire deaths and destroyed homes and businesses diminished.

During the 1930's, on duty paid members constructed 35 miles of fire alarm wires, connected 40 boxes, built a modern rescue truck out of an abandoned bus chassis, refurbished an 85 ft. aerial truck purchased from New York City, upgraded 2 existing pumpers, built one of New Jersey's few searchlight trucks and renovated fire stations 2 and 3 to accommodate paid personnel. In 1937, a pioneer two way radio system was installed, far ahead of most cities. Stolen Nazi secrets led to Teaneck Fire Department firefighters being equipped with dry chemical fire extinguishers years before these devices were common.

When World War II loomed, Teaneck Fire Department was in high gear. The remaining volunteer firemen were either inducted as paid firefighters, formed the Teaneck Volunteer Ambulance Corps or joined the new Teaneck Fire Auxiliaries who eventually became the present Box 54 organization. Trailer pumps were obtained and a fire station was temporarily established at Whittier School. Air raid drills were held between the various public safety organizations. Communications checks occurred every two hours. All this preparedness paid off on May 24, 1942, when two US Army Air Force P-39 Aero-Cobras collided in high winds over Teaneck Road and State Street. One plane dove out of control into the street in front of 1090 Dartmouth Street, spraying the front of a doctor's home with flaming aviation gas. Fire entered an open bedroom window where a little girl was sleeping. The other war plane spun towards Cherry Lane and Queen Anne Road, its gun solenoids shorted, spewing .50 caliber machine gun rounds from eight guns. It hit the detached two car garage at 890 Queen Anne Road, igniting the structure and two cars. The well oiled public safety machine swung into action, instantly squelching both fires, rendering aid to two injured firefighters, an air raid warden and the two pilots and controlling crowds and traffic. Teaneck Fire Department was so prepared that Murray, now Chief of Department, offered to form a fire column to be loaded on landing ships to be shipped to Britain to fight the conflagrations spawned by the Luftwaffe!

Teaneck's tremendous growth after World War II, combined with exceptional prosperity led to the construction of the present Fire Headquarters in 1948, followed by the present Fire Station 2 in 1953. The Fire Alarm system was improved and many boxes added. The idea of connecting

building fire protection systems to Fire Headquarters via master fire alarm boxes was instituted locally in 1948 with the various schools being the first connected. Modern pumpers, the first since 1929, were added in 1947 and 1948 with a modern steel aerial ladder in 1949. Upgrades in the 1950's included a 56 hour work week for firefighters, a switch to FM two way radios, self contained breathing apparatus to replace 1920's filter masks and a more advanced rescue truck. The Glenwood Avenue fire station was closed, but a second ladder company was staffed at the new Cedar Lane fire station. In 1968, a permanent fire station in northwest Teaneck, desired since 1929, was opened becoming Engine Company 4. New pumpers in 1959, 1964 and two in 1968 as well as a 1965 aerial ladder replaced older vehicles. In 1970, the work week was finally reduced to the present 42 hours. The 1970's commenced with a near conflagration at the Teaneck Lumber Company on Water Street. Desperate work in an ice storm saved the surrounding business blocks on Cedar Lane and Front Street (now American Legion Drive). A mansion fire at 283 Barr Avenue in 1972 saw firefighters jumping from windows to avoid flaming floor collapses, but the building was saved just as it was from a similar fire in 1933. Three firefighters were burned when a fire burning in concealed spaces blew down explosively on them at the Figuretone Salon fire at Cedar and Garrison. Two of them narrowly escaped death. Major store fires in Sharban Carpets and Davis Pool store threatened Teaneck Theater, hurt dozens of firefighters and wrecked neighboring Tabatchnik's delicatessen during this period. Ronald's Furniture store burned down across from the municipal building.

The Teaneck Redevelopment Agency started accumulating houses in Glenwood Park to make way for Glenpointe. In 1976, Teaneck had 150 structure fires, including 36 working fires in the blocks bounded by Glenwood, East Oakdene and Harding Avenues and Division Street. Vandalism arson was rampant. Surely something had to be done.

In 1977, a new fire inspector was appointed and two new programs grew rapidly. In 1974, Firemen's Mutual Benevolent Association Local 42 had started an aggressive public fire safety information program. In 1977, this was made a department program with 50 speeches and numerous news releases designed to inform the public how specifically to prevent accidental fires. For intentional fires, both structure and brush, a new fire department investigation program was launched. Every fire resulting in casualties or significant loss was instantly investigated by Fire Department personnel, sometimes while the fire still raged. Local police at that time seemed reluctant to help so Teaneck Fire Department reached out directly to the Prosecutor's Office, US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the NJ Forest Fire Service and insurance investigators. Teaneck Fire Department stakeouts were set, informants cultivated and patterns analyzed. Soon, arson profiteers did not get their "sure thing" insurance payments and juvenile delinquents were caught in their acts of vandalism. While punishments were still ridiculously small compared to the enormity of a fire, the certainty of capture had its effect and the arson epidemic, both in buildings and in meadowlands, dramatically receded.

Brush fires now are a mere 10% of what they were. Building fires declined by about a third with arson much less of a problem. New apparatus including four pumpers, a medium duty rescue truck and a tower ladder were purchased in the 1980s. In 1990, a new fire station 3 at 370 Teaneck Road replaced the decrepit Morningside Terrace fire station.

The lessons of 99 years of organized fire protection are clear. The four fire stations staffed 24 hours a day, an adequate level of staffing, strict proactive code enforcement, the advanced municipal fire alarm system and the aggressive fire investigation programs all are the absolutely necessary answers to very real, life threatening problems. They must be maintained and improved far into the twenty first century so that Teaneck does not sink into the immense fire tragedies of the 1920s or the vast commercial fire losses of the 1970s.