



Newsletter of the Middletown Township Historical Society

HISTORICAL NOTES ON THE TOWNSHIP'S FIRE COMPANIES

The development of fire fighting forces usually tracks the growth of a town. So it happened in Middletown Township. Early fire fighting in rural areas was spontaneous neighborly cooperation. With residents scattered and communication poor to non-existent, combating a fire was often limited to preventing its spread to other buildings and saving the contents of the burning one. Bucket brigades would form, but they were often ineffective.

Nearby examples of the devastation of spreading fire were at hand. Business blocks were destroyed in Freehold in 1873 and Red Bank in 1880 and again in 1881. Those fires threatened even wider destruction. A close concentration of combustible buildings generally preceded establishing fire departments. The first fire company in the township was formed in 1880 in the part of the Bay View section that would separate in 1887 as Atlantic Highlands. It was called the Everett Hook and Ladder Company No. 1, named for its chief engineer, Peter Y. Everett. It should not be confused with the Everett section of the Township on the Holmdel border. This still active company changed its name to Atlantic Highlands Hook and Ladder Company No. 1 in 1885.

The first fire company still part of the Township was Navesink Hook and Ladder Company No. 1 formed in 1886. Navesink had been free of major fire

for some years, but it was compactly built of frame structures and surrounded by grass and woodlands. The danger from the latter could be real. Nearby Chapel Hill was threatened by a woodland fire in 1880. It burned forty acres of the Higgenbotham plot, damaged property of A. C. Watrons and Charles Lufburrow. A newspaper account claimed destruction of the village was threatened. The Navesink Company organized May 1, 1886, at All Saints Memorial Church and met there for a year. They then leased Milbury Stearns' pool room for a year, felt the need for their own premises, bought a lot on Monmouth Avenue opposite their present location and built a frame firehouse (illustrated in the June newsletter).

The early fire companies also fought fires by bucket brigades. Although more effective when conducted by an equipped, organized company, the firemen needed a pumper and powered apparatus. An early attempt at placing a hand pump on a wagon was not satisfactory, especially if a horse was not available. The township received its first motorized equipment in 1911 when the company purchased a used, 60 horse power Thomas Flyer automobile, sold the automobile's body and mounted a rotary pump and hose on it.

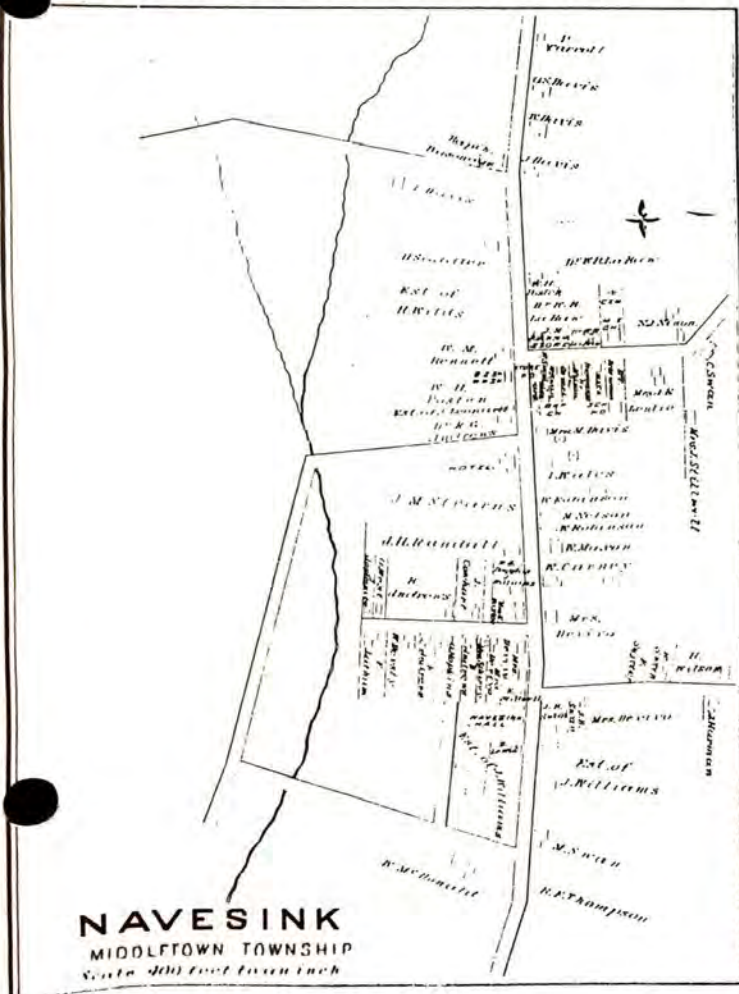
The company built a new fire house opposite the earlier one and in front of the present one in 1929, meeting there for the first time January 2, 1930. It served until replaced in 1969. The Navesink Company has a proud record of community service in addition to its firefighting capabilities. They have had numerous township firefighting "firsts" and were the only company until 1903. Their equipment, second owned building and early memorabilia are well represented in the Society's exhibit.

The next several companies were founded on the bayshore, a likely development as here was the township's population center and locale of 1890s and early 20th century bungalow construction. The purpose of the organizers of the Brevent park and Leonardo Fire Company was clearly stated in a 1903 circular to residents: "Owing to the frequent burning of unoccupied cottages, hotels and other property in the borough of Atlantic Highlands and vicinity, the recent advance of insurance rates on such character of property and the possibility of insurance companies refusing to take risks on such properties; We the people of Brevent Park and Leonardo residing here permanently or nearby, beg to suggest that a fire brigade be organized for the mutual protection of all..." They touched issues that would be challenges for decades, adequate water and summer homes. Their first motorized apparatus was a Model T Ford with an extended chassis on which was mounted two thirty gallon chemical tanks. Water supply activities prior to capable hydrant service included use of a water tower at Leonard and Highland Avenues and construction of small dams in 1927 near Brevent Avenue and Vanderbilt and in 1928 near Leonardville Road.

The first fire house was located at Monmouth and Roop Avenues. It was moved to Center Avenue in 1910. A new fire house was built in 1914 and was later given a major expansion. The difficulty of early alarm signals is exemplified by Brevent's effort. The first man spotting a fire was to discharge six shots from his shot gun. Its lack of success gave way to the then typical striking of a locomotive rim with a sledge hammer.

The original name of Middletown's third fire company, Belford Chemical Company, reflected a key extinguishing process in the days before adequate water delivery. The company claims its origin from a bucket brigade at a lumberyard fire, a fine example of spontaneous assistance turning into long-term public service. The company was formed in 1916 with their first equipment a Victor Motor Chemical Engine. A pumper was purchased in 1927. The company filled a vital need for fire protection as it was near industry, particularly the fish processing plant, and a soon-to-develop cottage construction boom.

A history of the Community Fire Company states its origin stems from the difficulty of hand-drawn equipment (in the absence of an available horse) to climb the Center Avenue hill. The company formed in 1922, but the nearby Brevent Park Company had motorized equipment since 1916. Robert Banfield was selected their first chief. A garage was built at the rear of the Community House of the Ocean View Property Owners Association at Monmouth and Ridgewood Avenues. The company erected its firehouse at Appleton and Highland Avenues in 1925 and built a major addition in 1955. Their first equipment transaction gives an insight into old-time costs and financing. A 1



1/2 ton Ford fire truck was bought in 1922 for "only" \$2,050, but only \$1,500 could be paid then with a loan taken for the balance.

The East Keansburg Fire Company, the Township's fifth, was organized in 1922. Their first equipment was also a Model T Ford fitted with chemical tanks. The East Keansburg Company, has in some years, responded to more alarms than any other Township company. Many of them are grass fires. Most are not dangerous, but unchecked grass fires can lead to widespread destruction in areas of closely built structures. They led to early adoption of outdoor fire control regulations in the Township.

Port Monmouth has seen one of the Township's most spectacular fires, the Smith fish processing plant, in 1932. It also saw a symbol of the founding of the modern community destroyed by fire. A house from the early 1850s built by the Port Monmouth Association, the site of groundbreaking exercises for the Raritan and Delaware Bay Railroad in 1856, was destroyed by fire in 1892. This company was also founded in 1922. A charter member, Henry Pulsch, survives sixty-five years later. Their first equipment was a Ford truck with chemical tanks. It arrived the same day in July 1923 that the firemen erected the roof on the frame garage that served as first firehouse. The present firehouse was dedicated in June 1933. It has been altered, most notably following a December 1960 fire causing extensive damage.

The Township's seventh company, the Independent Fire Company of Belford, became independent from Belford Chemical in August 1924. The companies have the distinction of closest proximity, three blocks apart. An old school building served as first firehouse, while their early alarm signal was the rapid ringing of the Belford Methodist Church bell.

The site of the Middletown Township Fire Company No. 1 was a vast farm owned by Joseph Field. He died in 1897 at age 104. In time, the farm was purchased by organizers of the Monmouth County Fair who projected they could obtain a fair grounds at no cost by selling unneeded land for real estate development. Several developments covered the land to the Navesink River, but the closest fire protection was in Red Bank. The company was formed in 1924. A firehouse was built in 1926 on land on Highway 35 donated by John Cook, publisher of the Red Bank Register and owner of the surrounding real estate development. Their first truck was purchased that year, an American LaFrance. An early alarm was also a locomotive rim which was struck with a sledge hammer. One can still be seen in front of the firehouse at Highway 35 and Longwood Avenue, now, of course, only a reminder of the early days. The company's area has seen some notable fires. One occurred while the company

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MIDDLETOWN: THEN & NOW

The presentation of older and new comparative views, successful as museum exhibition and slide shows, will appear in the newsletter. This 1898 renovation view of the Middletown Reformed Church promoted editorial skepticism. The picture had no identification, but was part of a Middletown collection. The building's shape was vaguely reminiscent of the present structure, but the differences were too great for a typical face-lifting renovation, especially four side windows compared with the present five. Review of contemporary press accounts and a church sketch copied from Bristol board in 1875, used on 1930s programs, were convincers.

The Monmouth Press reported on January 1, 1899, that the church had been closed since September 1898. Renovations were very costly with carpenter work by Charles Tindall altering the appearance very much. The entrance was changed entirely with the porch and two vestibules converted to additional



Reformed Church - under reconstruction



Reformed Church - today

seating. Another entrance was erected making the church twelve feet longer. The eight windows on the sides were replaced by the ten memorial windows.

Neither that account nor one in the Register January 25, 1899, mentions the tower. The Middletown Reformed Church has been altered often; it has been a virtual 150 year renewal process. The Church is interested in preserving its historic images and seeks information about the location of 19th century paintings or needlework images. The latter were made in the 1840s and were seen in the 1930s. However, their current locations and owners are not known. If you have any information, contact the Church's minister, the Rev. William Coventry, 123 Kings Highway, Middletown, NJ 07748, the Society, or the editor Randy Gabrielan, 671-2645.

See the September 3, 1936 Register for a lengthy centennial history. Thanks to Ed Banfield for the photograph.

MIDDLETOWN QUIZ

47. Where was Middletown Township's Highland Park.
48. How did George H. Stout of Chapel Hill find a fast way to transfer money in 1881.
49. Who was the Township's first woman elected official?
50. What Lincroft resident was narrowly defeated by James D. Howard in the 1969 House of Representatives election?
51. What and where is the "hole in the wall"?

NAVESINK HALL

The shabby building standing forlornly on the southwest corner of Monmouth and Hall Avenues in Navesink belies its past as the center of that neighborhood's social and civic life. A review of their account book and random press clippings give an insight to those days.

Funds were raised via a community subscription plan in 1879. A share was five dollars, with no subscriber holding more than two shares. It is not known if this was a limit to widen interest in the venture. Forty-eight subscribers appeared to take sixty-eight shares raising \$339. R. G. Andrew, president of the association, contributed \$9, apparently confusing the secretary, as a share number was not listed for him. Shareholders included many names long associated with the area, including, Burdge, Leonard, Lufbur, McClees, Posten, Sickles, Swan, and Williams. There was at least one woman, Ann Mount, and one black, Isaac Wales.

Construction was noted in the press. The Register reported on February 13, 1879, that the foundation of the town hall was laid on Monday (February 10) by builder O. S. Davis. A month later they indicated that lumber was received and the building was in the course of erection. The building was probably completed by January. The Register took note of it on April 29, 1880, stating "The hall at Navesink is a one-story building supplied with gas and capable of

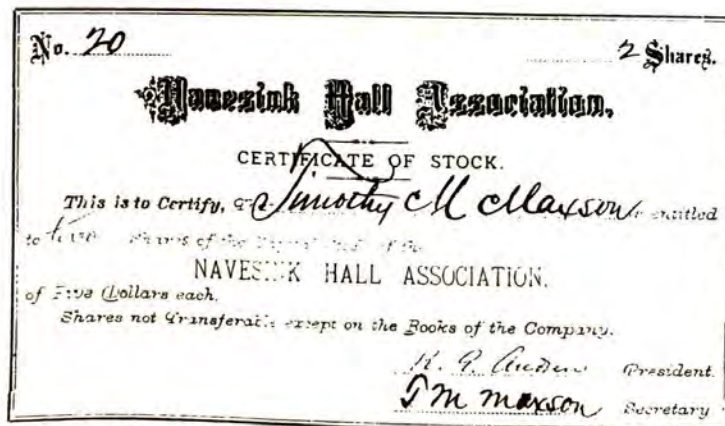


Navesink Hall today

accommodating about 400 persons."

O. S. and E. O. Davis were each given two shares for work done, as was Webster Swan, an earlier cash subscriber. Swan had a store at Monmouth and Navesink Avenues, the site of the present Country Store, and was a Navesink Postmaster. Three cash subscribers were added, including P. and H. Duryea, a name still associated locally through the Navesink Library.

The Hall's first rental was \$10 on February 4, 1880, for an unidentified customer. Most later entries include the renter's name, contributing much of the book's reference value. The accounts do not answer every question, including part of building rented, date and possible gratis use. There are twelve entries for 1880. The lowest amount is \$1 from Mr. Gaskil, while the highest rental is \$10 for seven renters, including the Democratic party. Entry dates may reflect when the cash was received as the Republican party was also a renter, paying only \$5 with both parties entered "November 6". The final two entries are for Minstrel shows, December 14 from Keyport and January 4, entered on the prior year's page, from Red Bank. Most of 1880's expenses were for work, furniture and fixtures, including \$26 to J.H. Peters, December 16 for chairs. Work was likely ongoing all year.



A certificate in the Navesink Hall Association

The 1881 ledger shows only six entries. A ball, oyster supper, and Sunday school entertainment were typical of the times. Blacks held two summer events, their receipts merely entered, "cash from colored folks". Other entries during that decade reflect the activities popular then, including, cake walks, Punch & Judy, concerts, Mme. Judy's Wax Works, King Laughers, debates and many minstrels, often with descriptive names such as the May 1, 1886 mastodon minstrel. The churches, community social organizations and firemen were regular users. Groups from nearby towns also hired the hall.

The temperance movement was strong in the 1890s. A prohibition meeting paid \$6 October 27, 1890, South American Indians (?) \$12 July 28, 1893, a one armed entertainer \$4.42 October 8, 1895 and an escaped convict concert

\$3.50 on October 23, 1896.

The Association's annual meeting there was often mentioned in the press with a reminder that income is kept low purposely. Meetings for the public good probably were not charged. There was no receipt for an October 1913 session discussing community improvement. Education was a focus and Melvin A. Rice was a key speaker, outlining improvements made during his six year tenure on the school board. Improvement of the hall was also discussed then. Walter B. Conner held 51 shares of association stock, a majority, and offered it to anyone who was willing to spend \$500 to improve the hall. No such transaction is on the books, but a major expenditure was made in 1916 for painting and other improvements.

A mobile society needs fewer neighborhood activity facilities. Most faded from use. The Navesink Hall is now used for storage. The Society needs an old picture of the hall and would be pleased to borrow one for copying if a donation is not available.

MAILING LIST AND DUES PROMPTER

This issue is the first mailed with computer printed labels. The new format will help mailing and organizing dues and membership information. The single letter on the indicates mailing status. Members are "M", "L" for life members. Our several courtesy copies, sent to individuals helpful or close to the Society are designated "C", while samples are "S". The new list will help reduce the duration of sample mailings. We hope many of the sample recipients will join or subscribe. Libraries and organizations with whom we exchange are marked "I", institution.

MEETING DATES OCTOBER PROGRAM

The last two meetings of the year are Mondays, October 24 and November 28. The time is 8:00 pm and the place is the museum, Leonardville Road & Chamone Avenue, Leonardo. Ed Kemble will present his slide talk, "From Carriage to Car", on October 24.

The program explains the area's change from horse-pulled to motor-driven road transport. The region's transportation often views the larger issues of water travel, a key factor in our 17th century settlement, and rail transport, which boosted commerce and all-year residency. However, most travel, especially now, is by an individual going from place-to-place at a time and by a route of his choosing. Thus, this is the personal side of travel history.

The early views are exciting and insightful. Hear about 19th century toll roads, blacksmithing, late carriages and early cars. See Monmouth's pioneer automobile and aircraft manufacturers, the Aeromarine plant. The program promises to be both educational and entertaining. Visitors are Welcome, Too.

BRIEFLY NOTED

The "Middletown: Then and Now, Part 2" slide show will be shown Wednesday, November 2, 7:30 pm at the Middletown Township Public Library, 55 New Monmouth Road. This and all library programs are free and open to the public. The Society welcomes loans of older pictures for future presentations. Both versions of the "Then and Now" program are available for showing to public groups.

The library is also presenting a series on the history of the New York & Long Branch Railroad by lecturer Peter J. Koelsch, a previous Society speaker. Two of the three parts are to come. The dates are Thursdays, November 17 and December 8, both at 7:30 pm. The November talk deals with the railroad's difficult early years and the interference of the Pennsylvania Railroad. Most riders now know the railroad as New Jersey Transit's North Jersey Coast line. The December program will focus on the many names and identities of our railroad. As with all library programs, no ticket is required.

FIRE...

Continued from Page 1

was organizing. Percy Straus' mansion on Chapel Hill Road, one of the finest in the Township, was destroyed in May, 1924. The American LaFrance arrived in time to fight the club house fire at Country Club Estates near the river. Another was recent, the December 31, 1984 fire destroying the old barn near the firehouse, removing the last building of Josie Field's farm.

The River Plaza Hose Company was incorporated in 1927. It has had two firehouses on the same site at Foster and Applegate Streets. The earlier frame structure was built in 1928 while the present brick building was erected in 1960.

The service area of the Township's tenth company was quite different from the earlier companies. It was characterized by large estates in rural parts making up over one-third of the Township. The Lincroft Fire Company was organized in May, 1932. Their fire house was opened in October 1936 and was tastefully designed not to look like a firehouse. Their first fire truck was a chain driven Brockway pumper. Today's equipment includes one of the Township's two aerial trucks. The service area has changed extensively. It now includes several offices with their highly combustible contents and the Township's version of high-rise buildings, keeping the company in the forefront of fire fighting capability.

Middletown village, the oldest section of the Township, was the last to get its own fire company. The Old Village Fire Company was organized in 1955, meeting initially at the Middletown Reformed Church. Their first location was a garage on Liberty Street. Later that year the company moved to a barn on the north side of Highway 35. Old Village was admitted to the Township's fire department in 1956 and built the present firehouse on the south side of Highway 35 in 1957. They bought two used trucks in 1955, a 1938 Brockway hook and ladder from Fair Haven and a 1927 American LaFrance from Rumson. The formation of the company seemed timed perfectly to protect the commercial construction that promptly followed on Highway 35.

The Township's companies have come a long way from temporary homes and second hand equipment. It is the largest all-volunteer department in the world and operates a modern training facility. Our firemen carry on a great historic tradition despite the demands of the times and lack of public awareness of the needs of volunteer service. Their worthy sacrifice is of great value to the public well being and merits the support it urgently needs.

JOIN OR SUBSCRIBE

The Society's annual year-end membership special now applies. Join now and your dues will cover the balance of this year and all of next. We prefer that interested readers join and hope at least a few will become involved with Society activities. However, we know most join to receive the newsletter regularly. Others are reluctant to become members realizing they can not become active. Although there is no obligation with membership, the reluctant reader can now subscribe to the newsletter. The subscription is \$5. Dues are \$5, \$10, or \$25, for individual, family, and sustaining categories. Mail your check, name, and address to the Society, PO Box 434, Middletown, NJ 07748.

A renewal notice will be included with the October issue.

NEW MEMBERS

Katherine DiPaula
Rodney Klami
David and Alice Luce

Middletown
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Middletown

Mr. & Mrs. Robert Massagli
Agnes Palumbo
Patricia Shields
Charles Watson

Middletown
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Middletown

THANKS

Ellen Broander: A miniature colonial room given in memory of Sarah Broadner

Patricia Brocklebank: Plans for house of Mrs. Dexter Blagden and related drawings

Friends of the Middletown Library: A book on a Lenape Indian symposium

Freeholder T. Narozanick: A copy of the Bayshore Waterfront Access Plan

Robert Pelligrini: A book of poems by a Middletownite

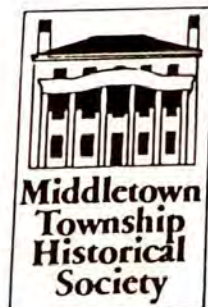
Arnold Strahl: A copy of American Architect with a Middletown subject

QUIZ ANSWERS

47. Leonardo, consisting of the Croyden Hall and Beacon Hill Country Club areas. It was formerly the E. T. Burdge farm and was intended to be a development of fine summer homes.
48. He received the first money transfer telegram ever received in Red Bank, at the Western Union telegraph office. Per Register, March 17, 1881.
49. Louise Bodman, elected in 1936 as justice of the peace. "Olga Boeckel" is the answer to first woman township committee member and mayor.
50. Marcus Daly, who was a Monmouth County freeholder from 1960 until his death, July 25, 1969. It was the first of Congressman Howard twelve consecutive election victories.
51. An arched path under the railroad tracks at the foot of Washington Street in the Wilmort Park development. It was built to permit farm animals to pass from one side of the railroad to the other without crossing the tracks.

FIRE EXHIBIT CONTINUES

The exhibition, "Firefighting in the Township", will be on view in the main exhibition room through the end of the year. This assemblage of equipment and graphic memorabilia give one an insight into the importance of these public protectors. Museum hours are Saturday and Sunday, 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm.



P.O. BOX 434
MIDDLETOWN, NJ 07748
PHONE: 291-8739 during museum hours.
EDITOR: RANDALL GABRIELAN

DEDICATED TO RESEARCHING, COLLECTING AND EXHIBITING THE HISTORY OF MIDDLETOWN TOWNSHIP.

Museum: In the main building at Croydon Hall on Leonardville Rd. between Chamone and Bellevue Aves. in the township's Leonardo section. Open Saturdays & Sundays.

Meetings: 8:00 PM at the museum, generally on the fourth Monday with occasional exceptions for major holidays.

Donations of historical materials: Please see a museum guide or write to the Society.

MEMBERSHIP DUES PER CALENDAR YR.

Individual — \$5.00
Family — \$10.00

Dues for new members joining after Oct. 1 include following year.