

# ABOUT TOWN<sup>®</sup>

## WHERE THERE'S SMOKE...

by Vivian Yess Wadlin Fall 2022



*This is a story that jumps around like water on a hot griddle. It jumps in time and it jumps in geography. When the smoke clears, I hope you have a greater appreciation for the history of our local fire departments, your investment in them, and their hundreds of volunteers.*

### March 17, 1891. Highland.

The fire destroyed much of the village. Reporters on the scene described in searing detail the failing efforts to fight the fast-moving inferno. It eventually obliterated a significant portion of the business district, many second-floor homes, and the life of six-year-old Clarence Ellis.

Clarence's father relived the loss, explaining the next day that he could hear his boy calling, "Papa, can't we get out?" and "Papa, save me." He continued, "The smoke was intensely thick and as I groped about the rooms I heard Clarence call once or twice, but could not find him."

*Poughkeepsie Eagle*, March 18, 1891.

Succor came immediately. "The residents of the village who were not visited by the fire threw open their houses to their unfortunate neighbors, providing them with clothing, etc., in such cases as they were needed."

In addition to the overwhelming tragedy of the child's death, the financial losses were staggering. The business community was devastated. Twenty-five people were now homeless, all their possessions gone. One large Poughkeepsie department store set itself up to accept donations for those left homeless.

It was not as though there had been no warning. Lloyd Town Historian Joan Kelley pointed out the 1887 Sanborn Insurance map's estimation of a combustible situation in Highland. Sanborn maps were line drawings of buildings and streets in cities and villages indicating the construction materials used in each building, the building's use, and the area's fire protection equipment and potential. The map's explanatory seal read:

Highland, NY. Nov. 1887. Population 1500, *No Steam & No Hand Engines. No Independent Hose Carts. Water Facilities. Not Good.* Prevailing Winds: W.

The haunting italics in the original said it all—*No. No. No. Not Good.*

The people of Highland were left to fight the 1891 fire with buckets. It was not until a pumper truck was brought across the Poughkeepsie railroad bridge on a flatcar that the rest of the village was saved.



Unlike Highland, some American communities and cities had adopted firefighting equipment, forces, and procedures a century earlier. It is unknown if any of Highland's fathers had been familiar with Benjamin Franklin's 1733 letter to a Philadelphia newspaper strongly suggesting that fire protection in the city was in need of an "ounce of prevention" to spare "a pound of cure." We do know Philadelphia and other communities

heeded those words, and consequently, Franklin is considered the Founding Father of Firefighting.

**In June of 2022**, Esopus Fire Department Chief William Freer gave me a tour of his fire station on Route 9W in Esopus. The huge bright yellow trucks looked like thoroughbreds at the starting gate. Ready, eager, able. But it was another piece of life-saving equipment that caught my attention—a handheld infrared scanner. It could detect a person in a smoke-obscured space. We stood in a room of about 1500 square feet while Chief Freer explained, "We can scan a room this big filled with smoke in about five seconds to determine if we need to enter to save someone." Without the small scanner he noted, it would take many minutes to search and ensure no one was inside. Those minutes could strand another soul in another room without detection. I thought of little Clarence Ellis.

Chief Freer is a second-generation Esopus department volunteer. He serves with his father, Wayne Freer, who is also the Ulster County Deputy Fire Coordinator at Golden Hill in Kingston. The elder Freer previously served as the Esopus chief. He gave me details on the history of his department, which was inaugurated in 1939 and began service in 1940.

Multi-generation family members of fire departments are not uncommon. Also at Esopus, I met George Tsitsera and his grandson, Hayden Mitchell.

Hayden is the fifth generation of men in the family to join there. At sixteen, he is in training—having met him, I would put my life in his hands without a second thought.

Hayden is not the only impressive young trainee I met in Esopus. Pictured with him on page two are Kaitlyn Keane age 19, (one of five female members of the Esopus team), and Kevin Mul-lady, age 21.

Both Freer men assured me that neither one's



gender or position on the age spectrum is an obstacle to being involved in any of the county's volunteer departments. "I have a job for everyone with an interest, be it active fire fighting, public relations, fundraising..." and more.

The sheer number of Ulster County volunteers is impressive. Except for a small number of the City of Kingston fire service, *all county fire department members are volunteers*. Today, according to a "Fire Departments in Ulster County, New York" site ([www.countyoffice.org/ny-ulster-county-fire-departments/](http://www.countyoffice.org/ny-ulster-county-fire-departments/)),

There are 101 Fire Departments\* in Ulster County, New York, serving a population of 180,129 people in an area of 1,124 square miles. There is one Fire Department per 1,783 people, and one Fire Department per 11 square miles.

We citizens are aided well beyond fire suppression. Emergency services such as "... medical emergencies, incidents involving hazardous materials, rescue calls, and motor vehicle or other accidents," all fall under their responsibilities—not to mention search and rescue of lost or injured hikers, and cats-in-a-tree type calls.

In the mid-1990s, a study of all the counties in the United States measuring the ethereal concept of civic connectedness (what makes a great place to live) showed Ulster County to rank third out of 3,600 plus counties in the entire nation.

Fire departments are one of the cores of that measure. Belonging to an organization, be it civic, religious, or special interest—such as historical societies, sports teams, book clubs, or gun clubs—is integral to strong communities. Imagine your community's next parade without fire department participation. Let's not forget firehouse pancake breakfast fund-raisers.

In New York State's 62 counties, Ulster ranks 21st in Fire Departments per capita, and 19th of 62 counties in Fire Departments per square mile. That's a lot of connectedness.

**In July of 2014**, I happened upon a class of young trainees preparing to take on the responsibilities required to graduate as a volunteer firefighter. They were part of the first class of expedited training (essentially a boot camp) requiring three weeks of intensive study and training. For these trainees, the program replaced the slower pace of 150 hours of classes stretching out over months which is still the norm. The group was assembled on the parking area of the Highland Hose Company (Milton Avenue and Route 9W) but the trainees were from a number of surrounding communities.

The next step for the would-be volunteers was at the training facility in Dutchess County a few days later. I joined them there to watch the recruits' participation in equipment use, personal safety drills, and much more. It was a very hot day. The trainees were wearing the heavy protective gear of their new calling. They looked devilishly hot and uncomfortable. Each man's equipment and clothing cost was approximately \$15,000.



Upper photo: Hayden Mitchell with hand-held scanner, and his grandfather, George Tsitsera. Lower: Future firefighters Kaitlyn Keane age 19, Kevin Mullady, age 21 Hayden Mitchell age 16.

Several days later, I attended their moving graduation ceremony. They were continuing a very long tradition of volunteerism and joining organizations to effectively respond to emergencies. The graduates I asked said they did it to be of service and to rescue their fellow residents.

Development of a community's fire departments often followed a pattern: A terrible fire, one or two civic leaders determined to take action to mitigate future disasters, a committed community, brave volunteers, and fundraising. So it was for Highland after its 1891 conflagration. Shortly after the fire, a long article about Highland in the *Poughkeepsie Eagle* newspaper read,

There is an outcry now for a fire company and a steamer. Laying pipe through the principal streets with hydrants, and a good force pump in one of the mills (along the Twaalfskill) would be much better, as the pipes would be always ready, or a pipe from some of the dams (Shantz Mill) in the stream, south of the village would force water over most of the houses without any pump at all. In either case a good hose company would be all the fire department needed.

According to Lloyd (Highland) historian Warren Sherwood, on April 1, 1893, Lloyds' town leaders issued a permit for the construction of a reservoir and the installation of pipelines. By 1895, the Highland Hose Company No. 1 was incorporated. In March 1897, the community bought a "...four-wheeled hook and ladder truck..." and the first Firemen's Parade took place on April 19th of that year.

Rosendale's fire department began much the same way. According to the August 26, 1895, *Kingston Leader*,

At 1:30 A.M., Sunday, August 25, a disastrous fire broke out in the village at the barn of Dr. Robertson on Main Street of the village. The fire quickly spread in both east and west directions to envelope 27 businesses and private dwellings causing an estimated \$80,000 in damage.

That fire was fought with a bucket brigade. Rosendale's Active Hose Company was incorporated in 1899. In October of 1955, another of Rosendale's trucks was put to an unusual use—pumping out cellars after Hurricane Diane flooded the village.

### Dollars and Sense

Looking at the investment communities and fire departments make today in site acquisition, building construction, hydrant systems, trucks and other vehicles, upgrading equipment, and training, we taxpayers would seem to have quite the bargain. Just the life-saving hand-held scanner mentioned earlier costs \$5,000 dollars each—Esopus has three.

Chief Freer also introduced me to the brawn of his team—the technology-crammed trucks. His firefighters are the brains. The Fire Chief's car is a mobile intelligence, command and communication center with internet, geolocation mapping, and even a whiteboard to jot down those critical notes while the

action is hot. “I wish everyone in Esopus would tour our firehouses to know the level of constant monitoring and protection we provide,” Freer noted.

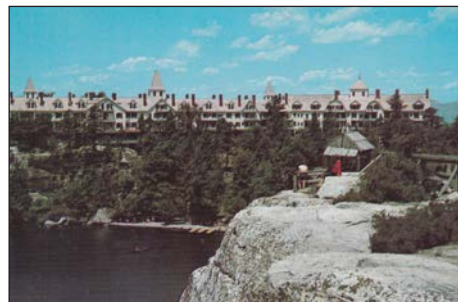
The comment made me recall hearing of an American town that made fire protection a choice. You could help defray the cost of your community’s fire department by paying a fee and having protection, or not pay and use your hand-held extinguisher or garden hose should disaster strike. Sure enough, consulting the website for *Fire Engineering*, there was an article in 2010 regarding that situation in Obion, TN. “...homeowners in the region outside the town limits of South Fulton, Tennessee, have to pay \$75 a year to have fire protection from the town’s fire department.” That is known as “subscription services” protection. Homeowner Gene Cranick did not subscribe. His house ablaze, the firetrucks and men arrived and declined to engage the flames. They did ensure the well-subscribed home next door was protected from the growing fire.

The article’s author noted that in addition to the subscription price, if a fire did occur and the department responded, there was an additional \$500 to be paid by the owner of the charred home.

Historically, American fire protection in cities was often by subscription with fire “insurance” companies. In larger cities, several companies might show up at a fire, and if the building had one company’s plaque prominently displayed, the fire was fought by the men and equipment of that company.

Unlike that subscription system, the terrible fire in Highland in 1891 had great help from Poughkeepsie, particularly the Cataract Department whose building stands proudly today near Mount Carmel Square. Newspaper articles described the first desperate attempts to utilize the available transport to bring the larger city’s equipment to its tiny neighbor’s aid. As noted earlier, their fire equipment eventually came across the railroad bridge (now Walkway Over The Hudson). Regular 1891 transport across the Hudson was by ferries, there would be no Mid-Hudson Bridge for another 40 years. Fortunately, the railroad bridge was completed in 1888.

In 1974, the Highland Fire Department was instrumental in putting out the fire that closed that same railroad bridge. Because the bridge was 212 feet above the river and had long spans over land that were also high, it was a difficult fire to hose down. Eventually, the Highland-side volunteers



Images top down: New Paltz Normal School. Bellevue Villa, Highland. Woodmere, Lake Minnewaska. Cliff House, Lake Minnewaska. Kingston reenactment of the 1777 British troops burning the city.

were able to quell the fire of oil- and creosote-soaked ties but not before the fire became so hot it twisted the metal rails and rained debris down on the Poughkeepsie buildings and land below.

### Earlier Blazes

A December 1904 fire burned the five-story Bellevue Villa hotel in Highland. The blaze, visible across the Hudson by all in Poughkeepsie, made full-page headlines in that city’s newspapers. The hotel’s water supply came via aqueduct from Illinois Mountain and had been turned off for the winter. No one fought that blaze.

New Paltz had its share of terrible fires, but not many as spectacular as the ones that destroyed the New Paltz Normal School (1906) and the two that destroyed the Minnewaska hotels, Cliff House (1978) and Wildmere (1986). Both had ceased operation prior to fires.

### October 13, 1777

Probably the most famous Ulster County fire in history was the burning of Kingston, NY, when the British razed the city during the American Revolution. Kingston had been the site of the adoption of the New York State Constitution and became its first capital. To the British, the city had appeared a hotbed of revolutionary zeal.

Once every other year, re enactors clad in the uniforms of the opposing forces reprised the attack. It is loud, smokey, and evocative of that era’s war-making. Covid has halted that invasion for now.

The Kingston Fire Department had been formed in 1757 with one piece of equipment purchased from, of all places, England. In 1880, the city reorganized with seven companies. In 1908, Kingston changed to paid and volunteer fire houses. Today, it has three paid and one volunteer company.

### Your Protection Responsibility

As both George and Willaim Freer remind us: How are your smoke alarms? Carbon monoxide sensors? Fire extinguishers? Flammables stored? Family escape plan? You are your family’s first line of fire fighting. Fire is unpredictable, your response shouldn’t be.

And I’ll add: Regret is forever. Remember Clarence Ellis.

*\* Including fire houses within departments.*