

The Great Fire of 1922

By ERNEST SIMON

Those residents of Port Washington today who lived in the community before 1922 will recall with horror the disastrous fire which wiped out three large buildings, practically destroyed another, and claimed the lives of two small children in the early morning of Jan. 23 of that year.

It was the most disastrous fire in the history of the community, and up to that time only the second in which human lives were lost.

It was the third large fire Port suffered, and by far the most devastating. The first large fire was on May 8, 1902, when the Bayles corner burned, and with it several other houses on the corner of Main Street and Shore Road. The second large fire broke out on the morning of Jan. 2, 1920, when the A.B. Baxter building (almost directly opposite Bayles Corner) burned.

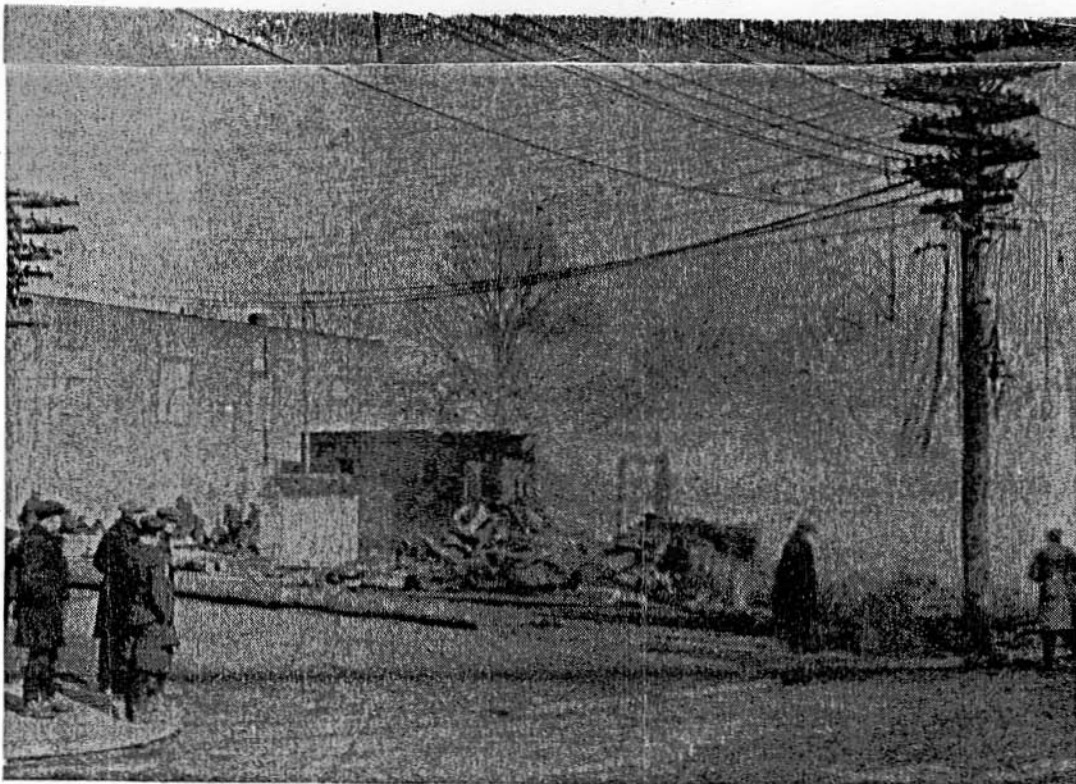
The fire of 1922 swept the business block on the north side of Main Street opposite the railroad station, from Herbert Avenue to North Bayles Avenue. Entirely consumed were the Nassau Light and Power substation on the corner of Herbert Avenue, the adjoining Muzante building (where the fire started), and Barney McCourt's hotel and cafe.

With a strong northwest wind blowing at about 40 miles per hour and the temperature down to about 10 degrees above zero, the flames swept across Main Street.

I remember running down Main Street that morning with my co-fireman and neighbor, the late Jim Horton, who was soon to become captain of the Flower Hill Hose Company. Main Street looked like one huge, red flame, leaping from building to building.

Five families who lived in the Muzante building were driven into the street, all in their night clothes. Their household effects, clothing and other personal property were all destroyed by the flames.

The children burned to death were Antoinette Cestari, 3, and Maria Fasano, 5. They were members of the family of Mr. and Mrs. Bosca Fasano who, together with the family of Mr. and Mrs. Patsy Fasano, occupied an apartment in the upper floor of the building. The lower floor was occupied by a hardware store. The Cestari child and her brother John were orphans and lived with the Fasanos.



MAIN STREET AND HERBERT AVENUE AFTER THE GREAT FIRE OF 1922. (Photo courtesy of the Port Washington Public Library Ernie Simon Collection.)

Several other families in the building had narrow escapes. It was a miracle that other lives were not lost.

Blowing across the street, the flames hit the Nielsen building at 60 Main St. The upper story was burned away and only a skeleton of the building remained. It was said afterward that asbestos shingles on the roof almost halted the fire at this point.

So intense was the heat that the paint on the railroad station was badly blistered. No one could cross Main Street at this point as flames were shooting across the street.

The firemen were badly handicapped from the start. There was no automatic fire alarm system in those days—the system consisted only of the siren on the Flower Hill

Hose Company and the bell on Liberty Hall on Carlton Avenue for the Atlantic and Protection Companies. Much time was lost in relaying the alarm to the lower part of the village.

Port Washington had no powerful fire pumps in those days. Everything depended on hydrant pressure. The Protection Engine Company had just received its new American-LaFrance pumps but there had been a delay in forwarding the hard hydrant suction line needed to pull water from the hydrant. So the powerful pumper was useless.

The firemen claimed that the hydrants were frozen and difficult to open. John Coles, a blacksmith by trade and strong as

an ox, said he could not budge the hydrant opener. The water commissioners claimed the hydrants were in good condition and stated that they believed the 3 firemen were too hasty or used the wrong methods in opening the hydrants.

The firemen were deeply aroused and later carried the battle to the Town Board, filing many affidavits from members of the department swearing that the hydrants failed to open, and when they did open the water pressure was weak. The battle between the two groups became almost as hot as the fire had been, but after several weeks the issue died down.

Viewing the area today, one can hardly realize that such a holocaust took place

Fred Read was a local attorney, former school board member, and member of the Lions Club of Port Washington. The first two paragraphs in this personal note to Chief Peter Zwerlein describe the devastating fire that occurred on January 22, 1922 when he was a pre-teenager.

MEMO FROM

Frederick W. Read, Jr.

To - Peter

APR 3 1989

Enclosed is a photocopy for your information and retention of Ernie Lincis article written quite a few years ago for the Port News concerning the 1922 fire about which I spoke to you. Since we lived nearly on North Bayle Ave at that time, I as a pre-teenager have vivid recollections of that fire which we witnessed and even for a time felt threatened by that madam fire Sunday morning Jan 22, 1922.

The coal in the basement of Barney McCourt's "saloon" burned through the following fireway.

The individual who gave the most historical talk before the Lions Club was Edward (Ted) M. Murray of 35 Mitchell Road, telephone 212-2121. He will be out of town this week returning next Sunday.

Tom Saeco is collecting some descriptive material about the masons which I will forward to you when I receive it.

Am passing word at the Cow Neck Peninsula Historical Society about your willingness to speak before them about the true Port. It will let you know the results.

Best wishes -

Fred