

# Port Washington News

Established 1903

News

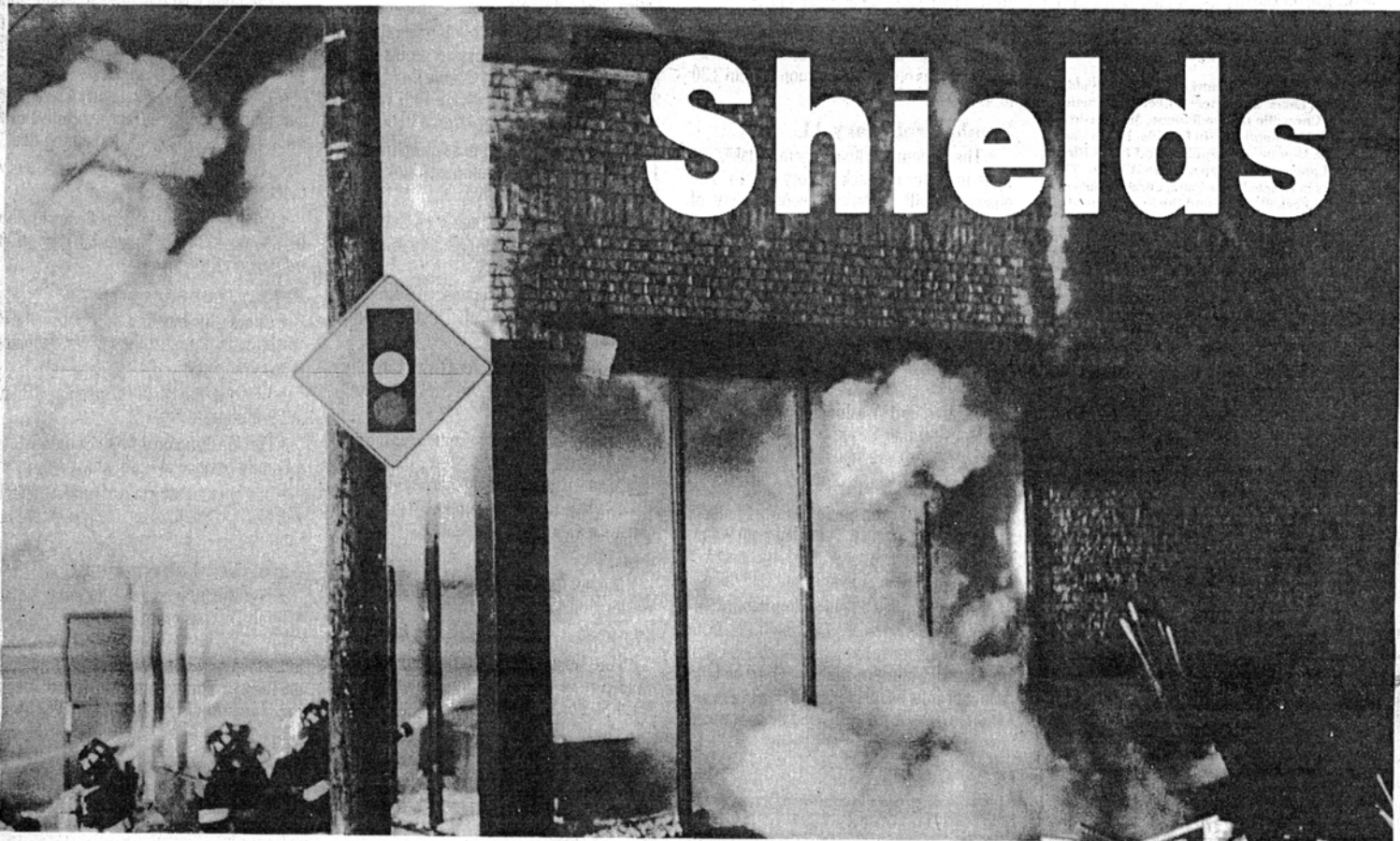
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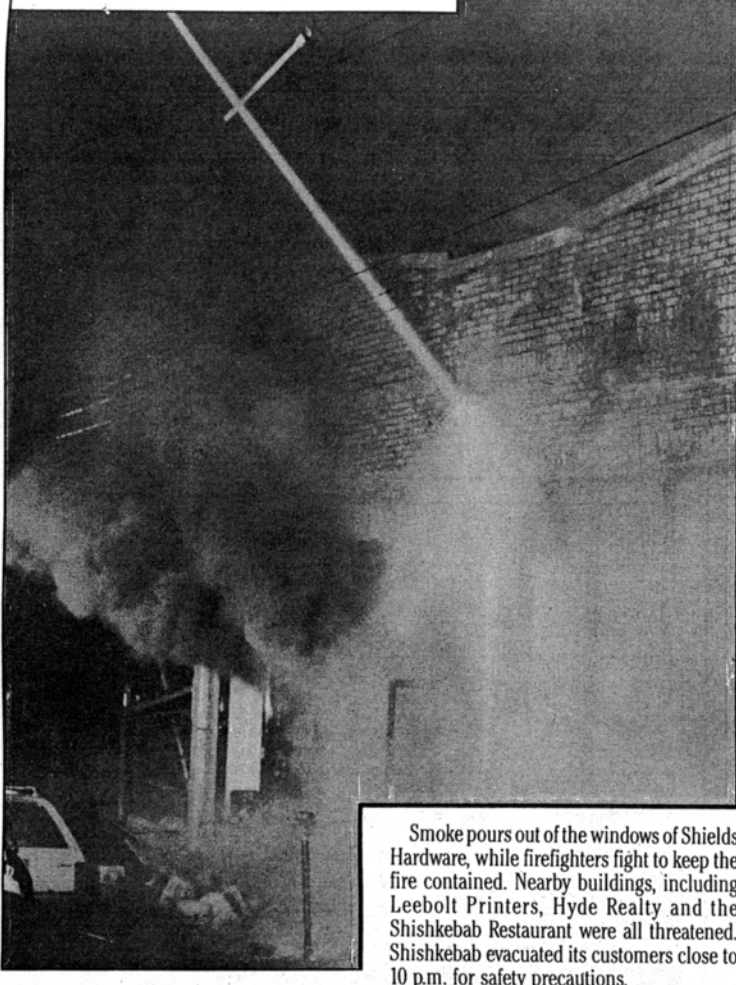


# Shields

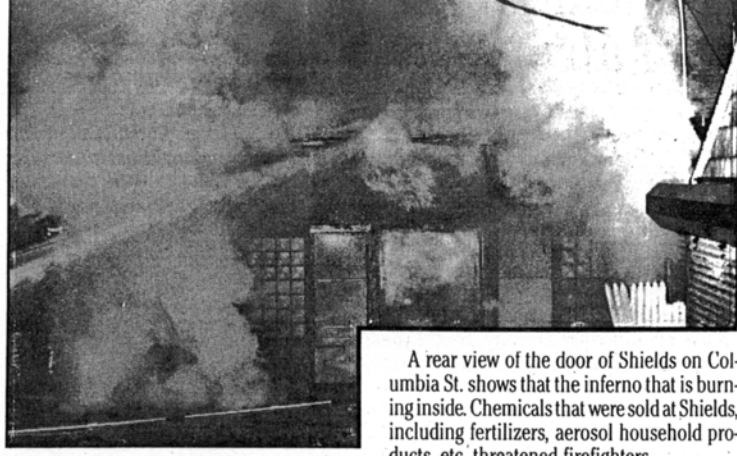
Story pg. 3 — Photos by Bruce Kreutzer



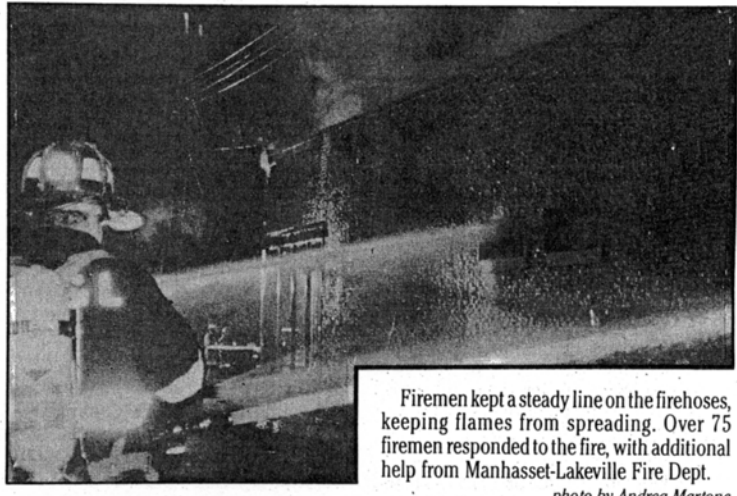
# Destroyed By Fire



Smoke pours out of the windows of Shields Hardware, while firefighters fight to keep the fire contained. Nearby buildings, including Leebolt Printers, Hyde Realty and the Shishkebab Restaurant were all threatened. Shields evacuated its customers close to 10 p.m. for safety precautions.



A rear view of the door of Shields on Columbia St. shows that the inferno that is burning inside. Chemicals that were sold at Shields, including fertilizers, aerosol household products, etc. threatened firefighters.



Firemen kept a steady line on the firehoses, keeping flames from spreading. Over 75 firemen responded to the fire, with additional help from Manhasset-Lakeville Fire Dept.

photo by Andrea Martone

# History Goes Up In Smoke

By Andrea Martone

Jack Shields has always had a reputation for being hard-nosed and shrewd when it comes to business...two characteristics that have contributed to his success in owning and operating the oldest family retail business in Port Washington's history.

On this particular night, however, emotions overcame him as he stood with members of his family in shock and disbelief as their 73-year legend was destroyed, the result of a fire that began earlier that evening in the basement of the family's hardware store, located and known for decades as "the Shields corner".

Shortly after 8pm, when Jack's four children had closed the store to return home, Chuck

Walker of Hyde Realty, located next door, decided to return to his office to catch up on paperwork. "I parked right in front of Shields and as I locked my car I smelled smoke," says Walker. "At first I thought someone had a fireplace going, then I noticed the glass windows of Shields were all fogged up...I knew something was wrong." Within minutes after calling the police and fire department, trucks pulled up in front of the landmark building to find the interior filled with heavy smoke. "We were concerned about this particular fire," says Fire Chief Peter Zwerlein, "because of the threat of chemicals such as chlorine, fertilizers, propane, household cleaners and insecticides that could lead to explosions."

All power and gas was immediately cut off on the block. Next was the removal of the thirty 20lb propane tanks stored in the adjacent rear garage. Initially, the fire department was unable to locate the source of the fire, but suspected it was in the basement. Shortly after, the smoke and heat condition in the basement made visibility so poor that it became impossible for firefighters to remain. "Access holes were cut into the first floor in order to introduce fire-fighting foam in the basement," Zwerlein explains. "However, because of the balloon construction of the building, the fire spread rapidly, within the walls and ceiling of the building." Firefighters who were on the roof of the building, as well as several who were inside, found themselves confronted with flames that encompassed the room and burned right

through the roof. "Fire Chiefs Salerno and Cole recognizing the changing heat and smoke conditions, pulled all firefighters off the roof and out of the building." He added.

From that point on, the fire's extinguishing became entirely an exterior operation. Miraculously, no firefighter was injured, despite the entire building becoming consumed in flames and smoke. The firefighters' main priority became protecting adjacent buildings from igniting, which included businesses such as Leebolt Printers, Hyde Realty and the Shishebab Restaurant. Firemen stood on the neighboring buildings hosing down the walls because they feared the side brick wall of Shields would collapse, spreading the fire.

Despite help from seventy-five Port  
(continued on page 6)



The AFTERMATH. After firefighters worked through the night to prevent the fire from spreading to adjacent buildings, a landmark stands destroyed with a 73-year history behind it.

## Port's Bravest in a Hard Day's Night

By Christine Cronin Southard

At 8:30 a.m. the day after the blaze the Port Washington Volunteer Firemen were still on the job at what was now the shell of Shields Hardware. They were scruffy with stubble and smoke, exhausted, depleted but still on the job. Most hadn't been home yet but a few had gone home for two hours of shut-eye and were back on the job. Most agreed that this was the worst fire they had ever fought because of the blinding smoke and intense heat.

According to Chief Peter Zwerlein, the fire started in the basement. Smoke was pouring out. The lock to the basement was removed and firemen entered the basement only to be met with such intense heat and smoke they had to evacuate and find another solution. Next, an access hole was cut into the first floor and foam was shot into the basement in the hope that it might be contained to that area. Instead, when the basement was filled with foam, the heat was so intense that containment was impossible. Fire shot up the walls and ceiling of the first floor creating a perilous inferno. The first floor was then evacuated and the only way to fight,

according to Chief Zwerlein, "was through an exterior ladder situation."

"Chlorine and propane storage tanks were removed from the area. The fire would have been even more hazardous had the fire extended to these areas because of the toxic air," said Zwerlein. The house in back of Shields' and the apartments in the next building were evacuated. The fire was then fought by placing hoses in strategic areas." By 4 a.m., it was under control and by 5 a.m. it was out.

John Salerno, a 29 year veteran, said, "It was one of the toughest fires to fight because of so many chemicals and paint. The conditions were very hazardous." Danny Salerno, 22, John Salerno's son, was also on the scene. Richard Volpe, a 15 year member, agreed. "It was the worst I've seen. There was continuous fueling of the fire due to paint and aerosol cans. All through the night you could see the flashes of blue light, which were exploding aerosol cans," he said. Vincent Costa, who also had been on the job for thirteen hours, said, "I can't wait to get home to my wife and three kids. Fires like

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## Port's Bravest

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this make you appreciate life."

Seventy-five men worked through the night in what basically became a protection fire. When it was obvious that it was impossible to save Shields, the main priority became protection of the adjacent buildings. At least, the elements were with them. The night was calm, not windy.

Four hundred and fourteen thousand gallons of water was pumped that night. But the help didn't stop there. When fireman Don Kurz, also president of Kurz Oil in town, realized that the

fire trucks were running low on fuel, he refueled them.

Fred Falconer, the fireman was among the seventy-five who put out the blaze at Shields. The next day Falconer's Florists trucks were on the site helping the Shields family unload what was salvagable. Falconer's, like Shields, is a third generation Port business. Fred Falconer and Don Kurz knew this wasn't just a storefront fire to the Shields family. They understood. It was a blaze of blood, sweat and tears.

## History In Smoke

(continued from page 3)

firefighters who came to fight the blaze from every department, additional equipment was needed and Manhasset-Lakeville was called in along with an ambulance from Great Neck Vigilant that stood by in case of an emergency.

414,000 gallons of water later, the firemen were finally able to return home, or to their jobs, the following day before noon. Although the fire was under control 2 1/2 hours after it began at 8:30pm Tuesday evening, firefighters remained on the scene until 11:30 the following morning, constantly "wetting down" the building and keeping a watchful eye on smoldering areas. Because of smoldering, as well as the extensive damage to the building, fire trucks were called back to the scene three times in the next two days.

And through the whole ordeal, Jack Shields stood helpless, watching what would become the second worst fire in Port's history, since the Lumber Yard fire fifteen years before. That night, standing with the five members of his family across the street from the store his father built in 1920, Jack had visions of himself as a young

boy of eight, working side by side with his father, John, the founder of the business. Started in 1916 when the trolley rolled down Main Street, John Shields and his brother began a partnership in plumbing, heating, roofing and hardware, across the street from the present building. John eventually dissolved the partnership and decided to build a new building for his business that would come to be known as the "Shields Corner", where the business would thrive for 73 years with the help of the three generations of Shields family members who believed in it. Until the devastating fire on Jan. 28, Papa Jack, who had no siblings, worked with his wife, Ann and their four children: Patti, Kevin, 22, J.P., 29, Richard, and Rob, 26. Each of the Shields children, following in their dad's footsteps, had begun learning the ropes of the business since they were only youngsters.

"Besides being the oldest retail establishment in this town," says 60 year-old Shields, "people tell us that we are rated as one of the best on the east coast. I know this business inside and out and we're dedicated to this type

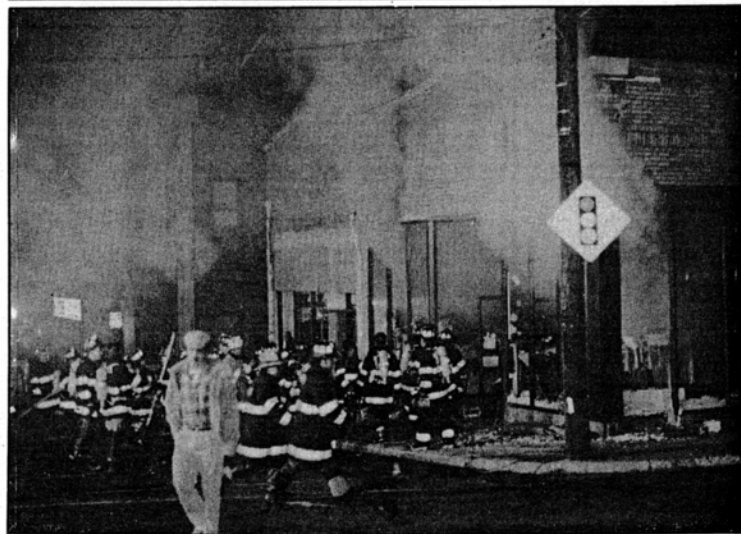
of business. We stocked everything." A large and diversified inventory was unquestionably one of the secrets of the success of Shields Bros. A local plumber who is one of Shields' loyal clients, recalls, "you could always be sure to find whatever part you needed, no matter how many years ago it was made. I'm telling you, even forty-year old parts could be found at Shields."

Now boarded up, the landmark building's fate remains undetermined. "We're definitely going back into the hardware business," Jack Shields says confidently. "It's just a question of whether we will rebuild or relocate, depending on cooperation we receive from the village of Baxter Estates and the town." In the meantime, it's business as usual for the family plumbing and roofing business, that is now operating solely out of 269 Main Street, directly across

the street.

Clean-up efforts have been in effect for over a week since the fire, with dedicated and concerned citizens all donating their time and services to help the family in the massive clean-up project. "There's just so much to do," says J.P., the eldest of the Shields children. "We cannot thank the community enough for all their help. The support we've received has been astronomical and we cannot express our appreciation in words alone."

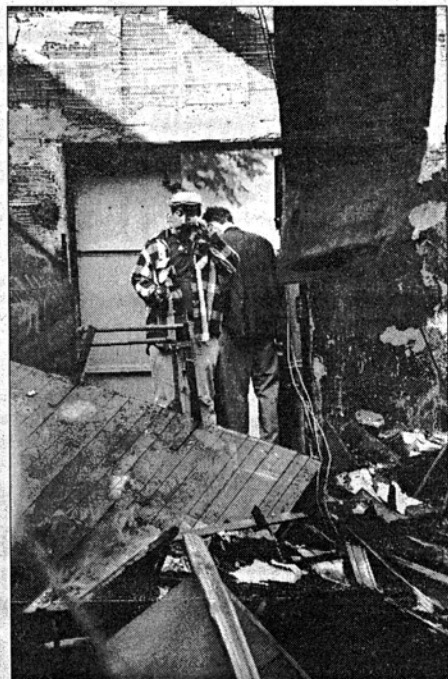
As expected, Port rallied around with great distinction in a time of tragedy. Lifelong customers lent a hand, St. Stephen's church offered work space, local tradesmen offered their services, tools and supplies. Even the peevish facade of Jack Shields came tumbling down at the community's reaction to his loss.



J.P. Shields (with hat) walks away in despair as firefighters deem fire "out of control."



Newsday / Kathy Kmonicek



Newsday / Michael E. Ach

Firefighters try to extinguish flames at Shields Brothers Plumbing/Hardware in Port Washington on Tuesday. Right, Jay Shields surveys the damage yesterday at his family's business.

# Landmark Store Guttled by Fire

By Gwen Young

Shields Brothers opened when Port Washington's Main Street still had trolley tracks and the village was known as a summer resort area.

Tuesday evening, a fire that started in the basement of the hardware store at 267-271 Main St. gutted the landmark business.

"This was a historic store," said lifelong resident Peter Zwerlein. "I think it's third generation. I'm thirty-nine. It's been here as long as I can remember. My father is seventy. It's been here as long as he can remember."

As chief of the Port Washington Fire Department, Zwerlein worked with about 75 firefighters Tuesday evening to try to save the Shields Brothers store. But by yesterday morning, all that was left of the building at Main and High Streets was the structure's frame with cannon-ball-size holes through the roof.

Zwerlein said the fire started about 8:50 p.m. and was contained by 11:30 p.m. One firefighter, who suffered smoke inhalation, was treated at the scene.

Chemicals such as chlorine and fertilizers were kept in a separate area behind the store and were isolated by firefighters before they caught fire, Zwer-

lein said.

Robert J. Doran, assistant fire marshal for the Nassau County Bureau of Fire Investigation, said the cause of the fire should be known within a week. The basement of the building filled with about 6 feet of water from fire hoses, making it difficult to determine the cause, he said.

The business was established in 1917 by John and William Shields. The building was constructed in the early 1920s.

Several families from surrounding houses and buildings were evacuated during the fire but were allowed to return to their homes about 3 a.m. yesterday.

Patricia Quintanilla evacuated her second-floor apartment next door to the hardware store with her 10-year-old son, Irvin, and her sister-in-law. "It was very gigantic," Quintanilla said, describing the fire. "All the smoke was coming in here."

Frances Lewis, who rents a house owned by Shields Brothers that bordered the hardware store, said, "The lights were off, the clock was off and I was frozen stiff" after the gas heat had to be shut down. Like Quintanilla, Lewis watched the firefighters for hours after being evacuated until she was permitted back

into her house.

Zwerlein's department was assisted by the Manhasset-Lakeville Fire Department, and the Great Neck Vigilance Fire Department sent an ambulance to the scene.

A longtime resident of Port Washington, Lewis said the hardware store was there as long as she could remember. "I hope they rebuild it," she said. "It's a shame to lose another part of Port Washington," she said.

J.P. Shields, one of the family members who runs the business, said, "the store was closed" when the fire began. "The building was checked an hour before the fire started. Everything was all right."

Plumbing is the family's primary business, but the hardware store was more nostalgic. The store was lined with maple and oak cabinets that had tiny drawers for small hardware parts, as in older times, Shields said.

Asked if the hardware store would be rebuilt, Shields said, "We don't know what we're going to do."