

Basking Ridge Fire Co. to celebrate 100 years of service

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This and other stories are gathered on the Mr. Local History website with the article: Historic Fires in the Somerset Hills - <http://www.mrlocalhistory.org/somersetthillsfires/>

The company continues to this day as an all-volunteer organization. It's come in handy more than a few times, putting a stop to fires that could have become major catastrophes. This Saturday, June 26, 2004 the fire company plans to celebrate the milestone in a big way. A parade, complete with fire trucks, floats and marching bands, will start at North Finley Avenue and Ridge Street at 1 p.m. and continue south through the village to Ridge High School. There, the company will host a community barbecue.

The company's creation was a classic case of a community taking action to deal with a need. But like many initiatives, it took time. According to company research, there were calls for action as early as Jan. 6, 1809, when a Basking Ridge resident wrote a letter to The Genius of Liberty, a Morristown newspaper, and proposed the creation of a "mutual insurance fire company." As the years went by, Basking Ridge village had one big fire after another: in 1843, 1850 and 1880, when a "disastrous" blaze destroyed three buildings at the southwest corner of Finley Avenue and West Oak Street.

The defining moment occurred in the fall of 1903 when a fire on the Charles Wickenhaver farm claimed a large barn and four horses. Residents realized that the same fate could befall the new school that had just opened on South Maple Avenue, where the township library now stands. On June 17, 1904, a group of Basking Ridge residents met at the old township library at Finley Avenue and West Oak Street to formulate plans for a fire company. A week later, on June 24, the Basking Ridge Fire Company was formally organized, with J. Walter Allen as chief.

The new group received its first firefighting equipment on July 4, 1904, when the Basking Ridge Improvement Society donated a hand-drawn hose cart with 500 feet of hose. A year later, company members made a horse-drawn hook and ladder wagon.

That same year, the fire company got a home when it was allowed to build a wood frame building on school property across the street from the Maple Avenue School. The building was completed in October 1905 at a cost of \$600. First Big Response Ironically, the company's first major response involved the Maple Avenue School. At 2 p.m. Saturday, April 30, 1906, a fire started in the basement and extended up the hall stairs to the top floor auditorium. Twenty-two men, using a hose cart, fought the blaze for an hour.

Other fires followed. On Tuesday night, April 5, 1911, the company was called to a fire that destroyed the Basking Ridge Train Station on Depot Place. Despite the loss, The Bernardsville News reported that the firefighters "were on the spot in a commendably brief space, L.F. Dunster's horse being attached to the hose wagon."

Seven months later, in November 1911, the company left the horse-and-wagon era behind when it purchased a Moline motorcar from the New Jersey Automobile Company for \$1,875. In seeking that and

other upgrades, the company launched community fund-raisers, including minstrel shows and dances at the old Dayton's Hall at the corner of Finley Avenue and Allen Street. Its biggest event was an annual carnival held on the grounds of the Maple Avenue School every August from 1910 to 1941.

The carnival featured up to 25 attractions, including a steam-powered merry-go-round, and drew thousands of people. Funds from the carnival enabled the company to build a brick, two-story firehouse at the corner of South Maple Avenue and Henry Street in June 1915. The cost was \$10,000. "It is a 30 x 50 two-story fireproof structure of Spanish tile and in keeping with proper surroundings," the defunct Recorder newspaper said. "For beauty and convenience, it will not be surpassed in any town of Basking Ridge's size in the country."

Also reported was a speech at the laying of the cornerstone on Thursday, June 25. G. Scoot Voorhees of the Improvement Society "gave the firemen warning, saying he thought there might be a possible chance of them getting a little lazy, in view of fact that they had such splendid equipment and a fine firehouse, but he told them that with all these things it still needed quick men and he hoped that wouldn't occur."

Adding First Aid Voorhees need not have worried. In fact, the company expanded its duties on April 13, 1934, when six firefighters organized the First Aid and Rescue Squad of the Basking Ridge Fire Company No. 1. Two weeks later, the members purchased a second-hand Meteor funeral car from Garabrant & Son for \$350.

During the company's 50th anniversary year in 1954, The Bernardsville News reported, it responded to "a record" 163 calls, including 47 for fires and 116 for first aid. There were 12 house and building fires and 28 grass fires. Formal membership remained exclusively male for several decades. In April 1974, a stir ensued when Caroline Hebard of Van Doren Drive filed a lawsuit charging the company with sex bias for not allowing her to join the first aid squad. The company fought the suit, arguing that members could not depend for their safety in a fire on the comparably lesser strength of a woman. But Hebard won her case in September 1977, and though she had moved to Bernardsville by then, the company entered a new era. The firefighters adapted quickly to the times and in April 1985, they launched a junior program for both boys and girls ages 16 to 21.

Facilities were also an issue by the 1970s. Although the firehouse was expanded in 1961, it became inadequate for the growing community. A 4.3-acre owned tract on Washington Avenue was chosen as a new firehouse site in 1976 and was later obtained from the township in exchange for the existing firehouse and a 2.3-acre, company-owned tract at North Finley Avenue and Allen Street. The new firehouse opened in May 1985.

The old firehouse was sold to Daniel Tullo in March 1993 for \$251,000. It now houses The Fabric Yard and Curves. The land at North Finley was improved with a gazebo. Today, the fire company has about 25 active members and about 70 overall, including members of its first aid squad and senior members. It annually gets about 250 fire calls and 800 overlapping first aid calls, according to Rich Moschello, company president.

Most of the fire calls consist of residential and commercial alarms, carbon monoxide, motor vehicle accidents and assists to other communities. The equipment includes three pumpers, one rescue truck, two ambulances and a chief's command vehicle. The company gets \$45,000 and \$15,000 per year in municipal aid for fire and squad needs, respectively, but still generates the majority of its revenue from residential and business donations. Major Fires Through the years, the company has been called to fight major fires.

While some level of destruction was often inevitable, the firefighters worked hard to keep things from becoming far worse. A prime example occurred on Monday night, April 2, 1923, when a blaze behind the Basking Ridge Train Station destroyed a 14-room double residence and a seven-room combination house and grocery store. Three families were left homeless but there was much to be thankful for. "When the fire was at its height," The News reported, "Eleanor Pope, two-and-a-half-year-old daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John E. Pope, was asleep upstairs and was rescued just before the ceiling fell."

Brush fires, particularly in the old days, were especially threatening. On Thursday afternoon, April 19, 1928, a fire at Mount Airy and Pill Hill roads consumed about 300 acres and spread to the Holy Cross cemetery property. It was put out by about 200 firefighters from Basking Ridge, Bernardsville and Liberty Corner. Merchants on the east side of the Basking Ridge green breathed a sigh of relief on Tuesday night, Sept. 6, 1932, after the company put out a fire that began in a barn on the Louis Schaefer estate and spread to a neighboring garage. Said The News: "The timely discovery of this blaze no doubt saved that section of the village from destruction as the burning structure was located between the buildings occupied by Savage Brown (now the Lemon Lounge),

Rocco Santolino, Moffett's Garage and the Basking Ridge Fire Company. "A fire destroyed the three-story Broadacres Hotel at the fork of Route 202 and Madisonville Road on Saturday morning, Jan. 6, 1940, but not before creating some very anxious moments. Responding in bitter cold, the Basking Ridge and Bernardsville fire companies overcome a strong wind that "was blowing large chunks of lighted wood over the houses on the south side of Madisonville Road, opposite the hotel," The News said.

A hangar and two airplanes at the old Somerset Hills Airport on Lord Stirling Road burned on Friday, Jan. 10, 1941, but firemen from Basking Ridge and Liberty Corner stopped it from spreading to the nearby office building. "Huge columns of smoke which rose from the burning planes and other materials stored in the hangar attracted many spectators," The News reported.

Agricultural fires were also a challenge. One burned about 100 tons of hay on the 208-acre Schaenen farm off South Maple Avenue on Wednesday afternoon, July 11 1945. Several chicken houses were destroyed but no livestock perished.

The historic Washington House, now The Store Restaurant, on South Finley Avenue was saved after a fire gutted the fourth floor early Tuesday, Dec. 2, 1947. Firefighters, who found flames spreading up 30 feet from the cupola, worked from 2:30 to 5 a.m. in chilly 18-degree air.

Another landmark, the Van Doren Mill, was found with roof shingles on fire during efforts to put out a grass fire across the street on Childs Road on Easter Sunday afternoon, April 10, 1955. "Within minutes water was poured on the roof and the historic landmark was saved," The News reported. "The fire left a 15-foot hole in the roof."

Turbulent Times Firefighting was also vital during the turbulence of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Police headquarters on Stonehouse Road was firebombed early Monday, April 15, 1968, when someone tossed a Molotov cocktail through a window. The municipal courtroom off Collyer Lane was also firebombed early Monday, Oct 7, 1974.

The two-story clubhouse of the Pennbrook Golf Club, now the Basking Ridge Country Club, sustained major damage in a fire on Sunday morning Aug. 29, 1976.

Only fast work by the Bernards Township and Bernardsville fire companies saved the old wood-frame structure from burning to the ground, The News said. The damage was estimated at \$500,000 to \$1 million and ultimately, the clubhouse was razed in May 1977. A new, cedar-sided clubhouse rose on the

site in 1981 but that too may have vanished had it not been for a response from Basking Ridge, Bernardsville, Liberty Corner and New Vernon firefighters on Friday evening, April 4, 1996. A blaze destroyed the kitchens on the first and second floors but got trapped inside the roof, leading about eight firefighters from Basking Ridge and Bernardsville to chop holes in the roof to find it and let the hot gases out.

Some other, less spectacular house fires have also featured acts of heroism. On Tuesday morning, March 26, 1974, firefighters entered a smoldering house at 93 Cross Road and suffered cuts while rescuing an 8-year-old boy who was hiding in a closet. Despite all the risks, the company did not have a fatality for more than 90 years.

That changed during a response to a fire at an unoccupied house at 3 North Brook Ave. at 3:10 a.m. Wednesday, Nov. 9, 1994. Richard Liddy, 66, of Millington, a former company chief and president, suffered a heart attack while pulling a hose and died six days later. Adding to tragedy, investigators found that the fire was deliberately set. The homeowner, Joseph D. Cox, was found near the blaze under a blanket and was later charged with arson and murder. Two courts ruled that the evidence was illegally seized but Cox died during an appeal.

If the past is any guide, the 100th anniversary celebration should draw a big crowd. The 50th anniversary parade on Saturday, June 26, 1954, drew more than 2,500 people to watch about 750 participants march on Finley Avenue.

Old Days This file photo from 1910 shows members of Basking Ridge Fire Company No. 1 sitting in their horseless fire engine outside the Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church on the village green. The company celebrates its 100th anniversary this Saturday, June 26.