

Bayonne Fire Department
Some early major alarms detailed in
upcoming fire department history
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Within three weeks, the final copies of A History of the Bayonne Fire Department by the late Dr. Walter F. Robinson should be rolling off the presses at Jersey Printing Company on Linnet Street.

Fire Chief John T. Brennan has told me he saw a final proof of the book and that he is very pleased with it. Soon after the city received its 10,000 copies of the history, arrangements will be announced for its sale to the public.

Several weeks ago, thanks to Chief Brennan, I was able to give you a sneak preview of Dr. Robinson's last work and I would like to release another installment in today's column.

Today's material comes under the heading of Some Early Major Alarms. And while the narrative concerns major fires, history buffs can see what life was like from 1907 to 1928, by reading between the lines.

"1907 August 16: During its first full year of operation under Chief Alfred Davis the paid Bayonne Fire Department answered 138 alarms. One of these occurred on the estate of John Dempsey, funeral director, on Broadway at 14th Street. Back of his office were barns, housing 15 horses and coaches. About midnight a fire started in the hay loft over the stables. Meanwhile a returning excursion train had just unloaded passengers at West 8th Street Station. Those walking on Broadway saw the fire, rushed into the burning stables, and hauled out the hearses and coaches plus the harness and saved all but one of the 15 horses. In latter stable fires on 22nd Street the horses were not so fortunate. It was well known that horses often become panic-stricken in a stable fire and try to rush into the flames instead of away from them.

"1907, December 3: Park Theatre on Broadway and 23rd Street Shoe store and theatre cafe on first floor, telephone switchboards on second floor and lawyers' offices on third floor. Smoke in the stair wells and halls cut off 11 lady telephone operators and three men. They moved up to the third floor and were rescued by aerial ladder trucks.

"1911, November 30: La Tourette Hotel: This huge wooden building faced the Kill Van Kull on 1st Street between Broadway and Avenue C. Its dried out frame construction made it the second largest fire hazard in Bayonne, surpassed only by the nearby Port Johnston Coal Docks. On the afternoon of Thanksgiving Day, the guests were just finishing their holiday dinner when a fire broke out in the western wing of the long wooden building. Quick response and effective work by the firefighters saved the rest of the ancient structure. In gratitude the guests signed a letter to the Mayor and City Council, congratulating Chief Davis and his men, saying, "Too much praise can not be accorded them. In the face of a high wind that was blowing that they should have saved the main building..." When this majestic "fire trap" was torn down in 1921 the Bayonne Fire Department was entitled to a sigh of relief.

"1912, June 9: Booth Lumber Yard (now Woodward's) at Oak and Linnet Street. Sparks from a passing locomotive ignited a pile of lumber. The flames reached a row of houses on Linnet Street as the occupants carried out the household goods. The fire also destroyed the adjacent brick buildings of

the former Public Service gas plant. The whole fire department was on duty all night as the blaze illuminated the sky for miles around.

"1913, June 15: In northern Bayonne the all-wooden railroad bridge crossing Newark Bay was operated by the Pennsylvania and Lehigh Valley Railroads. In that day of burning locomotives hot coals fell from a boiler grate to the wooden ties underlying the rails. The fire then raced westward along the wooden timbers of the bridge. The drawbridge had to be opened to prevent the flames from reaching the western section. As a result, 39 loaded freight cars caught on the bridge was burned, including 6 of sheep, 2 of poultry, and 33 of farm produce. The bay was covered with burned vegetables and roasted sheep and chickens.

"1920, February 8: The whole city had just become blanketed in deep snow. The owner of a house on West 43rd Street turned on the draft of his basement furnace but he forgot about it and went to see a moving picture at the Lyceum Theatre. When he returned his house was ablaze and the heavy wind was pushing the flames through three other frame houses. All five of Bayonne's new motor pumper became stalled in snow drifts in trying to reach the fire and had to be haled out by horses from livery stables and coal yards. Meanwhile, this writer (Dr. Robinson) watched a column of sparks rise above the burning houses, moved eastward, and drop on the roofs of his community on East 44th Street near the bay shores. He spent several busy hours with ladders and water buckets but luckily snow on the roofs quenched the falling sparks.

"1921, February 18: Motion picture laboratory on Avenue E and 43rd Street. At that time the film was made of highly flammable celluloid. Chief Davis has visited this plant several days before and warned the owners against locking fire escape doors. When this celluloid exploded three girls were trapped in the fire by locked doors. The owners were prosecuted in county court and fined.

"1923, March 29: An explosion in a barn near Cottage Street shook all of Bergen Point. It was caused by a large still producing illicit whiskey, called hooch, in these prohibition days. Again on January 26, 1927, a fire on 20th Street uncovered a large whiskey still in operation.

"1926, May 21: Bayonne Casino on First Street, a combination boxing arena and dance hall. Two nights before, the Democratic Ball there was attended by Governor Moore and Mayor Frank Hague of Jersey City. All Bayonne's fire companies fought the blaze but the casino was destroyed.

"1927, January 16: Three buildings on the southwest corner of 19th Street and Broadway. Temperatures were well below freezing and the streets were covered with ice. Snow impelled by high winds hampered the firefighters. As the flames spread, the roof of the middle building collapsed. Three firefighters standing on the roof fell 30 feet but escaped death. News reel cameras recorded this fire and two nights later the pictures were shown at the De Witt Theatre, depicting Bayonne firefighters in the freezing weather, risking their lives to extinguish a fiery furnace.

"1927, March 25: Fire in a garage on East 7th Street destroyed 27 automobiles and four autobuses. This marked Bayonne's transition from horses lost in burning stables.

"1928, April 1: Bayonne Bolt Company occupied a square block on 2nd Street and Humphrey Avenue. The taps and dies

in the machines threading bolts and nuts had to battle in jets of lubricating oil. Over the years the floor became saturated with spilled oil. Therefore, a short circuit started a fire in one place and flames spread so quickly throughout the whole structure that the 170 girls and men scarcely escaped with their lives. To make matters worse, a strong north wind wafted the sparks to cause seven additional fires nearby, including the roller coaster which had just been found at Amusement Park.