

“Port Washington Village On Fire!”

by Frank C. Pavlak



Gleason & Bailey ladder wagon of Atlantic Hook & Ladder Co. #1 in front of Liberty Hall (c. 1905). (Courtesy of Atlantic Hook & Ladder Co.)

At 11:05 AM, on May 10th, 1902, the Western Union Telegraph message received by the Sea Cliff Fire Department read “Port Washington village on fire send assistance at once.” At 10:15 that Saturday morning, a devastating fire erupted on lower Main Street at the junction of Shore Road, commonly known as Bayles Corner.

The fire started in the barn of Dr. A.C. Bayles, pharmacist and well-known community leader, which was located behind his drug store, and quickly spread to the adjoining buildings. The fire was fueled by hay, the wood frame buildings and a high northwest wind. By day's end the Bayles' barn, drug store, Van Wicklen's ice cream saloon, Dr. W. Cocke's barn and part of his residence, as well as several other structures, were destroyed.

At that time, the Port Washington Fire Department consisted of Atlantic Hook & Ladder Co. #1 and Protection Engine Co. #1, both having fire houses around the corner from the fire scene. Fire fighting equipment was extremely limited. Atlantic owned a Gleason & Bailey ladder wagon with fire buckets and Protection a Rumsey hand pumper with a separate hose cart. Atlantic was lead by Foreman Henry Klothe and Protection by Foreman Eugene E. Carpenter, who had held that office since 1894 and was considered the first Chief of what was then the Port Washington Fire Department.

As Harold Seaman, who was a long time member of Atlantic, and who eventually bought the Bauer Hardware Store which became known as SeamanNeedham, recalled in a *Port Washington News* article, "William M. Hyde and I were having a catch in front of the Atlantic Fire House on Carleton Avenue when Charles Davis, standing up in his wagon, came racing down the street at a deadrun, shouting for us to ring the bell."



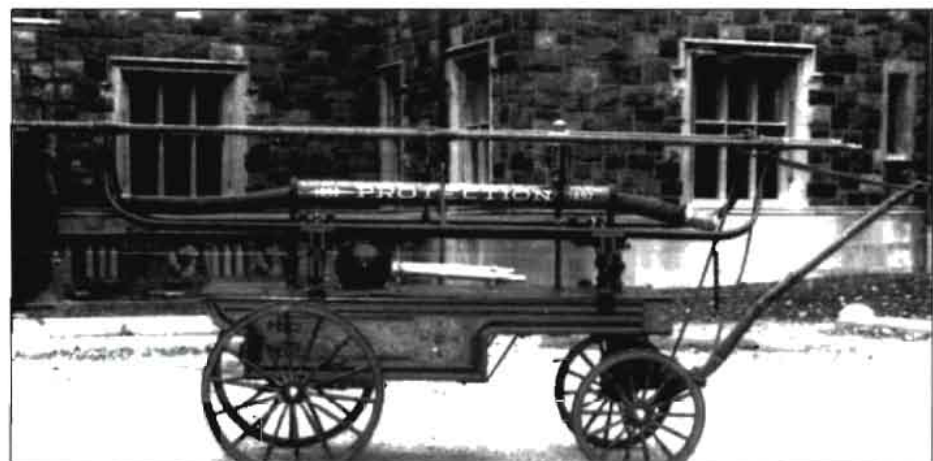
Alarm bell at the Atlantic Hook & Ladder Company #1 at 25 Carlton Avenue. (2001 Photo by Frank C. Pavlak)

wagon and buckets were immediately put into action, drawing water from wells and cisterns. Protection's hand pumper was a great asset. However, there were obstacles to overcome. First, there were no fire hydrants. They were a few years away, so the pumper had to draw

When we asked "Where is the fire?" he just answered, "Can't you see it?" Sure enough, the thick black smoke was curling up to the sky just a block away.

"We rang the bell, the only fire alarm in Port Washington at that time, and hauled open the doors of the firehouse to pull the old white hook and ladder truck down the street to the Bayles fire."

The bell, located at Atlantic, coupled with the billowing smoke, brought men, women and children to help. Atlantic's ladder



Rumsey hand pumper of Protection Engine Company #1, S. Washington Street. Both the Atlantic and Protection companies were only one block away from Bayles corner where the fire occurred. (Courtesy Protection Engine Co. #1)

water from Baxter's Pond, more than a block away. Because of the distance there was barely enough hose to stretch a line to the fire. Second, it took twenty people to man the "brakes" (pumping rails).

Mrs. Katherine Gould, wife of railroad heir Howard Gould, sent a large crew of employees from her estate, Castlegould, in Sands Point, to help man the pumper. "They almost pumped the Baxter Pond dry getting water to the fire." Great praise was given to the woman telegraph operator in the Bayles Building who withstood flames and heavy smoke to send out messages for help before the wires burned through. Help arrived from Great Neck, Roslyn, Sea Cliff and as far away as Flushing and Bayside.

Considering the great distance, 1902 road conditions and the speed of the horses pulling the heavy fire equipment, the response was fast. Although the supply of water was limited, the fire departments were able to couple hose lines together and reach a large number of wells to douse the flames. There was great fear the fire would spread to the large general store of A. H. Baxter and the Central Hotel. Had this happened, the entire business district would have been destroyed. Much credit is given to the assisting fire departments and to all the men, women and children of the community working together to save the village. Seaman recalled, "That day youngsters also helped by putting out many fires in adjoining buildings which were caused by flying sparks. Many families moved their furniture and belongings up the hill in the firm belief that the village, as it existed then, was doomed."

A few weeks later, as a sign of appreciation, Atlantic and Protection invited all of the assisting fire departments back to Port Washington for a parade and dinner with entertainment. It is understood that Mrs. Gould paid for the reception. Each department was presented with a large leather shield to thank them for their help.

Over the next several years the burned out buildings were replaced with the Bayles Building (1914) we see today.



The Red Door building at 305 Main Street, was built by A.C. Bayles soon after the 1902 fire and used by Bayles for his pharmacy until 1914 when the three story Bayles Building (right), corner of Main Street and Shore Road, was constructed. (Photo George Williams)

About the Author: Frank C. Pavlak was raised and educated in Port Washington and has served as a trustee of Protection Engine Company No. 1 for 26 years. His book, *History of Protection Engine Company*, was published in 1992 on the occasion of that company's 100th anniversary.