

Medfield's Worst Fires

By Richard DeSorgher (2011)

Over the years Medfield has endured many severe fires; some in the woods and fields that consumed hundreds and, occasionally, thousands of acres, often seemingly unstoppable. Various ones destroyed homes and resulted in loss of life, and others were spectacular, burning barns filled with hay and other combustibles with flames reaching high into the sky. In return, our firefighters have responded, often with heroics, to battle these destructive forces.

By far the worst fire ever to strike Medfield started in the early morning hours of February 21, 1676 during what became known as the King Philip War. Thirty-two houses, barns and outbuildings were burned. The three bridges connecting Medfield to our west over the Charles River were also burned and the town lay in smoky ruins, decimated. It took years for Medfield to fully recover. It was the only time the town of Medfield was attacked by outside forces. No modern day view of those events could possibly fully understand the emotions those in Medfield endured that morning, with smoke, fire and death all around them.

Medfield was without a town hall for the first 250 years of its history. Finally, thanks to the monetary gift of George Chenery, our first town hall was built in 1872. Less than two years later, however, it burned down, including the destruction of the fire engine and the area used as the engine house. The building was thoroughly on fire when the alarm was given and the citizens and the engine company were thus compelled to stand and watch the beautiful edifice fall into a heap of ashes, powerless to do anything to save it. It was voted to rebuild the town hall. A portion of the tower at the southwest corner was left standing and was utilized by being incorporated into the new structure. The new town hall was rededicated on November 2, 1874.

The year 1876 was, according to William Tilden's History of Medfield, the year that Medfield was visited by the fire fiend. First, the South School, located near the intersection of High and South Streets, burned. It was rebuilt that same year at a cost of \$1,546. Then the Orthodox Congregational Church (now the United Church of Christ), with all its contents and the new chapel located near the church were totally destroyed by fire. Finally the straw shop of Daniel D. Curtis was burned to the ground. The straw shop at the time was located in the old Townsend House, where the Montrose School is today. Despite heroic efforts by the engine company, the flames swept steadily on til the buildings were burned to the ground. A new and spacious hat factory was then rebuilt; that is the present building on North Street now home of the Monrose School.

Ord's Block, formerly Wills Hardware and later occupied by Master's Touch, was totally destroyed by fire in 1889. James Ord had one of the largest stocks of stove, furniture and crockery in the area. Upwards of \$600 worth of stock was destroyed. The building itself was estimated at \$3,500. The general feeling was that the fire started from the coal stove on the first floor. Ord's Block was first erected in the fall of 1882. T.C. Wood & Company selling dry goods, boots and shoes, was the first floor tenant. In the winter of 1883-84 the upper floor was used as an indoor skating rink. The present building was rebuilt in 1891 and opened for business in 1892 with James Ord Furniture, Stoves and Hardware occupying the building.

1896 saw a major fire at Noon Hill. Newspaper accounts said: *"A fire left burning at a camp along the Charles River near Dwight's Bridge resulted in over 200 acres of woodland being burned. Hundreds of cords of wood, piled up ready for market, were destroyed along with two houses. In a strong gale the flames were often more than 40 feet high. The fire roared through the pines like a furnace. Loss was estimated at \$2,000. But for the fact that the wind died out, the whole of Noon Hill would have been burned over. It was one of the worst fires in the history of the town. Great credit was due the fire department and the town citizens who responded without want of pay."*

In 1899, major fires burned to the ground the Newell House on Bridge Street, the cider and saw mill owned by William Weiker off Bridge Street and the house of Mrs. Albert Gay. At the house of Esther Strang on High Street, family nurse Delia Kennedy was burned to death and the house was completely destroyed. A thorough investigation was unable to put blame on anyone.

One of the worst fires in many years and one of the most suspicious took place in 1909 when the American Steam Packing Company on North Street near the Dover town line burned to the ground. Telephone lines had been cut, preventing the sending of an alarm. Loss was reported at more than \$10,000. At the time of the fire, 10 men were employed by the packing company. The building was completely rebuilt and within three weeks a new 150-foot by 25-foot three-story plant was complete.

The Hotel Gerald on West Mill Street near the Junction was totally destroyed by fire in 1915. Loss was estimated at \$2,500. The building had been unoccupied for several months. That same year, fire of unknown origin caused several hundred dollars worth of damage to the rear of the shops owned by Col. Edwin V. Mitchell on North Street and occupied by Roy E. Kerr Company, Plumbers, and Harry Zeitler, tailor. Prompt work by the fire department with the new 40-gallon chemical engine prevented serious loss. Shortly after that, a severe woods and brush fire, which started near Green Street, burned over 300 acres, spreading to the Child Estate on Main Street and as far as David Meaney's house on East Main

Street, opposite the current Sunoco gas station area. Fire fighters responded at 9:30 in the morning and fought the fire, with assistance from Dover, until 6:00 PM that evening.

The year 1921 saw the worst fire in a century. With the exception of 1676, when half of Medfield was burned during the King Philip War, this was one of the greatest fires ever to strike the town. It left behind a blackened swath two miles wide by two miles long across the town. It was believed to have been started by sparks from a locomotive near the former Medfield State Hospital. Fires started by sparks from locomotives were a common cause of fires that plagued Medfield for many years and kept busy the town's fire department. Once the fire began, in the area of the train tracks across from the former hospital in the north end of town, it gained strength with greater and greater intensity. Added to the fact that there were incredibly strong winds, a "perfect storm" scenario was created. The high winds caused large clumps of burning leaves to blow high into the air and scattered the flames in all directions. Once the fire had struck into the pine timber, there was no stopping it. The flames, taking on a life of their own, roared south and east across Adams and Harding Streets. As the housing developments of today were not yet built most of the town and the area impacted were open fields, brush or woodland. The flames, coming across Adams Street where the Memorial School is today, took the large two-story house, barn and outbuildings on North Street owned by George Ellis along with all their contents. The fire was being battled by the Medfield Fire Department but was out of control due to the fierce winds.

Alarms went out for assistance from the Millis, Dover, Walpole and Dedham Fire Departments. All five town departments began to fight the blaze as it crossed over North Streets and headed up Pine and Green Streets, threatening Medfield Center and the homes along Summer Street. Meanwhile, emergency crews at the State Hospital continued to battle the flames which were now encroaching upon the hospital property, frightening the over 2000 patients living there. Smoke was reported so dense that firemen were unable to get near enough to fight the fire. Town residents began responding to assist the firefighters. In response to Medfield's call for help, and the fear that the flames would sweep through the buildings in Medfield Center, a special train was sent by the New Haven Railroad with 200 men to assist in fighting the now out-of-control blaze. The fire swept across the area that is today Lowell Mason Road and all the area of Pine Needle Park. It was here, in the tall pines, that the wind-swept flames could be seen for miles. Fire fighters decided to make a stand all along Hartford and Main Street as the fire soon engulfed all the land along the present Hatters Hill and Pederzini Drive area and entered into the even more densely timbered Rocky Woods. Firefighters and volunteers, now in the hundreds, mounted a last ditch defense along Hartford Street and Main Street, with the hope they could stop the inferno

from crossing the street. If not, there would be no controlling it, as it would race into Dover and Walpole.

For seven long hours the firefighters and volunteers fought the flames. Their defense along Hartford and Main Streets held. But in its wake more than 2,500 acres of field, brush and timberlands were destroyed. In today's map, the area destroyed would have included Adams Street, West Mill Street, West Street, Pine Street, North Street, Dale Street, Lowell Mason Road, Meade Avenue, Castle Avenue, Johns Avenue, Remsen Avenue, Summer Street, Pine Street, Green Street, Brook Street, Earle Kerr Road, Newport Lane, Kenney Road, all of the streets and homes in Pine Needle Park, all of the Hawthorne Estates, all of the Overfield Estates off Pine Street, Winter Street, Maplewood Road, Scott Road, Cedar Lane, Spruce Way, all of the Hatters Hill Road area and all the Pederzini Drive area.

In 1923, for the second time in 50 years the town hall burned. The fire occurred early in the morning of January 17 during bitter cold weather. When the alarm came into the fire station, located in the lower level of town hall, it was reported that the dispatcher asked "Where is the fire?" to which the operator responded, "over your head." The entire inside of the building was gutted, leaving only a partial shell standing. Blankets of snow on the nearby buildings kept the fire from spreading. Hot embers were reported to have fallen up to two miles away. A defective chimney was thought to have been the cause. A fireproof cement vault saved many of the town records. Many other records, not in the safe, were destroyed. While the fire apparatus was able to be saved and was used to help fight the fire, the building itself was a total loss. Estimated loss was put at \$50,000. All town departments, the American Legion, and the Red Cross suffered losses and had to be relocated. Because of the high insurance rates, the town was only protected to the extent of \$28,000. The post office was moved into the central Railroad Station on Park Street. The fire department and apparatus were moved into the Medfield Garage and Dewar's Garage on Park Street until the new town hall was completed later that fall. The fire station then returned to its location in the basement level of town hall. Where it would stay until the North Street Station was built in 1961.

On April 29, 1932, a fire in Rocky Woods burned a total of 580 acres, costing the town \$714.65 to extinguish. Help was called from the departments of Dover, Millis, Walpole, Westwood, Norwood, Foxboro, Needham, Wellesley and Natick to combat the blaze. During the 1950s spectacular fires took place with the burning of Del Kelly's barn on Rocky Lane and the Old Yellow Tin barn on Claypit Road. In 1957 St. Edward Church on Main Street was hit by lightning resulting in fire inside the steeple. As Medfield did not have a ladder truck with ladders that could reach that high, the town had to wait for mutual aid and hook

and ladder trucks from Westwood and Walpole to put out the fire; thankfully with only minimum damage.

The year 1967 saw two major fires. First, the burning of the Medfield State Hospital barn took place. Filled with hay, the barn became an inferno with flames seen for miles around. Five surrounding town fire departments aided Medfield in the battle. The town then shook when a gas explosion on 36 Spring Street leveled the house, with three towns coming to Medfield's aid in the disastrous explosion.

In February of 1986 Medfield was hit with another of its worst fires in recent history when fire struck the Park Street Medical Building. With rapid and professional work the Medfield firefighters, along with quick assistance from Dover, Millis, Medway and Westwood, contained the fire so that it did not spread to the other buildings on the street.

During the 1990s/2000s the town saw fire devastate three of the town's most historic houses, with fires at the 18th century Lucy Bran House on 661 Main Street, the 18th century Quinobequin House on 49 Bridge Street and the 18th century Richardson House at 1 Main Street.

Through great personal efforts by the owners, Brad and Betsy Phipps of the Lucy Bran house and Stephen and Kathleen McCrossan of the Quinobequin house, both were saved and historically restored. The historic Richardson house, however, was burned by arson and was never rebuilt. It was replaced by the current Tubwreck Drive housing development.