

## Where's the Fire? Part One

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By Robert Fridlington

There is perhaps no more colorful chapter in Cranford's history than the story of the origin and development of the township's Fire Department, from its inception as a volunteer organization through its early years with paid fire fighters employed by the municipality.

Curiously, not much attention has been paid to this story. Emmor K. Adams, Jr., gave us the fullest account in 1929, and not unexpectedly placed himself at the center of most of the events (as Adams said, "If I don't blow my horn, no one will hear it"). Most of Adam's memoir was printed in the Cranford Fire Department's Centennial booklet in 1993.

In 1976, the late Arthur Burditt wrote a brief history on the origin of the department for a series that ran in the *Cranford Chronicle*. But the Department deserves more. It deserves a full-blown history.

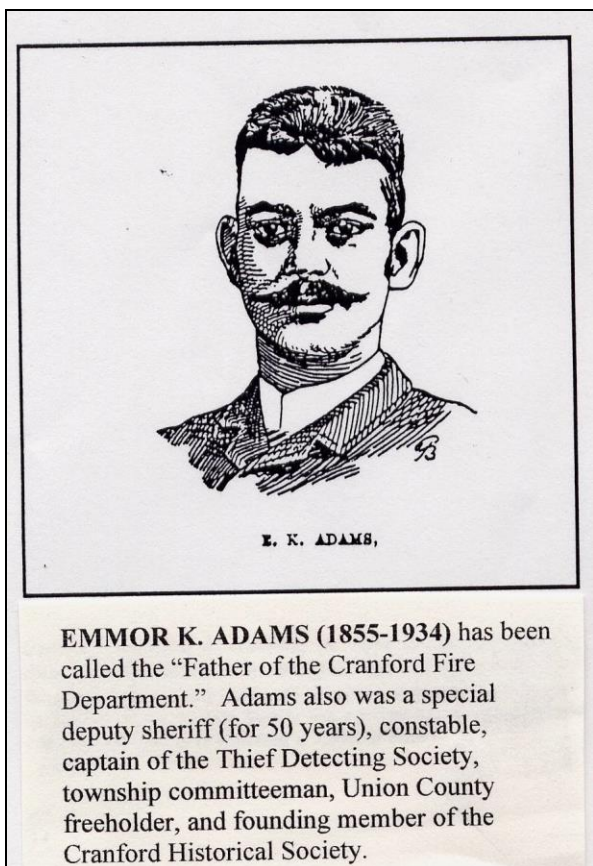
The story really begins in 1879 when E.K. Adams led an effort to purchase a village hook and ladder truck for the town. The money was to be raised by subscription, but contributions failed to materialize. This failure is puzzling since fire was certainly a constant threat and fire safety a constant concern. Adams explained it by saying that the appeal was not strong enough and lacked enthusiasm. More likely it was because residents believed there was not an adequate supply of water for fighting fires.

An adequate water supply would not become available until the early 1890's when the Union Water Company began laying a twelve inch main along the Jersey Central tracks between Plainfield and Elizabeth. In the spring of 1892, the company informed the Cranford Township Committee that it could now supply the town with water, and a committee met with company officials to discuss the possibilities. The water company would lay a system of lateral mains and furnish any number of hydrants, provided there were at least ten on each mile of the main. The cost would be \$25.00 per hydrant per year. The same mains would supply water to private residences.

The company's offer sounded good to the majority of residents, who wanted clean water both for domestic use and for fire protection. Nevertheless, the township backed away from an agreement. Adams later claimed full credit for blocking the proposal, stating that he wanted to delay action until he could raise enough money to purchase 500 feet of hose and a carriage to carry it.

Yet, the issue was not that simple. The company laying the mains was being sued by another company, also called the Union Water Company, which was composed of some of Cranford's wealthiest and most influential citizens. These men had social and political ties to members of the township committee. Headed by Alden Bigelow, they claimed the exclusive right, granted by legislative charter, to develop a water system in Cranford. Their lawsuit would continue for years.

The town fathers wanted to avoid any entanglements. In October when they received a petition signed by 144 "property owners and voters" asking the township to contract with the water company to provide water for domestic use and fire protection and to establish 25 to 30 hydrants as "a very desirable public improvement," they simply



filed it away. But after a few wealthy citizens agreed to pay the annual fees if hydrants were installed near their homes, the petition was resurrected and approved.

Two “prominent citizens”, according to Adams, had promised to raise enough money to buy the necessary fire apparatus for a volunteer company, but they raised barely enough “to buy a decent fire hat.” So Adams himself took over the job of fundraising and collected a total of \$410.00.

In order to recruit and organize a hose company a public meeting was held in the township rooms in the old Miller Building on North Avenue. Any adult male resident could join by paying an initiation fee of fifty cents. As a result, said Adams, “every ‘bum’ in the town” attended the meeting and frightened the respectable prospects away. Despite this, the group was able to adopt rules and regulations that they thought the “rabble” would find difficult to live with. Events would prove them badly mistaken, however.

Adams also negotiated with a former Chief of the Newark Fire Department, who was in the fire department supply business, to purchase a second hand, rebuilt, four-wheel hose carriage with a reel, 500 feet of new 2 ½ inch rubber-lined cotton hose and two brass nozzles.

The Union Hose Company was officially organized on November 10, 1892 (it was incorporated in 1895). Adams says, modestly, that he declined the position of Foreman of the company because he was “ignorant as to extinguishing fires in the proper manner.” He believed an experienced man should head the company until he, Adams, “had taken a few lessons in the art.” Eight years later he was elected Chief of the Department.

The man chosen as the first Foreman of the company was William W. Mendell, a local carpenter, builder, and Civil War veteran, who would also serve Cranford as Justice of the Peace for more than 50 years. Mendell did have experience. He had been a member of the Long Island City, NY Fire Department for several years and he served in the locally famous Elizabeth, NJ, Rolla Company, No. 2 (that boasted the motto, “Rolla to the rescue”). Years before, Rolla was the first Elizabeth company to put its members in uniforms. As it turned out, Mendell’s experience did not impress the men of the Cranford Company.

The arrival of the hose carriage was a big day in Cranford—except that the company had no place to store it. But C.L. Abry offered the Hose Company the use of his barn at South and South Union Avenues until the township could get around to building a firehouse of its own.

Adams still was not satisfied. As soon as the hose company was organized, he began planning for a hook and ladder truck. This time his approach was a bit different: he personally spoke to some of the “best citizens in the town” and recruited them for the new company. The township, moreover, agreed to pay for a new ladder truck, although all volunteers would have to pay for their own equipment. On April 17, 1893, just five months after the Hose Company was established, a Hook and Ladder Company was officially organized. Adams immediately resigned from the Hose Company and was made Foreman of the new group.

In November, the volunteers moved into a new firehouse, paid for by the town, with some assistance from the two companies. The new headquarters was on North Avenue East, about where the present railroad tunnel is located. On November 29, 1893, Cranford’s brand new newspaper, the *Chronicle*, could scarcely contain its enthusiasm: “Cranford can well afford to feel proud over her Fire Department, and every member of the Fire Department is justly proud of being one of Cranford’s firemen.”

Yet, less than six weeks later, after a series of sensational articles, the paper suggested the hose company be disbanded and reorganized. What had happened? What had gone wrong?

*[to be continued]*

