

Where's the Fire? Part Two

By Robert Fridlington

In November 1893, the village of Cranford could scarcely contain its pride in its two new volunteer fire companies. The Union Hose Company and the Hook and Ladder Company had moved their carriages out of Mr. Abry's barn and into the new firehouse on North Avenue.

On the second floor, each of the companies had set up its own meeting room, with members buying the furnishings. Fire companies formed close-knit fraternities and the meeting rooms in the new firehouse became clubrooms of a sort, especially the one used by the Hose Company.

There were plenty of fires to keep the men busy, especially in old barns filled with hay and straw. Years later, E.K. Adams recalled that before the new firehouse was built some of the members would meet at the hose cart barn. These "roughnecks," as he called them, would "rush to growler" (translation: fetch a pail of beer from a saloon) and after a night of carousing would draw straws to see who would go out and set fire to a barn. What Adams neglected to mention was that this practice continued after the volunteers moved into their new quarters.

The Hose Company ushered in 1894 with just such a rampage. In the January 3 *Cranford Chronicle*, under the heading "Cranford Disgraced," editor-proprietor John Alfred Potter declared that "the fair name of the Cranford Fire Department and the whole village as well was besmirched on New Year's Eve by the outrageous conduct of a few rowdies connected with Union Hose Co., No. 1."



Union Hose Co., Number 1 [1895]

The "outrageous conduct" began just after midnight New Year's morning. Benjamin W. Brown, a Roselle Constable, was returning home after a meeting at the Methodist Church in Cranford when he was waylaid by five inebriated young men near the hose house. According to Brown, the gang demanded money and when he refused to comply, one of them struck him in the face with a club, knocking him down. When he got to his feet, he was struck again. Brown then ran to the railroad station with the five attackers at his heels. Cornering him in the station, they threatened him but inflicted no further injury.

Brown recognized three of the men as members of the fire company but he knew only one by name, the one who had struck him. His name was Cornelius Crowley and he was not only a member of the Union Hose Company, he was also a Township Special Officer.

A short time later, a group from the hose company, “accompanied by a crowd of the worst loafers in town,” entered the firehouse and for the next three hours ten members, including Chief Daniel Torbush, celebrated the New Year in the Hose Company meeting room. Liquid refreshments flowed freely and twice new supplies were sent for. Finally, one of the men said, “Let’s have a shine” (meaning let’s have a fire), and the suggestion met general approval. After discussing two or three possibilities, three of the firemen set out with a can of kerosene.

Fireman David Rankin later stated that up to this point he had regarded the entire matter as a joke, but he now realized it was serious. Rousing Chief Torbush, “who was dozing,” the two started after the three men and had gone but a short distance when they saw flames from a barn owned by James Partridge. Meeting one of the firemen returning, the Chief demanded to know why they had set fire to the building. The reply was, “Oh well, it’s done now, so let her go.”

The Hose Company reached the fire quickly, but the firemen were so drunk they could not handle the hose properly and ended up dowsing bystanders. Word of the escapade, “which brought disgrace upon our fair village,” spread quickly, and the Union County Grand Jury was asked to investigate.

The Hose Company called a special meeting. Members were sworn to secrecy and threatened with expulsion from the company if they revealed anything about the group’s discussions or actions. The company did announce that a committee was appointed to investigate the New Year’s outrages.

The investigation concluded that Cornelius Crowley had a good alibi and had nothing to do with setting the fire. The investigators also concluded that Daniel Torbush was not guilty, although he confessed to being intoxicated and disorderly. But three of the men—Frank Ecke, Fred Brown and Jacob Kunkle—all confessed to taking part in the arson. Yet the Hose Company refused to formulate charges against any of the men on the grounds that such action might be prejudicial in the eyes of the grand jury.

The company did vote to suspend the four but only until the next meeting. As the *Elizabeth Daily Journal* dryly observed, “The good name of the company has thus been vindicated, for at least one month....”

Meanwhile, the Town Committee, obviously wanting to distance itself from the whole scandal, decided to do nothing until it had received the reports of the grand jury and the Hose Company committee. It would not even report on the recent rash of fires, despite the fact that 17 Cranford residents already had been subpoenaed by the grand jury.

And what about the assault and attempted robbery accusations made against three of the firemen? Chairman Horton actually told the committee that he had inquired into the story and found that Constable Brown’s “reputation for veracity was not of the best.” The committee, however, did unanimously accept, quietly and without comment, Crowley’s resignation as Special Officer. Cornelius Crowley had written a letter to the *Chronicle* vehemently denying he had done anything wrong. The grand jury, however, found Brown’s story believable. Crowley was indicted and later found guilty.

As the accusations and denunciations dragged on through the month of January, so did the suspicious fires. The *Chronicle* and the *Elizabeth Daily Journal* kept up a steady demand for some kind of positive action and the *Chronicle* found itself having to defend its coverage of the entire affair.

As early as January 10, Editor Potter of the Chronicle printed a long editorial stating that the paper's account of the events surrounding the New Year's fire had created considerable comment and had even provoked a published statement calling the article "sensational and in many respects erroneous." Potter vigorously defended the paper's story, acknowledging that some Hose Company members were innocent of any wrongdoing and commenting that when "we step on the toes of any members of the Hose Company we do not step on the whole company."

But criticism continued. Several points of view were expressed. One was that emphasizing the affair would result in giving the village a bad name. Another seems to have been that the miscreants were penitent so no further punishment should be imposed. A third was that the men were all good citizens who acted only after imbibing too much, so they really were not responsible.

The following week, Potter stated that the paper's coverage caused more comment in Cranford "than anything that has happened since its soil was first turned by the plows of the sturdy yeoman long before the revolutionary days." Potter's prose may have been tinged with purple, but his position was firm. "Everyone was surprised, many expressed indignation and some made threats as to what they would do to the *Chronicle* for presuming to publish anything about the town pet, the Hose Company," but he asserted, his business was journalism, "not toadyism."

Shielding the guilty, he argued, would be an injustice to every property owner in the village. "The law," he declared, "is no respecter [sic] of persons and a criminal in the Union Hose Company is not one whit better than a criminal out of it."

But how many agreed with him?

[to be continued]