

Underwear Factory Burns! Community Goes Without!

By Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian

Louis and Margrette Reed bought a building lot at auction in May of 1898, and hired Henry Lovejoy to begin construction of their home at what would later be numbered 70 West Church Street. An abundance of windows were installed in the new home to provide natural light for Mrs. Reed's dress making business, which she operated from the house. The contractor had previously built several notable homes in Fairport, including the William Newman house at 11 West Church Street and the home of Doctor Magill at 41 South Main Street, which for many years has been the Keenan Funeral Home.



The Reed's underwear factory was located behind the family home at 70 West Church Street

Mrs. Reed closed her dress shop in January of 1904 to focus on an exciting new business venture. Construction began in the back yard of her home on a two story wood frame factory building, 20 x 40 feet in size. The "underwear factory", as it was called by residents, opened in July of 1904, and produced a line of corset covers. Reed advertised her product as a perfect Christmas present for ladies: "My Seamless Corset Covers, in any of three grades, 25 cents, 39 cents, and 50 cent qualities, lace trimmed, very pretty".

In its first years, the Reed Company thrived, so much so that shortly before the fateful fire, space was rented to store inventory in what was known as the Hooker building at 43 West Avenue. Fortunate indeed, as it prevented all their finished goods from going up in flames.

The smell of gasoline, charred wood, and burning underwear filled the air on West Church Street on a Tuesday afternoon in March of 1907. Fairport's newspaper made the announcement: "Reed Factory Burned and Girls Narrowly Escape". Lydia McKinley was heating pressing irons on a small gasoline-fueled stove when the unit malfunctioned and burst into flames. On the second floor of the building were eleven women, aged 19 to 52. Minnie Wolf ran down the wooden staircase to the Reed home, less than forty feet from the factory, and used the telephone to call for help. The growing fire blocked the only stairway to safety for the remaining ten women. With no fire escapes, the employees were trapped.

A crew led by John Wemes was digging a nearby basement when they heard screams coming from the factory. The men found two ladders at nearby homes and attempted to rescue the screaming women perched in the second floor windows, but the ladders were too short. At the Fairport newspaper reported, two ladders were "hastily spliced together and the women were assisted through the window and to the ground. In the excitement, two girls tried to descend at the same time and the ladder broke, throwing them to the ground, but without serious injury".

Next: From the ashes, new life for the underwear factory

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Fairport-ER Post, 01/21/2016