

## Early Fire Fighting was an Uphill Battle

By Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian (August, 2020)

A devastating fire at the DeLand factory in February of 1893 prompted the village of Fairport to invest in a waterworks system, including a network of fire hydrants, and as in turn, the first water service to homes and buildings. Prior to the DeLand fire, blazes in the village very often resulted in a total loss. Despite the best efforts of firefighters, the challenge of getting water to the fires was often insurmountable.



*February 3, 1893: As the DeLand factory was consumed by flames, firefighters were unsuccessful in their attempt to pump water from the frozen Erie Canal. The DeLand factory was across the street from the Fairport Hotel, seen in this image behind the men. Greatly modified in the early 1900s, the old inn still stands today, and is known as the Millstone Block.*

*(photos from the collection of the Perinton Historical Society)*

A handwritten record of fires in Fairport covering the years 1888 to 1907 reveals that fire-fighting was often, literally, an uphill battle. On Summit Street, seven houses and a barn were burned over the 19-year period. The near impossibility of getting fire equipment up the steep hill, coupled with little or no availability of water, put Fairport firefighters in an impossible position.



*Ruins of the DeLand factory fire of February 1893, on the current site of the Box Factory building and parking lot. The view is looking north across the canal.*

In the case of a fire at the Bown Carriage factory in 1886, although firefighters did all they could, the results were devastating. The Bown complex once stood among neighboring houses on the east side of South Main Street, between Church and Orchard Streets. At about midnight, a neighbor spotted flames in the upper story of the carriage shop, and awakened owner George Bown, who lived by the factory. Moments later, a passerby noticed the flames. He ran several hundred yards to the DeLand factory, where the engineer on duty was prompted to blow the factory whistle, alerting firefighters that a blaze was underway.

Firefighters quickly assembled, and directed their horse-drawn fire engine to the corner of Main and Church Streets. Here they ran a hose through a basement window of the Fairport First Baptist Church, intending to pump water off the cistern located there. When they found that the cistern was dry, they doubled back with their fire engine north to the canal. A hose was lowered to the water and laid down on South Main Street, but came up short of the distance required to reach the fire. Chief Levi DeLand raced to his factory and obtained another length of hose. Once connected, almost 1,600 feet of hose finally carried canal water to the raging inferno, but by then, it was too late.



*This photograph, captured sometime prior to the Bown factory fire of 1886, is a view looking north on South Main Street. The Bown factory buildings are in the right-center portion of the image. In the distance to the left is the Fairport First Baptist Church.*

Without water to fight the blaze, the three-story factory, and two smaller Bown buildings were in ruins. Two adjacent homes were also destroyed. As stated in the Monroe County Mail, "In a town of this size, with the water supply for fire purposes limited to the canal and Thomas Creek, it is a great wonder that serious fires have not occurred here before. It would seem this experience would be sufficient to cause our people to take immediate steps to provide the fire department with an ample water supply. We hope the Village Fathers will not allow this matter to rest until some measures have been put in place to better protect the property of Fairport."

Seven years later, the great Deland factory fire of 1893 finally motivated Fairport to install a waterworks system, giving firefighters a far better chance at success.