

Fire Escapes an Afterthought on Early Buildings

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Part Two of a Two Part Series

As the new Town Hall opened for business in October of 1907, concern was sweeping across America regarding the lack of safe escape routes in buildings. After two small fires at the new municipal building, residents became increasingly concerned with the safety of the structure, considering that the second floor community room often held crowds of six hundred or more.

THE MONROE COUNTY MAIL,
THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 1911.

CALLS IT DEATH TRAP
Writer Says Town Hall Should be Im-
mediately Supplied With Ade-
quate Fire Escapes.

Local resident John S. Gunsaul of Cole Street was greatly concerned, and wrote a forceful letter to the editor of the local newspaper in November of 1911. He referred to the four-year-old building as a “death trap”, and stated that a disaster by fire would be “due to criminal negligence on the part of a few trusted public officials.” His letter was followed by another from Reverend D. J. Torrens, pastor of the Congregational Church, who urged the Town Board to accept the “immediate duty of providing adequate means of egress” at the Town Hall. He stated that “the chief danger at such a time would not be from fire, but from the panic which would be sure to ensue.”

The Town Board quickly assembled and authorized a committee of one, Town Supervisor, Thomas J. Bridges, to investigate the fire safety issues at the Town Hall. Meanwhile, the New York State Fire Marshall sent a letter to Doctor George S. Price, a physician in Fairport who lived across the street from the Town Hall, and also served as the Fire Department’s Chief Engineer. Price was ordered to make an inspection of the building. Price responded, “I have done as you requested and find the law is being violated. The defects are so many and of an architectural nature that I can devise no way to remedy them. I would respectfully suggest that your department send an expert here to pass upon the building.”



A fire escape on the south side of the Town Hall is visible in this circa 1920s photograph



Students on horseback at the rear of the school once located at 38 West Church Street. A fire escape is visible on the building in this photo from September of 1914.

After the state Fire Marshall's visit, fire escapes were installed at the Town Hall, Shaw's Hall, and the Clark building, all in 1912. In 1913 fire escapes were installed on the grade school wing of the school at 38 West Church Street, Fairport's first high school. A few months later, plans were revealed for a three story addition to the Fairport Baptist Home, with fire escapes connecting each floor.



Fire escape at the Northside School on East Avenue, circa 1950s.

There was still room for improvement in providing for the safe exit from buildings during an emergency. Evidence of that is a hospital built without fire escapes in Onondaga County in 1915, because “inmates (patients) there would not be in a condition to use them.”