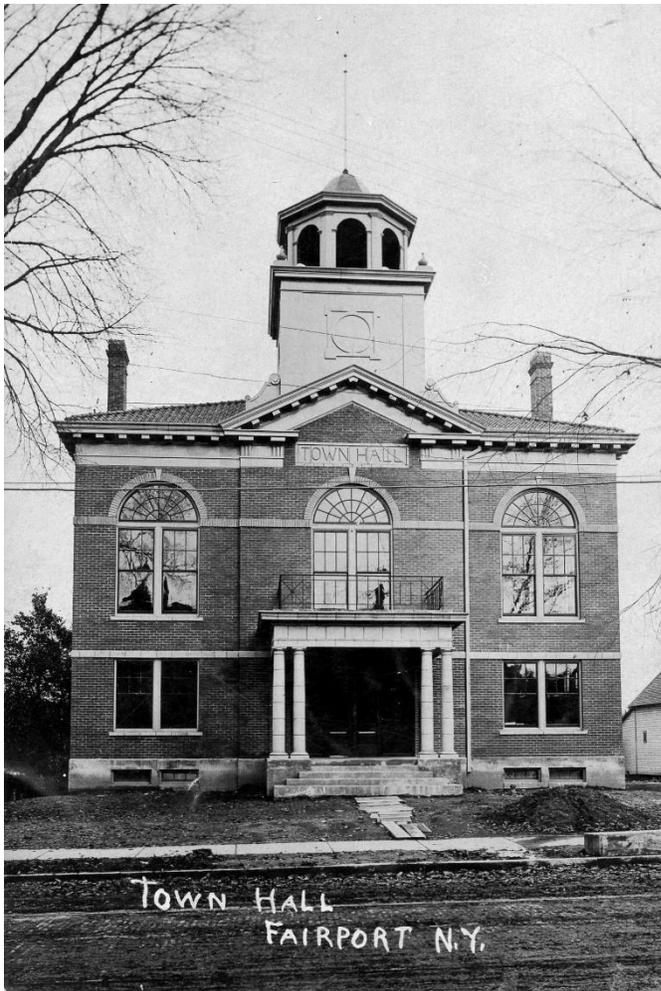


Fire Escapes an Afterthought on Early Buildings

By Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian

Part One of a Two Part Series

Just as the Titanic was considered unsinkable until it sunk, countless buildings that were claimed to be “fireproof” were destroyed by fire. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the notion that a structure was fireproof reduced the likelihood that fire escapes would be included in the design of the building. A horrific accumulation of devastating fires in cities and towns across America led municipalities across the country to reconsider the wisdom of providing additional means of escape, even in “fireproof” buildings.



This photo is from the fall of 1907, as finishing touches are being completed at the new Town Hall at 31 South Main Street. Fire escapes were not part of the original design and construction.

When our first town hall was built at 31 South Main Street in 1907, today's Village Hall, there were no fire escapes included in the budget. A description in the Monroe County Mail prior to construction said "the building will be of steel and brick construction, the floors being of tile and cement, and fireproof throughout." The second floor was designed for use as a public hall for meetings, concerts, and athletic events. The room, reachable by only one stairway and through two narrow doors, was intended to accommodate as many as 800 people, a number immensely greater than the allowable occupancy would be today.

THE MONROE COUNTY MAIL, THURSDAY, MARCH 28, 1907.

***Reed Factory Burned and
Girls Narrowly Escape***

As plans for the new town hall were being approved in March of 1907, a few blocks away a two-story wooden underwear factory burned to the ground. Only the quick response by nearby construction workers with rickety wooden ladders prevented catastrophe for the eleven women working on the second floor of the building. Two months later a fire broke out in Pittsford's Town Hall, a building made of brick. At the time masons were busy building the brick exterior walls of the new Perinton Town Hall. Residents were reassured that their new building would be "practically fireproof", with wood used only for doors, window casings, and, contrary to earlier reports of tile, wood floors. Soon the public became aware of more materials inconsistent with claims of a "practically fireproof" building, when it was reported that wood trusses to be used in the roof were temporarily lost in transit.

The Town Hall opened for business in October of 1907. After a few near-disasters in the next four years, including paper decorations that caught fire at an Odd Fellows celebration, and a basement blaze resulting from wood piled near the furnace, residents became increasingly concerned with the safety of the building.

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Next: *The Public and the State Fire Marshall Demand Fire Escapes*