

WEEDSPORT AFTER THE FIRE OF 1871-----

On the Monday evening following the fire, indeed even while the winter supply of coal still burned slowly in each of the burned out businesses, the Weedsport Fire Department was invited to a supper at the Willard House, hosted by Donovan & Co., Burritt Bros., and Beach & Co., all of whose buildings had been saved by the most gallant and laborious efforts.

The firemen met at the remains of the engine house on Furnace St. where O. W. Burritt gave them a formal invitation. Headed up by their band, they marched around in front of the Franklin Hall, where C. J. Beach delivered a speech thanking the firemen and the citizens of the Village for their part in subduing the flames. They then marched to the Willard House for a splendid meal prepared by Mr. and Mrs. Sturge.



Denny
Randall

Almost immediately the Village government convened and attempted to relocate burned out businesses and merchants. They also decided that the fire could ultimately be used to some advantage to the Village. Seneca St., which previously had several "jogs" in it due to store fronts jutting out was straightened to it's present configuration and a local law was passed that forbid (in Weedsport as in Chicago) the construction of frame buildings in the business district of the Village. A permanent grade was established for streets and sidewalks and discussions ensued about modernizing the fire department.

Pursuant to the new rules all buildings built on the ruins, or subsequently in the downtown area were required to be of "fireproof" construction. This then explains the rather unimaginative architecture of the brick buildings on Seneca and Brutus Streets which were hastily erected shortly after the fire.

A fire chief was soon elected who would change not only the Weedsport Fire Department, but the entire volunteer fire service of New York state as well. He went on to serve as President (Mayor) of the Village for several terms. His name was Henry D. Brewster and he was a director of several concerns, including railroads and the Peoples Savings & Loan Co of Syracuse. More importantly to our story, Governor Roswell Flowers had appointed him New York State Assessor. His office was in Syracuse and he commuted daily by train.

The job of the State Assessor was to set fair market value of property to be acquired by the State for public works projects, including those of eminent domain. Chief Brewster was extremely progressive and immediately after taking office proposed the purchase of a new fangled steam operated fire engine. Accordingly, in 1874 a spanking new Silsby steamer was delivered to Weedsport from the factory in Seneca Falls, which at that time was the fire engine capital of the world. it was temporarily housed in a barn on Furnace St. until a suitable firehouse could be built.

The firehouse was built on South St. at the end of Furnace St. in 1884 and is still in use today, having been added to and modernized in 1950 and 1974. Out of respect for Chief Brewster, what is now known as Company 3 was known for many years as "H.D. Brewster

Steamer". As a note aside the "H" and "S" on the cornice corners of the building stand for "hose" and "steamer".

The Village could not afford to stable horses for the infrequent fire calls, so they offered \$5.00 , which was a handsome sum at that time to the first team to hook to the steamer when the alarm sounded. When your writer first joined the fire department in the early 1960's an elderly retired fireman named Bill Johannes recalled watching as a young child as the horses raced to the firehouse as the bell was ringing. He also noted that if the drayman, or farmer didn't happen to be on the wagon when the alarm sounded he was liable to be about three blocks behind spouting a stream of curses that would wilt flowers. The horses had been beaten so many times to get to the firehouse to collect the five bucks that they were taking no chances!

I mentioned that the progressive Chief Brewster would have an effect on all Volunteer Firemen in the State. He was elected on the very first Board of Trustees of the newly created Firemen's Home and through his efforts and influence a property outside of Hudson, N.Y., which had been purchased by the State for the erection of an insane asylum for women was signed over to the State Firemen's Association for a nominal sum. Not until your writer was elected 100 years later was anyone from Cayuga County so honored. The Home is currently being replaced with a new building and remains a testimony to Chief Brewster and the others involved. It is still the only retirement home for volunteer firemen in the world which is not supported by tax dollars!

Chief Brewster went on to form the now defunct "Order of American Firemen" and the Weedsport chapter was predictably the "H.D. Brewster Chapter". He and the publisher of the local newspaper, William Churchill were instrumental in founding the Northern Central Volunteer Firemen's Association, which is still going strong in a nine county area of New York.

In closing, to show you what a small, but convoluted world in which we live, Chief Brewster was married to Mary Louise Baum, the favorite sister of Wizard of Oz creator L. Frank Baum and the Baums were frequent visitors to Weedsport, even after they moved to California. A daughter, also named Mary Louise died of diptheria at age 11 and is interred in Weedsport Rural Cemetery, while Chief Brewster and his wife rest in the Baum plot in Syracuse's Oakwood cemetery.