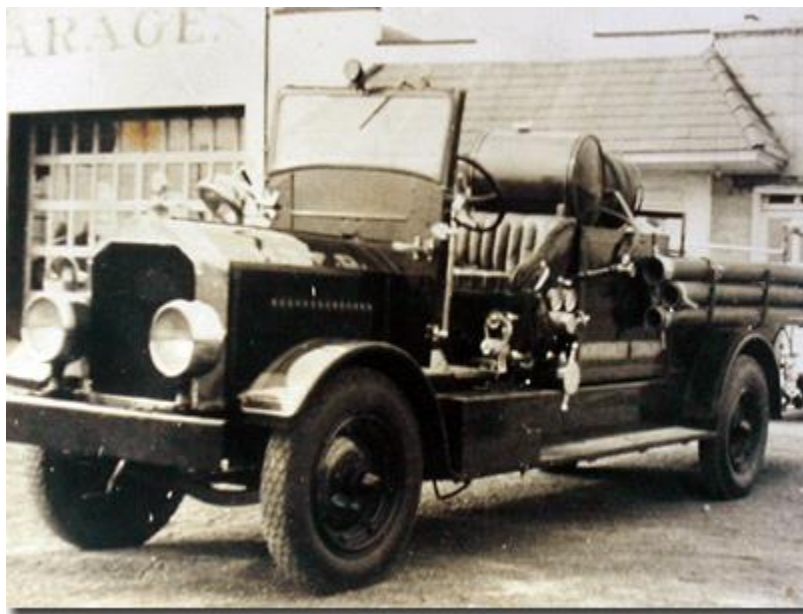


29 A Tale of Three Firehouses

In the good old days, fires were plentiful, but ways to extinguish them were few. If you had a fire, you called in your neighbors with buckets or contacted the nearest community that had a fire company for help.

Most rural communities didn't have fire companies or the equipment to put out barn or house fires effectively. Rocky Hill had a fire company in the late 19th century equipped with a hand pumper and a hook and ladder truck. In 1902, Rocky Hill had the first written record of their fire company, although it had been operational for many years before that.

In 1939, Belle Mead started the first fire company in Montgomery Township, so they're celebrating their 80th anniversary this year. Like so many fledgling fire companies, Belle Mead Fire Company began with one piece of used equipment, a pumper that they bought from New Egypt Fire Company for \$300. Belle Mead outgrew their original firehouse and built another one on Route 206. They finally built their current station on Belle Mead - Griggstown Road. It's much larger and can accommodate their modern equipment. You can still see one of the old Belle Mead firehouses next to Belle Mead Garage, where it's used for car repair today.



In 1939, Belle Mead Fire Company bought its first fire engine, a 1920 Child's Pumper. It became Blawenburg's first fire engine, too.

Blawenburg Starts a Fire Company

The Blawenburg Fire Company, as it was known for years, had an unlikely start. As its website reports, "[Many fire companies](#) are founded out of tragedy - barns burning, children's lives in peril, disaster looming. In a panic, the citizens rally to protect their community. Some fire companies arise from the ashes. Not ours."

In 1946, Blawenburg was still served by the Belle Mead Fire Company, and many local men (yes, firefighters were always men at the time) volunteered with the Belle Mead company. One of those Blawenburg volunteers, Everett May, Sr., was also the mayor of Montgomery. He had an insurance business in Blawenburg, selling policies to many area residents. He knew that if Blawenburg had its own fire company, the insurance rates would drop. This sounded like a good deal to him, so Everett, along with local residents Albert Van Zandt and Walter Terhune, proposed forming a fire company in Blawenburg. The residents agreed with their proposal, and a group of residents along with Everett, Albert, and Walter set about forming Blawenburg's first fire company. They quickly realized that they needed firefighting equipment if they wanted to call themselves a fire company. Along came an irresistible deal. Everett knew the Belle Mead Fire Company was buying a new fire truck, so he arranged the sale of the old 1920s vehicle to Blawenburg Fire Company for a dollar. Thus, the Blawenburg Fire Company officially was formed on October 10, 1946.



Charter members of Montgomery Township Volunteer Fire Company #2, originally Blawenburg Fire Company, are shown in this 1966 photo.

Back row (L-R): Bill Terhune, Claude Lewis, Bob Saums, William Mathews

Front row (L-R): Louis Verbeyst, Edward Terhune, John Ficken, Ken Dorey, Tom Skillman

Charter members not shown: Jim Ajamian, David Moore, Dix Skillman, and John Van Zandt, John Van Zandt is the only surviving charter member.

Three Firehouses

If you have a fire company and a fire truck, you need a place to keep equipment. Walter and Marie Terhune, who lived on Great Road just south of the Musselman's store at Blawenburg corner, agreed to lease their garage to the fire company. It had a dirt floor and needed some work. Several locals provided free labor to put in a cement floor in the garage to make it suitable for their "new" fire truck. This single bay garage served the new

company well for the next decade. Within a year, the first fire siren was installed. The practice of blowing the fire signal at noon on Saturdays began and continued for many years. This building that served as Blawenburg's first fire company still exists today as the Blawenburg Post Office.



In 1952, the fire company found another irresistible deal for a new fire engine, but this opportunity came with a problem. The 1935 pumper, which they bought from J. B. Hunt Co. for \$1500, would not fit in the fire house. Fortunately, they didn't have to look too far for new quarters. The old MCM garage on Blawenburg-Belle Mead Road (Rt. 601) became available, and, most importantly, the engine would fit into its two-bay garage. The building needed a lot of repairs, so they were not able to move in until 1953.



New World Pizza is the current business in the second firehouse. It was the MCM Garage before the fire company bought it in 1952. In 1971, the fire company sold the building to That Foreign Car Place, a foreign car repair business. It operated the business there for many years.

In the 60s and 70s, Montgomery Township was growing and so was the fire company. Despite a relatively low number of fire calls (35 per year in 1965 compared with over 350 per year today), another engine was purchased, and again there was talk of needing another, larger firehouse. There was also talk of creating fire districts and a fire tax to help both Belle Mead and Blawenburg fire companies with growing expenses.

By the late 60s, the fire company was in need of a bigger building, and they wanted to keep it within Blawenburg. Specifically, they wanted the fire company to be relocated to the property west of Blawenburg Church where the Blawenburg School was located. Students no longer used the school since Burnt Hill Road School was opened, and the building was serving as the Board of Education offices for the growing school district. The fire company never made a deal for the school property, so they looked “out-of-town” for a new location. They found some property east of Mountain View Road for sale by Fred Loeser. They purchased three acres and wasted no time in building the current firehouse. In 1971, on the 25th anniversary of the Blawenburg Fire Company, the new firehouse was dedicated. In 1990, the building was expanded to include a second floor with additional meeting and storage areas.

From Clambakes to Fire Districts

Raising money to support that fire company has always been a challenge, but as the township grew it became increasingly difficult to raise sufficient funds. When Blawenburg Fire Company began, there were expenses, but they had hand-me-down equipment and minimal expenses.

Fundraising wasn't as critical as it would later become. The need for better equipment led to the need for a larger fire house, which led to a need for more money... and so it went.

Over the years, many fundraising events have been held. Two of them provided the most money—the annual clambakes and fundraising drives. The fire volunteers became very good at holding clambakes and did so for many years at the Princeton University reunions. They no longer have Princeton reunion clambakes.

But fundraising didn't keep pace with expenses and the fire company realized that they needed to form two fire districts in Montgomery Township, one for Belle Mead and the other for Blawenburg. The township was divided into two fire districts. The companies serve their respective districts and continue to support each other as needed on fire calls. Developing fire districts led to a fire tax to support the operations and capital needs of both volunteer companies today.

Along with the new districts came new names. Belle Mead Fire Company became Montgomery Volunteer Fire Company No. 1—Belle Mead and Blawenburg Fire Company became Montgomery Volunteer Fire Company No. 2—Blawenburg.

Volunteerism at its Best

When you think about it, Montgomery's population today is nearly six times greater than when the Blawenburg Fire Company came into existence. According to the Census Bureau, there are over 23,584 people in the township today compared with 3,819 people in 1950. Where once there were farms and open space, today there are many houses, apartments, town houses, and condos. Early residents could not imagine such growth and change. The township continues to grow and the need for fire and other emergency services continues to grow along with it.

What is truly amazing is that both the fire companies and emergency medical services are still staffed by volunteers. We thank all those who take time out of their personal lives to provide these vital services 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and 365 days a year.



A MTVFC #2 fire truck in the Hopewell Memorial Day Parade

A Personal Fire Tale

My introduction to the fire company was unexpected and definitely unwanted. In March 1973, two months after Evelyn and I moved into our home, we hired a plumber to install some pipes in the crawlspace underneath the kitchen so we could hook up our washer and dryer. The plumber arrived on a Sunday morning just as the Blawenburg Church bell was tolling to summon worshipers.

The crawlspace had a dirt floor, and it was a tight squeeze. Our plumber was a big man. It wasn't a great place to ignite a torch, but that's what the plumber had to do to connect our new pipes to our existing plumbing system. It took him awhile to get the materials he needed under the house and to figure out how he could fit himself into those crowded quarters.

This was the first time the plumber had been to our house, so he didn't realize how the old house was insulated. In the 1840s, it was quite common to use bricks for insulation and hold them together with mud and horse hair.

It took the plumber quite a while to figure out his strategy for doing this job. As Evelyn and I stood in the kitchen, we could hear his muffled yelling as he fumbled around beneath the house.

Then we saw smoke coming up through the powder room in the kitchen. Yikes! What was happening to our new home?

As the smoke increased, we could hear the plumber's cough increase. We called 911 and ran to the crawlspace to help him. Soon, we heard the fire siren go off in the distance. (The siren was still located at the site of the old Blawenburg firehouse on Rt. 601 at that time.) The plumber made it out of the crawlspace sputtering and coughing. We assumed a safe spot on the lawn as we watched the trucks arrive and the fire team go into action. They swarmed into the house and pulled hoses around to the crawlspace while the plumber kept apologizing to us, saying he had no idea that horse hair was so flammable.

The house was filling with smoke as the fire moved up the interior walls. We stood helplessly, when a man in a black robe came running across the lawn. We recognized him as Roger Rozeboom, the pastor of Blawenburg Church. Support from the clergy, we thought, how nice! Since Roger was one of the few people in the fire company who could use a Scott Air-Pak, a type of air tank, he was the firefighter designated to enter the smokiest part of the house. We didn't realize it at the time, but Roger had left the pulpit that Sunday morning to help us!

As Roger crossed the lawn, he took off his robe and donned a Scott Air-Pak. He turned to us and uttered words we will never forget. "See what you get for not coming to church!"

We stood speechless as the firefighters carefully laid tarps on our floors before putting hoses in the attic window and shooting water down the wall to extinguish the fire. Outside near the crawlspace, the firefighters found the plumber's wallet on the ground and in the midst of their activities, took time to put it in the refrigerator for safekeeping,

Our fire was out in short order. We are thankful that the damage was minimized by the quick acting Blawenburg Fire Company. The plumber made all the repairs we needed and successfully installed the pipes on his second try. Evelyn and I greatly appreciated the efforts of the fire company not just to put out the fire, but also for the care for our old house that they demonstrated in the process.

Oh yes, we were in church the following Sunday!



This picture of MTVFC #2 was taken during Shelly Elwood's tenure as Fire Chief in the 1990s. Shelly is in the front row. There are several charter members of the original Blawenburg Fire Company in this picture. How many of these firefighting volunteers do you know?

Blawenburg Facts

1. Female firefighters

- In 1976, Beth Perkins became the first female to complete Somerset County Fire School and become an active firefighter in Blawenburg.
- In 1992, Shelly Elwood became the first female fire chief in New Jersey, a position she held for six years.

2. The Strawberry Festival, held each June by local Scout Troop 46, was originally a fundraiser for the Blawenburg Fire Company. The event was held on the lawn of the Parsell family, who were active in the fire company. Over time the event was transferred to the Scout troop, who still dish out strawberries with angel food cake and ice cream at their annual event.

Sources

Montgomery Township Volunteer Fire Company No. 1—Belle Mead

<http://www.mtvfc1.org>

Montgomery Township Volunteer Fire Company No. 2—Blawenburg -
<https://www.mtvfc2.com/history.html>

There is a much more detailed information about the MVFC2's history on its website.

Rocky Hill Fire Company - <https://www.rhfd53.com/history.html>

Wikipedia, Montgomery Township, NJ -
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montgomery_Township,_New_Jersey

Photos

Original fire truck - <http://www.mtvfc1.org/History-Past%20Fire%20Trucks.htm>

Charter members - MTVFC No. 2

Post Office - D. Cochran

New World Pizza – D. Cochran

Current fire truck – D. Cochran

1990s fire volunteers - Montgomery Volunteer Fire Company No. 2 – Blawenburg