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From the ashes of 1874's Great Fire grew Natick of today

Archival photographs offer views of Natick's Main Street (Route 27) before the devastating fire of Jan. 13, 1874. (Natick Historical Society Photo)

By Megan McKee
Globe Correspondent / January 11, 2009

It was a cold, clear morning on Jan. 13, 1874, when a raging fire fed by a western wind ravaged downtown Natick, destroying 35 buildings in a blaze that could be seen for 20 miles.

The fire reshaped the face of downtown Natick, which was rebuilt in the red brick seen today, and ushered in a new way of firefighting, with fire hydrants replacing the use of deep ditches and pumps.

It also demonstrated the resilience of a town that rebuilt itself from an agricultural community into a prosperous industrial center with a large immigrant population.

Lifelong resident Robert Worthington documents this and other chapters of Natick's firefighting history in "Chronicle History of the Natick Fire Department," which rolled off the presses last week. A new exhibition at the Morse Institute Library also commemorates the 135th anniversary of both the fire and the library, which had opened only days before, just outside the path of destruction.

"It's the impact of that fire on the center of Natick that developed it to what it is

today," said Worthington.

The Great Fire came at an important time in American history. In 1874, the Long Depression had just set in; a cataclysmic years-long economic downturn, it resulted in scorching unemployment and social unrest.

"People think it's the end of the capitalism," said Robert Allison, chair of Suffolk University's history department, describing the 1870s as "a really horrific time."

"The country had been booming because of the Civil War, and this all ends," he said. "The economy keeps going on fumes, then really collapses in the 1870s."

By the time the Natick blaze was contained, six hours after it started, it had done $650,000 in damage, equal to $12 million today when adjusted for inflation.

The town started rebuilding immediately, with the bulk of construction finished within a year. The Fire Department saw the event as a catalyst to update firefighting techniques during an era when other devastating fires changed the psyche of cities and ushered in fire codes and safer construction techniques.

In October 1871, the Great Chicago Fire killed hundreds of people, burned 4 square miles of the city, and caused damage worth $222 million at the time, or $3.8 billion when adjusted for inflation.

In November 1872, Boston's entire financial district was wiped out in a blaze that caused damage totaling more than $73 million, or $1.2 billion in today's money. Allison said some speculate that the event contributed to the Panic of 1873 that fed the Long Depression.

And the village center in South Natick was wiped out by fire in March 1872, with seven buildings destroyed.

The events of Jan. 13, 1874, in downtown Natick were documented by the Boston Daily Globe and the Natick Bulletin in the lurid, dramatic language of the era's newspapers.

"Disaster falls with a crunching blow," wrote the next day's Boston Daily Globe, with the fire leaving the downtown a "waste of smouldering ruins."

The fire got its start at about 3 a.m., when it was discovered on the second floor of a building at Summer and Main streets. The fire then jumped across Summer Street to J.P. Wolcott's three-story shoe factory, which was only a year old.

If the air had been calm, the damage might have ended there, but a driving wind from the west pushed the flames across Main Street, now also known as Route 27, into the heart of a commercial block lined by Main, Central (now Route 135), and Washington streets and the railroad tracks.

"It is almost too terrible to realize," reported the Natick Bulletin. The paper's headquarters were destroyed, along with the post office, Congregational Church, a concert hall, the fire station, and numerous businesses, including grocers, dry goods sellers, and clothing stores.

The Morse Institute Library, which had opened Jan. 1 on the east side of Washington, at its intersection with Central Street, survived with only a singed roof.

Much of the destruction was due to Natick's firefighting capabilities, or lack thereof, according to news accounts. Worthington, who spent years combing through microfiche files and historical documents, said sentiment in Natick in

the mid-1840s was against spending the money for a centralized fire department, largely because of the town's agricultural makeup. The farmers felt it was unworthy of support.

By the 1870s, the town was shifting from a farming community to an industrial center, with about 30 manufacturers of shoes and shoe-related products. The Natick Fire Department, however, hadn't seen the same growth.

When the Great Fire broke out, volunteer firefighters had to pump water from ditches, about 20 to 30 feet deep, that had been dug as reservoirs in case of fire. Pumps were powered by hand - with a dozen men continually pumping to maintain pressure - or steam engine, which was much more efficient. Unfortunately, the man in charge of the steam engine that morning wasn't skilled in its operation, said Worthington.

In addition, the department's canvas hoses turned out to be rotted, and burst from the pressure of the pumped water. It took 25 minutes before any water made it to the flames.

Natick called in backup from neighboring towns. Ashland was the first on the scene, with units from Framingham's Saxonville section, Newton, and finally Boston arriving later. Six hours after it began, at 9 a.m., the fire was contained; the center's mostly wooden buildings reduced to piles of ash.

But if the fire was disastrous, it also illustrated the sense of community that Peter Drummey, head librarian at the Massachusetts Historical Society, said was a trademark of the time.

"That idea of personal assistance was very strong," said Drummey. "This idea of a community assisting one another is a big idea in the 19th century."

When tragedy befell a community, its residents as well as other communities felt a shared sense of responsibility to remedy the situation. Part of the reason, Drummey said, was that no social safety net existed.

Optimism was another common characteristic of the age, Drummey said. The feeling was further fueled by Natick's rapidly expanding population, from 5,000 residents in 1865 to 7,500 a decade later, an increase fueled largely by immigrants and young people.

Even though the economy was in shambles in 1874, people had a way of looking at disasters as opportunities, said Drummey.

In the same Natick Bulletin article that lamented the destruction of the newspaper's building and equipment, the author went on to write: "But we are not discouraged, not at all. We are only moved to greater exertions . . . We have found sympathy and kindness extended upon all sides, for which words fail to express our appreciation."

The numbers bear out that optimism. According to an 1875 Massachusetts census, a year after the fire, the entire town's manufacturing output totaled about $2.6 million, with $2 million coming from the shoe industry. In 1865, the output was $1.75 million. Clearly, the town was soldiering on.

The Fire Department saw the Great Fire as a wake-up call. In 1875, 78 fire hydrants were hooked up to the town water supply, replacing the too-few reservoirs, according to the town's annual report. The department also replaced its destroyed station with a headquarters across Main at Summer Street. The department stayed there until 1998.

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The Morse Institute's exhibition is on its lower level; Worthington's book is available at the library and the Natick Historical Society, 58 Eliot St. ■