

Part One – 19th Century Fire Fighting in Nunda

Introduction

The Town of Nunda was organized in 1808. These were pioneer times and the greatest concern of the first settlers was basic survival. But within a generation, a community had taken shape in what had been a wilderness. The History of Livingston County credits Charles Carroll, owner of the land upon which the Village of Nunda stands with the layout of the village in 1824. Captain Hand's Centennial History of Nunda states that map maker Henry Jones laid out the business section and village square as early as 1823. Sixteen years later, a rising population and booming economy allowed the young community to become an incorporated village in April, 1839. It is then that the history of the Nunda Fire Department begins.

Beginnings - 1839-1860

Fire was one of the first concerns of the new village government. On June 13, 1839 Henry Jones, dentist W.M. Chipman, Dr Clifford C Chaffee and businessman Bradford Perez Richmond were appointed as fire wardens. Their job was to inspect the stoves and chimneys in the village for safety. The fire wardens were given some power of enforcement – residents who failed to make the corrections ordered by the fire wardens within 10 days were fined \$3 and \$1 for each day thereafter – a hefty sum in those days.

That first village meeting also established a Hook and Ladder Company. The leading young men of the time were appointed to the company – Addison M Crane, Hiram C Grover, Thomas Raines, Francis H Gibbs, Joseph White, James Swain, Jehiel Reed, Henry Ashley, D Morse and Henry Chalker.

The new company needed equipment, so the Village fathers appropriated \$25 to purchase implements. This money was probably enough for their hooks and ladders, but not buckets. They would be brought by every “able-bodied male inhabitant” who, according to village law, had to “in case of an alarm of fire, to repair immediately to the fire with a pail or fire bucket and while the fire shall continue shall obey all reasonable commands of the fire wardens.” If they didn't, they were fined \$1.

Two years later it was clear that more resources were needed to protect the growing village. The Genesee Valley Recorder of March 11, 1841, complained “Our Hook & Ladder Company is at present merely nominal, inasmuch as they have no means of extinguishing fire except their ladder and fire hook – no buckets having as yet been furnished. “

It appears that the call for improvement was eventually heard, for in June of that year the village trustees authorized the paying of the “appointees” of up to \$1 per day for services rendered and raised the fire wardens pay to \$3. More importantly, the Recorder announced on July 1st that a special meeting was to be convened to raise money for the construction and filling of a reservoir and “and purchase of such other objects to guard against fire.”

The “object” that was most important was a way of getting water from the new reservoirs onto the fires. That fall Nunda took a great step forward and purchased such a machine – the November 11th 1841 edition of the Independent Gazette congratulated the Village on purchasing its first fire engine from the Auburn Corporation. This became Engine #1, and the members appointed to work the new engine were increased to twenty-four. This engine was a hand operated pumper with

bars on each side whose up and down motion moved the pistons which drew water from the reservoirs and forced it out through the hose.

The following year the Village made a \$200 final payment on the new engine, and renamed it Engine #4, and 12 more firemen were appointed bringing the total to thirty-six “paid” firemen. Although expenditures were made twice to make repairs to the new engine in the fall of the year, by the close of 1842 Nunda could boast a “modern” engine and three dozen fire fighters to man it.

Over the next two decades, Nunda went through a period of rapid growth. The area saw the completion of the Genesee Valley Canal through the Village, the construction of the great Erie Railroad through the southern part of the town, and even a change in counties as Nunda and Portage moved from Allegany to Livingston County. As the community evolved, so did its fire department. The following notes taken from the Village Board minutes document this evolution. (Information in italics is a direct quote from the minutes, the rest is a summary of the information.)

1843- June 10th: All previous rules and regulations relating to Fire Companies were repealed....A Fire Company was organized as Fire Co #4 consisting of no more than 24 members appointed by the trustees (see appendix for the Rules and Regulation as listed in the Village Record Books. July 24th “*Whereas doubts have been expressed of the legal organization of the Hook & Ladder Company of the Village, therefore resolved that a Hook & Ladder Company be and the same is hereby organized which shall consisted of not more than ten*

persons. Resolved that the Hook & Ladder Company shall be governed by the Rules & Regulations for Fire Company....”

1844- June: “*Resolved that trustees be authorized to purchase or lease as they deem most advantageous for the Corporation a site for the current engine house and that the expense of the same be paid from the contingency fund.*”

1846- June 9th: “*Resolved, that \$125.00 be raised by tax for benefit of the fire company and that the trustees be and are authorized to pay members of the fire company for services rendered as in their judgment may think advisable for the interest of said village*”

1848-June 26th: The account was audited and order drawn on the treasurer for \$11.00 being for moving the Engine House.

1849 – Paid rent of \$25.00 for arrears of rent due Hugh McNair for lot occupied by Engine House, and also the further sum of \$50 to pay said McNair for ten years’ rent of last mentioned lot from and after 1st day of June, 1849.

1850- August 6th: “*Resolved that present fire company known and distinguished as Fire Co #4 in Village of Nunda be and the same is hereby disbanded and the members thereof are removed and discharged from any and all further service as members of said Company*”; August 16th: “*Resolved and it is hereby ordained that a*

Fire Co. be organized to consist of not more than 24 individuals and be known as Fire Co. #4” This company would

1852- June 21st: Lucius F. Paine was appointed chief engineer of the Fire Department, Orvice Smith was assistant chief.

It is not entirely clear why the companies were often disbanded and reorganized, but it is likely that politics or personality clashes between the Village leaders and the fireman were a significant factor. But differences were set-aside in July of 1852 when the dreaded cry of “FIRE” went out as Nunda suffered its first major fire.

The fire broke out the Empire Block at the northwest corner of State and First Streets around three o’clock in the morning. Before it could be stopped, it consumed over a dozen businesses and offices, including those of the local newspaper, the Nunda Times. More damage would have been done, according to one account, had not been for the “greatest exertion of the citizens of the village”. It was also felt that “those who managed the engine...deserve great praise.” (See appendix for newspaper account)

The fire had an immediate impact on Nunda’s view of their fire department. It may have been the result of public pressure that the Village leaders voted at their October 2nd meeting to raise through tax a sum of \$1000 in order to “purchase a fire engine and a suitable quantity of hose.” But by the time the fire debris had been carted away from the Square in preparation for new construction, the urgency felt at the October meeting gave way to a frugality that would often

sour relations between the Village government and its fire companies. On November 4th the Trustees rescinded the October resolution and told the firemen to use the monies already in their fund to repair their engine room and make other needed expenditures. This would not, of course, mean another fire engine. Despite the close call of losing their entire Village Square in the July ’52 fire, it took three years for the Village Board to agree to upgrade Nunda’s fire fighting capacities.

Action was finally taken between June of 1855 and April of 1856. First, the Village passed a resolution authorizing the Trustees to sell the engine house and look for a better site. Then in September, the Village Trustees authorized the purchase of a new fire engine for \$1000. The Wright Brothers of Rochester NY were contracted to build what would be called “Protective Engine #1” and 200 feet of hose. The new engine came in on rail, costing the Village an additional \$23.85. But, Nunda could now boast two engines!

This second, newer engine would need a company to man it. Even before the arrival of the Engine, the Village government had, in the March 19, 1856 meeting passed a new resolution stating that “all ordinances and regulations heretofore made and published for the government of any fire company in said village by the trustees thereof be the same and hereby repealed. That a fire company to consist of not less than 40 members be hereby organized to be distinguished as Protection Fire Co #1 in charge of Fire Engine called Protection #1 belong to the Village.” Lucius Paine was also appointed chief.

The very next month the Village paid L.B. Warner \$100 for the purchase of a lot for the engine house and “lock

up”. The following month Village money was authorized for the purchase of uniforms, a hose cart, and other equipment for Protective Fire Company #1.

On September 14, 1859 the firemen of the Protectives presented Lucius Paine with a gold-headed cane. Paine had been a leader in the fire company for nine years – nearly half of its existence. It is not known if speeches marked the occasion, but if Paine or another looked back over the first twenty years of fire fighting they would have remarked on the struggle to build the companies – of the dedication of a small group of men who had weathered a fickle and a frugal Village government to build a department with two “modern” engines, a hose cart, and the other equipment needed to protect area homes and businesses. They had been successful, but the struggle was not over. The decades that followed were full of challenges to the firemen.

Growing Pains (1860-1900)

The four decades from the Civil War to the dawn of the 20th century were pivotal years in Nunda’s history. The Village and the surrounding area underwent significant economic growth fed by the completion of the Genesee Valley Canal, several railroads, and a nation wide industrial boom. New industries, a wider variety of shops and artisans, and substantial houses were appearing on the ever expanding village streets.

Naturally other changes would follow. A new school would be built, a baseball team organized, a plethora of clubs and organizations formed, and more services provided. The time period also saw the development of the telephone network, the first electric lights, and a new water system. This

rapid expansion and development would not come easily. There was economic set backs, local conflicts, and political infighting. But these growing pains would not prevent the eventual growth and maturing of the Village.

So it was with Nunda’s fire companies. Nunda Firefighters, now with “modern” equipment and handsome uniforms, seemed to have a new status in the community as the decade of the 1860’s began. They appeared in March of 1860 at a festival held for the Nunda Band, “clad in red shirts...and had very much the appearance of a fire company, and looked as though they might do efficient service in staying the devouring element.” Two weeks later the Nunda News boasted, “with two good fire companies and all the machinery in working order, we may feel quite safe against any large fires.”

That June the Village voted \$50 toward engine repairs and the payment of fuel and lights, and appointed Robert Cree chief engineer of the fire department. The next month the Nunda fireman proudly marched in the Hornellsville Fourth of July parade. Later in July the two companies gathered as “The Fire Department of Nunda” and resolved that “we the citizen firemen of Nunda hereby express our thanks to the firemen and others of Hornellsville for the 4th of July invitation”. They looked forward to next summer when they could return the honor by inviting the Hornellsville firemen to Nunda’s celebration.

But in the swirl of a growing national crisis, attention to Nunda’s proud fire companies soon waned. In January of 1861 the News reported that at a meeting of the Hope Fire Company #4 “a complete reorganization of the company was effected, acting under the old officers.” This may have been little more than elections or reassignments of duty, for the next

regular meeting was set for February. By that time a new Confederate government was forming in the South and the Nation was rapidly headed toward a bloody civil war.

When the new President called for volunteers after Fort Sumter, Nunda was faced with raising a company of volunteers. Although eager to comply with the call, the next months drained the areas finances and energies. Although the Village did pay what seemed to have become an annual \$50, a confrontation brewed between public officials and the firemen in July of 1861.

Although the fire companies must have lost some of their members to the Union Army, they were still determined to host the annual Fourth of July parade. As planned nearly a year before, the Nunda firemen sent an invitation to their counterparts in Hornellsville to come for the holiday celebration. When they received an acceptance the local firemen hired a band and prepared for the grand day.

Then came the blow. Citing a lack of public interest, the celebration was cancelled by the public officials. The embarrassed firemen, feeling they had been misused, talked of disbanding. The next newsworthy event shows they did not disband, but it is clear that tension remained between the Village government and the fire companies for several years.

The War consumed most of the Village's energies over the next few years. Little appears in the News about the fire companies, except that the Hope Fire Co #4 gave several dances at Holmes Hall, a popular gathering place on or near the northwest corner of State and Second Street. Holmes Hall was, ironically, the scene of Nunda's next large fire.

The fire began in the afternoon of December 7, 1865 and was well established by the time the alarm was sounded. It

was a windy day, and soon three buildings were engulfed in flame. If the fire had jumped across Second Street to Lovell's Bakery, they might have lost all of the buildings to the Square. But, according to the News "The firemen and citizens did nobly, and by their exertions saved other buildings. The engines worked well and plenty of water was procured from the canal nearby." The foreman of the two companies – Capt George Grieg of No. 1 and M.C. Kiley from No. 4 - gave "good execution in staying the flames" as did the Chief Engineer Lewis Bliss. According to the News the most heroic figure was that of Lucius Paine whose "giant like form" was seen "guiding water from the hose, where it was so warm that a blanket was kept over him and pails of water had to be constantly thrown over him."

Despite the efforts of Paine and other firemen, the fire seemed to do little to bring the Village and the fire companies closer together. In 1869, when the Protectives needed new hose, they decided to try to gain public support with a public exhibition. On May 22, Village residents watched in amazement as the firemen put two streams of water over the roofs of the buildings on each side of State Street. Taking advantage of the moment the fireman asked for financial support to buy two hundred feet of hose. It does not appear that the plan worked, but the Village did pay to make some repairs to the Engine #4, now over twenty-five years old. The next year the Village paid out \$20 for hooks and ladders.

1872 proved to be the decisive year. In May the Nunda Fire Department – both companies – voted to disband. Despite the seriousness of the situation, the issues drifted for several months. In July there was a meeting to talk about purchasing a steam fire engine, and the next month an attempt was made to

reorganize the fire department. But it appears that little was actually done, leaving the area without the protection of trained firemen. What would happen if a major fire broke out?

The answer came in November when the stately Craig House on South State Street burned. The disastrous fire resulted in C.K. Saunders' editorial in the November 23 issue of the News:

Shall we have a reorganization of the fire department? This is an important question to those who reside in the village and should be seriously considered. While some may maintain that the engines can be handled by the citizens in case of fire and made to do good execution, still there is nothing like organization and especially at a fire. The citizens may of course man the brakes and apply sufficient motor power to throw as much water as an organized company. But the great point is to have effective service, which can hardly be expected where everybody is ready to give orders and few left to execute. With a properly organized fire department, officered by good men who understand their business, very much property can be saved and every property-Craig's house, with a well-officered company who knew how to go to work. The fire could have been controlled with half the damage.

Water enough was thrown upon the house to float it away, without doing much good, for the lack of a director.

We have all the material for a first-class fire company in Nunda. The question is: Why are we not organized? The old companies disbanded because they felt they had not been fairly treated, as though their services were not appreciated and in some respects we believe they had cause for complaint. There is a disposition to organize a new department by convincing the old firemen and others. This opportunity we hope may be encouraged by our trustees and citizens. Firemen only ask to be sustained by material aid from the trustees to keep the engines in good order and sufficient hose, and to be furnished a comfortable place for meeting. The effort on the part of some citizens to reorganize by voting down appropriations for new hose has been poor policy and was the main reason for dissatisfaction of our former efficient companies. It is suggested that the small engine be sold and leather buckets be purchased and a bucket company organized. This would be in connection with a hook and ladder company. We throw out these suggestions that our citizens may discuss

the question of reorganization and at the proper time a meeting may be called for the purpose. There is no reason that we should not have one of the finest organized and most efficient fire companies of any town of our size in the state.

The answer came the following March when a new fire company was organized. The company requested they be furnished with hose and have the support of the community. Shaken by the Craig fire, prodded by the influential editor of the Nunda News, and aware of the needs of the ever-expanding Village, the local leaders agreed to the demands. Nunda had a fire department once more!

Over the next ten years the newly organized department continued to grow. The combination of money from a variety of fund raising events and a small but steady flow of cash from the Village helped to purchase new uniforms, a hand fire extinguisher, and replacement parts for both Engines. The funds also allowed for the construction of a 60 foot tower for drying hose to be built on First Street near the engine house. L B Warner, a local storekeeper, donated the land.

A Festival was held on Christmas Day, 1878 at the Academy of Music next to the present day Bell Memorial Library. Entertainment included a minstrel show and music – those attending reported danced until dawn. The \$70 raised, along with money in the treasury was enough for a new fire bell for the engine house tower. The new bell was first heard during the week of February 1st 1879. Later that same year a

new hose company of about 20 members was formed on August 8, 1879.

In 1882 the Village requested that an inspection of the fire fighting equipment be made. The report, submitted by Joseph Lovell, provides an interesting view of the fire department at that time.

Lovell found Engine #1 in “good and effective working condition, very nearly as good now as when new.” The older Engine #4, however, needed additional work. In addition to recent repacking of the cylinders and valve seats, “the body of the engine needs some repairs and the whole machine needs repainting” Lovell recommended keeping the Engine in service because “it can be used effectively under circumstances and surrounding that would render the use of the larger engine impractical.” He went on to recommend that Engine #1 have 50 men in its company, and the smaller Engine #4 have 40.

The story was different in some other areas. Although the hose cart was in “good condition”, almost 150 feet of the Department’s hose was “worthless”, The hook and ladder truck was in “a condition of general dilapidation”, due to being kept “in a damp hole under the engine house”. The department also was hampered by having only eight or ten of the recommended twenty spanners (hose wrenches) and by that fact that two of the five ladders owned by the firemen “had been missing for some years”. The Department was also short of hooks and axes, but did have one “chemical” fire extinguisher.

All these problems were generally minor – easily fixed with some money and manpower. Lovell set forth a more urgent problem – water. “The question of a water supply for the fire department is one that the people of this village should take up and dispose of without very much more delay....”

The question was mainly one of supply. The Village had long ago drained the frog ponds that had once been left in the Square to provide water for fighting fires. In their place four reservoirs had been built.

The reservoirs were 16 feet long, 8 feet wide and 8 feet deep. The walls were of quarry stone 18 inches thick laid up with water lime. The bottoms were cobblestone laid in water lime. The covers were oak planks 6 inches thick and covered with 2 feet of earth and provided with openings with covers at each end. 8 feet x 16 feet x 8 feet = 1,024 cubic feet - a capacity of 7,680 gallons. They were located in the square, at the corner of East and Church Street, at the corner of Massachusetts Street, and on State Street just south of the square.

Originally the water for these reservoirs had come from the run-off from nearby buildings. The coming of the Genesee Valley Canal provided a better source of water. Pipe drew water from the Canal near Lock 44 to fill the State Street and the square reservoirs. Pipes then carried the water from the square's reservoir to the East and Church Street reservoir which in turn fed the one on Massachusetts Street. This worked well until the Canal closed in 1878. With the Canal gone, the reservoirs were at risk. Although the old canal bed still had enough water in it to keep the pipes and reservoirs full, Lovell warned that "we have no assurance that our connection with the canal may not be cut off at any time, and we should then be wholly without supply." Lovell noted that "there have been various plans suggested, having in view a more modern and enlargement system of water works..." but felt in the meantime "that our present supply be kept good, and that our

reservoirs be kept full from some source on which we can rely." That source turned out to be a local casket maker.

The village trustees accepted a proposition from W. H. Willard in June, 1886 to supply water to fill the reservoirs for \$50 per year. The pipe was to be made of wood four inches in diameter and buried in ditches three and one-half feet deep. Pipe was to be tested to 80 pounds pressure. Mr. Willard installed a pump at his furniture "manufactory" on the west side of State Street near the creek (later the Casket Company) to pump water from his pond. He set a hydrant at the corner of State and Portage Streets, attached two lines of hose and threw two streams of water simultaneously 20 feet higher than the flag staff atop the Nunda House (the Nunda House was a three-story building at the northwest corner of State and Portage Streets). From this beginning, the village water system evolved. By December, 1887 the Village had fully completed, tested, and accepted the new Nunda Water Works.

With the new water system on line, the Hope Fire Co #4 decided to disband and reorganize as the Hope Hose Co #4. On May 28, 1888, the Village granted permission to formally organize the new company under State Law. The same month Chief Engineer Peck purchased a "handsome" hose carriage from a firm in Seneca Falls, which was wound with new hose when it arrived. Most of the funds for the new equipment were probably raised by the firemen themselves, since it appears the Village was committed to only supplying the usual \$50 a year for equipment upkeep and purchase.

The need to raise funds encouraged a growing social role for the fire companies. Their socials, plays and dances, not only provided money for equipment and uniforms, they also became an important part of the Village's social and

cultural life. One of the main community events of the year was the Annual Ball held by the firemen. According to the late Marjorie Frost, "...the annual balls, the first of which was held in 1885, were important social events for 35 or 40 years".

The minutes of Hope Hose Co #4 for the 1896 Ball indicates just what a major affair these balls were. In order to prepare for the evening, the firemen had to form a number of committees. These included Reception, Dining Room, Decorating, Soliciting and Collecting, Checkroom, Tickets, Dishes, Platform, Printing, Invitation, and Duck (bunting material). Meyrsing's Orchestra was hired to play for dancing. The G A R Hall was rented for \$5 (which did not include the janitors pay). The well-attended event brought in \$159.95. Once the total cost of \$152.00 was taken out, \$7.95 was added to the Companies coffers.

Nunda's fire companies were also becoming a source of civic pride and competition. The firemen paid close attention to their equipment of uniforms, and often traveled to other communities to participate in parades and reviews. On July 4th, 1887, for example, thirty men of Co #2 took the train from West Nunda to Fillmore to parade in their white hats, red shirts, leather belts, and black pants. Not to be outdone, Co #4 voted in 1889 to wear uniforms that consisted of a Prince Albert coat, black trousers, and white fatigue caps. Their ribbon badges were also replaced with shiny new metal badges.

The First Annual "Parade and Review" was held in October, 1890 in the Village Square. Large crowds gathered to watch the fire companies from several neighboring communities parade and drill. The Nunda band played from the new band pagoda and "discoursed excellent music" as the Wadsworth Hose Co from Geneseo carried out a drill in the

Square. The partisan crowds cheered as twenty-four Hope Hose Co #4 drilled first with their hose cart. Then came the larger Neptune Hook & Ladder #2, drawing their new truck "wearing red shirts, blue caps, dark pants and leather belts. Both Companies did a splendid job despite the muddy streets."

Well equipped and dapper in their uniforms, it would appear that Nunda's two companies were now secure and stable. But by 1894 problems again arose with Hope Hose Co #4. Although they had proudly taken their place in the Livingston County Fire Association, they were forced to appeal to the Village Trustees for additional funds. Apparently they were not successful because the next winter they raised raised fireman's dues to \$.25 per month.

Company #4 disbanded in 1896. In November of that year, the Trustees voted to dispose of all property belonging to the company, except for the uniforms. The sale was held in December of 1896, netting \$56.65. The Village used the proceeds to pay Company #4's outstanding bills (a total of \$26.29), and the remainder was given to the Hook and Ladder Company #2. The uniforms were given to local merchant Edward Northway for safe keeping, hinting that the company might sometime be re-organized.

Despite this set back, the century ended well for Nunda's Firemen. Given the poor state of their firehouse on First Street and the growing need for better facilities for the growing government, the Village of Nunda purchased land on the southeast corner of Mill and State Streets and hired local contractors Charles R and Chester T Foote to build a new municipal building.

The work started in September 1899 and was constructed at a cost of \$5,100 in only six months. A January

27, 1900 article in the News which boasted that Nunda was “an active and progressive Village” and reported that the “handsome new fire engine house and lock up is rapidly nearing completion. When completed this will be one of the handsomest and best arranged village halls in Western New York.” When finished, the new structure would be a “two story veneered brick building especially designed as a hall to transact all village business, and for the accommodation of the public.” It would also include a “near and well appointed opera house” and “spacious rooms for the Neptune Hook & Ladder Co No 2, and ample quarters for a hose company.... (at the) Southeast corner is a well arranged hose tower, and the northwest corner is ornamented with a bell tower....”

The building was ready for use in February 1900 and the old property was sold at public auction to Newton Barker. That same month the former members of Hope Hose Company #4 demanded that the Village return the monies and property to the Company – they soon reorganized and proudly took possession of their rooms in the new Village Building. That summer the Village bought a new fire alarm bell from the Cincinnati Bell Foundry Company for \$80. The new bell was carefully installed in the new bell tower, ready to ring in a new century of fire fighting in Nunda.

Over the next century the Fire Companies of Nunda would continue to adapt to a changing world and continue to protect Nunda and the surrounding area.