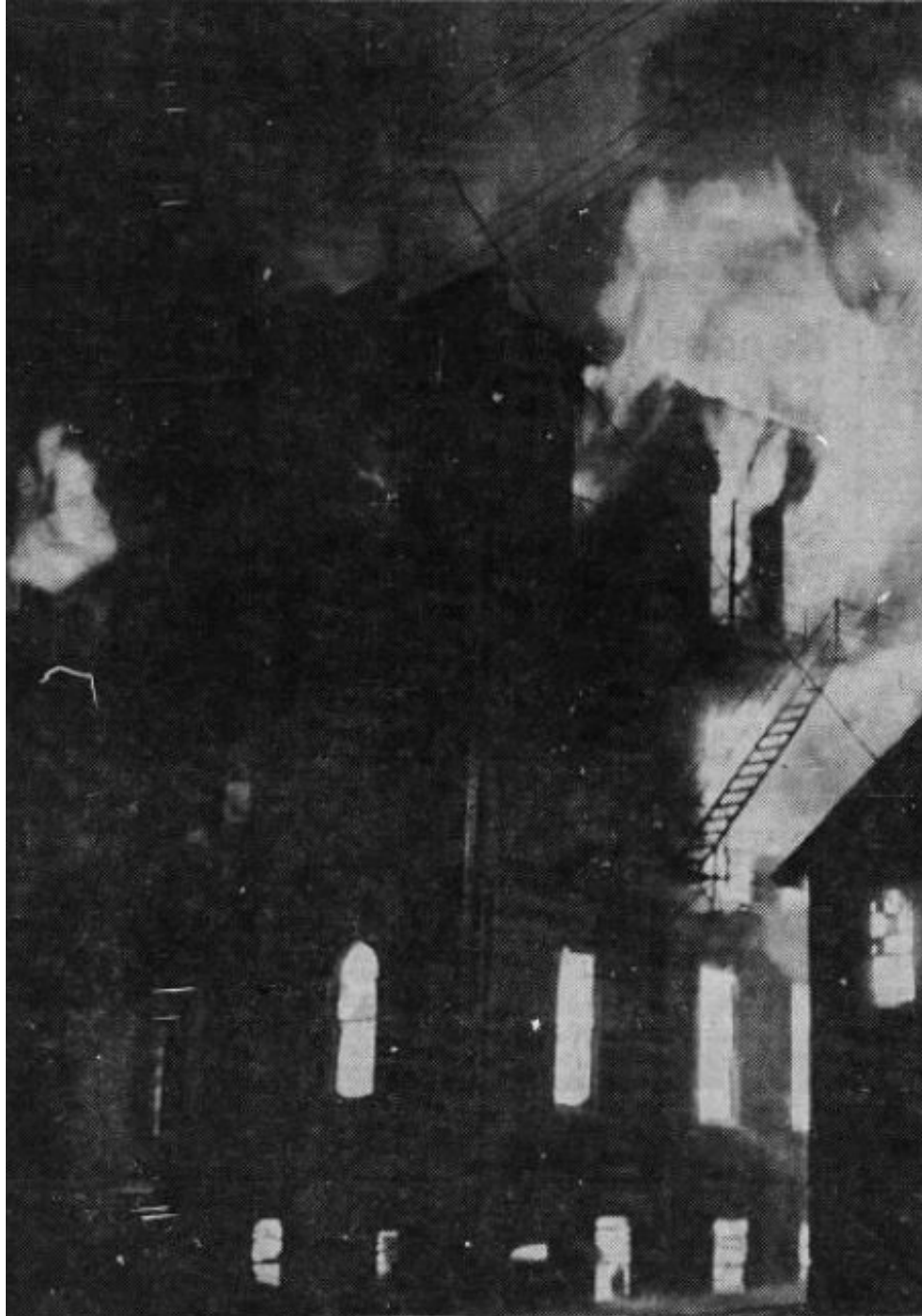


THE UNION FRATERNITY HALL FIRE



**Manchester Borough, York County, Pennsylvania
Monday, February 18, 1963**

On Monday, September 4th, 1911, an application was made to the York County Court of Common Pleas for a corporate charter for the Union Fraternity Hall Association of Manchester. The purpose of the organization was to build, provide, furnish and maintain a suitable public hall or quarters for lodge and other public meeting purposes.

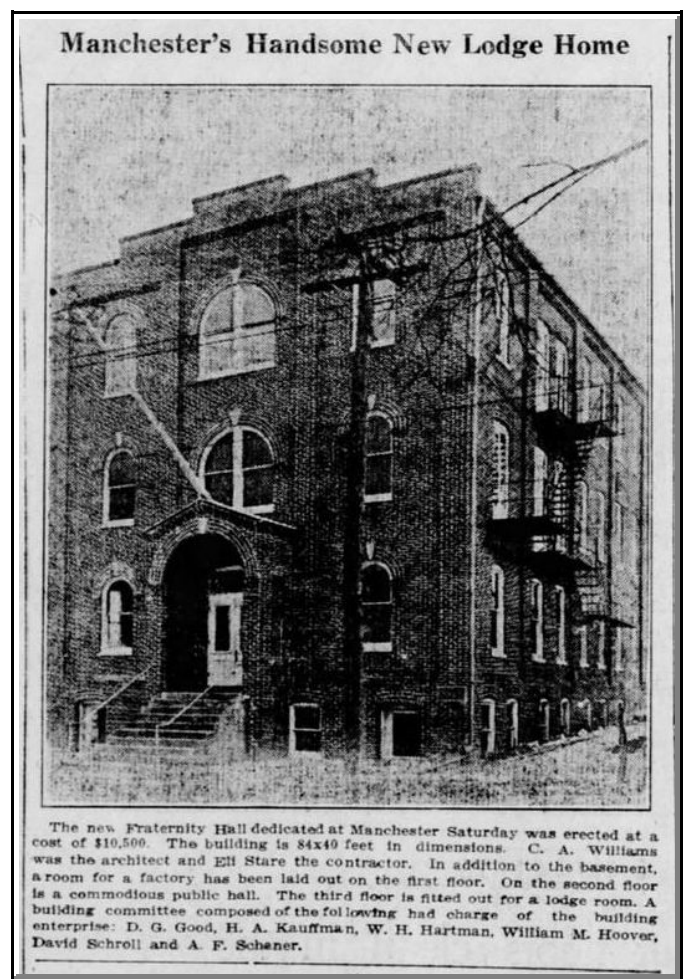
Although the organization filed for incorporation in September, the actual construction of the building began in May of 1911. Apparently the incorporation was merely a formality needed for when the building was completed and in operation.

The Association was made up of two Manchester fraternal lodge organizations, the Patriotic Order, Sons of America, and the Junior Order United American Mechanics.

The building was completed in early 1912. It was of brick construction, three stories high with a basement. The building had a forty foot frontage on Main Street, and was eighty-four feet deep. The building was equipped with fire escapes and was pronounced as the finest of its kind in York County. C. A. Williams was the architect, and Eli Stare was the contractor. The building cost \$10,500 to build.

The basement was designed to be used as a restaurant, and the second floor contained an auditorium. The third floor consisted of a lodge meeting hall to be shared by the two lodges, and the first floor could be used as a factory or store room. The building was dedicated with a parade and festival on Saturday, February 24, 1912.

Newspaper accounts from the era show that the hall was used by a variety of



organizations, including the Union Fire Company of Manchester, whose nearby fire house was too small to hold banquets and other large events.

The first annual convention of the York County Firemen's Association was held in Manchester on New Year's Day, 1915, with an ox roast, convention sessions and a grand ball being held in Fraternity Hall. An estimated 800 to 1,000 firemen participated in the parade.

In May of 1916, the Manchester School Board rented the first floor of Fraternity Hall to be used as a high school. A full three-year high school course was offered at the hall. Many school plays were held in the Fraternity Hall auditorium, and commencement exercises were held there as well. The building was used as the Manchester High School for a number of years, and was later used as an elementary school.

Union Fire Company Moves

By the 1950s, the Union Fire Company of Manchester was quickly outgrowing its former blacksmith shop on Main Street. In 1952 it purchased a plot of land on York Street to build a new fire hall. In June of 1956, ground was broken on the new fire hall, a 45 by 50 foot brick and cement block building. Equipment was moved into the new fire station on Monday, May 20, 1957, and a two-day program to dedicate the new station was held on Friday and Saturday, September 6th and 7th, 1957. The Borough of Manchester retained the former fire hall as a borough building.

Association Dissolves

When the Manchester Elementary Center was formed in the former Manchester High School, all elementary school classes were moved to that building. This must have dealt a huge blow to the Union Fraternity Hall Association. The building, once a center for activities in the borough, now sat vacant.

The Association sold the building in October of 1958, and on Monday, December 1, 1958 the school district was reimbursed for its share of the expense of a new heating plant that had been previously installed in the building. On December 22, 1958, the Association has dissolved its corporation.

Foam Products

In October of 1958, Foam Products purchased the Fraternity Hall building.

Foam Products was originally formed in Philadelphia as Foam Toys, Inc. in 1951. By 1953, the firm had relocated to York, operating at 149 East College Avenue. Molded foam rubber toys had been the principal product of the company, but the addition of industrial and medical therapeutic products resulted in the change of name.

Foam Products started renovations to the building, with offices being built in the front of the first floor. The basement and second floor would be prepared for manufacturing, while the first floor rear would be set up for storage.

The business moved into the building in December. Small molded pieces to be made at the Manchester plant ranged from earphone cushions for the Air Force to toe pads for foot ailments.

Foam Products would also open a plant in York Haven.

The 1959 Fire

On Tuesday, May 19, 1959, fire struck the Foam Products plant in Manchester.

Around 6:00 a.m., an unidentified milk delivery man discovered that the building was on fire, and drove to the Manchester fire hall to sound the alarm. When firemen arrived, smoke and flames were pouring from windows on the north side of the building. Manchester fire chief Gordon Ziegler took command of about 100 firemen from Manchester, Mount Wolf, Emigsville, York Haven and Strinestown, battling the smoky blaze for two hours before bringing it under control.

Plant operations had started a three-week shutdown the day before to move equipment into a new addition at the rear of the building. Damage to the equipment and building was estimated at \$50,000, with an additional \$25,000 in inventory, built up to cover orders during the shut down, destroyed by the fire. Sgt. Jack Arms of the state fire marshal's office determined that the fire originated in the first floor ceiling or the second floor flooring, and was likely electrical in origin. Nearly 60 workers were temporarily out of work until the plant was repaired.

In 1962, the Foam Products plant in York Haven had been struck by fire. But the worst was yet to come.

The 1963 Fire

Around 2:20 a.m. on Monday, February 18, 1963, Eugene Livingston of Mount Wolf was on his way to work as a janitor at the Gazette and Daily newspaper in York when he saw flames as he approached the square in Manchester. He quickly drove to the Manchester fire house to sound the alarm.

Bonnie Bowers, who lived with her parents at 19 South Main Street, immediately north of the plant, was awakened by a noise outside. She noticed a silhouette of a man surrounded by red outside the kitchen window, and when she went to the door he ran off. She woke her father, who then evacuated the family from the house.

Manchester fire chief Clair Heilman said when the first apparatus arrived, flames were coming from windows on all three floors of the building. Mount Wolf firemen found the fire hydrant closest to the building was frozen and not operable. They relocated to another hydrant 100 yards north.

Firemen from Manchester, Mount Wolf, Emigsville, York Haven, Dover, Strinestown and Pleasureville battled the blaze in 12 degree weather for hours, as flames leapt fifty feet above the roof of the former Fraternity Hall.

For two hours, firemen played streams of water on the Bowers residence, just 20 feet away from the foam plant. The home suffered broken windows, blistered shutters and scorched walls, but other than some damage to the roof, the house and barn remained standing.

Things did not go as well on the south side of the building.

At about 4:00 a.m., a portion of the south wall collapsed. The borough building, the former fire hall, was well involved in fire. Despite the efforts of the firemen, the borough building was a total loss. Embers from the fire drifted as far away as Mount Wolf.

Losses to the plant were estimated at \$150,000, and forty-five workers were left jobless. Damages to the borough building were estimated at \$10,000. Two firemen

were hurt from falls due to icing conditions.

A cause of the fire was unable to be found in newspaper accounts from the era.



Information compiled by Gregory C. Halpin, Chief Historian, Department of Fire/Rescue Services, City of York, Pennsylvania from accounts in the York Daily and the Gazette and Daily newspapers, as available on newspapers.com web site.

Presented to the Union Fire Company of Manchester at the annual banquet, Saturday, February 24, 2018.