



Preparing for demolition -- Around noon on August 11, about eight hours after fire destroyed Spencerport's Lyell Avenue fire station, firemen did the hard tasks of removing tributes to fallen comrades. Fireman **Dave Wieme** removes the name of the station from the masonry on the street-side of the building. Photographs by Walter Horylev. More about the disastrous fire and how the department is coping inside this week.



Two fire trucks are now temporarily housed at the Spencerport Electric Department building at the DPW site on West Avenue in Spencerport village. Other trucks saved from the fire have been placed at the district's two other stations. Above, rescue truck 2918 and pumper 2912 are backed into the building. Alphanumeric pagers help keep volunteers in touch and up to date on department events. Photograph by Walter Horylev.

# Spencerport firemen respond to catastrophic event, begin process of rebuilding their house

Firemen are accustomed to fighting fires and helping the victims through the tragedy that comes from losing their homes and possessions. It's rare that they are called upon to fight a fire at their own home and begin the painful process of rebuilding and re-equipping their own fire station.

This is what firefighters of the 105-member Spencerport volunteer department were faced with in the early morning hours of Friday, August 11 when fire ripped through their Lyell Avenue base in the Village of Spencerport at 3:30 a.m. One of the worst parts of the tragedy, according to Fire Chief Chris Wood, was watching as the blaze swept through Fire Station No. 1 but being unable to battle it because the gear worn by the volunteers was inside the smoldering building.

Wood has been a volunteer since 1980 and has served as chief since January. Prior to that he had a stint as chief from 1999 to 2001.

"That was the most frustrating part -- that we had close to 100 firemen show up and not be able to get to their gear," he said. "Everyone was safe but it was a stressful time for everyone to not be able to do anything. We lost a big part of our history."

In 1962 the department's equipment was moved from the downtown village location to this building, a former car dealership. Then fire chief, Al (Curley) Zarnstorff, a contractor, had bid on and been awarded the renovation job and became known as the fire chief who had built his own fire house.

## Saving the trucks

Before the building became engulfed, one of the volunteers, Fire Commissioner Rich McQuilkin, along with other volunteers, were able to remove the fire trucks from the building. McQuilkin has been a volunteer with the department since 1980 and has also served as a district commissioner for the past four years.

McQuilkin, who lives a short distance from the fire station, said he received a phone call from the department's alarm company that a burglar alarm had been tripped. "I asked them to have a police officer meet me there," he said. At that time, McQuilkin said, there was no reason to believe it was anything other than a tripped alarm.

On his way to the firehouse he smelled smoke and saw what looked like puffs of smog. "I didn't think anything of it until I got to the firehouse and saw smoke above the west bay," he said.

It was then that his decades of fire training kicked into auto pilot and he entered the building and noticed an increased amount of heat and that the smoke was heavier at the far end of the kitchen where

it leads to the meeting room. "At that point smoke was down to about one foot from the floor and I realized I'd better call for help," he said. He went to pick up the phone in the meeting room and it rang before he got to it. "It was the 911 supervisor, Steve Cousins, who is also one of our volunteers," McQuilkin said. "He was calling to see if everything was okay. I told him, 'I have a building full of smoke,' and he sounded the tones that would alert the other firemen."

McQuilkin said he went down the pathway behind the trucks and got a blast of heat. He got down on his hands and knees and crawled to the meeting room and saw a column of fire going from floor to ceiling. "I crawled out of there, closed the door and went to the radio room (front of building) so I could get the doors open on the truck bays." He said the first door opened at the push of the button but the second bay door didn't. He had to go out and push the opener automatically. "I started unplugging the trucks' air hoses and electric wires, hopped into the first truck and pulled it out. I went back in and got my gear and was going to pull off a hose to fight the fire but by that time the whole ceiling and the truck bay was on fire."

Safety became an issue because of the steel beam construction of the building. "Once the steel beams and trusses that support the building are exposed to fire, their support is weakened and they can twist and completely collapse," he said.

Simultaneously, several other firemen had arrived on scene and proceeded to drive the department's six other vehicles from the building.

"Because we knew everyone and all of the trucks were outside of the building, we knew we just had to wait outside. No one could get to their gear," he said.

McQuilkin has been credited with saving the vehicles but he said he simply had the foresight to get the bay doors open. "I only took out one of the trucks, there were other volunteers on scene by that time and they rescued the rest of the vehicles," he said. "I have read about other departments that this has happened to and they can't get the trucks out and without trucks you are out of business."

From the time he received the call about the alarm and responded and by the time the vehicles were out of the building, the time elapsed was likely less than five minutes, McQuilkin believes. Scott Magin, Tim Stevely, Jeff Tewksbury and Adam Salamone were among the first volunteers on the scene, he said, adding, "So many showed up that it was hard to keep track. This is a dedicated force."

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# Spencerport firemen

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### Continuous protection

Wood said that even in the midst of the fire and its aftermath, residents received continuous fire protection. The volunteers from the Spencerport Fire Department are responsible for 3,500 residents.

“We had two fire trucks stationed within the village by the canal and they were under 24-hour security,” he said. “We were waiting to get the vehicles moved into the bays (at the Spencerport Electric Department building) at the DPW on West Avenue because the air brakes on the trucks need access to the air compressors to keep them operable.” The department’s other vehicles are stationed at its other two fire houses.

Area fire departments volunteered to fill in for Spencerport volunteers who had been up around the clock. “The residents of the village were never without fire protection even during this catastrophic event,” Wood said.

Village Mayor Ted Walker, who was out of town at the time of the fire, said, “This is an understandably trying time for the village and I applaud the firefighters for their dedication in the face of this catastrophe.”

### Outpouring of support

Support has been pouring into the Spencerport Fire Department from local departments as well as out of state firefighters.

“You always hear how the fire company is made up of brothers and in a case like this you really know what that means,” Wood said of the offers of assistance with firemen and equipment that he has received. Gates and Churchville offered equipment and personnel; Greece Ridge has offered coats and boots, Hilton has volunteered to wash gear, for examples.

State Senator George Maziarz, a volunteer firefighter for more than 30 years, showed up at the scene and promised to speed aid, to the tune of \$10,000, to the department. “It was a catastrophe. This is a tough, tough time for them,” he said. “I felt that offering emergency appropriations was the least I could do to help this department through this time.”

Wood said that when Maziarz finished speaking to the firemen he reached into his pocket and pulled out \$500 and donated it to the department. “We truly appreciate his support,” Wood said. “We have had people driving up to the fence (around the demolished building) putting flowers through the fence, handing us money. It’s been amazing.”

### The next steps

Wood said there is no way to prepare for an event of this magnitude. “You just can’t plan for it, there is no contingency plan in place for the loss of your firehouse,” he said. “What we are doing is taking it hour by hour. Okay, this is what we will do in the next four hours. We will deal with that then look on toward the next eight hours and so on.”

Wood said it was the department’s intent to rebuild on the site of the former fire house but that they wouldn’t be able to break ground until spring.

“Right now we are looking into places to store the vehicles for the long term,” he said.

Members of the Spencerport Planning Board had reviewed preliminary plans for a new fire station presented at their August 1 meeting. District officials have been discussing updating the headquarters for about a year.

As of August 16, two of the fire trucks are being housed at the Spencerport DPW site and Wood said they are in negotiations with a company to move the pumper and other rescue vehicles into the village. “I can’t really say where they might be going yet because we haven’t finalized anything but we are looking to get the vehicles back within the village,” he said.

### Investigation

Monroe County Fire Investigator Mike Fantigrossi said the cause of the fire is still under investigation. “We have not found anything suspicious but the investigation is ongoing,” he said.

It has been determined that the fire started in the ceiling above the department’s meeting room. Fantigrossi said the insurance company is also looking at several pieces of equipment that were ruined to see if they may have been the cause of the blaze.

“Because of the condition of the building and because it had to be demolished (because of the threat of collapse) the investigation is a bit more arduous,” he said. “We don’t know the cause and are continuing to investigate.”

As for what will happen to the debris from the building, Wood said the department is awaiting issuance of a permit from the Department of Transportation that will allow it to be hauled to a landfill.

“Because of when the building was constructed, there was asbestos in the building materials,” Wood said. “Until we are issued a permit, we have to keep the debris moist and we are wetting it down about three times a day to keep dust at a minimum.”



The last trace of flames in the roof of the Spencerport Fire Department building is extinguished approximately 8-1/2 hours after the fire was discovered August 11, 2006. Photograph by Walter Horylev.



A view of the large bay shows ceiling fragments hanging down and piles of scorched rubble on the concrete floor. The turn-out gear hung in compartments at the rear of the bay. Photograph by Walter Horylev.



Salvaged firefighter equipment included these helmets, showing some damage from the fire. Right, many of the boots in this pile survived by quick action on the part of the firefighters. Photographs by Walter Horylev.



The demolished Spencerport Fire Department building the evening of August 11. Photograph by Evelyn Dow.