

The Great School Fire

The 1963 Hurlbutt fire destroyed a school, but taught important lessons to the Weston fire service.

By Peter V.K. Reid

The sirens at Weston's two firehouses started wailing at 6 A.M. one October morning, and they didn't stop. Volunteer firemen within earshot climbed out of bed, and rushed to the firehouses. It was October 30, 1963, and Weston's volunteer fire department was about to be forged by fire.

Anson Keene, a volunteer fireman who worked at the Gilbert & Bennett wire mill, was the first to reach the Norfield fire station. He immediately telephoned the Westport Fire Department, which handled fire dispatch for Weston. He was informed that a milkman delivering to the Hurlbutt School had seen smoke in the building.

Keene then made one more call, to trigger the telephone chain that supplemented the firehouse sirens in summoning fire personnel. Once the telephone chain was activated, each man was to call two others until everyone on the list had been reached.

That duty done, Keene rushed to the school, and was soon joined by fire chief Jack O'Brien and fireman Matt Johnson. Smoke was visible outside, and when they went inside, smoke was wafting through the hallway. As they moved upstairs, they began to hear the fire, an audible crackling that was building to a roar. By the time the men were back outside, the fire had broken through the roof.

Volunteer Charlie McCullough was the fourth man on the scene, and he immediately ran into George Vogel, a former New York City fireman who served as Weston's director of buildings and grounds. The two could see that this fire was serious indeed. "I had been on the fire department for several years," McCullough recalled, "and I'd helped put out a few fires with Joe Spetly. In many cases, our fire response in those days was just two guys with a truck, but most fires were small, and this hadn't been a cause for concern. When I arrived at the school, there was a one-foot square hole in the roof, and flame was coming out like a blowtorch."

Weston's volunteers were soon flooding the scene, including Captain Charlie Pokorny, Captain Bob Studwell, Tommy Phillips, Anson Morton, Bob Harper, Jr., Sprout Fancher, and Alex Buttman. Fred Moore, later to become fire chief and fire marshal, was a young lieutenant at the time.

"In those days, fire protection was still in its infancy," Moore noted. Automatic fire alarms and sprinkler systems as we know them today did not exist. And, although rudimentary heat-detection devices were available, none had been installed at Hurlbutt.

By the time most fire personnel arrived, the fire was already well seated in the structure. And, as soon became clear, Hurlbutt could have given firetraps a good name. The Hurlbutt School might have looked like a brick building with a slate roof, but appearances were deceiving. The school was a Depression-era building, constructed in 1932 by the Works Projects Administration (WPA). The roof was imitation slate, and very heavy, requiring a dense lattice of wooden supports. The brick siding was just a façade, also backed by wood. There were no fire stops in the structure. "When the WPA built it, they didn't know anything about compartmentalization," Fred Moore noted.

Worse, the ceilings were made of cane board. The cane was intended to suppress sound in the classrooms, but the material was later banned in the 1970s due to its flammability.

The Hurlbutt School of those days was a long one-story building with a two-story addition on the far end. The fire started on the second floor of that addition, in an area above the girl's bathroom. Painters were storing paint in a room there, and the fire may have started with some oily rags and a careless smoker. There was also a ventilating system installed in that part of the building, and this had been running all weekend, so an overheated motor could have been the trigger.

Whatever the cause, the Weston volunteer fire department had a serious blaze on their hands. As the department marshaled its forces, young lieutenant Moore tried to make an interior attack. "We thought we'd be able to cut the fire off at the beginning of the two-story addition," he says, "but it went high, and we were driven back."

Charlie McCullough recalls that a locked door was preventing access to one room. "Anson Keene didn't want us to break the window," he recalls, "so he left to get a key. By the time he came back, the door was gone."

Another team broke through a door adjacent to the gym, and brought hoses into play, but the fire was spreading fast through the structure. The wind was strong, 35 MPH, and blowing from the north. The fire was burning south to north, and the wind turned the interior into something akin to a blast furnace.

Astonishingly, in the part of the building not yet engulfed by fire, some teachers had arrived and were busily carting textbooks outside. Marie Keene and Julia Studwell joined them, and then rushed over to Peter's Market to get cardboard boxes for the books. They soon were filling up their car trunks with books and school materials and carting them to safety. It had soon become clear to the fire personnel that interior attacks were coming to naught.

Modern-day firefighters rely on self-contained breathing apparatus and heat-resistant protective gear to get to the seat of a fire, and Weston's firefighters had neither. The department had two MSA (Mine Safety Administration) masks. There were also three or four Class C masks. "The MSA masks were a little better than the old U.S. Navy ones we had been using, but we only had two," recalls Fred Moore, "and the Class C masks were terrible. They had no positive pressure, and they had these two goggle eyes. You couldn't see anything when you were wearing them."

Some Weston firefighters were equipped with plastic helmets, rubberized raincoats and high boots. But many of the new men had no protective equipment at all. Charlie McCullough just wore an old cotton coat. "I had no turnout gear," he recalls. "Car coats were quite the vogue at the time, and I had one made of black corduroy. It looked almost like a fireman's coat, but I had no helmet and no boots."

Water supply, the key to any successful interior attack, quickly became an issue. The hoses had been feeding from a 3000-gallon tank at the school, but this was soon exhausted. The Weston Fire Department had one attack pumper with a 400-gallon tank, a 1934 Mack pumper with a 250-gallon tank, and two 1954 Chevrolet tankers with 800-gallon tanks. These tanks were quickly drained, and Anson Keene set out to lay a 2-1/2-

inch water supply line to Cobb's Mill pond.

Meanwhile, other local fire departments were joining Weston in the battle. Westport sent an aerial ladder truck and a pumper. Wilton and Georgetown sent trucks, as did Newtown, Norwalk, Easton and Redding. Even Botsford, CT sent a tanker, a large converted dairy truck with a massive stainless-steel tank.

The Georgetown pumper hooked up to Anson Keene's supply line at the Cobb's Mill, and began pumping water to a Wilton pumper, and then on to Weston's Chevrolet pumper at the bottom of the school driveway. The tenuous 2-1/2-inch line provided water to the fire scene, but the small diameter of the hose kept flow to a relative trickle. Modern water supply hose is four inches in diameter, and made of robust synthetic materials that rarely fail. In contrast, the hoses running from Cobb's Mill kept blowing couplings, and firemen raced to replace lengths of hose.

Meanwhile, Anson Keene noticed that Weston's Chevy pumper was vibrating alarmingly, and then the engine quit. He went under the hood, and found that the vibration had knocked a spark-plug wire loose. "I replaced it," he recalled, "and then 'bam,' the engine threw a rod." With that pumper out of commission, the department's 1934 Mack was rolled into the breach. Although almost 30 years old at that time, the Mack had a gear pump that could move a lot of water. "We got the old Mack hooked up, and it purred like a kitten," Keene said.

A tanker shuttle was also providing water to the scene. Fireman Matt Johnson was driving one of Weston's Chevrolet tankers. "I would drive to Cobb's Mill pond, and also a pond on Tommy Phillip's property. We'd fill up the tanker truck and bring it to the center. They would pump it out, and I'd go back for more. We did that all day."

Meanwhile, the fire was burning almost out of control. Hose lines were playing on the structure, but there was no longer any hope of saving the building. "We had no big hose," Fred Moore said. "The 2-1/2-inch lines we'd laid to Cobb's Mill worked, but didn't get us much water. The fire was burning like a bandit, and we couldn't go in to get it. We wanted to fall back on a 'surround and drown' strategy, but we didn't have the water to drown it."

Westport had set up its aerial ladder to pour water onto the fire, and a Westport firefighter named George Cuseo was up at the top of the ladder manning a hose. Weston's Charlie McCullough, still wearing his corduroy coat, took another 2-1/2-inch line midway up the ladder to add to bolster the exterior attack. "It was like witnessing hell," McCullough said. "The fire had burned through the floor to the boiler room, and you could see the white-hot structural steel. Our hose streams could do nothing to stop it."

Suddenly, the brick façade of the school began to buckle toward Westport's aerial truck. A Westport firefighter jumped into the vehicle and began to move it. "I shut down the hose line, and then dropped it," McCullough said. "As the truck moved, the ladder dipped down toward the fire. It was a wild ride."

Mr. McCullough may be guilty of understatement, for every man on the scene recalled the danger of that moment. "When the façade and the roof went, and the truck started moving, Charlie was still on that ladder, and that ladder dropped toward the fire," Fred Moore said. "That was our closest call." As the fire burned, the artificial slate shingles on the roof popped off, still burning, and created a hazard to men and equipment. The material burned hoses, and burned right through the raincoats firemen were wearing. "It was an immense conflagration," McCullough said.

Firefighters kept pouring water on the exterior, and by 3 P.M., the fire was subsiding. "Sooner or later, everything that could burn had burned," Moore said.

When the fire was over, Julie Jones, owner of the Cobb's Mill Inn, invited all the Weston and out-of-town firemen to the Inn, where she had the kitchens working overtime. Every firefighter involved in combating the blaze warmly remembered the Inn's hospitality. As fireman Keene recalled, there was even a bottle of Scotch placed on every table.

Firemen stood a fire watch over the structure through the night, and the next day a crane was brought in to knock down remaining walls. The structure was a total loss, with damage estimated at \$485,000 in 1963 dollars. All twelve classrooms, which housed grades four through six, were destroyed. Almost all the furniture burned. Some textbooks and school records were saved, thanks to the industry of the teachers, along with Marie Keene and Julia Studwell.

Fire was prevented from spreading to the East House and South House, but 272 students from Hurlbutt were displaced, and local churches offered classroom space until a new school could be constructed. Temple Israel, First Unitarian Church, Emmanuel Episcopal church and Norfield Congregational church each offered space.

The students probably had mixed feelings about the event. Westonite Mark Campbell recalled watching the event as a little tike. "I watched my school burn as I was eating cereal in the kitchen of my house," he said. And, while he might have felt some small satisfaction at the time, the event did prove seminal. Campbell ultimately became a line lieutenant and life member in the Weston Fire Department.

For Weston at large, the event was an introduction to the realities of a big fire at a time when larger structures were being built in town. "The fire was featured in the National Fire Protection Association journal, and fire protection became a big issue in this town," said Fred Moore. "We made sure that new structures had protection, with heat detectors and alarms." The fire also transformed every facet of the Weston fire service. Fred Moore and other line officers who fought the Hurlbutt fire had a lot to do with this. "At that time, we tended to the 'surround and drown' school of thought," Moore said. "After that, we wanted to get in and get the fire out. Instead of having the fire come to you, you go to the fire. That's what you have to do."

Aggressive interior attack is now Weston Fire Department doctrine, instilled by Fred Moore when he was chief for over 25 years, and carried on by Chief John Pokorny, son of the late Captain Charlie Pokorny.

However, it took years to assemble the building blocks for effective interior attack. In a town without city water lines, water supply was and is a crucial element. "If you can get the water to the fire, that's half the battle," Moore noted.

In the years after the fire, the town appropriated monies for larger capacity tankers. In 1968, two 1000-gallon tankers were purchased from Govens & Knight in Watertown, CT. And, by 1973, Fred Moore had found a source of imported large-diameter water supply hose. A new American LaFrance pumper was purchased (the current Weston Engine One) with a 1,750 gallon-per-minute pump and a bed that could

accommodate a mile of big hose.

Personal protective gear also took on greater significance. Numerous men, even those wearing the rudimentary protective gear, were burned by flaming material at the Hurlbutt fire. Others, like Charlie McCullough, who manned the aerial ladder in his corduroy coat, were just lucky. "By today's standards, OSHA would have locked all of us up," McCullough said.

Fred Moore worked with other fire officers at the Connecticut Fire Academy on the transition from the 3/4 coats and boots to full protective gear, a transition that was completed by the 1970s.

Training also received greater emphasis. "The old school fire department fought fires with what they had," McCullough said. "today's training is much more detailed. In 1963, we had very little knowledge about attacking a major fire. There's no question that the Hurlbutt fire was a turning point for the Weston fire department. It is a whole different ball game today."

As McCullough implies, Weston's highly professional volunteer fire service is the end result. Every Weston volunteer firefighter must pass the state Firefighter One course, and many choose to complete Firefighter Two as well. The department conducts hands-on training on a year-round basis, and annual training requirements were doubled two years ago. Each firefighter is issued full, modern protective gear the day they sign on. This gear includes a structural firefighting bunker coat and pants, boots, gloves, fire helmet and personal self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) mask. Some still wear corduroy coats, but only to the annual Holiday party.

The department's apparatus have also been transformed. The 1934 Mack is now a parade truck, and though it has been laboriously restored, no one can envision a situation where it would be hooked up to a water supply line at a major structure fire. In addition to the 1974-vintage Engine 1, the department fields two 1989 E-One attack pumpers with 1000-gallon tanks, a 1997 Peterbilt/E-One tanker with a 2,500-gallon tank, a 2001 Pierce attack pumper with a 1,000 gallon tank and a 2003 Ford rescue truck.

There are many more large structures in town, but the evolution of fire protection and the fire service insure that they are better protected. "The Hurlbutt School fire woke a lot of people up in this town," said Fred Moore. "If we had a similar fire today, we would be able to suppress it in the early stages."

Note: Author Peter V.K. Reid is a volunteer firefighter, and lives in Weston with his wife and daughter