

The Kemp House Fire, Ballston Spa NY . . . and the Pursuit of Better Firefighting Equipment



After the tragedy, improving fire equipment became a big political issue.

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NOTE: There is a companion video to this story available at youtube.com. Go the "Ballston, the Historian's Perspective" and look for the video entitled "The Kemp House Fire."

It all probably started with an overheated oil or wood stove.¹ At least that's what they said after it was all over. Six dead, all in one family, a destroyed house, demands for better fire service. "The most terrible [tragedy] that ever occurred in this village [and it has] cast a gloom over the entire community."²

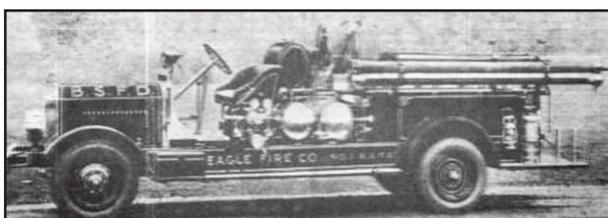
Early in the morning of November 6, 1925, the Union Fire Department was alerted and fire trucks were deployed to the scene, the home of George Kemp, his wife, and family of five children. The fire department was only located on Bath Street so it was less than a mile to the scene of the early morning (12:30 AM) fire; presumably it would not be a long trip but factors related to a fire in later years to almost the same location, a fire to be discussed later, may have impacted response time. The fire department was not legally obligated to deal with the fire as it was outside the "corporation" (village) of Ballston Spa. And negotiating the hills from the village to the scene of the fire was difficult for the fire apparatus which had to use low gears just to get there.³

The nearest fire hydrant was a quarter mile away, north into the village of Ballston Spa, and thus quite a distance away from the Schenectady-Ballston road, or Church Avenue, house located about two buildings south of the present Stewart's convenience mart.⁴ Laying all those hoses, which were reported to be about 1000 feet in length, would certainly have taken a considerable amount of time.

When the firemen arrived, they found a "seething furnace"⁵ which they were unable to enter until some of the



The Kemp house fire was outside the Village of Ballston Spa, and it took a while for Village fire equipment to reach it. This is a view looking north on Church Ave. in 1925.



The fire prompted the purchase of this fire engine.

flames and heat had been quelled. Neighbors told of one of the children in the family, Beatrice (age 16), who had climbed out of a window, her clothes afire. She screamed for a neighbor who quickly extinguished the girl's clothes, probably saving her from death. The entire side of the house broke into flames shortly after the girl escaped.

Neighbors at the time told of a fire that seemed to center in the chimney area in the house. That led to some speculation that the fire began in the wood stove, although other reports suggested that the chimney itself was not operational; it had previously been blown down in a wind storm.⁶ Yet even other reports indicated that the chimney had been repaired only two weeks ago and was functional.⁷

When firemen were able to enter the remains of the home, they found five bodies huddled together; all were burned beyond recognition. A sixth body was found in another room of the one-story four room house. The dead were George (age 40) and Sarah Kemp (age 32-3 ?); Mrs. Kemp's daughters from a previous marriage, Viola (14), Carol (10), and Myrtle (9) Allen; and another child from Kemp's earlier marriage, Marthenia (11). Identifications could only be made by size alone. The position and location of the five bodies led to the belief that the father had tried to move a chiffonier, a tall dresser often with a mirror on top, away from a window to facilitate the escape of the family but that he and/or the others may have been overcome before he could accomplish the task.⁸ The investigators also noted that the father's body, with his wife and three children, was in a room other than the one in which he slept, indicating that he may well have been trying to herd them to allow them

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