

## Danbury's Fire Bug of the 1880s and 1890s

Brian Stevens

When an attempt to burn the house of ex-superintendent Foster of the street railway was made a few nights ago, it was thought that the dreaded fire bug had reached the height of his ambition. To start a fire directly under the sleeping apartments of seven or eight men and leave them to possibly roast alive was as terrible an attempt as could be made, and such might have been the case had the fire got well under way. Fortunately it was discovered too soon.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately for Danbury, this was just at the beginning of a string of more than seventy fires that occurred between 1888 and 1893 attributed to a person or persons the press referred to as the "fire bug." The Connecticut State Firemen's Association, which was formed in 1885, reported that incendiarism was an increasing problem around Connecticut, but Danbury's fire bug was extraordinary. The fire bug caused the modern equivalent of tens of millions of dollars in damage around Danbury and many of the fires were in such close proximity that there was an area dubbed to be the "Firebug District."<sup>2</sup> The fire bug was elusive to Danbury's police, and by 1891, with three years yielding no real suspect, authorities hired an operative from Pinkerton's National Detective Agency. The Pinkerton operative's investigation ultimately led to no arrests, though after his investigation there were significantly fewer incendiary fires reported and, except for a couple of fires in 1893, none in the press attributed to a fire bug. While there was no single culprit or group that was indicted for Danbury's rash of fires during this period, the fire bug episode was the byproduct and confluence of the political, labor, and ethnic unrest that was playing out on a local and national level. Moreover, the episode punctuated Danbury's difficult transition both in name and nature to becoming a city. In the middle of these fiery expressions was Morris Meyers, the first Chief of the City of Danbury's paid fire department; Meyers was a successful Democrat and a German Jewish

---

<sup>1</sup> *Danbury News*, July 25, 1888.

<sup>2</sup> According to lists provided to the Pinkerton operative in 1891, there were 68 fires presumed to be fire bug fires. It is unknown when the Danbury Police and City officials began counting the fires, so the number could be higher. There were five fire bug fires or attempts after the list was compiled; Pinkerton Reports; Western Connecticut State University Archives, Danbury (hereafter cited as WCSU Archives); "State Firemen's Association." *The Hartford Courant (1887-1922)*, Aug 18, 1887, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed January 21, 2014). The damage amount is based on an average derived from <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/relativevalue.php>. The average used is ~\$1 1890 = \$25 present.

immigrant whose important place in the new city government was the embodiment of a shift in the composition of the electorate.

The Danburians of that period, most of whom were in some way directly or indirectly affiliated with hat manufacturing, were faced with a population that had nearly doubled over the preceding decade and was increasingly made up of immigrants. Hat manufacturing was difficult work that involved intense heat and exposure to mercury (used in the softening of fur for hats) which was well documented, even at the time, to be highly toxic.<sup>3</sup> There was a pressing need for investment in Danbury's infrastructure and substantial municipal debt.<sup>4</sup> Menacing news of labor unrest, strikes, and violence around the country as well as in Danbury were a regular presence in the press even amidst vast increases in the gross output of hat manufacturers.<sup>5</sup> Politically, Danbury had been evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats, and most elections since the 1870s had been decided by very narrow margins. By the late 1880s, Danbury's festering Still River was a potent indicator that change was required. With a larger population, the small, slow-moving, and prone-to-flood stream could no more serve as the town's sewer than could the 19,000 citizens and hat industry rely on a fire department made up solely of volunteers. It was also recognized that the old part-time borough government was overmatched by the tasks that lay before it. Amidst this upheaval, fires were set, among the largest the area had seen up to that point. Rebecca Edwards's *New Spirits: Americans in the Gilded Age* highlights Cuban revolutionary José Martí's reaction to the 1886 Haymarket bombing, which described U.S. activists as "volcanoes erupting from a vast underground reservoir of molten rock." Further, she notes Martí's observation that the U.S. was "terrified by the increased organization among the lower classes." Historians now widely label this period as "The Great Upheaval." In Edwards's *New Spirits*, she argues that in some ways "the crisis of the 1890s was larger even than the Great Depression . . . and it was accompanied by determined, collective protests that shocked the nation's elite."<sup>6</sup> Danbury's problems may not have individually amounted to Martí's "volcanoes erupting," but something like that would come when many of the changes Danbury had to face came to a head in the spring of 1888. The city sank into a morass of accusations against suspected hatters and volunteer firefighters, in the midst of economic tensions of the Gilded Age and the coming Depression of the 1890s.

### *The Borough of Danbury, Connecticut in 1888*

---

<sup>3</sup> L. Dennis, "Hatting as Affecting the Health of Operatives," *The Sanitarian* No. 410 (1904): 67-69. [https://books.google.com/books?id=tSwUAAAAIAAJ&dq="mercurial diseases among hatters"&pg=PP1](https://books.google.com/books?id=tSwUAAAAIAAJ&dq=). Dr. Dennis summarized some of the past research into the hazards for laborers in the industry.

<sup>4</sup> *Register and Manual of the State of Connecticut* (Hartford: The State, 1891), 454. Between 1880 and 1890, Danbury grew from a town of 11,000 to a city of 19,000.

<sup>5</sup> "Prosperous Danbury," *The Hartford Courant*, Jan 05, 1891, <http://0-search.proquest.com> (accessed February 10, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Edwards, *New Spirits: Americans in the Gilded Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 197, 236.

Anti-Southern sentiment after the Civil War had solidified much of the Connecticut's political power with the Republicans, but that alignment was short-lived. For the late nineteenth century, John Garraty's *The New Commonwealth* asserts that the "safest generalization that can be made about political alignments, aside from the obvious sectional divisions, is that party preferences were more influenced by family tradition, religion, and local issues of the moment than by the policies or pronouncements of statesmen and their organizations."<sup>7</sup> Northern Democrats benefited from various Republican scandals, but strong regional nuances to partisanship thrived.<sup>8</sup> Some recent scholarship questions the established assumptions that dismiss the period's politics as simply cynical and corrupt. Worth Robert Miller maintains that recent historians "have changed the emphasis from such considerations to the very real fact that Gilded Age politicians and parties truly engaged the American public on fundamental issues concerning the direction of the nation and the role government should play in national life."<sup>9</sup> In the 1884 elections, Democratic candidates for governor and president received 53 percent of the Danbury vote over the Republicans' 45 percent. While results were closer in the 1886 state elections, Democrats were again victorious that year in Danbury. However in 1888, Republicans received slim majorities in the gubernatorial and presidential races in Danbury, while most of Fairfield County favored the Democrats. Danbury saw 87 percent of its eligible voters go to the polls in 1888, up 12 percent from 1886. Based on these numbers, neither Danbury's Republicans nor Democrats had a comfortable edge over the other, and its electorate was mobilized.<sup>10</sup>

The borough leadership in 1888 had been infiltrated by the reformers, and newspaper stories documenting a rash of suicides, attempted suicides, and violent crimes stood in stark contrast to columns regarding the accustomed lighter local fair. Poisonings, drownings, beatings and shootings were now a reality of *Danbury News*.<sup>11</sup> The summer of 1888 was reported as very hot and followed a difficult winter

---

<sup>7</sup> John A. Garraty, *The New Commonwealth: 1877-1890* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 238.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Kleppner, *The Third Electoral System 1853-1892: Parties, Voters, and Political Cultures* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 94-106.

<sup>9</sup> Worth Robert Miller, "The Lost World of Gilded Age Politics," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 1, no. 1 (2002): 50, <http://0-www.jstor.org.www.consuls.org/stable/25144285> (accessed February 10, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Connecticut Secretary of the State, *Register and Manual of the State of Connecticut*, (Hartford: Case, Lockwood, and Brainard, 1888-1889).

<sup>11</sup> June 27, 1888, July 5, 1888, and August 15, 1888 document at least four suicides and attempts; Francis Burns was found beaten to death on May 16, 1888; Julius Weber was assaulted on April 11, 1888; Virgil Barnum was shot by his brother-in-law in April of 1888. See clippings: (<http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/exhibits/show/firebug/danbury-of-the-period/suicides-of-1888>)

that saw the colossal blizzard of 1888. Danbury's streets were unpaved, and improvements like newly invented electric street lights were a necessary expense to keep pace with competing municipalities. Significant infrastructure changes needed to be considered if Danbury expected to continue growing. In April of 1888, there was a petition put forward to then-Borough leader Warden L. Legrand Hopkins to create a charter for a City of Danbury, and Democrat Lewis Legrand Hopkins led the Charter Committee that first met in early July of 1888.<sup>12</sup>

Hopkins was a colorful, well-traveled character descended from a Revolutionary War soldier named Abel Sherwood. His life was punctuated by episodes involving fire.<sup>13</sup> Hopkins's Danbury was roughly half U.S.-born and the other half primarily German and Irish immigrants. Hatting had attracted much of the labor to the area, and those jobs began to draw persons from nearby Brookfield and Sherman.<sup>14</sup> Other groups were also present, including a small Jewish population. Jews in 1880s Danbury were few in number, predominantly German, and families like the Stones, Landsmans, Plauts and Deutsches were prospering.<sup>15</sup>

Danbury's hat manufactures maintained a delicate balance with labor in the 1880s, but by 1888, indications of significant support growing in the labor sector were apparent in Danbury's second Labor Day celebration. The *Danbury News* attributed the surprising popularity of the celebration and parade on timing and not on the significance of the holiday itself, claiming that everyone was away for the Fourth of July and everyone stayed home at Christmas. Despite the *News*' characterization of the holiday, its large parade included the Borough leadership, unions, and Danbury's first three fire companies: Washington, Humane and Kohanza. Forty members of Washington, twenty of Humane, and six of

---

<sup>12</sup> "The Borough Meeting." *Danbury News*. June 27, 1888.

<http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/files/original/f03e7c5cedb291a4c6f723272ed69355.jpg>

<sup>13</sup> *Commemorative biographical record of Fairfield County, Connecticut: containing biographical sketches of prominent and representative citizens, and of many of the early settled families*, (Chicago: J.H. Beers & Co., 1899), 1182-1183.

<sup>14</sup> Hopkins's father died when Hopkins was a young man. He went to school in New Fairfield and in Brookfield, where he worked on his uncle's farm. In his early teens he ran off to Jersey City, NJ, and earned a living as a newsboy on a rail line. From there he went to New York City and then aboard a trans-Atlantic steamer, where he had his first brush with fire. A ship he was on, the *Endymion*, caught fire near Wales, and the young Hopkins was badly injured by a falling spar that crushed his skull. After a long recovery in Liverpool, he returned to New York and then was off to California to mine in Shasta County. By the end of the Civil War, he had returned to the East Coast and worked in hatting, the railroad, oil drilling, surveying, bottling and retail. He married Grace Agnes Croal in September of 1865 and finally settled in New Fairfield with a hatting business. Fire then intervened again in his life when his New Fairfield hat business burned to the ground. His other ventures in New Fairfield proved unprofitable and he moved to Danbury to work in the freight office of the Danbury & Northern Railroad. He was politically active most of his life, and once he relocated to Danbury he pursued his political ambitions. He was elected to the Connecticut General Assembly several times between 1870 and 1887, having already served as deputy sheriff, sheriff and warden. William E. Devlin and Herbert F. Janick, *Danbury's Third Century: From Urban Status to Tri-Centennial*, (Danbury: Western Connecticut State University, 2013), 98-101.

<sup>15</sup> Eric Roman, "The Jews of Danbury: A History." (Unpublished manuscript [1979?]), American Jewish Archives.

Kohanza marched. Most of these volunteers were also hatters.<sup>16</sup> The rise of the Knights of Labor, the Hat Trimmers' Association, and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was a threat to management and specifically to Danbury's hat manufacturers. According to Connecticut's Bureau of Labor Statistics report of 1902, the year 1888 marked the time when, in addition to labor-management disputes, there were serious rifts between the Knights of Labor and the individual trade unions. The Report characterized the period as "stormy" and "filled with struggles between employer and employee and between trade unions and the Knights of Labor." The report also cited the creation of thirty-four labor organizations represented in Connecticut between 1885 and 1889.<sup>17</sup> Edmond Tweedy of the Tweedy Manufacturing Company and his National Associations of Fur Hat Finishers had managed to orchestrate a truce with the Knights of Labor in the Fall of 1885. "[A]doption of the plan in Danbury . . . with articles of agreement between the parties interested, practically closed the vexatious warfare between capital and labor in the hatting industry, which had prevailed for thirty-five years."<sup>18</sup> It was an uneasy truce, especially as the influence of the Knights of Labor gave way to the trade unions. Tweedy and his fellow factory owners may have paid close attention to the well-attended Labor Day celebration and would watch and wait as hatters would soon bear the brunt of the blow against labor that came out of the anti-boycott ruling, *Loewe v. Lawlor* (the so-called "Hatters Case"), less than 15 years hence.

Most buildings that the Labor Day parade passed in Danbury were made of wood, and light and heat were derived from an open flame.<sup>19</sup> Because of the cruder means of fighting fires, once one started, it was potentially more catastrophic than today.<sup>20</sup> There was a great deal of space devoted in the Borough Charter (and eventually the City Charter) relating to the composition and operation of a fire department. According to Bailey's *History of Danbury*, the first fire engine was purchased in Danbury by subscription around 1794, but a fire department was not founded until after Daniel Blake delivered an 1829 petition to the borough burgesses in reaction to recent large conflagrations. A poll tax of two and a half cents was charged to citizens to fund the enterprise. The early firefighters in town belonged to volunteer companies and the number of established companies and members in them grew with the town. Fines delineated in the respective company's "rules of order" were used to control volunteer behavior and foster discipline. In the 1850s, the position of chief engineer was created to coordinate different companies at fires, manage

---

<sup>16</sup> "Danbury's Holiday." *Danbury News*. September 5, 1888.

<sup>17</sup> Connecticut. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Eighteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics for the Year Ended November 30, 1902*, (Meriden, Conn.: Journal Publishing, 1902), 332.  
<https://books.google.com/books?id=u0kmAQAIAAJ&pg=PA1>

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Hotchkiss, *Sixth Annual Report of The Bureau Of Labor Statistics Of The State Of Connecticut, For The Year Ending November 30. 1890*, (Hartford, Conn.: Case, Lockwood & Brainard, 1891)  
<http://books.google.com> (accessed January 2, 2015), 132-193. Source also contains summation of the conflict with hat finishers and discussion of the walkout in November of 1890.

<sup>19</sup> Griffith Morgan Hopkins, Jr., *Atlas of Danbury, Connecticut from Official Records, Private Plans and Actual Surveys*. (Philadelphia, PA: G.M. Hopkins, C.E., 1880). The maps indicate the primary construction material for the structures depicted. Most structures were, not surprisingly, made of wood.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce Hensler, *Crucible of Fire: Nineteenth-century Urban Fires and the Making of the Modern Fire Service*, (Washington D.C.: Potomac Books, 2011), chap. 17.

expenditures, and make annual reports to the borough burgesses.<sup>21</sup> By 1888, the Borough had purchased 200 fire badges for volunteers, and the volunteer companies consisted of Washington Hook and Ladder Company No. 1, Humane Hose Company No. 1, Kohanza Hose Company No. 2, Padanaram Hose Company No. 3, Independent Hose Company No. 4, Wooster Hose Company No. 5, Citizens' Hose Company No. 6, Water Witch Hose Company No. 7, and Phoenix Hose Company No. 8.<sup>22</sup>

Photographs of these early volunteer companies show hardy mustachioed men in double-breasted uniforms with lovingly maintained firefighting accoutrements. Guidelines for membership and operation of the volunteer companies were delineated by the borough, which had to approve new candidates and officers elected by those volunteers.<sup>23</sup> As elsewhere, the volunteer fire companies in Danbury were practical as well as social organizations that encouraged strong allegiances and company pride. However, it was reported that it could take as long as twenty minutes to assemble the volunteers at a fire.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, according to historian Jon Teaford, "fire brigades were politicized, violent, and often lacking in . . . expertise or professional sense of responsibility."<sup>25</sup>

In the summer of 1885, Danbury's burgesses came into conflict with the firefighters when then-Chief of Volunteers Howard Porter Stevens was asked to resign.<sup>26</sup> Stevens's troubles began the night of June 6-7, 1885, when the Beckerle & Co. hat factory exploded, killing five, and hurting many others, including two firefighters. This was only the second time on record that a Danbury firefighter had been killed in the line of duty. Criticism was leveled at Stevens for the handling of the fire and he was asked to resign. The next week, his brother firefighters defiantly re-nominated him to be chief, but the borough burgesses rejected the nomination and named another chief, Patrick Fisher.<sup>27</sup> Based on their re-nomination of Stevens, this incident showed the firefighters in clear opposition to the burgesses but not prevailing.

In 1888, John H. Ellwood was nominated and approved by the burgesses to be chief engineer of

---

<sup>21</sup> "The Growth of Fire Department . . . in the City of Danbury" by William Foley, 1965. Truman Warner Papers; Box 28, Folder 49; WCSU Archives. A student research paper principally summarizing company minutes and Borough minutes, 19-33.

<sup>22</sup> "The Growth of Fire Department . . . in the City of Danbury" by William Foley, 1965, Truman Warner Papers; Box 28, Folder 49; WCSU Archives.

<sup>23</sup> Borough of Danbury Records, ~1870-1889; Danbury Public Library. Rules governing the volunteer companies, pg 471-473 - <http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/items/show/1531>.

<sup>24</sup> "If Danbury's New Paid Force of Fire Fighters..." [Danbury] *Evening News*. November 20, 1889.

<sup>25</sup> Jon C. Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870-1900*, (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1984), 163.

<sup>26</sup> Stevens was a native Danburian born in 1857. His father, Turner, was a machinist. In 1876, Stevens was a boarder at the Turner House on Main Street and worked as a painter, but by 1885, when he was elected to be chief engineer, he was again a machinist in business with his father. Stevens had been involved with the formation of the Connecticut State Firemen's Association in 1884 and was a vice president in the organization in 1885. According to newspaper reports, he was a vocal member of the group and "expressed the hope that politics would never have control of the organization." "Chiefs of Fire Departments," *Danbury News*, May 28, 1884.

<sup>27</sup> Borough of Danbury Records, Ledger 3, p. 157, Danbury Public Library.

the borough's volunteer fire companies. Ellwood was born in Connecticut in 1858 and appeared in Danbury in the 1870s. He joined the Kohanza Hose Company in the late 1870s and worked as a foreman at the Beckerle & Co. hat factory on the bank of the Still River at the northeast end of Liberty Street. His tenure as foreman at Beckerle began in 1886, just after its devastating fire of June of 1885, and he remained there until 1897. A foreman was management's direct connection to the laborer, and had substantial power, being in charge of hiring and "what completed work would be accepted and therefore who would get paid,"<sup>28</sup> according to historians Janick and Devlin. Ellwood was also a Republican and a member of the nativist group the Order of United American Mechanics (O.U.A.M.), which was anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, and anti-Semitic. Under a banner of sentimental nationalism, nativists fearing competition from new foreign workers collected into the O.U.A.M. and groups like it, fixated on limiting immigration or reversing it. The O.U.A.M. enjoyed some popularity in Danbury in this period.<sup>29</sup>

Though there were a small number of fires consistent in nature to the fire bug fires starting in 1885, Ellwood and the volunteer companies would have to deal first with the group of fires attributed in the press to the fire bug, beginning with a fire at Clarke's box factory on June 20, 1888. The fire started at the factory at White and Canal Streets and spread to J.T. Bates's lumber yard and other structures nearby. By July, after a number of large incendiary fires, the *Danbury News* speculated in a headline on July 18, 1888, "Do we have a fire bug in our midst?" The fire caused damage of an estimated \$2.5 million in today's dollars. The attempt to burn the house of the street railway's ex-superintendent Foster, where seven or eight men were in danger of being roasted alive, occurred at the end of July 1888. On July 20, 1888, the *Hartford Courant* called the rash of fires "something like a reign of terror" when it tabulated the more than a dozen fires over the past two months. Also that summer, there was a reported incident of a fire company's hose being sabotaged, rendering it inoperable for a number of hours. The rash of fires ended by August with no culprit found.

In December 1888, the only entrance to a home on Elm Street was doused in kerosene, imperiling its twenty occupants. Luckily, the fire was extinguished before any damage was done. The fire bug's most common method for setting the fires was to use kerosene or waste oil as an accelerant; this was applied to rags or trash that would then be stuffed into walls or floorboards, or strategic places on a building were simply soaked in oil or kerosene. The targets were mostly barns, factories, and industrial areas; however there were also a few instances of tenement houses being targeted with the perceivable intent of having as high a death toll as possible. Despite the outbreak of fire bug fires in 1888, Ellwood's leadership was without criticism in the press, and *Danbury News* provided little or no information on the investigation

---

<sup>28</sup> Devlin and Janick, *Danbury's Third Century*, 18.

<sup>29</sup> Ellwood's obituary from the February 8, 1915 [Danbury] *Evening News* lists Ellwood as a member of O.U.A.M. and two members served as pallbearers at his funeral. Also see Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 81-86, 95-96; Stephen Thernstrom and Richard Sennett, *Nineteenth-Century Cities: Essays in the New Urban History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 92. O.U.A.M.'s annual event drew 200 people in February 1891. "American Mechanic's Social." [Danbury] *Evening News*, Feb 24, 1891.

conducted by the borough's police.

The borough police force at the time consisted of two or three officers who had been organized in 1884, supplemented by part-time constabulary.<sup>30</sup> There is no reason to believe that Danbury's borough police differed from their peers around the country, therefore they were too few in number and had little training beyond some basic rules of order.<sup>31</sup> One of its police officers was Michael J. Keating. Keating became a member of the department after first being elected a constable back in 1872, and he was appointed to the paid police force in 1884.<sup>32</sup> To illustrate the part-time nature of his borough duties, as late as the 1880 census, his occupation was "hat sizer." Keating was born in Ireland and came to the U.S. as a young man sometime after the Civil War. According to newspaper accounts, he rose to local fame as a catcher of horse thieves, an endeavor in which he was reported to excel at. The Danbury press leveled little or no criticism of Keating during this period, but outside of Danbury, in Waterbury's *Sunday Herald* in particular, Keating was characterized as a bumbling provincial. In one article, the *Herald* described Keating frantically running through town looking for his gun, which he had recently misplaced; he wanted the gun to shoot his son's dog.<sup>33</sup> Another police officer in 1888 was James H. Waggneur<sup>34</sup> who had previously worked for the railroad. Waggneur and Keating were both Republicans, but Waggneur was also a Freemason, a member of the Knights Templar, and a veteran of the Civil War who served in the 132nd New York Infantry and saw action in North Carolina.

Captain Keating as the country bumpkin with Stetson hat and shotgun, investigating the fire bug; *Sunday Herald* (Waterbury). Aug 1889, CT State Library

Bailey, Hopkins, Stevens, Ellwood, Keating and Waggneur would have significant roles in Danbury's first two years as a city.

"We Are A City"<sup>35</sup>: *Danbury in 1889*

"As the compact, homogeneous city yielded to the sprawling heterogeneous metropolis, the simple council-dominated government of the early 1800s gave way to a more complex framework of the distributed authority and balanced power," according to Teaford.<sup>36</sup> The

---

<sup>30</sup> Devlin and Janick, *Danbury's Third Century*, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Jon C. Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870-1900* (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1984), 276-277.

<sup>32</sup> According to Keating's obituary in the *Danbury News*, Harris Crofut was first named captain and then resigned leading to Keating's appointment, but there is no such incident reported in the Common Council's *Proceedings and Records*.

<sup>33</sup> "Impetuous Captain Keating," [Waterbury] *Sunday Herald*, November 3, 1889.

<sup>34</sup> Spelled Wagner from 1886-1889 and then Waggneur from 1889-1893 in the Danbury city directory.

<sup>35</sup> Headline from the *Danbury News* after the charter had been ratified.

<sup>36</sup> Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph*, 80-81.



growing pains were obvious in Danbury. The city charter had some provisions that sparked debate, but it took only a year for it to be drafted and ratified. This was due in part to the sense of urgency brought on by the state's legislative schedule and by the very basic issue that the borough was running at a high deficit. The borough burgesses and appointments were one year in length, which had contributed to short-sighted fiscal leadership. The policy of paying members of the city government was another change brought about by a city charter; those who favored paid local officials argued that pay meant any male citizen could serve, not just those who had the leisure time to devote to their office. It was hoped that a city government would administer affairs more responsibly than the borough government had.

However, a point of contention in devising a city charter involved city ward representation in the Council and Aldermen Boards.<sup>37</sup> The many new immigrants to the city lived primarily in the Fourth Ward, and their large numbers meant immigrants would control that ward and be a substantial political force. Significant debate centered on, given the political alignment of the Fourth Ward, speculation about the political balance of power resulting from city-wide or ward based elections in aldermen races.<sup>38</sup> Those opposed to citywide aldermen won out, but a compromise regarding representation resulted in the first alderman representing the Fourth Ward having an initial one-year term (also true for the Second Ward) instead of a two-year term. This was established so that the Common Council could avoid having the elections for all members in the same year. But it was the immigrant-heavy Fourth Ward's lot to have their first alderman with a one-year term.<sup>39</sup>

The city charter was approved by the state legislature and signed by Governor Bulkeley in early

---

<sup>37</sup> Herb Janick, and William Devlin, *Danbury's Third Century*, (Danbury, Conn.: Western Connecticut State University, 2013), 2-9.

<sup>38</sup> "The City Charter." *Danbury News*, January 3, 1889.

<sup>39</sup> *Charter, Ordinances and Rules of Order of the City of Danbury* (Danbury, Conn.: Town Clerk's Office, 1889).

"[T]he voters of the first and third wards of said city shall elect... one alderman from each ward, who shall be a resident of his respective ward, and who shall hold office for two years. . . . [T]he voters of the second and fourth wards of said city shall elect . . . one alderman for each ward, who shall be a resident of his respective ward, and shall hold office for one year. . . . [T]hereafter, the voters of said second and fourth wards shall in like manner elect an alderman from each ward, who shall hold office for two years. . . . [T]he voters of each of the wards of said city shall elect . . . two councilmen, who shall be residents of their respective wards, the one receiving the highest number of ballots to hold office for two years, and the one receiving the next highest number of ballots to hold office for one year."

April of 1889, and the city's first election had to take place close on its heels, days later.<sup>40</sup> The results of the 1889 city election were close between Democrats and Republicans, but saw L. Legrand Hopkins become Danbury's first mayor. While Hopkins's Democrats, with their support from the immigrant community, controlled the Council Board, the split on the Aldermen Board was a tie. These results fit precisely into Teaford's assertion about the emerging structure of urban rule in the late nineteenth century:

[T]he structure of municipal officialdom was adapted to the social tensions of the age. It permitted immigrant newcomers to exercise a strong voice in the city councils and to wield authority of their own neighborhoods. Yet those native-born businessmen who had long exercised authority in urban America remained at the helm of the executive branch.<sup>41</sup>

The Danbury Republicans may have been hopeful about their prospects going into these first city elections, as the most recent state elections the previous November had seen solid Republican majorities, but after the Danbury ballots were counted in April 1889, the Republicans came up short. They would see yet another setback in the weeks following the election, although one Republican who was victorious in the election was the hat factory owner Dietrich Loewe, the future plaintiff in the "Hatters' Case," who won a seat on Danbury's Council Board.

There were large celebrations to mark the birth of the new City of Danbury on May 9, 1889. Additionally, Danbury's Democrats held their own celebrations in response to their success at the polls. Amidst the festivities, the nascent Common Council immediately went about the business of making appointments to the various positions in the city government. Hopkins nominated Michael Keating as Danbury's first police captain. Nominating Keating meant consistent leadership in the police department for the borough-to-city transition, but was "the mayor's funeral" according to Alderman Walsh, a Democrat.<sup>42</sup>

Under the city charter, the city fire department was overseen on the Common Council by its Fire Committee, which created reports on the actions and finances of the fire department. The charter delineated positions, such as chief engineer, and it appeared in Danbury that the first chief engineer for the city would be John Ellwood. Starting on May 9, 1889, the first meeting of the newly formed and

---

<sup>40</sup> "We are a City, Shake!" *Danbury News*, April 18, 1889.

<sup>41</sup> Jon C. Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870-1900*, (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1984), 81.

<sup>42</sup> According to Keating's obituary in the *Danbury News*, Harris Crofut was first named captain and then resigned leading to Keating's appointment, but there is no such incident reported in the Common Council's *Proceedings and Records*. "Municipal Legislation," *Evening News*, May 10, 1889.

elected Board of Aldermen considered Ellwood's nomination for appointment as first chief engineer of the fire department. His application was ordered placed on file, and on May 14 the Council Board followed by ordering a ballot for Ellwood. Even the first Danbury city directory presumed that Ellwood was or would be the city's chief, as that was how Ellwood was listed.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to Ellwood, there were also petitions for Frank Eastwood, Howard Stevens, and Frank Gallagher to be chief engineer, but a petition from J.T. Bates with three hundred signatories presented to the board by representatives of the various fire companies for Ellwood and Richard Fitzsimmons to be reappointed as chief and assistant chief, respectively, must have made an impression. Seemingly the closest contender was Eastwood, who had three representatives from the Humane Hose Company appear before the board in support of his candidacy. One of his supporters from Humane, Morris Meyers, "was willing to provide \$1,000 security, if was needed."<sup>44</sup> There were articles praising Ellwood and expressions of support in the *Danbury News*,<sup>45</sup> and though he had been the most recent chief, his bid for the City position was unsuccessful. ~~but something thwarted his candidacy.~~

On May 18, the election results for council and aldermen were challenged based on reported irregularities in the counting of ballots.<sup>46</sup> Using the recount as justification, on May 24, Alderman Walsh led an effort to reject any nominations that had thus far come from the Common Council and succeeded. The next day, results of the recount were announced, and Anthony Sunderland (a Democrat) was found to be the winner over G. Mortimer Rundle for the Board of Alderman.<sup>47</sup> At that point, Ellwood's candidacy was reconsidered. His Republican affiliation and the Democrats' new majority as a result of the recount may have been enough to doom his candidacy. No matter the reason, Ellwood's nomination was derailed, and to anyone looking for examples of partisan favoritism, they would have found it.

On May 21, the Council Board reconsidered the appointment of Ellwood on a motion from Councilman McPhelemy, and a ballot was ordered that resulted in Morris Meyers's election over Ellwood as chief engineer, seemingly out of nowhere. The mayor declared Meyers elected, and on June 6, the aldermen took up the council's resolution appointing Meyers as chief engineer, but the resolution was tabled on a motion from Alderman Walsh. The following week, on June 15, the aldermen held an informal vote where Meyers received six of twelve votes, Ellwood received three, and P.J. Fisher (of Humane) received three. A formal vote followed with the same result and Meyers was named chief.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> "Municipal Legislation," *Evening News*, May 10, 1889; *Crofut's Danbury City Directory*, (Danbury, Conn. : F.B. Crofut, 1889).

<sup>44</sup> "Borough Board." [Danbury] *Evening News*, April 4, 1889.

<sup>45</sup> "Chief Engineer Elwood," *Danbury News*, May 1, 1889. [<http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/items/show/928>]

<sup>46</sup> "A Political Surprise," [Danbury] *Evening News*, May 20, 1889.

<sup>47</sup> Rundle was elected mayor in 1895.

<sup>48</sup> The new City of Danbury published the *Proceedings and Records of the Board of Councilmen and Board of Aldermen of the City of Danbury* which documented the actions of the deliberative boards in the City government. Previously, these proceedings were only recorded in ledgers.

Morris Meyers came to the United States from London with his mother Jetta (Lehwald) when he was eight years old, but the family was originally from Prussia. He arrived with four siblings in New York in 1864, but ended up in Danbury by 1869.<sup>49</sup> When Morris's family came to Danbury, they would have had, at least on paper, a fairly solid support system in place, and by the 1880s, much of Morris's immediate family appears to have lived in Danbury. Morris partnered with Jacob Meyers in the 1870s, and the two ran a tobacco shop on Liberty Street. By the 1880s, Morris started his own shop at 265 Main Street and Jacob Meyers moved to 275 Main Street.<sup>50</sup> These two shops were on either side of the railroad station—the heart of the “fire bug district”—and would have been the first retail establishments that arrivals by rail in Danbury encountered when entering Main Street. Morris Meyers joined the Humane Hose Company shortly after his arrival in town, and while with the company, he served terms as foreman, trustee, and treasurer. He was said to have only one eye, but this disability did not prevent him from active participation in his company.<sup>51</sup>

Fig. 2. The Humane Hose Company in the early 1870s. The man farthest to the right, standing in the back row, may be Morris Meyers, based on a comparison to a known portrait of his brother who was on the City Council of Cambridge, MA. Danbury Historical Society.

The mayor made official Meyers's appointment as chief by swearing Meyers in at 10 p.m. on the street in front of his house at 383 Main Street, immediately following the alderman vote on June 15. In a piece regarding Meyers's appointment, the June 17, 1889 [Danbury] *Evening News* stated that the “reason of this seemingly hasty action was that should a fire start Sunday, someone should have definite authority to take charge of the fire department, and . . . it would be a delicate matter for the retiring chief [Ellwood] to assume charge of the department.” The same article went on to say that “it is doubtful if there are five members that can show a longer record of service” than Meyers. Republican Charles Peck on the Common Council reportedly vigorously opposed Meyers's nomination and strongly advocated for Ellwood.<sup>52</sup> When Meyers's appointment was made, Ellwood chose to hand his badge and fire key over to

---

<sup>49</sup> His father's name was Michael, and a Michael Meyers died in Danbury in May 1865. A Jacob Lehwald, a veteran of the 23rd Connecticut Infantry who had been discharged in late 1863, had already settled in Danbury in 1862. Morris Meyers's mother is also listed as “Jettie;” she was born Henrietta Lehwald. Morris' siblings listed on the ship's manifest show Amelia (6 months), Mark[o] (3), Julius (7) and Jacob (10) in addition to Morris. Jacob Lehwald left Danbury for Savannah, GA where he lived until his death in 1899 - he was listed as receiving a pension as an invalid in 1884. There were also a Samuel Meyers (sometimes spelled Myers) and a Laura Lehwald living with Samuel Zarkowski on Main Street in 1870. Zarkowski was a successful tailor who sold ready-made clothing, and was Morris Meyers's future father-in-law.

<sup>50</sup> Currently, the U.S. Post Office is located where Morris Meyers's shop stood.

<sup>51</sup> Information derived from census data and from Danbury directories of the time, but whether this Jacob was Morris's brother Jacob is not clear. However, it is likely that this Jacob was Morris's older brother. 1870, 1880, and 1900 Census records; 1872-1898 Danbury Directories. City of Danbury Birth and Death Records; Wooster Cemetery Records; Bailey's *History of Danbury*.

<sup>52</sup> Peck, who would be elected mayor after Hopkins, was also affiliated with the O.U.A.M., as he is listed as a member of the “reception committee” for a February 1891 event according to the [Danbury] *Evening News*.

the Fire Committee rather than pass it on personally to Meyers, as had been the custom among retiring chiefs. Ellwood and his fellow former Chief Engineer Howard Stevens hated Meyers, according to the Pinkerton operatives' documents, and this hatred fully bloomed when the two found themselves working with or under Meyers in 1889.

Danbury's city seal was designed by Councilman Henry Hoyt, who chose a phoenix rising from the flames with a banner stating "Perge Modo," translated from the Latin as "ever onward" or "continue moving." This was in reference to the 1777 burning of Danbury by the British, but the symbolism on the seal must have seemed coincidental to those designing it as the city had so often had parts of it in flames in the year prior.<sup>53</sup>

The string of fires that began in the summer of 1888 continued through January of 1889, which saw the Fry barn, Wooster House (at White and Main), and Green Brothers hat factory set aflame. In March, Scott's Hat Shop, Tooley Brothers, Tomlinson's Ice House, and the A.M. White Hat factory were targeted. However, the summer of 1889 saw an escalation in fires immediately following the naming of Morris Meyers as chief engineer. In June, the Davenport & VonGal Factory, Beers Lumber, Coal Yard, and Hawley Bradley's barn were set afire; in July, Meekers Grain Elevator, Clark's Box Factory, Beers' Ice House, George Chichester's barn, Michael Reagan's barn, D.G. Penfield's barn, and the Housatonic Railroad repair shops were also burned. In August, the sewing machine factory on Canal Street, Bate's Lumber Yard, the Danbury House, J.M. Ives Company, and Byron Dexter's hat factory were targeted. These are only some of the fires. There were reports of at least forty fires in the period of April through August 1889.<sup>54</sup> In the midst of the city's 1889 fires, the Common Council decided that a cash reward needed to be offered to aid in the fire bug's capture. The reward was never paid out.<sup>55</sup>

The only fatality directly tied to a fire bug fire occurred on August 12, a night when there were nine fire bug fires. At around 10 p.m., the "Danbury House" or "Anderson Place," which adjoined the fire department building on Ives Street, was found to have a small but rapidly growing fire. The odor of kerosene oil was noticeable even at some distance, and it was discovered that a large quantity of kerosene had been poured over the rear of the building, which was unoccupied except for a crowded saloon in the basement. As the fire was discovered early and was close to a firehouse, the fire was extinguished before it spread or accomplished much damage. At 11:15 p.m., just as saloons were about to close, Captain Keating was talking with passers-by at White and Ives when two men ran up to him claiming there was a fire on Ives Court. On his way to inspect it, Keating saw the street suddenly illuminated and a mass of flames

---

"American Mechanic's Social." [Danbury] *Evening News*. Feb 24, 1891.

<sup>53</sup> *Proceedings and Records of the Board of Councilmen and Board of Aldermen of the City of Danbury, 1889-1890*. Danbury Public Library. Danbury Ledger, 1889, pg. 22.

<http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/files/original/54b521f6b2243749af2a671cc1768316.jpg>

<sup>54</sup> "How They View It." *Danbury News*, August 14, 1889.

<sup>55</sup> *Crofut v. Danbury. A Digest of the all the Reported Cases Decided in the Supreme Court of Errors... State of Connecticut*, v. II. (Hartford: Dissell Publishing, 1900). pg 1686.

darted upward. Ives Court was thought to be one of the most dangerous districts in Danbury for a fire because of the large wooden structures crowded together, which included the Central Hotel at the corner of White Street. The fire was controlled under Meyers's direction by 2 a.m. and the damage limited to the center of the square formed by Ives, White and Main Streets. Inside one of the buildings, the badly burned remains of Barney Van Wie were found and inspected by Dr. Wile. Van Wie was a local character known to be a heavy drinker, who was thought to have gone to sleep in one of the buildings in the square. Van Wie's death led the *Danbury News* to include this headline in its story about the blaze: "Is it Murder, Also?"<sup>56</sup>

Additionally, that summer of 1889, the Gaylord home was the scene of an attempted arson. Gaylord's mother spotted a man sticking an oil-soaked rag inside the window of her tenement. The man fled, but after she sought police assistance an unidentified person threatened her, saying that talking to the police would result in her house being burned down.<sup>57</sup>

Insurance companies began to react that summer to the continuing fire problem. The *Danbury News* wrote in August: "[The fire bug] has given Danbury a pretty black eye, said the NEWS informant, and a few fire insurance companies have already withdrawn from the city. Other companies will certainly follow suit unless there is a stop to the fires." In another story, the *Danbury News* reported, "This incendiary business has got to be stopped. It is not absolutely necessary that he should be taken alive." The *Danbury Evening News* summed up the situation in 1889 as:

[F]iremen, policemen, detectives and citizens were kept constantly on edge. No one knew when, where or what the next alarm was to be. . . . That an incendiary bold enough to set a fire in broad day light should continue his work week after week without detection is indeed remarkable. More so is it that not the slightest clue to his identity, nor the least reason for his act could ever be found...Really no tangible theory could be formed.<sup>58</sup>

The frequency of fires tapered off for a period in the fall of 1889.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> "Is it Murder, Also." *Danbury News*, August 13, 1889.

<sup>57</sup> "The Danbury Fire Bug: A Remarkable Story - What the Gaylord Family has seen and heard," *The Danbury News*. July 22, 1889. <http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/files/original/f51ff37b1de4c0e0f371f901e8638ed9.jpg>

<sup>58</sup> "One Hundred and Fifty Thousand Dollars: The Cost of Forty Seven Fires in Danbury in 1889," [Danbury] Evening News. January 10, 1890.

<sup>59</sup> Of the 47 fires in 1889, it is not documented exactly how many were incendiary or attributed to the fire bug, but by *Danbury News*' account, around half of the fires could be assumed to be the work of the fire bug. In 1890, the Common Council reported that the losses by fire amounted to \$260,000 ( about \$6,600,000 in today's dollars) and that insurance collected on those losses amounted to \$206,000. There were 43 calls to the department and 22 of them (51 percent) were considered incendiary cases or arson. It also reports 45 paid firefighters (about 20 percent of all the firefighters in Danbury). The next year, there was no report from Chief Meyers, so total reported numbers are not known.

### *Danbury's Paid Fire Department Established*

It is, indeed, a fascinating and glorious scene to see flames leaping and curling upward, varying in colors, blended with volumes of rolling dense smoke as a frontispiece, roaring and gorgeously floating along toward the sky as a background in an inspiring splendor more beautiful than a master of the brush could hope to equal. But, beautiful as are such thrilling occurrences, to prevent and overcome them is a perpetual study, requiring deep calculation. . . . [W]hen an alarm sounded instantly (throughout an entire city) starts modern apparatus, drawn by trained horses . . . dashing along the streets, the mind of man has been constantly confronted with the ever perplexing problem of successfully combating and subduing the life-destroying, property-destroying element—FIRE. . . . [The fire department's] recognized efficiency is as indispensable to the protection, safety, and prosperity of a city as is the regular army and navy of fighting men imperative to the stability dignity, and integrity of a nation.<sup>60</sup>

By the mid-1800s, as municipalities reached a certain size, they would find it necessary to move away from relying on volunteers and establish paid municipal fire departments—like a move from a militia to a regular army, as Herbert Jenness implied above. Jon Teaford emphasizes the pivotal role fire underwriters played in the U.S. urban transition of this period and stresses that “a broad range of diverse business and professional groups displayed a special concern for the excellence of municipal services and the merit of city officials.” Teaford also points out that volunteers in “a politicized fire brigade of ward heelers and saloon loafers manning outdated . . . engines could spell doom for the fire underwriter.”<sup>61</sup> Mark Tebeau's *Eating Smoke: Fire in Urban America* acknowledged that “the debate over firefighting pitted the interests of business and the incipient middle class against the interest of the urban working-class and immigrant communities.” Tebeau, whose father had been a firefighter, argues generally that time showed those interests were actually closely aligned and that “the street-level battle to control firefighting reveals a more complex portrait.” However, there was a time when those interests appeared pitted against one another to those involved, even if their interests were actually aligned. While there was popular appreciation for the chivalrous tradition of the volunteer fireman, the consequences of poorly managed fires grew with the density of urban populations. The paid departments were often regarded by their volunteer predecessors as less manly, lazy or even as “lager-beer Germans.” Tebeau points out further that the image that some supporters of the volunteers wanted to promote was that they, unlike the paid firefighters, “were not depraved immigrants, unskilled wage laborers, or slaves; they were independent native-born men who commanded their own labor and technology.”<sup>62</sup>

Even the introduction of technology like steam engines and horse-drawn fire apparatus were seen by some supporters of the volunteer system as crutches that the inferior paid departments needed to

---

<sup>60</sup> Herbert T. Jenness, *Bucket Brigade to Flying Squadron: Fire Fighting Past and Present, 1909* by , (Boston: Geo. H. Ellis, 1909) <http://books.google.com/books?id=0nMMAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA1>

<sup>61</sup> Teaford, *Unheralded Triumph*, 198, 80-81,.

<sup>62</sup> Mark Tebeau, *Eating Smoke: Fire in Urban America, 1800-1950*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 127, 133.

supplant the volunteers.<sup>63</sup> The City of Danbury purchased its first steam fire engine in 1889.<sup>64</sup> According to the 1889 edition of Roper's *Handbook of Modern Steam Fire-Engines*:

Paid fire departments have nearly superseded the volunteer system in almost all the cities in the country, and so far have given very satisfactory results, so much so, that even those who offered the most stubborn opposition to their establishment, would not now. . . . Engine houses have been transformed from loafing places to establishments where the routine of duty is enforced and obedience substituted for insubordination.<sup>65</sup>

The 1909 edition of *The Handbook for Fire Protection* sized up the situation rather more sharply:

[V]olunteer companies are too often more interested in the welfare of their individual companies than in the welfare of their city or town is indicated by the frequent and almost universal opposition exerted by volunteers to the introduction of paid departments, and sometimes by the actual violence with which the volunteers welcome their paid successors. . . . [I]t is to be recommended that volunteers be replaced by paid men, even if the payment be slight.<sup>66</sup>

With monetary damages tied to insurance policies, there was an air of inevitability to the move away from a volunteer-only system for a municipality the size of Danbury, though many would have been aware that violence, including cases of incendiarism, had accompanied the change to paid departments elsewhere in the United States.<sup>67</sup>

In September 1888, after that summer's fire bug fires, the borough's Insurance Committee had been charged with making recommendations to the burgesses for bringing more efficiency to the volunteer fire companies. Their recommendation called for a reduction in membership in the Washington, Humane, and Kohanza companies to foster more efficiency, purchase of fire steamer, and suggested paying firefighters in Danbury's first three companies.<sup>68</sup>

The Humane Hose Company in the early 1870s. The man farthest to the right, standing in the back row, may be Morris Meyers, based on a comparison to a known portrait of his brother who was on the City Council of Cambridge, MA. Danbury Historical Society.

---

<sup>63</sup> Amy S. Greenberg, *Cause for Alarm: The Volunteer Fire Department in the Nineteenth-Century City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 154.

<sup>64</sup> James Bailey, *History of Danbury, Conn., 1684-1896* (Danbury: Burr-printing House, 1896), 561.

<sup>65</sup> Stephen Roper, *Handbook of Modern Steam Fire-Engines* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1889)  
<http://books.google.com/books?id=p2C0y3hbe5EC&pg=PP1>

<sup>66</sup> Everett Crosby and Henry A. Fiske, *Handbook of Fire Protection* (Louisville, KY: Insurance Field Company, 1909), 139. <https://books.google.com/books?id=boFBAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA2>

<sup>67</sup> Barry D. Karl, "Lo, the Poor Volunteer: An Essay on the Relation between History and Myth," *Social Service Review*, 58, no. 4 (1984): 513, URL: <http://0-www.jstor.org.www.consuls.org/stable/30011758> (accessed January 14, 2014).

<sup>68</sup> "Insurance Committee," *Danbury News*, September 11, 1888.



After the rash of summer fire bug fires, on September 18, 1889, it was unanimously voted to change from a volunteer to a partly paid fire department.<sup>69</sup> The paid department that was established closely resembled what was recommended by the borough's Insurance Committee in 1888,<sup>70</sup> and the mix of paid and volunteer fire companies Danbury implemented then still exists today. The paid fire department was first composed of three men to operate the steamer, twelve men from the Washington Hook and Ladder Company No. 1, and nine men each from the Humane and Kohanza Hose Companies. The Common Council's *Proceedings Records* lists forty-five paid firefighters by April of 1890. The men in those companies not slated for the paid companies could remain volunteers in other organizations, but a department made up of volunteers and paid firefighters meant that there would be two distinct orders of firefighters.<sup>71</sup> Another consequence to the creation of the paid fire department was that Morris Meyers, who already had the distinction of being the city's first fire chief, would add to that the distinction of being the first chief of the paid Danbury Fire Department. While reorganization meant that the three oldest companies had the "honor" of comprising the city's paid companies, those volunteer establishments were effectively disbanded, at least in name. To illustrate the importance of these companies in the eyes of their membership, Kohanza and Humane decided, not without precedent, to maintain their unit and created "social clubs" for their former volunteers. Kohanza continued to make appearances at parades and balls in neighboring towns under the Kohanza Hose Company No. 2 name for the next few years, even though the hose company was really a social organization. The Kohanza Social Club showed a disdain for the paid arm of the department by offering membership only to those that did not accept the terms made by the City to be in the paid department, and if a member later joined the paid ranks, membership was forfeited<sup>72</sup>

These intra-departmental politics aside, underscoring Danbury's acknowledgement of the perceived negative influence of party politics in the *Rules of Order . . . of the Danbury Fire Department, Adopted, November 12, 1889*, the rules state: "No permanent officer or paid member of the Department shall attend a caucus of political convention as a delegate, distribute tickets at any election, or take any part whatever in political matters, other than exercise his right of suffrage [sic]." It was not unprecedented to have such prohibitions in department rules, so as to not allow "the politician's polluted tainted breath tarnish the jewel [of fire service]."<sup>73</sup> These particular rules were in force at least through 1894.

Firemen were also not to be tainted with much monetary compensation. The 1909 *Handbook for*

---

<sup>69</sup> James Bailey, *History of Danbury, Conn., 1684-1896* (Danbury (Conn.: Burr-printing House), 1896, 489.

<sup>70</sup> Greenberg, *Cause for Alarm*, 1-17.

<sup>71</sup> "The Fire Department: What Will Constitute It, And How It Will Be Governed," [Danbury] *Evening News*, November 20, 1889.

<sup>72</sup> Statement of Morris Meyers, 01-15-1891; Pinkerton Detective Agency Danbury Fires Investigation Collection, MS020

<sup>73</sup> Greenburg, *Cause For Alarm*, quote from a letter in *The Fireman's Journal*, pg 110.

*Fire Protection* “recommended that volunteers be replaced by paid men, even if the payment be slight.”<sup>74</sup> Danbury followed that course and the compensation that the Fire Committee proposed for the paid firefighters was widely regarded as too low. In speaking for Kohanza regarding the salaries, Ellwood stated, “I was a member of Kohanza #2 and I with the rest would not accept a place on the paid dep’t on account of the very small salary. We were willing to work without pay, but when they put the salary at \$25 and \$50, we looked at it more as an insult than anything else.”<sup>75</sup>

In addition to pay, a reported source of animosity came from personal differences that Stevens and Ellwood had with Meyers. There had been an informal custom at fires among volunteer companies of “first come, first go,” where the first company at a fire was the first allowed to leave. A situation arose early in Meyers’s tenure when this protocol came into play but Meyers allowed two companies to leave before John Ellwood’s Kohanza Company, who believed themselves the first at the fire. Ellwood took offence and there was an altercation between the two men, and the resentment continued to loom over Ellwood and the entire Kohanza Social Club.<sup>76</sup> Stevens’s resentment of Meyers came shortly after the formation of the paid department. According to the *Evening News*, one of the many unsuccessful candidates for chief engineer, Howard Stevens, had a heated argument with Morris Meyers. Stevens, who was a machinist, claimed that he had not been paid for service he had performed on the fire department’s steamer. Stevens reportedly confronted and threatened Meyers at his shop. As a paid fireman, Stevens was Meyers’s subordinate, and Meyers asked the Common Council to approve Stevens’s termination from the department based on the department’s Rules of Order. Stevens challenged his termination and requested to be reinstated, suggesting that he possessed or could garner sufficient public or political support for his case. Stevens’s protests were heard by the Fire Committee, but his dismissal was upheld, though the city agreed to pay him for the work he claimed to have performed. The dismissal marked the second time in five years that Stevens had been asked to leave a position with the fire department.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, his flare-up with Meyers was not the only time that his temper landed him in trouble. In the summer of 1888, he severely beat a Hungarian tailor named Julius Weber who had a lien placed on his property in an effort to collect an unpaid bill.<sup>78</sup> Although Stevens had not been a member of the Kohanza Hose Company and had been a paid firefighter, shortly after his ouster from the Danbury Fire Department he was admitted into the social club through a Kohanza member named Edward Lobdell—a future-fire

---

<sup>74</sup> Everett Crosby, and Henry A. Fiske, *Handbook of Fire Protection*, (Louisville, KY: Insurance Field Company, 1909), 139. <https://books.google.com/books?id=boFBAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA2>

<sup>75</sup> Ellwood Statement; Pinkerton Reports, p. 3, WCSU Archives. <http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/items/show/723>

<sup>76</sup> Ellwood Statement; Pinkerton Reports, p. 4, WCSU Archives. <http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/items/show/723>

<sup>77</sup> “Wants to be Reinstated,” *Danbury News*, October 15, 1889.

<sup>78</sup> “The Weber Assault,” [Danbury] *Evening News*, April 11, 1888. <http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/files/original/fcf1bccbce70fde259ed2416ff61b372.jpg>

bug suspect.

## 1890

The compelling fire bug story had by 1890 percolated throughout area newspapers, including the *New York Times*. A young Charles Ives wrote to his father, "We are all talking about the fires in Danbury" and seemed to have written the beginnings of a fire bug limerick on the same letter.<sup>79</sup> There was even speculation in the *The Sun* [New York] that Danbury's fire bug was leading to a campaign of incendiarism across Connecticut perpetrated by the insane or anarchists.<sup>80</sup> There was a large fire in February 1890, one of the most devastating of the period; however, the *Danbury News* did not label it a fire bug fire. However, the *Waterbury Sunday Herald's* headline showed they were fairly assured that it was the work of the fire bug, and went with the headline: "The Firebug Again: The Most Disastrous Fire in Danbury's History."<sup>81</sup> The fire took place in the Hull and Rogers block at Main and Liberty Streets and destroyed most of the area. *Danbury News* articles covering the fire suggested that the fire department's performance was good on the whole but it could have possibly prevented the wide spread of the fire. In the period between February and November 1890 there were a few reported fires, and while a couple could have been fire bug fires, none was officially deemed such.

On a few occasions, Meyers was complimented in the press for his handling of the department. In March, the *Danbury News* reported a surprise party for Meyers at his home, attended by Mayor Hopkins, Captain Keating, and many paid firefighters. The headline for the story states, "Chief Meyers Reprimanded, Mayor Hopkins Takes Him to Task," and then goes on to tell how the mayor surprised Meyers in his kitchen and presented him with a gold chief engineer badge. The city published its first *Proceedings and Records* in early 1890; in it Hopkins stated in his "Mayor's Message":

Chief Meyers and those associated with him are to commended. . . . The large number of fires and the change to a partially paid department, have cause much anxiety and a great deal of hard work, which has been rewarded by a force of firemen thoroughly trained, supplied with all that is necessary for subduing the dreaded enemy fire. . . . Good feeling prevails among the men, both volunteers and paid being ready at any and all times to do honest loyal work for our citizens.

Hopkins had a chance in the spring of 1890 to replace Captain Keating. He had a number of viable alternative candidates, the most obvious being Sergeant Waggneur. Hopkins decided to stay with Keating, which may have contributed to Keating's support of Hopkins in the subsequent election. If

---

<sup>79</sup> Charles Ives, *Selected Correspondence of Charles Ives*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) <http://books.google.com/books?id=EJVwBQgf8q0C&lpq=PP1&pg=PR4>

<sup>80</sup> "The Firebugs of Connecticut," *The Sun* [New York], Dec. 29, 1890. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030272/1890-12-29/ed-1/seq-7/>

<sup>81</sup> "The Fire Bug Again." *Waterbury Herald: Sunday*, February 2, 1890. <http://cslib.cdmhost.com/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15019coll9/id/10543/rec/1>

Waggneor entertained notions of being named captain, he would have felt some degree of disappointment from being passed over.<sup>82</sup>

The fire bug had continued causing significant consternation with Danbury's insurers. For them, a perceived risk of fire could keep rates and demand high for insurance. However, when the risk drove rates too high because of insurance payouts, there was a crisis that went along with the old adage that the perfume of the premium must overcome the stench of the risk. By 1890 in Danbury, the insurance companies who had been recommending changes to the fire department since 1888 were complaining of too much stench in the risk.<sup>83</sup> The pressure on city officials, especially the fire and police departments, would have been significant to bring the fire bug under control. Hopkins, the Fire Committee, and Meyers had recommended the creation of a fire patrol paid for by insurance companies to help prevent the large number of fires it had already experienced; the plan as proposed never materialized. Also proposed was an increase in salaries paid to the firefighters, as talk of a walkout loomed.<sup>84</sup>

Though much of 1890 saw little of the fire bug, the inability of the Hopkins administration to put any suspects in custody for any of the fires had election implications. With victory margins so slight, both parties were aware that any issue could alter an election's outcome. The city offered a sizeable reward for the capture of an incendiary, but still had no credible suspect that would justify them paying it out.<sup>85</sup> Stopping or capturing the fire bug would benefit the administration's election hopes. Hopkins was reportedly intent on re-election, with Keating and Meyers also interested in that endeavor.<sup>86</sup>

In November, Danbury's brief respite from the fire bug ended. On the night of November 16-17,

---

<sup>82</sup> "Political Pickings: Gossip from among the Wire Pullers of Danbury," [Bridgeport] *Sunday Herald*, May 25, 1890. <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=oJBA3oede64C&dat=18900525&printsec=frontpage&hl=en>.

<sup>83</sup> "Our Fires: Viewed from a Commercial Standpoint," *Danbury New*, August 8, 1889. <http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/items/show/827>.

<sup>84</sup> There were fire police in January of 1891 but they were not paid. Hopkins was listed as an honorary member according to 1890-91's *Records and Proceedings*. In 1889-90's *Records and Proceedings*, Fire Police are listed as members of Kohanza and Humane.

<sup>85</sup> "One Thousand Dollars Reward," *Danbury News*, July 8, 1889.  
- Crofut v. Danbury. *A Digest of the all the Reported Cases Decided in the Supreme Court of Errors... State of Connecticut*, v. II. (Hartford: Dissell Publishing, 1900). pg 1686.

<sup>86</sup> "Special to, T. C. Politics in Danbury." *The Hartford Courant (1887-1922)*. April 14, 1891. There was, moreover, little room for error among candidates for state office at the time. The "Crowbar Governor" Morgan Bulkeley held the governor's office not from popular vote in 1888, but from Republican majorities in the General Assembly. Two years later, after a race where Bulkeley had not even run, Bulkeley remained in office for another two years. The gubernatorial election of November 1890 ended with Democrat Luzon Morris winning a majority of the popular vote against Republican Samuel Merwin, however accusations of ballot irregularities caused some ballots to be thrown out, resulting in an impasse between the two parties that culminated in the sitting Republican governor, Bulkeley (whose signature approved Danbury's city charter), remaining in office until 1893. "Suppose the Case." *The Hartford Courant (1887-1922)*, December 1, 1890. <http://0-search.proquest.com>. Kevin Murphy, *Crowbar Governor: The Life and Times of Morgan Gardner Bulkeley*, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 125.

1890, the night before the shops of seventeen hatting firms employing more than 3500 workers (approximately 18 percent of Danbury's population) were closed to all members of the Hat Trimmers' Association, and only days after Democrat Luzon Morris had been narrowly elected governor, a fire was set near the Foster Brothers factory, which destroyed the factory, its stables, and lumber yards. The fire was started in the sheds at the end of Delay Street near the railway tracks, and the wind carried the fire across the rail yard to piles of lumber and a stable. It also spread to tenement houses situated near the factory. The Fire Department was said to have been short-handed and water pressure from the city hydrants too low. Some claimed the steamer had been mishandled, and that firefighters had concentrated too much on extinguishing the fire in the lumber yard, which had contributed to the factory being totally destroyed. Bystanders claimed that their advice on fighting the fire had been ignored.<sup>87</sup> After a public hearing, Meyers was recommended for censure even as incendiary fires continued through December. After the Osborne Lumber Yard Fire on December 22, the police arrested Fritz Biehle (also spelled Beal or Biel), a German hatter, and a well-known and well-read anarchist. Further inquiry revealed that Biehle was too talkative when drunk and drunk too often. The charges were dropped, though according to the [Bridgeport] *Sunday Herald*, Biehle was nearly lynched.<sup>88</sup>

In the wake of the Foster Brothers fire, the Common Council's Fire Committee, made up of F.O. Smith, Matthew Scott, and William McPhelemy, stated: "Dissatisfaction on the part of the public, widely and freely expressed, coupled with a tendency to insubordination and a laxity in the performance of duty by some of the members of the department have caused [this] committee much anxiety." Based on supposed public opinion, it was resolved:

By the common council of the city of Danbury: That the management of the fire of Nov.16, 1890, reflects great discredit upon the ability of Chief Engineer Morris Meyers: that had he used good judgment the fire could have been confined to very small limits and that owing to his mismanagement, property was needlessly destroyed; in view whereof he is deserving of censure at the hands of this common council.<sup>89</sup>

The Aldermen would not accept the Fire Committee's report and called on a Special Committee to come up with recommendations for how to proceed. The Special Committee, made up of Alderman Rundle, Councilman Caleb M. Purdy (of the Second Ward), and Councilman William H. Foley (of the Fourth Ward), reported back to the Common Council in early 1891 that they could not censure any member of the fire department without specific charges, and that the Fire Committee had overstepped their authority in their report. The nature and content of the debate that took place in the Common Council leading them to hire the Pinkerton operative is not documented. However, the timing of Pinkerton's being retained

---

<sup>87</sup> "Swept by Flames," [Danbury] *Evening News*, November 17, 1890.

<sup>88</sup> "On the Firebug Track," [Bridgeport] *Sunday Herald*, December 28, 1890.

<http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/files/original/8f6362fedd6b73551a916d9b37db8084.jpg>.

<sup>89</sup> *Proceedings and Records of the Board of Councilmen and Board of Aldermen of the City of Danbury, 1890-1891*, 134.

coincided with the creation of the Special Committee and the report of the Fire Committee.

### *The Pinkerton Investigation*

The Pinkerton's National Detective Agency reported a \$29,397 (some \$735,000 in today's dollars) profit for its New York Office in 1891, and Pinkerton's had 2000 active agents and 30,000 reserves around the country.<sup>90</sup> At the time, private companies like the Pinkertons were hired for both large and small investigations, some which today would fall under the purview of federal and state authorities. Increasingly toward the end of the nineteenth century, they were used by management to combat organized labor. Morris Friedman, a former Pinkerton operative's stenographer and author of the exposé *The Pinkerton Labor Spy*, claimed the agency "established and . . . has perfected a system of espionage, calumny, and persecution of labor of all crafts and classes which is, if possible, even more intolerable and pernicious than the universally detested and infamous Secret Police of Russia."<sup>91</sup>

Fig. 3, The letterhead used by Pinkerton operative McM in his investigation.

In Danbury, with firefighters threatening to resign en masse due to low wages, fires still occurring, insurance companies threatening to pull out of the city, no credible fire bug suspect, and the 1891 elections looming a few months away, an outsider's view was solicited. That outsider was operative McM, John T. McManus, of Pinkerton's National Detective Agency. Not much is known about McM other than he was on Pinkerton's payroll and had worked on a jewelry robbery investigation just prior to being called to Danbury.<sup>92</sup> No records were found documenting the transaction between Pinkerton's National Detective Agency and the City of Danbury either in city records or in the Pinkerton's National Detective Agency Records at the Library of Congress. The Common Council's *Proceedings and Records* show that the city paid the Pinkerton's National Detective Agency, but there is no mention of requesting their services. Because McM's reports were addressed to Joseph Ives, a prominent businessman not employed by the City, the appearance is that he and not the City hired McM. One newspaper article mentioned that

---

<sup>90</sup> Chart showing profits for the Agency's offices over a period of years, Box 37, Pinkerton's National Detective Agency Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Pinkerton Government Services, "History." Last modified 2013. Accessed July 3, 2013. <http://www.pinkerton.com/history>.

<sup>91</sup> Morris Friedman, *The Pinkerton Labor Spy*, (New York: Wilshire Book C., 1907), 2 <https://books.google.com/books?id=6rQBAAAAYAAJ&pg=PR5>

<sup>92</sup> Coincidentally, there had been a John "Kid" McManus for whom Pinkerton's had been hired to apprehend in 1887 in New York City. Danbury's McM and the "Kid" were not the same person. There are two photographs in the Pinkerton's National Detective Agency Records described as being images of John "Kid" M'Manus. The photos are of two different persons and the images must have been incorrectly labeled: one image shows a man in a top hat and dress suit from 1890 and the other shows what appears to be a younger and different man shabbily dressed in a photo with a date of 1900. It is possible that the photograph of the man in the top hat is Danbury's operative McM. The photograph is published online by the Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2006680254/>).

there was a Pinkerton operative working on the case, yet by the end of his investigation, it must have been widely known that he was in town.<sup>93</sup> No documentation was found that contained what the operative McM's explicit instructions from the city had been, but McM gave a clue to those instructions when he stated in one of his reports, "[i]t has been at the request of the parties in charge of this matter that I have refrained from questioning any of the suspects."<sup>94</sup> McM's statement suggests that he was not retained explicitly to catch the fire bug.

Operative McM's investigation can be tracked through his daily reports and the statements he obtained along the way from witnesses, police, and firefighters. These reports and statements are all that exist that document the investigation, but conspicuously missing are statements that he claimed to have taken from Mayor Hopkins, Captain Keating, Sergeant Waggnor, Daniel McCready (a suspect), and James Preston (a suspect), among others. Additionally, after reporting that he had been instructed to refrain from questioning suspects, McM went on to say that "by [questioning suspects] they may be able to get from them some clue. I suggest that each be interviewed and get them to explain some facts." The implication of this statement was that suspects had not been satisfactorily questioned in the first place. McM ended up questioning suspects, so he must have convinced someone of the necessity of that line of inquiry regardless of his mission. McM was investigating a string of crimes that went back to at least the middle of 1888; however early on he states that his investigation was centered on five of the most recent fires.

McM arrived in Danbury by train on Thursday, January 8, 1891 and would spend the next month immersed in and documenting the prevailing jealousies, antagonism and mistrust that had been the backdrop of these fires. McM had a room booked at the Turner House, located at 73 Main Street, a bit removed from the "fire bug District," which lay a few blocks north around White and Main. Initially, he was "under cover" and his adopted identity was that of an actor passing through town, but at some point early on he disposed of the false identity. On January 9, he began by meeting just down the street from the Turner House with Joseph M. Ives, Mayor Hopkins, and Alderman Rundle, who gave McM a brief outline of the expectations they had for his investigation. McM did not divulge the specifics of that conversation nor clarify whether he was in Danbury at the behest of a private citizen or the City of Danbury. He was also introduced to the self-constituted fire bug committee, made up of Sergeant Waggnor, Granville Holmes, James Porter and presumably Rundle. There is no documentation of this fire bug committee beyond the mention in McM's report.

McM was briefed on the latest fires by the unofficial "fire bug committee" who presented him with

---

<sup>93</sup> "Is there a Conspiracy?" *Bridgeport Sunday Herald*. February 15, 1891. "her repeated a dozen times until Detective McManus of the Pinkerton force told him if he didn't shut up he would fire him in the other room."

"<http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/exhibits/show/firebug/item/877>

<sup>94</sup> Pinkerton Report, Jan 13, 1891, p. 8.

witnesses' statements that indicated Howard Stevens as the top suspect. Despite his past service in the fire department, by 1891 Stevens was described by his contemporaries as heavy drinking, half crazy, and an excellent liar. Additionally, the committee told McM that Stevens' wife had stated in front of four witnesses:

God damn you Democrats. You got Howard out of the department and that god damn sheeny [meaning Meyers] drove him out of the city. You have him down as the fire bug. He did not do it, but we know who did.

Mrs. Stevens's claim regarding her ability to identify the perpetrator(s) was not pursued by McM.<sup>95</sup>

In McM's first days on the case, Sergeant Waggnor took it upon himself to show McM around the "fire bug district" and sites of the recent fires at Foster Brothers, Clark Box Factory, Osborn's Lumber Yard, Greene's Box Factory, and Reed's Machine Shop. Over the next days, McM interviewed witnesses to corroborate what he had been told by the "Fire bug Committee" and was able to place persons matching Stevens and Lobdell's descriptions at the scene of the Osborne Brothers fire, which had occurred the previous month. For the first days of McM's investigation, he found himself aided often by Granville O. Holmes, who in addition to being the clerk of the court was close friends with Howard Stevens. Holmes's acquaintance with Stevens was said to have been the committee's means of maintaining intelligence on Stevens's movements and activities. The two men were frequently seen drinking together, which leads one to question who was watching whom.<sup>96</sup>

Over the next weeks, McM was introduced to persons the police had identified as "of interest": "Whiskey" Davis and Archie Lake at the scene of a fire covered with manure and smelling of whiskey; Daniel McCready, who would become highly agitated at the sight of a fire; Edward Jenne (also a friend of

---

<sup>95</sup> In fact, McM, with one insignificant exception, sought only the point of view of men.

<sup>96</sup> Granville O. Holmes was a Danburian who became wealthy in the real estate business. McM reported that Holmes was known by everyone in town and a frequent visitor to Danbury's saloons. In April 1898, the *Bridgeport Herald* reported that Holmes had regularly blackmailed Danburians, describing a case in which the *Herald* claimed he would use his influence at the paper to prevent an embarrassing story from running for a fee. He died in December of 1900 at the age of 47 in Danbury, where his sparsely attended funeral was reported as absent of any city officials and short one pallbearer. James Porter was a hardware merchant on Main Street with his partner Andrew Hull. At some level, Porter and Rundle were business associates. "Blackmailer Branded," *Bridgeport Herald*, April 17, 1898.

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=I9UyAAAAIABJ&sjid=ywAGAAAAIABJ&pg=4179,1636524>

(accessed January 22, 2014); "This Was Shameful," *Bridgeport Herald*, December 2, 1900.

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=DwpVAAAAIABJ&sjid=DT0NAAAAIABJ&pg=2658%2C5361086>;

"A Family Affair," *Bridgeport Herald*, Jan 16, 1898.

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=HdUyAAAAIABJ&sjid=ywAGAAAAIABJ&pg=5076%2C275917>. The article discusses the Rundle family's hold on the Danbury Fair and mentions the relationship between G.M. Rundle and Porter.



Stevens), who had arrived in town in recent years selling fire extinguishers; and Frank “Sleepy” Gaylord (his family were the Gaylords targeted the previous summer), who had been found with his pockets filled with waste oil and matches. Throughout his investigation, McM went to the Danbury saloons to look for those suspects, and he frequently described himself indulging in the fare offered by these establishments.

On January 13, McM concluded in his report that “the person who set the Osborne fire is the person who set the others. . . . There is but one solution to these fires and that is an attempt to show up the inability of the present fire department to cope with fires.” The Common Council also had a meeting on the night of the 13<sup>th</sup>, at which the fire department resignations were discussed. On the 14<sup>th</sup>, McM took the first of two statements from Morris Meyers. His statements introduced McM to the controversy accompanying the appointment of the chief engineer and claims that Ellwood threatened that there would be “hell to pay” if Meyers became chief. He informed McM about some of the animosity that existed between himself, the Kohanza Social Club, Stevens, and others. However, Meyers said of Stevens: “I do not think that he has got the backbone to do anything of the sort. He in my opinion is half crazy but he would be just the person to get someone to set a fire and for the sake of a reward, turn them up.”<sup>97</sup> Meyers told McM of Ellwood’s suspicious discovery of the Reed’s factory fire while the Osborne Brothers fire raged. Most notably, Meyers also believed that the fires had come to an end as he had made peace with Kohanza by assisting a member of Kohanza, Augustus Ising, who had his leg broken by a fall while fighting a fire. Meyers had applied to the State Association of Firemen on Ising’s behalf for monetary assistance and was, in response to this gesture, appointed by Kohanza membership to a committee to help arrange a benefit for Ising. After the meeting, Meyers overheard a member saying: “Well, the fire bug is through now, we will have no more fires.” A week before, the *Danbury News* had reported that the committee under Meyers from the Humane Social Club would meet a committee from Kohanza to arrange the benefit for Ising.<sup>98</sup> McM did not mention his opinion on Meyers’s theory about the end of the fire bug. Also on the 14<sup>th</sup>, the *Danbury News* reported on the Common Council’s joint session debate over granting a salary increase to the city’s firefighters. Surprisingly, the story implied that the notion of a paid fire department was still at issue. Rundle argued that the resignations should be accepted, not because salaries were high enough, but on the principle that “he did not like the idea of a handful of men dictating to the city.” Councilman Foley responded:

[T]he men are underpaid. It is not good policy to underpay on principle. . . . The city first established a paid system, and some of the volunteer companies were disbanded by them. It was new innovation for Danbury and to start simply as an experiment, small salaries were paid . . .

---

<sup>97</sup> Mayor Hopkins later told McM that Stevens had threatened Meyers and Virgil Barnum on the street sometime this same day (January 13th).

<sup>98</sup> “To Arrange a Benefit.” *The Danbury News*. January 7, 1891.

with the understanding that they would be increased after the first six months.<sup>99</sup>

Both Alderman Rundle and Councilman McPhelemy mentioned the importance of sending the right message to insurance companies; Rundle thought they could accomplish that by denying the pay increase while McPhelemy thought an increase would have the desired effect. The same *Danbury News* article reported: “Before the motion was put, Mayor Hopkins stated that the paid system was the result of demands by the insurance companies, and it [the paid department] had to be maintained . . . and that the acceptance of the resignations would dispense with the paid branch.” McPhelemy added, “The day of pride of fire companies has passed away. Danbury has grown. It is now a city, a paid department was a necessity and we cannot go back.”<sup>100</sup> The Common Council voted six to five (the chair broke a five-to-five tie) in favor of a motion to table the department’s resignations and voted six to four to request that the Fire Committee ask for the resignations to be withdrawn for a month. The firefighters agreed to wait a month and thus the issue of salaries was deferred until a later date.<sup>101</sup>

McM interviewed John Ellwood on the 15<sup>th</sup>, and Ellwood denied ever threatening Meyers even while boasting about wanting to punch him. Yet, Ellwood claimed that the department needed someone at its helm that the men could look up to and that “universal dislike” of Meyers was behind the fires. McM noted Ellwood’s bitter hatred of Meyers and his resentment of Meyers’s position as chief. Ellwood told McM that he wanted Meyers to appear incompetent and inferior to the challenges. McM noted that the destruction of property due to fire and Meyers’s handling of the department served to bring Ellwood “nearer his cherished aim” of being named chief. McM posed the question, “Can it be that Ellwood would go to such extreme ends to gain his point, as to be the author or instigator of these fires?”<sup>102</sup>

Ellwood and Meyers did agree in their assessment that the apparent prime suspect, Stevens, was not responsible for the fires. Ellwood sympathized with Stevens and dismissed the idea of his involvement. Ellwood also believed that Lobdell was not involved with the fires, but insinuated that Lobdell was involved with Stevens’s wife. Soon after taking Ellwood’s statement, McM asked Waggneur if he believed Ellwood or Meyers, and Waggneur claimed to believe Ellwood, an opinion not disputed by McM in his report. McM’s vague interest in Ellwood as a suspect was not again expressed.<sup>103</sup>

By the 16<sup>th</sup>, McM was speculating in his report that the lack of pay together with an abundance of alcohol and incompetence among the paid firefighters were to blame for the fire bug problem. He also

---

<sup>99</sup> “The Firemen’s Resignations.” *The Danbury News*. January 14, 1891.

<sup>100</sup> “The Firemen’s Resignations.” *The Danbury News*. January 14, 1891.

<sup>101</sup> “The Firemen’s Resignations.” *The Danbury News*. January 14, 1891.

<sup>102</sup> January 16th Report, pg 2; Pinkerton’s National Detective Agency Danbury “Firebug” Investigation Collection, MS 020, box 1, folder 2, WCSU Archives. <http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/items/show/744>

<sup>103</sup> January 16th 2nd Report, pg 6; Pinkerton’s National Detective Agency Danbury “Firebug” Investigation Collection, MS 020, box 1, folder 2, WCSU Archives. <http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/items/show/742>

reported on pettiness in the police and fire departments as well as a friction between Waggnor and Keating. Keating had reportedly made his own statement (not in the collection) in the preceding days, the interview for which lasted around three hours. Sergeant Waggnor, upon hearing of the interview, expressed suspicious curiosity about it.

The night of the 16<sup>th</sup>, the Council Board agreed to grant the salaries the firefighters had requested. The Council Board's decision was consistent with a new realization in government that wages in general for most laborers were too low. A survey conducted by Samuel Hotchkiss, commissioner of Connecticut's Bureau of Labor Statistics, in this period revealed that Hotchkiss was "unnerved" as those surveyed "commented on 'the feeling of bitterness' which so frequently manifests itself in . . . 'discontent and unrest.'"<sup>104</sup> Danbury's hatter firefighters were feeling this discontent both in their relations with the city and hatting management. In relating what happened at the board meeting, Councilman McPhelemy told McM, "It was true that there was a bitter feeling shown towards Mr. Meyers," but McPhelemy believed that Meyers was fully capable of performing his duties as chief engineer.

Inserted in McM's reports is an anonymous letter addressed to Alderman Rundle regarding the fire bug. The letter, though undated, refers to the Council Board's decision to grant a pay increase:

Dear Sir,

I desire to thank you as citizen of Danbury for your [foresight] in regard to the increase of pay for the firemen. The town or the men of wealth in it should employ a first class New York detective agency to [run down] the fire bugs. The paid firemen are the fire bugs. The first series of fires was to blackmail the town into giving them pay instead [of] leaving them as volunteers. The second batch of fires was to blackmail the town into increasing their pay. Unless law and order be maintained in the town and all such outlaw business be suppressed the bright future of Danbury will be destroyed. . . . Put a good New York detective among the paid firemen and instruct him to obtain their confidence and he will soon get hold of the fire bug or bugs. . . . You may remember that the first series of incendiary fires was before their attempt to get pay, and the second series immediately preceding their application to obtain increased pay. There is no end to blackmail; the town allowed itself to be blackmailed once and now it is blackmailed again.

A true friend to the property and growth of Danbury.<sup>105</sup>

It is difficult to weigh the significance of this letter, but the city had hired the "New York detective." The letter is at least frank contemporary speculation on the motive and identity of the fire bug, and that there was a plurality of fire bugs in the paid fire department. Despite the fact that these incendiaries had blackmailed the city to receive higher pay, the author expressed support for granting the increase.

After a short trip to New York City on January 19th, McM returned to find that the fire bug had

---

<sup>104</sup> John A. Garraty, *The New Commonwealth: 1877-1890*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 136.

<sup>105</sup> Anonymous Letter; Pinkerton's National Detective Agency Danbury "Firebug" Investigation Collection, MS 020, box 1, folder 2, WCSU Archives.

struck and had been seen in his absence. Waggneor briefed McM that there had been an attempt to burn the house of a hatter named James Manion. The compelling news led McM to change his focus from Ellwood, Stevens, and Meyers to finding the man that witnesses had seen trying to set this fire. A witness, J.M. Parker, reported:

I noticed a tall man with a long overcoat walking slowly past Mr. Manion's house. I did not pay any attention to him at that time. . . . While watching him I saw a faint light as if made by a match. The light went out, then again came another flash. It was held close to the stoop. I ran to my door, and no doubt the noise made by closing the door frightened the man, for he jumped up and ran away very fast down Grand to Wooster. . . . Strange as it may seem I cannot give any description of this man. I was watching him from about 10 p.m. until 11:30 p.m. I can only say that he was tall, about 5' 9" and wore a long coat and derby hat.<sup>106</sup>

McM went to the scene of the crime, and found the porch of Manion's house doused in kerosene--at least a gallon by Waggneor's estimation. McM discovered a match the police had missed and used it to find matches like it in Danbury's saloons, ending up at Dillon's Saloon on Ives Street. There was talk in town of a significant walkout called by the Hat Trimmers Association, but McM noted no suspicion of a connection between the walkout and the attempt to set fire to Manion's house.<sup>107</sup> At Dillon's, McM met Special Policeman Goodell, who told McM over a beer and cigar that he had abandoned following Stevens and was instead on the lookout for the man Parker had witnessed the night before around Manion's.

Despite Goodell's opinion, the next day McM travelled to Taunton Lake to interview Stevens, accompanied part of the way by Officer Bradley. Stevens lived in what McM described as a large, comfortably furnished home on the lake. A photograph of Stevens when he was briefly chief engineer was prominently displayed in the house. Stevens's wife had to fetch her husband, who was ice-fishing on the lake. Stevens granted a short interview over whiskey, venting about his hatred for Meyers and how he would punch Meyers when he got the chance. Stevens mentioned to McM that Edward Jenne, a volunteer fireman, should have been made chief engineer, claiming that Jenne had experience with the Chicago fire department. Upon inquiring about Jenne from Pinkerton operatives in Chicago, McM was informed that Jenne had never been a Chicago fireman. According to Keating, Jenne was a man "that gets drunk quite often." After promising to continue his statement later that night, McM left Stevens and returned with Bradley to Danbury. Stevens did not show up for his meeting that night, leading McM back to the saloons to look for him, although Stevens eluded him that night. The next morning at the Wooster House, however, McM found Stevens hungover at a table with his face buried in his hands. After a couple of drinks, Stevens restated his hatred of Meyers and his support of Edward Jenne. Following the interview, McM went a few doors down to speak to Meyers in his cigar shop, reflecting on that interview, "[I] did not

---

<sup>106</sup> Pinkerton Report - Jan 20 1891, pg 3; Pinkerton's National Detective Agency Danbury "Firebug" Investigation Collection, MS 020, box 1, folder 4, WCSU Archives. <http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/items/show/746>

<sup>107</sup> "Lockout at Danbury." *Hartford Courant*. January 20, 1891. <http://0-search.proquest.com.www.consuls.org/docview/193770004?accountid=40083>.

like the way that Meyers answered me.”<sup>108</sup>

This brief interlude with Stevens was the only substantial deviation from McM’s new focus on the Manion house man, and in his pursuit he began to suspect the Danbury Police of obstructing his efforts. McM learned of one witness who was told by the police not to speak to him; a reasonable suspect whose existence had been withheld; and the arrest of a young man who had agreed to help McM identify the Manion house man. Councilman Foley bluntly told McM that it was a “common expression in the town that Keating would spoil any person who he [Keating] thought was getting any information in regard to the fires.” As Wilbur Miller has pointed out, police reformers, not unlike reformers of the fire department, “emphasised ‘professionalization’, which usually meant a more military style of organisation, higher educational standards and better training, concentration on crime fighting more than general order, and administration independent of local politics.”<sup>109</sup> Keating had been fortunate to catch some horse thieves before being appointed captain; for a former part-time constable like Keating, catching the fire bug could have only have helped his career, given the trend toward a more professionalized police force.<sup>110</sup>

On the 24<sup>th</sup>, the [Bridgeport] *Sunday Herald* ran an article regarding the dissension in the fire department and the opposition to Meyers:

The members of Kohanza Hose are very much exercised over a speech recently made at a banquet. It is alleged by Alderman Smith, who is chairman of the board of fire commissioners, charging that the hotbed of fire department dissention and the center of the opposition to Chief Meyers was in the Kohanza Hose company’s rooms.

The article then related a rebuttal from an anonymous member of Kohanza that is less a rebuttal than a reinforcement of the accusations that were related by Alderman Smith.

The statement made by Alderman Smith on that occasion is a deliberate misstatement of facts. This truth is...that the dissatisfaction arose among members of the paid department, most of whom are first-class firemen, although they have been selected by political preference, and who openly charge that there is a shameful incompetency at the head of the department, and have declared their intention of either resigning or using their own common sense as to the division of labor at fires.<sup>111</sup>

---

<sup>108</sup> Pinkerton Report - Jan 22-23, 1891, pg 3; Pinkerton’s National Detective Agency Danbury “Firebug” Investigation Collection, MS 020, box 1, folder 11, WCSU Archives.  
<http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/items/show/747>

<sup>109</sup> Wilbur Miller, “The Good, The Bad & The Ugly,” *History Today* 50 no. 8(2000): 29. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 27, 2015).

<sup>110</sup> Keating was awarded twenty-eight dollars by the State of Connecticut in April of 1889, for catching two horse thieves. (See *Special Acts and Resolutions of the General Assembly*, pg. 980 of the January 1889 session, <https://books.google.com/books?id=eMMvAQAAMAAJ&lpg=PA980&ots=y8PIgpcuCS7&dq=Michael%20J.%20Keating%20horse%20thieves%20danbury&pg=PA980#v=onepage&q=Michael%20J.%20Keating%20horse%20thieves%20danbury&f=false>)

<sup>111</sup> Bridgeport *Sunday Herald*, January 24, 1891

The vehement opposition to Meyers and a call for open insubordination are laid out in the article. Alderman Smith publicly accused Kohanza for being the source of the dissensions in the fire department, and the rebuttal admitted that Kohanza, while not the source of “dissent” in the fire department, enthusiastically supported those whom they accused of being the source, the paid firefighters. *The Danbury News* and *Evening News*, in keeping with their wish to keep politics out of its pages, had no mention of the speech.

Meanwhile, McM continued to occupy himself with tracking the Manion house man, with dwindling returns. His suspicions of police interference gave way to certainty that he was tracking a person the police knew to be a special policeman. He had slogged out to the edge of town to investigate a hoax fire orchestrated by a man who worked for John Ellwood. Additionally, a long conversation with Sergeant Wagneor revealed that months before when a George Meed [Mead] had been arrested for burglary, the take was found in the money till of Mrs. Dillon’s saloon on Ives Street. Among the other stolen items found was a fire key traced to Keating. Wagneor reported that Keating denied the key was his but could not produce his own key.

February 2 marked the last reported day of McM’s investigation. That morning, McM learned that a man had been arrested the night before with oil and matches, at Beers’ lumber yard on Main Street. McM went to the lumber yard and found evidence that kerosene had been spread around the site. He then went to the jail to see the arrested man and found Hopkins and several others already questioning him. McM recognized the arrested man as James Preston, whom he had met in Johnsonville, NY the previous fall. The “wild-looking” Preston only admitted to drinking in town the previous day, but Mayor Hopkins showed himself to be enthusiastic about pinning the fire bug fires on him anyway. Virgil Barnum, who had been appointed deputy sheriff by the mayor, was among the men questioning Preston. Barnum and the mayor insisted that Preston was the fire bug, but McM remained skeptical. McM included in his report that he believed that Barnum wanted to place the blame on Preston to put an end to the fire bug issue, and that Barnum was himself not an unlikely suspect; McM and the *Danbury News* described him as being unpopular in the community. Nothing came of Preston’s arrest and Barnum was suspected of contriving the entire matter.<sup>112</sup>

Thus after a month of trudging up and down the cold snowy streets of Danbury, with the taste of beer, whiskey, and cigars in his mouth, McM emerged from the basement of City Hall and turned south on Main Street, passing St. Peter’s, and entered the Turner House to write his report back to New York.

The wage increase that had been recommended by the Fire Committee and approved by the Council Board in January 1891 still needed the Board of Aldermen’s approval to be enacted; however, the measure was rejected by the Aldermen that February. The Republicans on the Council Board made an attempt to have the Council Board rescind their previous vote in support of a wage increase on the

---

<sup>112</sup> “Is there a Conspiracy?” *Bridgeport Sunday Herald*, February 15, 1891.  
<http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/exhibits/show/firebug/item/877>

grounds that Danburians “were of the opinion that the department were paid enough and they protested against the proposed raise.” Further, the Democrats characterized the move as a Republican attempt to “stave off this matter until their party get into power and then get the credit.”<sup>113</sup> Though the effort to rescind the vote on the Council Board was unsuccessful, the aldermen’s action meant that the wage increase was stalled, and on February 21, nearly the entire fire department resigned as a result. Paid firefighters agreed to respond to fires as volunteers, but the [Danbury] *Evening News* stated that the City would not be able “enforce discipline at a fire.” On the same day, the *News* followed this story with “Not a Wave of Sobriety,” documenting uncharacteristically high numbers of persons brought in for drunkenness.<sup>114</sup> As a result of the resignations, there was no paid Danbury Fire Department and Meyers was effectively rendered irrelevant during his last few days as chief.

According to the Pinkerton operative McM, the cooperation so necessary to a successful arson investigation was lacking in 1890s Danbury. This lack of cooperation alone may shed light on why no credible suspect was ever arrested. At the least, some combination of skill, luck, or support possessed by the perpetrator(s), and a coinciding lack of the same on the part of the authorities, allowed the fire bug to operate unheeded and remain elusive.<sup>115</sup>

The most definitive speculation on the fire bug's identity made by McM comes from his January 16, 1891 report: to accept the "entire batch of resignations, re-organize the entire force on a different basis, throw out all objectionable persons, take in only those that are known to be reliable men irrespective of party, put them under living wages, under rules to be lived up to, have the Engine house for the sole use of Firemen, and not an annex for [Danbury's many] saloons."<sup>116</sup> In other words, the fire bug's profile was an objectionable, unreliable, heavy drinking, underpaid, and partisan firefighter.

Notably missing from documentation of McM’s investigation or press coverage is any discussion of a connection between the labor tensions in the hat industry and the fires. Knowing that most of the firefighters in Danbury were hatters, discontent among finishers and other laborers in the hat industry also meant discontent among many in the fire department. The connection was implied when Pinkerton’s National Detective Agency was chosen for the fire bug era investigation. Hiring that national agency, which was the preeminent contractor for strike-breaking, in Danbury was a gesture with unfavorable

---

<sup>113</sup> "Meeting of the Councilmen," *Evening News*, February 21, 1891.

<sup>114</sup> "The Fire Department Muddle," *Evening News*, February 23, 1891.

<sup>115</sup> A 1952 article on the legal aspects of arson states: "The success or failure of an arson investigation depends, not only on how competent the arson investigator is, but also on the degree of cooperation that exists between him and the police and fire services, prosecuting attorneys and others with whom he is obliged to work. Unfortunately, in many instances, this cooperation is lacking, possibly due to envy, jealousy or other reasons; such a situation might result in losing a case." William C. Braun, "Legal Aspects of Arson," *The Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science* 43 (May-Jun 1952): 62. <http://www.jstor.org> (accessed October 5, 2012).

<sup>116</sup> Pinkerton Report - Jan 16, 1891, pg 3; Pinkerton’s National Detective Agency Danbury “Firebug” Investigation Collection, MS 020, box 1, folder 7, WCSU Archives. <http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/items/show/742>

implications for union men and their sympathizers; conversely, Pinkerton's associations with management suggested support for management's point of view and interests. Pinkerton's was used again in 1898 to help control the unsavory element who were attracted by the Danbury Fair.<sup>117</sup> Pinkerton's detectives were thought to "know all the crooks" and that Pinkerton's detectives would be able to "corral" those crooks before they could make any trouble.<sup>118</sup>

With or without a clear culprit and unbeknownst to most Danburians, the fire bug episode had essentially, except for a short spell in April of 1893, come to an end in January 1891. After helping Ising, Meyers professed confidence about the cessation of the fires as a result of his peace with Kohanza turned out to be well founded. Once the fires had stopped, anger more than relief was prevalent in Mayor Hopkins's emotional final address in which he predicted that the period between 1889 and 1891 would be seen as the hardest years in the city's history.

The change from a Borough to a City form of government is a radical one, involving a change in every department, and while many of our citizens realize this, and are willing to bear with patience, and to aid all they can in making the change a success; there have been and are others, that have done all they could to discourage and hinder the success of the work, some were honest in their opinions, but were willing to wait results. Knowing all men are liable to err; others have deliberately done all they could to destroy the good that was being done, and to injure us in the estimation of good citizens; such persons are unworthy of notice; they are inspired by personal feelings of hatred, envy or political disappointment; they have not the City's welfare at heart, and time will prove them to have had their own selfish aims in view while prating about the City's good.<sup>119</sup>

Words like "destroy," injure," and "hatred" that punctuated this final statement from Danbury's first mayor provide some insight on the ill feeling that permeated this episode. The 1891 "Mayor's Message" stands in stark contrast with Hopkins's very optimistic message that appeared in the previous year's *Proceedings*.

### *After 1891: Cooling Fires and Warming Discontent*

One can only speculate whether the inability of the Democrats to arrest a fire bug benefited Republicans enough to sway the 1891 Danbury elections, but despite Democratic gains in much of the state, Republican Charles Peck was elected mayor and his fellow Republicans gained control of the Common Council. Once Peck and the Common Council began making city appointments, Keating was demoted to patrolman and was soon ousted from the force, accused of drinking and other infractions.<sup>120</sup> Ellwood was appointed chief of the fire department and pay increases were granted to the paid arm of the

---

<sup>117</sup> G. Mortimer Rundle and Joseph Ives were among the management of the Danbury Fair.

<sup>118</sup> Bound for the Fair: Danbury Filling up with Fakirs and All Sorts of Crooks," *Bridgeport Herald*, October 2, 1898. <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=LtUyAAAIAIAJ&sjid=ywAGAAAIAIAJ&pg=4032%2C4285929>.

<sup>119</sup> *Proceedings and Records of the Board of Councilmen and Board of Alderman of the City of Danbury, For the Year Ending April 15th, 1891* (Danbury: Press of the Danbury News, 1891), 219.

<sup>120</sup> "Chief of Police Dismissed," [Auburn NY] *Daily Bulletin*, August 18, 1891. [http://fultonhistory.com/Newspapers/Disk2/Auburn NY Bulletin/Auburn NY Daily Bulletin 1891/Newspaper Auburn NY Daily Bulletin 1891c pdf - 0414.PDF](http://fultonhistory.com/Newspapers/Disk2/Auburn%20NY%20Bulletin/Auburn%20NY%20Daily%20Bulletin%201891/Newspaper%20Auburn%20NY%20Daily%20Bulletin%201891c.pdf)



department. There were a small number of “incendiary” fires between April 1891 and March 1893, but none were attributed to the fire bug.<sup>121</sup> A series of fires in April 1893 marked the only point during the Peck administration when newspapers identified the fire bug as the perpetrator.<sup>122</sup>

When the Democrats regained power again in late April 1893, Ellwood, despite showing a good record as chief, was not reappointed. Ellwood left Danbury shortly after his term as chief and worked in New York City in hat factories, while his wife and family remained in Danbury. He died in New York in 1915 and his body was returned to Danbury, where flowers from the O.U.A.M. decorated his casket. With Democrats back in power in 1893, Sergeant Waggneor, who had remained sergeant of police in the Peck administration, was removed from his position in November 1893 for what the *Danbury Evening News* described as misconduct. Waggneor vowed to appeal, but fell ill with a heart ailment and died within days. There is no mention of any incident involving Waggneor in the Common Council’s *Proceedings and Records*.<sup>123</sup> Patrolman David Bradley resigned from the Danbury police in the fall of 1893, with no clear explanation of the circumstances leading up to it.<sup>124</sup> Bradley, though, shortly returned to the department and eventually became captain.<sup>125</sup> Hopkins was elected as a probate judge in Danbury in 1893 and eventually retired to Florida. Though Keating did not return to the city police or a city position, he remained in Danbury where he was lauded in the *Danbury News* upon his death for his long service to the department, with no mention of his ouster.<sup>126</sup> Stevens, by the 1900 census, had moved to Chicago, where he died in 1928.

Meyers politically rebounded in 1893 and was elected treasurer of the City of Danbury and would also be elected president of the Connecticut State Firemen’s Association.<sup>127</sup> Despite the loss of his mother in the summer of 1890 to apoplexy, and his son in 1900 to tuberculosis, together with the tribulations surrounding the fire bug, Meyers remained in Danbury, continuing to participate in its highly contentious political process.<sup>128</sup> Above all, Meyers had made a significant contribution to Danbury during the fire bug

---

<sup>121</sup> “A Fire in a Wood Yard,” *Danbury News*, April 13, 1892, p. 6.

<sup>122</sup> “Is McCready the Fire Bug,” [Danbury] *Evening News*, April 17, 1893.

<sup>123</sup> “Charges Preferred Against Sergeant Waggneor,” *Danbury News*, November 9, 1893.

<sup>124</sup> “Bradley Resigns,” *Danbury News*, September 20, 1893.

<sup>125</sup> Both Waggneor and Bradley were sued in 1892 by a man claiming that they had wrongfully detained him and as a result the man contracted pneumonia. Their later troubles do not appear to have any connection to that incident. Bradley was also sued in the McFarland kidnapping case of 1892. Special to THE COURANT. “Danbury Officials Sued,” *The Hartford Courant* (1887-1922), Aug 09, 1892, <http://0-search.proquest.com.www.consuls.org/docview/554508614?accountid=40083> (accessed January 16, 2014)..

<sup>126</sup> “On Captain Keating’s Death,” [Danbury] *Evening News*, July 14, 1916.

<http://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/files/original/936dfb195b96b0bed1ee88627d7362f2.jpg>

<sup>127</sup> “Morris Meyers died at Danbury,” *Danbury News*, November 2, 1921.

<sup>128</sup> “Will Contest Election,” *Danbury News*, December 30, 1908. The highest office for which he ran was State Representative; he lost that contested election in 1909 by only 21 votes. “The House.” *The Hartford Courant* (1887-1922), Mar 04, 1909.

<http://0-search.proquest.com.www.consuls.org/docview/555618882?accountid=40083>.

Meyers contested the election as tallies were shown that indicated Meyers the winner over W.F. Tomlinson. No recount was called for.

episode, as he and his firefighters frequently risked their lives knowing they were in plain view of the persons who, in setting the fires, were as willing to burn and potentially kill firefighters as much as anything or anyone else. Ultimately, Meyers's decision to help a fellow fireman aligned with persons bent on his ouster coincided with the cessation of the fires. The nature of Meyers's political and civic career supports Robert Worth Miller's and others' reevaluation of politics in the Gilded Age, and Meyers was one of those parties Miller described as truly engaged with "fundamental issues concerning the direction of the nation and the role [of] government."<sup>129</sup> Conversely, the fire bug episode would also support some of the classic assumptions about the cynicism, greed, and violence of Gilded Age politics. What may give some clue of what Meyers's family felt about the episode is the fact that, upon his death in 1924, they gave the silver parade and duty trumpets he had used when Danbury's chief to the Bridgeport Fire Department and not to his former department.<sup>130</sup>

By 1892, the reward that the city had offered in the summer of 1889 for the arrest of a fire bug remained unclaimed, but in May 1892, Harry Crofut (sometimes Crofutt), the Town of Danbury's sheriff, caught the fifteen-year-old Frank O'Connor trying to set a fire. A couple of days later, Crofut went to the Common Council and tried to collect the fire bug reward, though aware that the young O'Connor was not *the* fire bug. The council would not pay out the money, but instead referred the issue to the city attorney. After three years of back and forth in the courts, in 1895, the Supreme Court of Connecticut ruled against Crofut's claim, on the grounds that the Danbury Common Council did not have the authority to offer a reward, and the city could not give a cash reward to Crofut, a sheriff of the town, for a task he was already on the payroll to perform.<sup>131</sup>

James Bailey, the principal chronicler of Danbury through his newspapers and *History of Danbury*, died in 1894. The *History of Danbury* was not yet completed upon Bailey's death and the task fell to a group of editors, including Susan Benedict Hill, to finish it. Hill admitted having to make Bailey's "crooked paths" straight, but the resulting volume remained the primary reference for Danbury history for the next one hundred and twenty years. The *History* became a useful reference for Danbury lore but was also reminiscent of the apolitical nostalgia contained in Bailey's fictional works. Though beneath the nostalgic tone in the *History*, Bailey had in his later years been "subject to seasons of deep depression...and profound darkness,"<sup>132</sup> accompanied by, according to a fellow Civil War veteran, heavy drinking.<sup>133</sup> His personal decline and death coincided with the fire bug episode and mirrored the turmoil

---

<sup>129</sup> Worth Robert Miller, "The Lost World of Gilded Age Politics," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 1, no. 1 (2002): 50, <http://0-www.jstor.org.www.consuls.org/stable/25144285> (accessed February 10, 2015).

<sup>130</sup> "Give Trumpets to City," *The Bridgeport Telegram*, November 4, 1925, p. 6. <http://www.newspapers.com/newspage/7071508/>

<sup>131</sup> Crofut v. Danbury. *A Digest of the all the Reported Cases Decided in the Supreme Court of Errors... State of Connecticut*, v. II. (Hartford: Dissell Publishing, 1900). pg 1686.

<sup>132</sup> James Bailey, *History of Danbury, Conn., 1684-1896* (Danbury: Burr-printing House, 1896), xxi.

<sup>133</sup> Art Young, *Art Young: His Life and Times*, (New York: Sheridan House, 1939), 240.

at the end of Danbury's pre-urban period. Yet the realities of the fire bug episode, the difficulties associated with urbanization, and even issues that confronted veterans of the Civil War (like Bailey) were left out of the *History of Danbury*, though, clearly prevalent when it was being written.

Just before Bailey's death, he had a chance to summarize the fire bug episode in an address to the Connecticut State Firemen's Association, which was meeting in Danbury. Hopkins and Meyers both attended:

It is a rare treat for me to see such a large body of firemen. I think I never saw so many together at one time, outside of a saloon... It was not long ago Danbury gained considerable notoriety on account of the firebug. He was a multifarious sort of insect. There must have been a dozen of him, but there is no counting the number of people who actually saw him and were just in the act of arresting him when something else came into their mind and caused them to forget to do it. The firebug got to be so infernally numerous that our people could not venture outdoors at night without a lantern for fear of falling over him and hurting themselves.

Bailey ended with a jibe relating to the insurance companies that had pulled out of Danbury as a result of the fire bug fires. Bailey's jibe reinforced Hopkins's sentiment from his final mayoral report that this fire bug period was Danbury's lowest ebb: "What will scare an insurance agent will make the hair in butter stand on end, and when a town gets so low an insurance agent deserts it, then it is the time to buy it; it will never get any lower."<sup>134</sup>

Danbury may not have sunk any lower, but between 1893 and 1908, it settled into additional difficult times due to the 1893 Depression, large strikes, and the 1903 "Hatters Case." However, even after the last fire bug fire, Danbury continued to show an inclination to link incendiarism with labor disputes, both as a tangible threat to guard against and as a weapon used by the disaffected.<sup>135</sup> The issues around the Danbury fire bug resonate in societal conflicts are still being debated. The political discord, wage disputes, prejudice, and conflicts over immigration continue to play out at Danbury City Hall and beyond. Though Danbury has not seen another episode like the fire bug to accompany those debates, it also has not since encountered the confluence of governmental restructuring, fire and police department reorganization, party takeovers, fierce partisan rivalries, labor unrest, national economic crises, and major demographic changes that were compressed into that brief but tumultuous period.

---

<sup>134</sup> "Miscellaneous Notes." *The Insurance Journal: A Review of the Insurance Business* 22 (1894): 284-90. Accessed January 20, 2015.

[https://books.google.com/books?id=huFAAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA284&ots=kR8Rb85O44&dq=Danbury fire bug&pg=PA284#v=onepage&q=Danbury fire bug&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=huFAAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA284&ots=kR8Rb85O44&dq=Danbury+fire+bug&pg=PA284#v=onepage&q=Danbury+fire+bug&f=false).

<sup>135</sup> "Rejected By Trimmers: No Settlement of the Hatting Question - Police Force Doubled." *Hartford Courant*. January 24, 1894. The story reports the doubling of the number of police because of a threat to burn hat factories in reaction to the failed settlement with the Trimmers' Association.

## Credits

Research assistance was provided at the WCSU Archives by Mary Rieke. WCSU Student researchers included: Gillette de Bary, and Theodore Billett with assistance from Kait O'Brien and Christina Mastriani. Editorial assistance was provided at WCSU by Dr. Leslie Lindenauer. Special thanks to Herb Janick, Bill Devlin, Danbury City Clerk's Office, Diane Hassan at Danbury Historical Society and Norma Vinchoski at the Wooster Cemetery, Danbury CT.

### *Note on the Pinkerton Reports*

The Danbury's "Firebug" episode was essentially forgotten as of 2012. This may be due in large part to the fact that the main chronicle for such things, Bailey's *History of Danbury*, overlooked it. A self-published 1969 work on the history of City's Fire Department only briefly mentions the episode in a section on Morris Meyers.<sup>136</sup> Likely the "Firebug" story would have remained forgotten were it not for a small collection in the WestConn Archives of the reports made by the Pinkerton operative, McM. The reports had been rescued by WestConn professors Truman Warner and Herb Janick and some student volunteers around 1970. Janick and Warner had been notified that items were being disposed of at Danbury's old City Hall and that anything disposed of was for the taking. Janick and Warner gathered some of their students and went to City Hall to salvage what they could. According to one of the students involved in this operation, Randy Potter found the Pinkerton reports and statements folded and packed into a shoebox and showed them to Janick. Janick saw to it they were added to the collections at WestConn where they have remained for the last 35 years. A few students and researchers over the years have looked at these materials but there had never been a concerted effort to illuminate what exactly was being investigated by the Pinkertons. In summer of 2012, WestConn students were recruited to take on the task of scanning, transcribing and researching some of the people and fires mentioned in these Pinkerton documents with the intent of creating a small online exhibit. Once undertaken, the scanning and transcribing took two weeks, but it was quickly discovered that the story behind those reports would take some time to unravel.

---

<sup>136</sup> The 1969 self-published book *The History of the Danbury Fire Department* by Donald Woods is viewable at the Danbury Historical Society.