

The Fire of 1919



Joseph Maloney; Business district before 1919

By the close of the First World War, the business district of Aurora was extensive and lively. Two groceries, a hardware store, a drug store and several smaller enterprises filled the area between the Wayside Inn (now the Aurora Inn) and District School No. 6 (“Aurora Arts and Design”). Warehouses behind these stores went all the way to the lake; among them was the old Common School building, predecessor to School No. 6, which had replaced it in 1903.



Business district circa 1907

The car on the left looks like pictures of N. Lansing Zabriskie's car. Alonzo Zabriskie and Dr. Cuddeback were also early auto enthusiasts.

Next to the Inn was the Morgan Store (below). Built in 1829, it was the oldest store in the county, and also housed Morgan family memorabilia, including several family portraits by Charles Loring Elliott.



Past the lane was the drug store, separated from Armistead's hardware by a narrow passage (above).

Village records were stored in the bookkeeper's office behind the drug store; a safe had recently been purchased for these priceless early documents. There was a tinsmith's shop behind the hardware store.



A second grocery store a few doors down was owned by Martin Maloney. The next building was the telephone exchange. Down the alley between the buildings one can just see the front of the old Common School, then being used for storage.

Like Morgan's, Maloney's carried a general line of merchandise, along with specialties like an annual calendar plate advertising the store. An outlet of Rothchild's Department store and perhaps a framer's shop were also in this block.



But sometime just after midnight on February 27th, 1919, all this changed forever.



Two Aurora men returning from Union Springs at 12:20 a.m. (probably getting off the train behind the stores) saw a fire in what seemed to be the tinsmith's shop, and they ran to alert as many as possible.

The first accounts of the fire suggested that a stove had been left burning in the tinshop; however, Mr. Armistead had checked it when he left. Observing that the north wall of his store rather than the back wall caught fire first, he believed that the fire started by spontaneous combustion in the narrow passage between his store and the drug store.

This was a place where paint cans and rags might well be discarded.

The night was bitterly cold and there was a strong northwest wind.

Auburn Firemen Hurry to Answer Appeal for Help and Battle Valiantly Under Chief Jewhurst—Town Brigade Also Lauded.

FLAMES AIDED BY LACK OF ANY PUBLIC WATER SYSTEM

Wayside Inn Ignited 10 Times But Saved and Two Sick Women Guests Are Carried Out in Safety—Morgan Store, Probably Oldest Structure in County, Levelled By Blast—Excitement Runs High At Wells College—Origin of the Fire Is in Doubt.

The fire was between the street and the lake. Household wells were inadequate, and the only other equipment owned by the Aurora Volunteer Fire Department was a small chemical pumper (below). Neighboring departments were called, and in the meantime a bucket brigade formed, which included Wells students.

Wells President Kerr Duncan Macmillan was among those who worked strenuously to douse fires on the Inn's cornices and roof. When shotgun shells began to explode in the stores, he gathered up the children, who had turned out with their parents but were now unattended, and took them to his home.



The wind direction endangered the new District School, the Village Hall (comprising the Library, Morgan Opera House and jail), Dr. Cuddeback's house next door, and Doughty house (today "Jane Morgan's;" built before 1805).



Firefighters from Aurora (headed by Eugene Maloney), Auburn, Union Springs, and King Ferry worked heroically, risking their lives to save as many buildings as possible. As the wind stilled later at night, the School and the buildings across the street were out of danger, though all were damaged.

FIVE BUILDINGS IN ASHES AND VILLAGE RECORDS DESTROYED

Some losses were insured. By morning, Aurora's mayor, Sanford Lyon, had revised his estimate of the loss upward to \$60,000 (\$8.5 million today).



The Village records, some already over a century old, had never been put in the new safe. The only remaining Morgan portrait was in the Wallcourt School (Taylor House, where it still hangs).



The mayor's little son, "Mac," never forgot his dismal fifth birthday: the drug store's ice cream counter was gone. Indeed, Aurora was suddenly without telephone service, groceries and pharmacy.

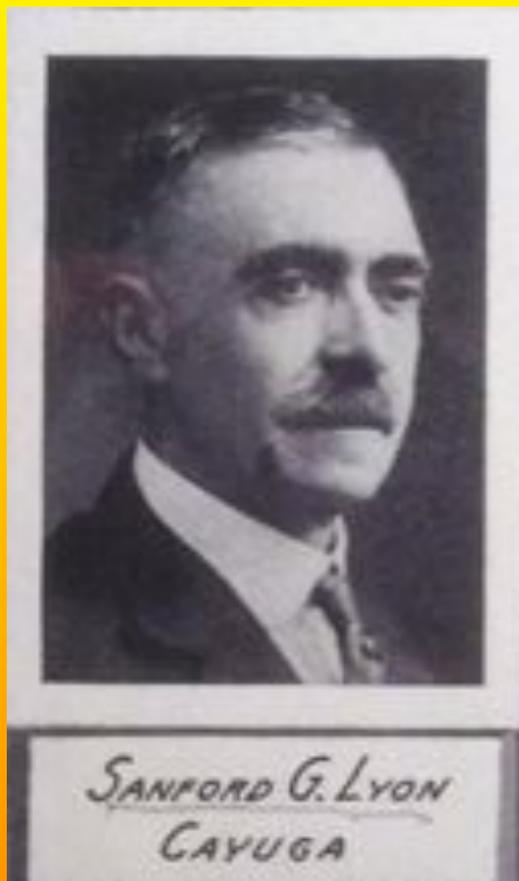
THE HEAVY LOSERS.

The Aurora Drug and Supply Co.
Rothschild Store Agency.
Martin Maloney's Grocery.
Old Telephone Building.
The Morgan Store.
The Armistead Hardware.



In addition to these, the Common School, a large warehouse and two icehouses were also destroyed.





Mayor Lyon immediately polled the businesses. All but N. Lansing Zabriskie, owner of the Morgan Store, were determined to rebuild.

FEBRUARY 28, 1919.

AURORA TO RE-BUILD AT ONCE

Open Store Temporarily in Home to Supply Food to Village.

Aurora got herself together last night and took a careful survey of the wreck of her business section. The result of this was announced by Sanford G. Lyon, president of the village, today.

Martin Maloney opened a grocery in his home, and a temporary drug store was set up in the basement of Scipio Lodge. Zabriskie, who also owned the Inn, expected to be able to re-open it by the following week.

Food Problem Acute

The problem of supplying the inhabitants of the village with food supplies was rather acute. Every store where food could be bought, or any other commodity for that matter, was burned. Martin Maloney has brought in a small supply of most necessary articles of food and has opened a temporary store at his home. He will at once put up a temporary wooden shack on the foundation of his burned over lot and put in a stock of groceries there. He will then build a substantial block in the Spring.

The Aurora Drug and Supply Company is opening a temporary store in the basement of the Masonic Hall, and will have supplies ready for distribution in three or four days, it was stated today.

Zabriskie sold the Morgan store lot to John Vanderipe, who put up a new building. (Below. It re-used the north wall of the old Morgan Store.) This later became Clark's IGA and was torn down in 2002.



A second grocery, the Red & White (above), took the place of Maloney's Store, and a service station filled much of the intervening space (center).



Business district, circa 1950



Post Office, 1940s

It seems amazing today that three of the rebuilt stores sold gas: not only the service station but also both groceries had pumps. There was a service station under the Fargo, too.

The only one of the rebuilt group still here today is the small building that houses "Bet the Farm," shown here when it was the Post Office and before it was an appliance store.

The present Post Office was built, fittingly enough, as the station for the Aurora Volunteer Fire Department.

Articles and pictures for this display were gathered by Linda Kabelac, Assistant for Visual Resources, and compiled by Linda Schwab, Village Historian. Notes and memories came from members of the Aurora Historical Society.