

The Branford Fire: A Special Report

Recent fire latest in long line of downtown blazes

The devastating fire last week reminds us of the importance of long-time businesses, both past and present, to life here in Branford. Main Street was one of two streets set out by the colonists, but it was not until the Civil War that the conversion of homes to commercial establishments began to take place. Most of Branford's Main Street buildings are known as blocks, but they are just single buildings, not whole blocks like in a city. The buildings destroyed in the fire were among the most historic in Branford and were recognized by the federal government as contributing buildings to the National Register Branford Center Historic District.

The building more recently known as Hair on Main at 970 Main St. was built in 1856 as a harness shop. John Barnes ran his business here for 41 years, selling harnesses, horse-riding clothing and bicycles. He was one of the first people in town to sell gasoline and repair automobiles. Barnes was a firefighter and drove headquarters' first engine, then known as the "chemical," which he stored at his shop. Longtime residents might remember Shumouny Confectionery & Tavern at this site from 1920 until 1945 and Branford Cleaners from

who could not pay their funeral bills. He was a colorful character and was the second person in Connecticut to get his driver's license, which he renewed every year, yet he never drove — he always had a chauffeur. He also kept bees and was one of the largest honey dealers in the state. Residents recall that the store had a musty smell and remember him

searching through many little drawers where he could always find the item you were seeking. Children delighted every year at Christmas time when Griswold set up an electric train display. Lewis Hamilton worked for Griswold for many years and later ran his own furniture store on Eades Street.

The A&P leased the first floor of the Griswold Block from

1937 to 1963, and Sam Griswold moved his Antique Gallery to the second floor. After Griswold's death in 1951, the Castellon family purchased the building and moved its bakery business from the Wilford Block to the Griswold Block in 1963. A small portion of the first floor of the Griswold Block was operated as a liquor store by the A&P from 1940 until 1970. A locksmith has been located here for 20 years.

East of the Griswold Block was



PICTURES OF THE PAST
Jane Peterson Bouley



Photo by Earl Colter, courtesy of the Branford Historical Society
A view, circa 1949, of the area destroyed by fire last week. Castellon Brothers Bakery was originally located at 1000 Main St.

been Hall & Power Grocery, Branford Public Market, Randazzisi Shoe Repair, CL&P, Ward's Radio, Shoreline Electric, Lawrence Florist, Robbin's Package Store and an auto parts store. More recently, J.C. Glassworks and Swish — a clothing store — have occupied the site. The block has been owned by George Robbins for many years.

The Castellon family started their bakery business in East Haven in 1924 and moved to the Wilford Block in 1936. They remained here until 1963, when they moved to the

second floor of Wilford Block.

- A fire at Linsley House on Meadow Street on Oct. 23, 1938, killed three tenants.

There have been other fires as well:

- Redman Hall on Park Street, 1944
- Branford Theater and Ashley Shirt, 1953
- Central Hardware, 1958
- Marcus 5&10, 1961
- Osborn Feed and Grain on Meadow Street, 1962
- St. Mary's Church, 1972
- Grocery Bakery at 1022 Main St.

remember Branford's Connection & Tavern at this site from 1920 until 1945 and Branford Cleaners from 1946 until 1960. Lynn's Restaurant was here from 1962 until 1975. For 20 years, there has been a hair salon on the first floor. There have been living quarters over the store for more than a century.

Next door, Samuel B. Miller had a small building where he operated an undertaking business. Samuel Ames Griswold, an undertaker from Essex, bought the business and erected a three-story building in 1897 that became known as the Griswold Block (978-986 Main St.). Griswold's store sold hardware, general merchandise, pot belly stoves, furniture and school supplies. Griswold also ran a funeral parlor on South Main Street. Sam Griswold was known throughout the state as an antique dealer and often acquired his antiques from families

until 1976. A bookshop has been located here for 20 years.

East of the Griswold Block was originally part of the Elias Linsley farm, which extended past the former Horwitz Store and back to Hillside Avenue. The Wilford Block, 988-1004 Main St., was built here in the 1890s by Charles Wilford for his butcher shop. George Birbarie ran a grocery store on the first floor, and the family lived on the second floor in the early 1900s. It was here that the first ice cream cones and sodas were sold in Branford, and where men gathered around the pot belly stove to share the day's gossip. During the early part of this century, the upstairs was rented to various men's organizations: The GAR, Knights of Pythias, The Redman and The Home Club. A fire destroyed the second floor of this block in 1938, and it was removed. Other occupants of these stores have

1924 and moved to the Wilford Block in 1936. They remained here until 1963, when they moved to the Griswold Block, which they had purchased from the Griswold estate in 1951. Bernie Page of Stony Creek started his sport shop further down Main Street and moved to the Wilford Block in 1964. Page retired in 1993, and Page's Sport Shop continued under new management.

The fire Jan. 28 is the latest of many in the center of Branford this century:

- A fire at St. Mary's Church in 1904 destroyed the brand-new church.
- A March 18, 1928, fire destroyed Toole Block and killed firefighter George Vickstrom.
- In 1939, a fire destroyed the sec-

Meadow Street, 1962

- St. Mary's Church, 1972
- Grocery Bakery at 1022 Main St., 1972
- Ye Olde Towne Restaurant, 1973
- Totoket Block, 1973
- Alfredo's Restaurant, 1975
- Silver Dollar Restaurant, 1976
- Wards and Towne Pharmacy, 1976
- Yankee Bike Shop on Veto Street, 1977
- Rosenthal Block, 1979
- Meadow Street Restaurant, 1982
- Harold's Sandwich Shop, 1989

EDITOR'S NOTE: Jane Peterson Bouley is the town historian of Branford.