

NORTH AVENUE FIRE 2004

Firefighters from Fanwood and three other communities worked for five hours to contain a stubborn fire at a home at 160 North Avenue on President's Day, February 16, 2004.

Struggling through ice and sub-freezing temperatures, about 60 firefighters from our town and Plainfield, Scotch Plains and Westfield worked from 4:30pm until almost 9:30pm to get the flames knocked down.

About an hour into the firefighting effort, Chief Rick Regenthal gave the order to firemen to evacuate the building for fear it would collapse under them. The remainder of the battle was mounted from outside and above. By the time the last of the flames were put out, the back half of the home was destroyed and the rest was uninhabitable.



About seven hours later, at 4:30am, the fire flared up again. Responding units quickly put it out.



The following morning, the basement was pumped out and an investigation showed the cause was electrical, not the furnace as originally thought.

Owner Scott Smith and his daughter Audrey, 2, escaped unharmed. Scott's wife, Emily, was on a plane to Arizona on a business trip at the time. The Smiths had bought the 100-year old home three years earlier and had made considerable improvements.

"All we have are the clothes we're wearing," Scott said as he watched the fire destroy his home. The Smiths temporarily moved in with Scott's brother Brian and his family, also Fanwood residents.

Fanwood firefighters arrived on scene just minutes after Smith called 911, but it was evident almost immediately that this blaze would not go out quietly. Flames shot up through the rear center of the home and began burning the frame construction from the inside out. Firefighters were hampered by cold temperatures that made the scene dangerous, forming ice on the ground and on their helmets and visors. When they returned at 4:30am to extinguish the flare up, Chief Regenthal warned his men that the inside stairway was "a sheet of ice".

The Fanwood Rescue Squad had both its rigs and a dozen members on scene, backed up by the Scotch Plains and Mountainside Rescue Squads. Six firefighters suffered minor injuries. One was transported to the hospital with a shoulder injury.

Fanwood's Department of Public Works also responded, bringing truckloads of salt to treat the street, sidewalks and driveways. The Red Cross responded with food and beverages for firefighters.

