

## 84 First Responders

By David Cochran

*When an emergency occurs today, we are fortunate to be able to call 911 and have help arrive within a matter of minutes. But that's not the way it has always been.*

When the Blaw family arrived in 1739, there was nothing but farmland near Blawenburg, and they brought with them whatever they could carry in their horse-drawn wagons. John Blaw and his sons Frederick and Michael had to build their houses and outbuildings to support their farms. They had to create fields where there were woodlands, and Michael had to establish his mill along Bedens Brook. While Montgomery Township was incorporated in 1702, it was a farm community for many years to come and support resources for the community were scarce. It was a “do it yourself” community.

Resources such as police, fire fighters, and emergency medical services were unheard of in early farm communities. There were no police to resolve problems, no fire fighters as we know them today, and no EMS or even doctors nearby. If the cow kicked over the lantern in the barn, the only help they could hope for would be neighbors who might be a half mile away, and the neighbors may not know about the fire unless they saw the flames. There were no fire trucks filled with water and certainly no fire hydrants, so the bucket brigade, neighbors who passed buckets of water from person to person, would be called in to put on the fire.

Similarly, if someone had a medical emergency, their only hope was to ride their horse to a doctor, who might be in more established towns such as Princeton or Hopewell. Even if a doctor arrived, he would have limited medications and could only render minimal help by today's standards. Limited access to emergency medical care and medicines were primary reasons why so many people died so young of injuries and illnesses that today could be treated with a visit to a doctor or emergency care facility. It was common for people to die of things like appendicitis, infected cuts, and complications during childbirth.



### Fighting Fires

Over the years, technology advanced, especially in the area of firefighting. Before cars and trucks were invented, firefighting was difficult, and in some cases impossible. If there was a fire

in the Covenhoven barn, it could easily become fully engulfed with no means of getting it under control. At a time when fire was the means of producing heat and light, fires were common.

Some communities, such as Rocky Hill, had pumper trucks filled with water. They were horse-drawn or pulled by whoever was available, and water was pumped from the trucks by hand. Water pressure was low, but it was better than the alternative. The primary method of fire fighting in the days before fire trucks was the bucket brigade.

Princeton was the first community close to Blawenburg to organize a fire company. According to the Princeton FD website, the fire company was organized in 1788 to protect the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), not the community at large. "Nassau Hall's original complement of firefighting apparatus consisted of one hundred leather fire buckets and two well-painted ladders."

Closer to Blawenburg, Rocky Hill had a fire company in the late 1800s. According to their website, they established an official company at the turn of the twentieth century. "(The) first firemen placed an order for a hand-drawn Seagraves Hook and Ladder truck costing \$370.00. On August 15, 1902, the Rocky Hill Hook and Ladder Company #1 was incorporated and for many years served the area between Hopewell, Princeton and New Brunswick."

The advent of gas-powered trucks made all the difference when it came to getting to fires and fighting them effectively. Belle Mead was the next area to get fire equipment, and they formed their company in 1939.

With some help from Belle Mead Fire Department, the Blawenburg Fire Department was formed in 1946. It was located in the building that now serves as the Blawenburg Post Office and moved 10 years later to where New World Pizza is today. You can still see the fire siren, the primary means of letting volunteer firefighters know about a fire at the time, on poles behind the pizzeria. (See Blog 29 - A Tale of Three Firehouses). Today, the Belle Mead and Blawenburg companies work together as Montgomery Volunteer Fire Company #1 – Station 45 (Belle Mead) and Montgomery Volunteer Fire Company #2 – Station 46 (Blawenburg).



*Early patches for the MTPD. The top patch is a generic New Jersey patch. The bottom left patch shows the Opossum Road bridge with the year of the first township meeting. The bottom right patch is like the adjacent patch with the state added.*

### **Police Department**

The earliest provision of a police presence in Somerset County was through a County Sherriff and the constabulary, a group of constables. This group was elected and appointed, so their effectiveness varied. There was little training or standards for performance. People living in rural areas such as Montgomery Township did not have a strong police presence. By 1914, there were petitions around the state for an organized state-wide police force that would provide better security in rural areas. As with all state petitions, there was resistance. Some feared that having state police would lead to a police state. By 1921, there were sufficient votes to form the New Jersey State Police organization.

The new State Police got off to a slow start. Sixteen hundred men between the ages of 22 and 40 applied for the 120 jobs, and two troops were established, one in Hammonton and the other in Netcong with a platoon in Freehold. These new recruits had 61 horses, 20 motorcycles, one car, and one truck to cover the state. It was difficult to have a strong presence with such limited transportation.

The State Police were on the scene for many years in Blawenburg, Skillman, Belle Mead, and Rocky Hill, and they continue to patrol rural regions today. Eventually, Montgomery Township hired part-time patrolmen to cover traffic issues and other minor problems, but they were backed up by the State Police for many years. Blawenburg was served by officers Joe Oliver, Cal Lovering, Eric Perkins, Fred Loeser, and others. By early 1974, the township population was growing, and the full-time Montgomery Township Police Department was formed.



*Patrolman Fred Loeser on patrol in Montgomery Township.*

## **Montgomery Emergency Medical Service (MEMS)**

In the earliest days, getting help in a medical emergency was difficult, if not, impossible. Help would have to come to the person at the place of their distress, and it often took a long time... sometimes too long. The death rate for common injuries was much higher than it is today, because of the lack of immediate attention.

It sometimes takes a tragedy for change to take place. Until 1972, people would have to transport themselves or be transported in a car to a hospital in Princeton or Somerville, or they might just wait for a doctor to arrive. Neither of these solutions was great, and according to one of the MEMS original founders, a situation like this led to the start of the MEMS. In 1971, a local farmer had a heart attack at his farm. There was no EMS, so a doctor was called. By the time the doctor arrived, it was too late.

This spurred a group of people to form the Montgomery First Aid Squad. Using older ambulances, the new volunteers trained with EMS volunteers from Hillsborough and Hopewell for a year or so and were on their own by 1973. Things have changed and the EMS has grown. It is still a volunteer group and also raises the money needed to provide its services. This is a rarity among communities the size of Montgomery.



## **Communication**

Communication is key to the work of first responders. Fire fighters and emergency medical service volunteers need to know when a call comes in. Similarly, police officers must find out about events and respond quickly.

Retired Montgomery Township Police Lieutenant Ken Chrusz recalls how communication worked in Montgomery in the early days of the police department, MEMS, and fire departments.

When the fire companies were formed in Belle Mead and Blawenburg, they had a major problem to overcome. Who was going to answer the phone and sound the alarm? Somebody had to be on standby to answer the phone 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The problem was resolved when the US General Services Administration in Hillsborough agreed to be the answering service for Belle Mead at their guard shack, and the New Jersey Village for Epileptics agreed to accept fire calls for Blawenburg at their switch

board. The Montgomery Township First Aid Squad (now called Montgomery Emergency Medical Services or MEMS) had the same problem when it was established in 1972. Nassau Answering Service in Princeton was contracted to answer emergency calls and sound the alarm via Plectron, a radio receiver that activates emergency responders. The Montgomery Township Police Department also used Nassau Answering Service.

Multiple phone numbers came into play:

Belle Mead Fire Co:	201-359-3111
Blawenburg Fire Co:	609-466-0440
Montgomery First Aid:	908-359-3222
Montgomery Police:	908-359-3222
NJ State Police:	609-452-2601

The Montgomery Township Police Department operated on a single band radio frequency. Mobile Data Terminals (MDP), Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD), and cell phones weren't invented yet. All communications "over the air" could be monitored by anyone with a scanner from Radio Shack. Whenever a sensitive issue needed to be discussed between Headquarters (HQ) and a patrol car, a call box system was used. There were approximately 10 public phone booths spread across Montgomery Township. Each phone booth was given a call box number. HQ would advise a patrol car to go to a call box. The patrol would advise that it had arrived at a specific call box, and HQ would call that booth. The most popular call box was the public phone at the Sunoco Station on Route 206 and Princeton Ave. It was a drive-up phone booth, and the officer didn't have to get out into the 100-degree or 20-degree weather to answer the call from HQ. The Blawenburg call box was at the Dairy Queen at Route 518 and Blawenburg-Belle Mead Road (now Route 601.)

Another significant event in Montgomery Township was the advent of the national 911 emergency phone number that we are all used to today. When a caller dialed 911, the address would appear on a computer screen in HQ and emergency services would be dispatched to that location. 911 could not be immediately established and placed into service in Montgomery Township until everyone had a street address. Many home addresses were PO Boxes or rural route numbers. It was the task of the Montgomery Township Engineering Department to assign a number to every home and business in the Township.

In the early 1980s, emergency services dispatching was transferred to the Somerset County Park Police in the East Millstone section of Franklin Township. Shortly thereafter, Montgomery established its own in-house dispatching, which operated for more than 20 years. Today 911 calls are received and dispatched by Somerset County Emergency Communications Center.

As Loretta Lynn sang in her country song, "We've come a long way, baby." We've come from days when emergency communication was almost non-existent to today when we can call one number to get help from our first responding organizations when we need it. These organizations



are well equipped and well trained. We should all be grateful for what our first responders do to keep us safe and help us when we are in need.

Thanks, first responders!

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## **Facts**

1. MEMS celebrated its 50th anniversary on June 9, 2022  
<https://www.themontynews.org/single-post/monty-ems-celebrates-50-years-of-volunteer-service>
  2. When the Green Flash Boarding House, aka Green Flash Inn, burned down in the waning days of the Prohibition in the early 1930s, Blawenburg didn't have a fire company, so trucks from Hopewell, Princeton, and Rocky Hill attempted to no avail to put it out. Perhaps the alcohol fueled the fire! (See Blog 14 – Whatever Happened to the Green Flash Boarding House?)
  3. An 1897 headline in the New York Times illustrates the results of limited emergency services. There was a train crash on the railroad line in Skillman. The headline said, “THREE WILL LIKELY DIE; Victims of Rail Collision near Skillman, N.J.” Not a hopeful story, but perhaps it was realistic.
  4. The New Jersey State Troopers that patrolled Montgomery Township were based at what was known as the Princeton Substation on Route 1 in Plainsboro. Around 1980, the Princeton Substation shut down and road patrol troopers came from the Hopewell barracks on Route 31. Eventually the Hopewell barracks shut down and now troopers come from the Kingwood barracks in Hunterdon County.
  5. The township was highlighting its history and planning its bicentennial celebration in the early 1970s at the same time as the first responding organizations were growing. The Bedensville School was moved from Route 206 at Orchard Road and was restored behind Burnt Hill Road School (Orchard Hill School today). Route 206 was renamed Van Horne Road. The Bolmer House at Routes 206 and 518 was restored and became Montgomery National Bank (currently Lakeland Bank). The Gulick house on Route 601, home of the Van Harlingen Historical Society, was restored. The historic bridges at the Mill Pond mill and Opossum Road were used as symbols of the township.
  6. While all of the first responding branches of the community have grown as the township has grown, there is still a need for volunteers for the MEMS and fire departments. If you have the time and are willing to be trained to serve your community, contact the respective organizations. They would like to hear from you.
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## **Sources Information**

A special thanks to Ken Chrusz for his contribution to this blog and many other Tales of Blawenburg blogs.

Belle Mead FD - <https://www.mtvfc1.org/history-1>

Blawenburg FD - <https://www.mtvfc2.com/history.html>

Hopewell NJ FD - 1911 <https://www.hopewellfire.com/>

NJ State Police - <https://nj.gov/njsp/about/history/1920s.shtml>

Princeton NJ FD - <https://www.princetonnj.gov/703/History-of-the-Fire-Department>

Rocky Hill FD - <https://www.rhfd53.com/history.html>

## **Pictures**

Officer Loeser – K. Chrusz

Patches – K. Chrusz

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