

Places in Time

WINTER 2015

Snowbound in History

Laura Nawrocik

Last winter was one of the snowiest on record in New Jersey and one in a string of recent record winters. One reason the winters of last year, as well as 2009-10 and 2010-11, seemed to be so snowy is there was at least one major storm that was either preceded or followed by smaller storms that replenished the snow and wreaked havoc with work and school schedules. A review of newspaper accounts shows that Lawrence has had cycles like this before, either getting a series of storms or really cold weather after a major storm so the snow lingers for weeks. A review of the storms listed on the website WeatherNJ and articles from the *Trenton Times* illustrate how those storms played out and the effect they had on residents in the township. Aside from the epic nature of some of the storms, we can also see how the way we deal with storms has evolved and how much the way they have an impact on our daily lives has changed over the last 100 or so years.

One of the biggest storm patterns from the second half of the 20th century featured similar circumstances as those leading up to 2014's big Valentine's Day storm. That pattern also took place in February, in 1967. In an account from the *Trenton Times*, a storm on the 7th dumped 12.7 inches on the Trenton area and daytime highs were only in the 20s. Forecasters called for 5 more inches of snow to fall on the 10th and prior to the storm on the 7th, a smaller storm left 1 inch of packed snow that was wet and mixed with ice from warmer temperatures before the cold snap. The storm on the 7th also featured high winds up to 40 mph that caused drifting and led many drivers to abandon their cars in snow banks. According to the article, "the trouble was there were unskilled drivers without chains on the road." The storm was a bit of a surprise, as predictions were for it to head south of the area and out to sea but instead it turned inland overnight, setting up a classic pattern

of moisture moving up the coast from the Gulf of Mexico and combining with colder air moving in from the west to produce a large storm.

Another classic pattern played out in another February, this time in 1978. After a series of mild winters, most budgets for snow removal had been reduced going into the winter of 1977-78. According to the *Trenton Times*, on February 6th, Mercer county shut down roads as of 1pm to all but emergency travel, as the second storm in two weeks became a classic Nor'easter that left 16 inches of snow on the ground with high winds following it, making clean-up difficult.

The storm occurred just two weeks after a January 20th blizzard, which left 14 inches in the area. A report in the *Trenton Times* on February 9th claimed the double storm was such a burden on the snow removal budgets that the state was considering a 1 cent temporary gas tax increase to establish a snow removal relief fund. The article reported that Lawrence Township spent \$24,000 on the two storms, which was \$2,000 above the budget for the year.

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Difficult travel conditions on Main Street in Lawrenceville circa 1900. (image: Lawrence Township Archives)

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The newspaper articles about the January 20th storm said the 14 inches was most since a Christmas Eve/Day storm of 1960 and referenced the 1967 storm mentioned above as having been officially recorded as 13.8 inches, marking 11 years between major snowstorms to impact the township and county. Prior to the 1967 storm, the 1960 Christmas storm was the largest and also occurred during a cycle of storms, having been preceded by a storm that brought 16.6 inches on December 11.

One thing the articles do mention is how difficult travel had become because of the storms. Recall that the article about the 1967 storm mentioned the lack of chains on cars in the pre-radial tire age. Today we are used to radial tires, SUVs and pre-treated roads to make a storm, while still difficult to handle, much easier to recover from once the snow does stop falling. Storms from the earlier part of the century, obviously, brought even more difficulties to residents of the township. A storm on January 23rd to 24th, 1908 was reported on in the *Trenton Times* on the second day of the storm as having left at least 9 inches with drifts of 14 inches and no signs of the snow letting up. The article mentions that the trolley line into Lawrenceville was way behind schedule and that residents of Mercer County could expect the lines, as well as the telegraph and electrical lines to go out at any minute, even noting that the clock outside of City Hall in Trenton had frozen a little after 3am. Nascent technology is always a little unreliable when pushed to extremes, but the early storm experiences of our town's citizens demonstrates just how much things have improved in terms of maintaining power and communications during a storm, as we would be a little hard pressed to think of a storm of less than ten inches today crippling the power grid or completely stopping travel. Oddly enough, one thing that was not interrupted was school. While the article notes that schedules were altered and there was a high rate of absence, classes were still being held for students who could make the trip in, depending on how the horses pulling their carriage could handle the roadways.

An interesting side note from the newspaper article covering the 1908 storm is a reminder that we have very few records of earlier storms because weather forecasting was

in its infancy, as the article concludes with a mention that the "prophets" indicate the 22 degree high was the coldest day of the year. By 1919, the "prophets" had changed to a full weather forecast that indicated how much car and truck travel was impacting how we handled snow storms. Part of the forecast that appeared in the December 17, 1919 edition of the *Trenton Times* included a highway service report and forecast. While there is now indication of a major storm, the forecast does mention a few inches of snow and how much progress was being made on clearing the improved (paved) roads from a prior snowfall. Today we may see roads cleared in a matter of hours from a storm of only a few inches, but the forecast for the paved roads was "frozen and rough, slightly covered" and the unpaved side streets was "very rough" with no improvement forecast for the next two days.

By the 1950s, the area was be getting the hang of dealing with larger snowstorms so that those few inches that fell in 1919 or the eight in 1908 seemed like a nuisance more than anything. A report in the *Trenton Times* from December 4, 1957 illustrates how much dealing with the snow had become less crippling for technology and travel. The article reported blizzard-like conditions and at least 7 inches of snow on the ground with more predicted, yet traffic was merely slowed and accidents seemed to be minor in nature. Perhaps the biggest bit of news from that article was that the Rider College basketball game against Hunter College had to be postponed, surely an indication that dealing with the snow had become less dire at the middle of the century.

Resources

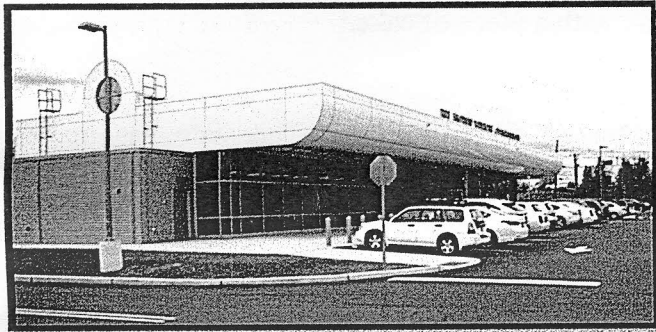
- Jonathan Carr, "Major New Jersey Snow Storms," October 31, 2014, *Weather NJ*, <http://www.weathernj.com/major-new-jersey-snow-storms/>.
- Weather Underground*, Historical Weather, <http://www.wunderground.com/history/>.
- Trenton Times* (chronological order)
- "Real Snow Hits Trenton A Blow That Is A Stinger," 24 Jan 1908, p. 3.
- "Weather Forecast," 17 Dec 1919, p. 3.
- "Blizzard Proportions: Seven-Inch Fall Slows Traffic To A Crawl," 4 Dec 1957, p. 1.
- James Goodman, "Blizzard Blitzes Entire Valley: May Exceed 12-Inch Fall," 7 Feb 1967, p. 1.
- Herb Wolfe, "Digout On, New Snow Looms: Storm Takes 7

Remembering Lawrence's Forgotten Airport

Dennis Waters

The NJ Motor Vehicle Services facility on US-1 is no one's idea of a good time, but when you are next there waiting on line for your inspection, close your eyes and let your mind wander back to a time when that piece of land concerned itself not with cars, but rather with airplanes.

Yes, for 25 years the Baker's Basin site was the home of Lawrence's one and only airport. For the first half of its existence it was a commercial operation. Later it was used



The new NJMVS Baker's Basin offices were constructed on the site of the original Trenton-Princeton Airport

as a base for the NJ Forest Fire Service. Plans for the new "Trenton-Princeton Airport" were revealed in early 1929, just a year after the Mercer County Freeholders had announced their intention to build an airfield near the Delaware River in Ewing. The organizers of the venture were two executives from the Hun School, Edward Stevens and Robert Lechner, and Joseph Wetzell, a well-known mechanic from Trenton.

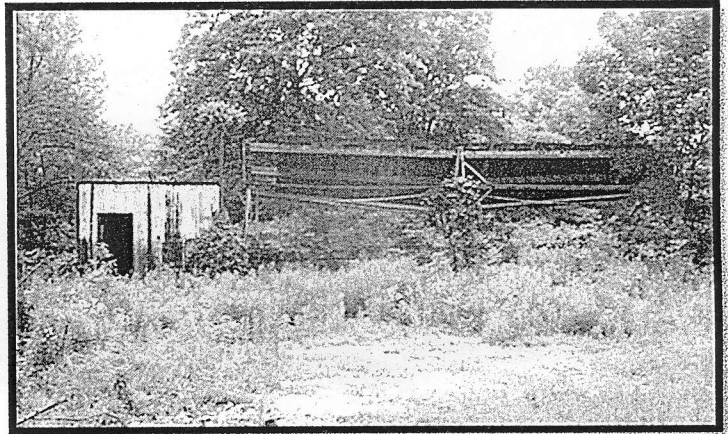
Later that year the trio constructed their airfield and hangar on a strip of land along Brunswick Pike that had been part of the Seely-Rostron farm. It comprised two 1,500-foot sod runways oriented north-south and east-west. During the 1930s it operated as a small general aviation airfield, offering flying lessons, servicing aircraft, and hosting the occasional air show.

In 1941 it was taken over by Plainsboro farmer Isaac Barlow, who established the "Isaac Barlow & Son Aircraft Division" there. Barlow's son Edward owned farmland adjacent to the airport. Barlow's ownership was short-lived, however. In 1942, with the war on, the airfield was taken over by the state of New Jersey.

Until the mid-1950s, the state used the field as a base for spotter planes of the New Jersey Forest Fire Service. By then it had become known as the "Old Trenton Airport." In 1955 the state announced plans to use the site to construct a new headquarters for what was then the Division of Motor Vehicles. The DMV began operation there in 1957. And the rest is, well, you know.

The land along US-1 and the D&R Canal was popular among aviators because it was so flat. After the First World War, the fields along Princeton Pike at Province Line Road were used for take-offs and landings. The site was informally known as "Port Mercer Airfield."

In the aviation boom following World War II, an airport was constructed along US-1 in West Windsor about two miles northeast of the Lawrence field. This was known as the "Nassau Airport." It operated from 1945 until about



The remnants of airport buildings in June 1973.
(image: Lawrence Township Archives)

1959. The site is now occupied by the Princeton Country Club.

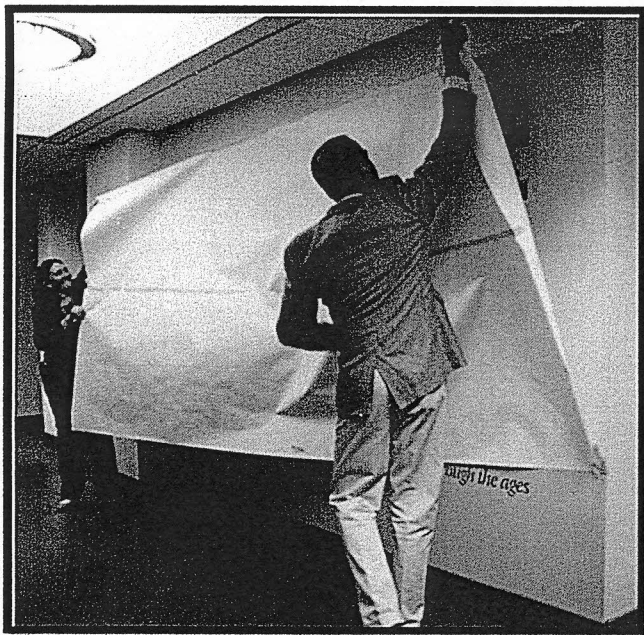
Check it Out: Local History on Display in the Municipal Building

The Lawrence Historical Society was proud to unveil the Timeline of Lawrence History in the Municipal Building on October 7, 2014. The display was funded by a grant from the Lawrence Township Community Foundation and produced in conjunction with the Township Historian's



Office and Three Bears Communications.

Mayor Cathleen Lewis (left) and Historian



Dennis Waters (right) at the big reveal.

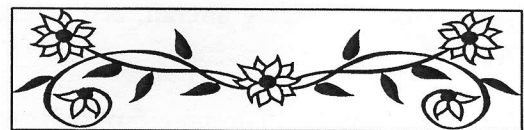
Announcements

Annual Meeting—Sunday, February 22 at 3 pm in the Lawrence High School Community Commons. The program will begin with a brief business meeting followed by township historian Dennis Waters' lecture "The Timeline of Lawrence History: 300 Years in 60 Images" based on the new display in the municipal building. Help us celebrate the township's birthday with a piece of cake.

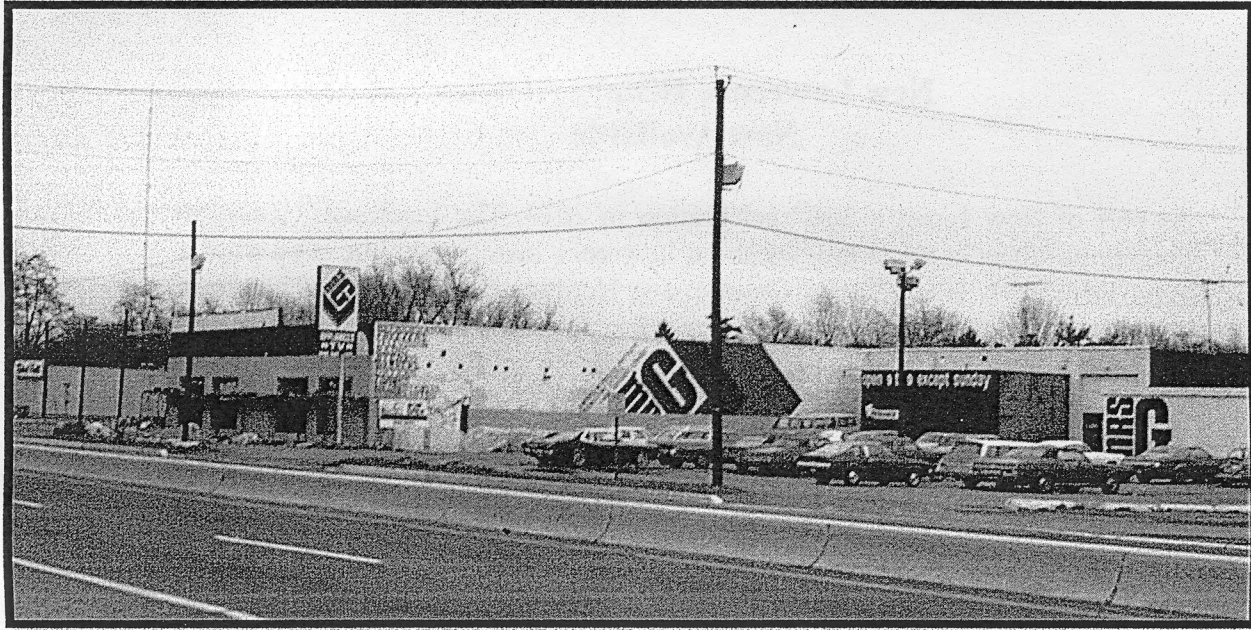
Port Mercer Canal House—The state has made progress on repairing the damage caused by Hurricane Irene. We hope to have a grand re-opening soon.

New Grant—The Lawrence Historical Society received a grant from the Mercer County Cultural and Heritage Commission Re-Grant Program to create a new exhibit for the Brearley House.

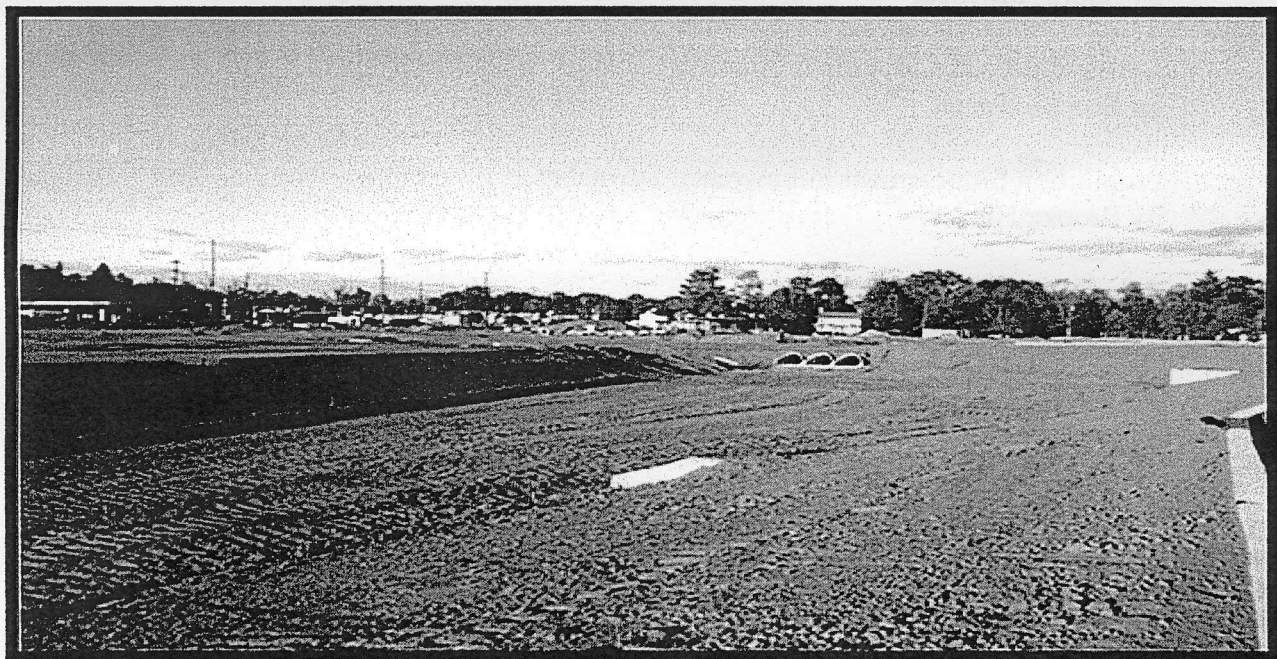
New Sunday tour hours at the Brearley House — Free tours are held 2pm-4pm on the third Sunday of each month. The earlier time slot accommodates shorter days in winter. Saturday tours remain 10am-noon on the first Saturday of every month from March through October. Check out our new tour signs on Princeton Pike and the D&R Canal path.



Mrs. G TV & Appliances Then & Now



The original Mrs. G TV & Appliances building under construction in the early 1970s.
(image: Lawrence Township Archives)



The same site sits empty in late 2014 as construction begins on a new commercial area which will include Mrs. G TV & Appliances and Wawa. (image: Laura Nawrocik)

New Lawrence History Articles Now Available

As part of New Jersey's 350th celebration in 2014, The Lawrence Historical Society produced a set of articles about Lawrence history with the support of a grant from the Mercer County Cultural and Heritage Commission. The series was designed and printed by Paul Schindel of Three Bears Communications in Princeton. The public launch took place at the Hogmanay Bonfire in December.

300 Years of History Along Route 206
by Dennis Waters

Federal City Road
by Janet Bickal

Lawrence Township Street Names
by Laura Nawrocik

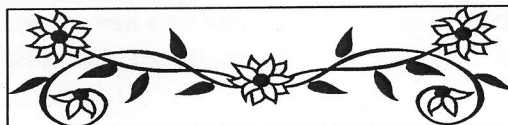
Lewisville Road and African American History
by Brooke Hunter

Prohibition Enforcement In Lawrence Township
by Brooke Hunter

Pole Farm: When Lawrence Was A Transatlantic Communications Hub
by Dennis Waters

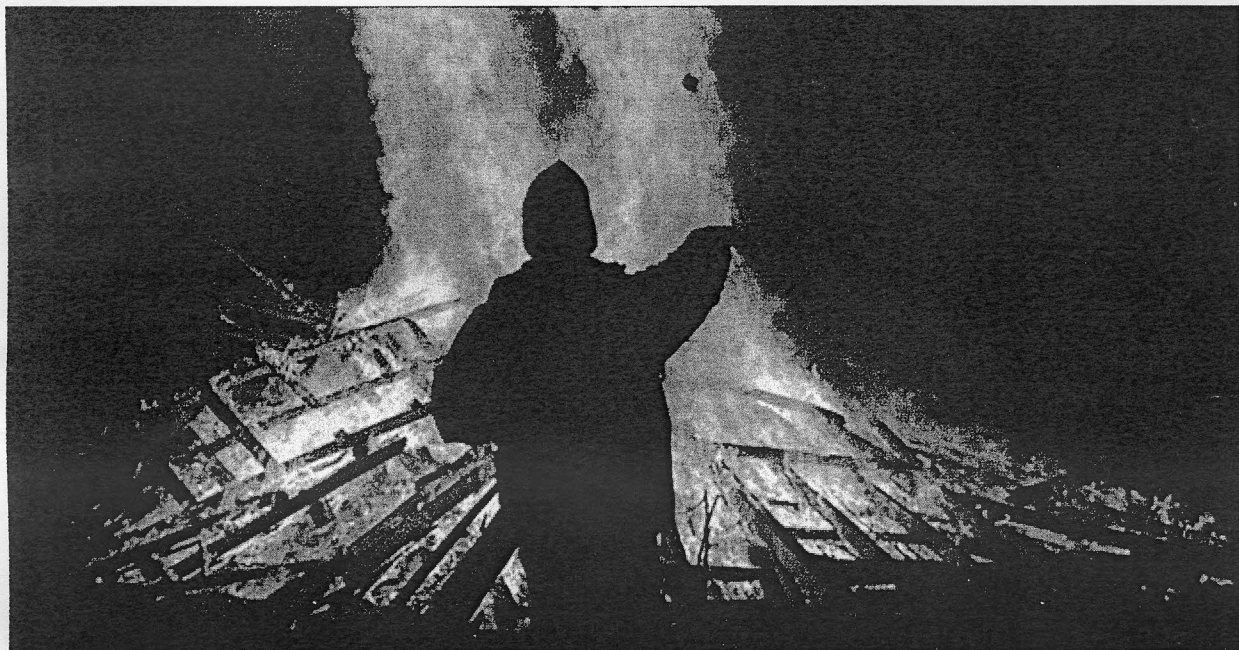
How Lawrence Township Became a Suburb
by Dennis Waters

The articles can be downloaded from our website at <http://www.thelhs.org/>. Print copies will be made available at society events and public buildings in the township. We also digitized and posted online the six articles done in 1964 as part of the New Jersey 300th celebration. We welcome your feedback. Send comments to Brooke Hunter at bhunter@rider.edu.

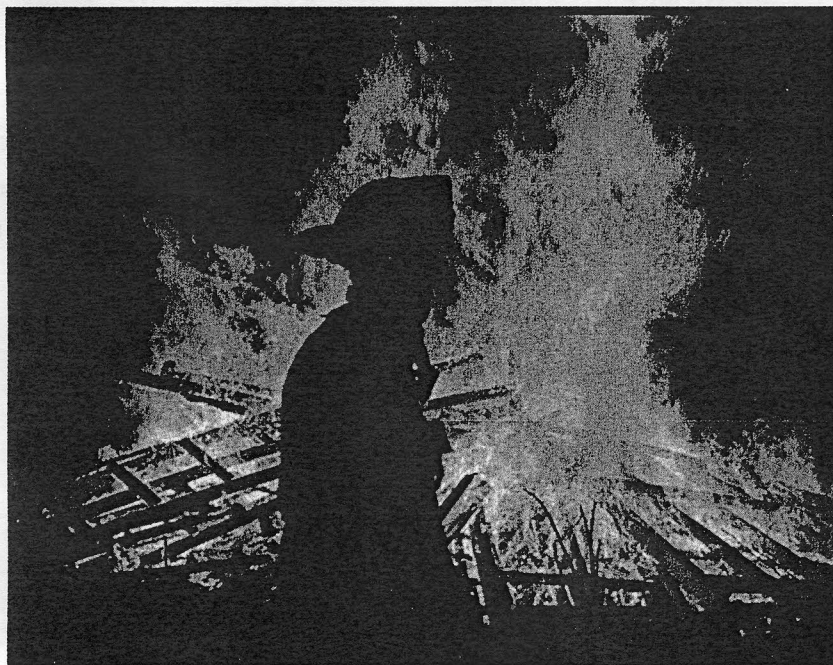


Hogmanay Bonfire 2014

Thank you to the Slackwood Volunteer Fire Department, Captain Paul's Firehouse Dogs, Lawrence Township Police, Lawrence Township Public Works Department, Lawrence Township Fire Inspector's Office, Mercer County Park Commission, Prism Properties, and our volunteers for another successful Hogmanay.



Above a reveler tosses a list of his cares from 2014 away.
Below a volunteer fire fighter tends to the bonfire.
(images: Laura Nawrocik)



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