

BEGGS & COBB FIRE

By Ellen Knight¹

On the morning of Sept. 17, 1959, the worst fire Winchester has ever known broke out at the old Beggs and Cobb factory on Swanton Street.

At 11:03 a.m. the first alarm was rung. Two minutes later the second alarm sounded and four minutes after that the third alarm. At 11:25 the fourth alarm went in.

It was an extraordinary fire. Reportedly, the smoke could be seen in Boston. The heat was so intense it shattered nearby windows and melted plastic signs.

Firefighters from 12 communities joined both Winchester's Fire and Auxiliary Fire departments in battling the flames. Men and equipment came from Arlington, Stoneham, Woburn, Medford, Reading, Malden, Wakefield, Burlington, North Reading, Middleton, Melrose, and Hanscom Field in Bedford.

The engines pumped 1,599,932 gallons of water in two days. They pumped for 106 and a half hours.

Flying sparks and bits of wood blew over the area and set different parts of the plant on fire. Along with the heat, they also set off several additional fires, mostly roof fires, on Spruce, Washington, Tremont, and Winter streets. In addition to these fires and the main blaze, firefighters were kept busy watering down many houses in the area, as well as Mottolo's Restaurant on Main Street, to keep them from catching on fire.

The firefighters saved all the houses and the other businesses. But Beggs and Cobb itself was destroyed.



LAST OF THE TANNERIES

The site of the fire had long been an industrial area. Alexander Mosely had a tannery there between the river and the railroad (the former Woburn Loop) in the nineteenth century. It was taken over by Loring and Avery and, in the twentieth century, by Beggs and Cobb.

The Beggs and Cobb tannery was the last survivor of Winchester's tanning industry, which had seen tanneries come and go on Manchester Field, on Cross Street, and on Lake Street. (The Maxwell tannery building was still extant; however, it had been converted into a gelatin factory long before this fire.)

But it was not the fire which ended that history. The business and site had already been sold, in December 1957, and the Swampscott entrepreneur who bought it announced that it would be closed.

The buildings were actually being dismantled when the fire broke out. For some time workmen had been tearing down parts of the building and were at work in the main shop when the fire started.

Though this fire was astonishing in its intensity, the fact of a fire breaking out at the old factory came as no surprise to the Fire Department. There had been other fires there. In fact, during the week before the great fire, on Sept. 8, three separate fires broke out in the basement, which took about three hours to extinguish. They were caused by the cutting and burning equipment used for the dismantling.

At the time of the great fire, the newspaper commented "with two floors above the basement the fire had real potential." It had, indeed, as everyone learned the next week. On Sept. 23 the fire came to an official end when the fire wall, the last remaining tannery wall, was demolished.

From the ashes a new industry never arose. The area was rezoned residential. Since 1965, the Parkview



Apartments/Condominiums have stood on the site.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Sept. 15, 1999. This revision supersedes all previous articles.