



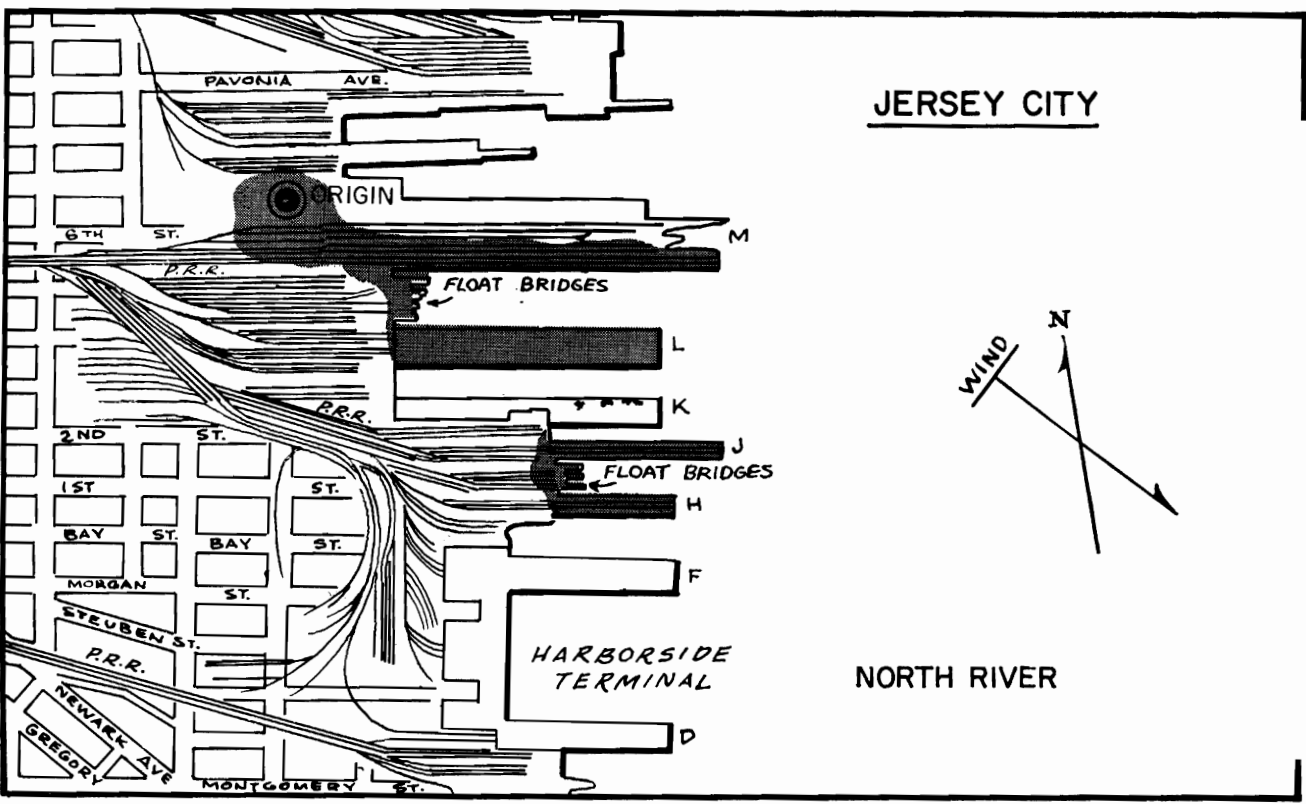
JERSEY CITY PIER FIRE

by
JOHN J. CUNNINGHAM (1)
Deputy Assistant Chief
Marine Administration Division
In collaboration with
GILBERT W. O'NEILL
Captain
Marine Co. 1

mutual aid at work

On the night of May 27, 1964, thousands of New York City residents, whose dwellings overlook the Hudson River in lower Manhattan, had ringside seats for a spectacular wind-fanned waterfront fire that lit up the Jersey shore. A fire that, before it was brought under control some hours later, taxed the combined ef-

forts of four F.D.N.Y. marine companies, five F.D.N.Y. Engine companies, 16 J.C.F.D. fire companies, 14 Coast Guard Vessels and 21 Pennsylvania R.R. tug boats. Units from nearby Bayonne, Hoboken and West New York manned the vacant Jersey City fire houses. Residents as far away as Brooklyn discovered evidence of



Above diagram shows layout of piers and extent of fire damage (red areas).

the fire on their sidewalks and lawns the following morning. Brands, carried by brisk winds, started a fire on a New York City North River Pier and deposited charred debris along the New York waterfront.

AREA INVOLVED

The section of the Jersey City waterfront where the fire occurred is the property of the Pennsylvania Railroad. Piers M, L, J, K, H (see diagram) and several floating bridges were involved.

Pier M has on its northern side an unoccupied stockyard of wooden construction with quantities of straw on the floors of the pens. Fourteen railroad tracks separate the stockyard from a heavy timbered coal trestle 1000 ft. long and 40 ft. high. This trestle, no longer in use, is on the southern side of Pier M and was at one time the longest facility of its type on the east coast.

To the south was Pier L, a vacant 180 ft. wide and 1200 ft. long pier with a wood frame superstructure covered with corrugated iron.

J and H were both open wooden piers.

Pier K, the only one in use, was a two story metal frame, metal sheathed building, constructed over solid fill. It was partially sprinklered and protected by a stand-pipe system.

The slips between the piers were used for storage and loading of railroad car floats. To the south lay Harborside Terminal, an industrial complex, whose safety determined the initial fire strategy.

The fire originated in a vacant loading platform at the foot of Sixth Street. Fanned by brisk winds from the northwest, it jumped 14 railroad tracks to the unused coal trestle. The fire quickly gained control of the entire trestle, sending flames 100 feet into the air.

MUTUAL AID

Upon receiving a request for assistance from the Jersey City Fire Department, the Fireboat *John J. Harvey*, Marine Company 2 was dispatched. A Marine Administration Division Chief responded on the *Smoke II*. The first Fire Department units to arrive were confronted by a 1000 foot wall of fire, threatening piers to the south with burning brands carried by the winds. The stockyard and freight cars to the north were beginning to smoulder from radiated heat. Request to operate at Pier M was received from the Jersey City Fire Department. This was the area of major involvement at that time. The *Harvey's* monitors and, later, hand lines were employed in this locality.

River traffic was extremely heavy that night and vision was impaired by dense black smoke. Tugs and Coast Guard craft were engaged in moving railroad car floats to safety. Many of these were already ablaze which added to the hazard.

The early contact between New York Fire Department and the Jersey City Fire Department Chiefs revealed the vulnerability of the Harborside Terminal (southernmost exposure) and the necessity for additional help.

Fire Commissioner Edward Thompson approved the request for additional help and sent Marine Company 1 (*John D. McKean*), Marine Company 6 (*Harry M. Archer, M.D.*), Marine Company 9 (*Firefighter*) and ordered Box 500 in Manhattan transmitted which sent Engine Companies 14, 24, 27, 32, and 55. The Chiefs of the 1st Division and 2nd Battalion also responded. Marine Company 3 (*John P. Mitchel*) patrolled the river to extinguish any fires started by the flying brands.



Fireboat *John J. Harvey* trains all of her "heavy artillery" on the fire.



Above: A solid wall of fire confronted Fire Department units upon their arrival. Below: This general view of the fire area was taken from distant New York City, indicating the intensity and scope of the fire.



Fire of minor consequence was extinguished on Pier 3, North River.

COMMAND POSTS

Fire Commissioner Edward Thompson, Chief of Department Edward Mc Aniff, Deputy Assistant Chief John Cunningham, and Deputy Chief Lewis Harris, responded to the fire. And from their command posts aboard the Coast Guard's *Navesink* and our *Smoke II* directed and coordinated operations. The *Navesink* was tied up at Pier H, which was directly in the path of the fire's extension. From this point any change in the fire situation could be quickly detected and remedial orders issued. The *Smoke II* patrolled the entire fire area to keep the overall situation under close observation.

The *Mc Kean* was stationed on the southerly fire flank while the *Archer* and *Firefighter* remained mobile, using large calibre streams at the center of the fire area. The combined efforts of the fireboats and land units finally turned the tide of battle and the end was in sight.

UNDER CONTROL

The fire was declared under control at 3:45 A. M. and the assessment of damage was made. The coal trestle was leveled. Pier L was completely consumed and Pier J was almost gone. Float bridges 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 were destroyed. On the plus side, however, the lights of Harborside Terminal shone through the darkness undimmed. Pier H had a few isolated fires that were quickly extinguished. Pier K was virtually untouched. Not one sprinkler head went off despite the intensity of the fire on nearby Pier L. This was in large measure due to the defensive positioning of hand lines and the Fireboat *Archer*.

As the F.D.N.Y. land units received the welcome "Take up" and the Fireboats one by one slipped back to their berths, another chapter in the story of Mutual Aid was written.

DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED

All fires have areas of difficulty and this one was no exception.

First and foremost was communications. Communications are the eyes and ears of the Chief in command at a fire. Without regular reports from the operating units, the Chief cannot make command decisions. Without these decisions we cannot operate in an effective manner.

The use of walkie-talkies enabled the Chief to direct all F.D.N.Y. units and coordinate all Coast Guard activities from his command posts aboard the *Navesink* and *Smoke II*. The Jersey City Department operated on different frequencies and personal contact between supervisory chiefs was necessary for coordination of efforts.

Other sources of difficulty were inaccessibility to the fire areas and the lack of municipal water supply. The yard hydrants were supplied with salt water drawn from the Hudson River by a permanently installed pump. However, the hydrants nearest the river on Pier M were without water and necessitated the stretching of 3½" lines from the Fireboat *Harvey* to supply hand lines protecting the northern flank of fire.

PROUD ASSOCIATION

The New York Fire Department has always been proud of its association with its neighbors across the Hudson. It was just a year ago that they came to our assistance during the great brush fire on Staten Island. Our relationship is based on mutual respect for each others ability in battling our common enemy.

We of the New York Fire Department are particularly proud of the words of Jersey City's Mayor, Thomas Whelan:

"Dear Commissioner Thompson:

Please accept, on behalf of your men, my most sincere thanks for their outstanding performance at the Jersey City waterfront fire last week.

For me, it was an honor and a privilege to be at your side during those critical hours, while the fire's tide was being turned. I am convinced that had your men been less courageous or less skillful or less resourceful our entire waterfront could have been destroyed."

We wish to thank the following members of the Jersey City Fire Department for their cooperation in the preparation of this article.

Chief Raymond Gibney
Chief of Fire Prevention Lawrence Connin
Deputy Chief Jules Riffard
Battalion Chief Matthew Lynch

WORTHY DEED

Members of Engine Co. 95 and Ladder Co. 36 banded together to answer a call put out by the Metropolitan Chapter of the National Hemophilia Foundation on behalf of an 8 year old neighborhood boy, Chris Connolly, a hemophilia victim. On June 26, 1964 a bloodmobile located itself at 431 West 204th St., Manhattan and received blood donations from the following members:

Engine Co. 95	Ladder Co. 36
Fr. John J. Costello	Fr. James J. Battle
Fr. James P. Cummins	Fr. William F. Fallace
Fr. John J. Lafayette	Fr. James J. McArdle
Fr. James J. McCormack	Fr. James R. McLaughlin
Fr. William P. Purcell	Fr. Raymond B. Teaton

This worthy deed has received the highest praise from the neighborhood people and is certainly in keeping with the finest traditions of the Fire Department.

Fire Prevention Week Oct. 4th - 10th