

South side firehouse built after Great Fire of 1900

Although it hasn't served as a Bloomington Fire Department station for well over seven decades, old Engine House No. 4 on South Main Street is still standing and, all things considered, not looking too bad.

The old firehouse has survived all these years as home to a series of small businesses, some successful and others not so much. Yet its years as a BFD engine house, from 1903 until its closing around 1941, tells us plenty about Bloomington's rich history.

Most remarkably, it was in the early 1920s that a dispute over the fate of this firehouse led to a change in Bloomington's form of municipal government!

The story begins on the night of June 19-20, 1900, when 45 buildings and 4½ blocks of downtown, including the 1868 courthouse, were lost in what is now called the Great Bloomington Fire.

It took a disaster of this size and scope for city leaders to get serious, dollar-wise, about fire protection. A joint committee charged with upgrading the fire department recommended the construction of a modern, centrally located headquarters station and several outlying, or neighborhood, engine houses. The city floated a \$34,000 bond issue (or the equivalent of nearly \$900,000 today, adjusted for inflation) to pay for the expansion project.

Central Fire Station, located on the 200 block of East Front Street, opened November 1902. This old firehouse is now home to the foodie favorite Epiphany Farms Restaurant. Completed four months later, in March 1903, were two smaller engine houses, No. 3 on the 800 block of North Center Street, and No. 4 at 914 S. Main St.

All three firehouses were designed by George H. Miller, one of the most influential architects in Bloomington history. The two outlying engine houses were likely identical or a mirror-image of each other, though No. 3 was torn down a long time ago.

The first firemen assigned to Engine House No. 4, according to *The Pantagraph*, included Capt. Patrick Twoomey, Joe Burt and Albert Radbourn (the latter was brother of fellow Bloomington firefighter John Radbourn and future National Baseball Hall of Fame pitcher Charles "Old Hoss" Radbourn).

It's likely the neoclassic brick engine house trimmed in brick and stone once featured a bell tower, though it's not known when it was taken down. The building has also lost one of two bay

doors that opened onto Main Street. Surviving decorative elements of the purposefully utilitarian building include a second story arched window.

Engine House No. 4 opened more than 20 years before the first viaduct (or bridge) spanned the two east-west rail lines running through the warehouse district south of downtown. The new station thus brought peace of mind to many residents of South Hill, the heavily German neighborhood south of downtown, who worried that freight and passenger trains were blocking grade crossings and thus slowing the fire department's response time to alarms on the city's south side.

Yet less than two decades after opening, with the fire department converting its horse-drawn wagons to motorized fire trucks, the future of Engine House No. 4 looked bleak. By the early 1920s, BFD Chief Henry Mayer maintained that "motorization" of the department made neighborhood fire stations, in a community as geographically compact as Bloomington (this was well before today's unchecked eastside sprawl), increasingly redundant. Accordingly, on May 1, 1920, the city shuttered Engine House No. 4, just as the department's few remaining horses were put out to pasture at Miller Park.

With this decision a large number of south siders began grumbling that the loss of the South Main Street fire station left their side of town at risk. On July 8, 1921, for instance, a residential garage at 704 S. Center St. burned down after fire department equipment and personnel were held up for several minutes at the Center Street grade crossing by a Big Four Railroad train.

"The south side people are beginning to feel that their properties are endangered unnecessarily by reason of the fact that they are without a firehouse," noted *The Pantagraph*. "They say on other occasions, the department has been held up by trains, and that the practice is getting a bit wearisome."

As a result, a committee representing 200 South Hill petitioners called for the reopening of their neighborhood firehouse, at least until a South Main Street viaduct could be built over the Big Four and Lake Erie and Western Railroad tracks.

At the July 22, 1921 city council meeting, Fire Chief Mayer argued for keeping the south side firehouse closed and in its stead installing a "block signal system." Under such a setup, fire alarms in the city's south end would automatically trigger trackside red lights alerting train crews to keep open key grade crossings south of downtown.

Supporters of the south side firehouse remained so unhappy with city officials that they successfully circulated a petition to change the commission form of city government (which had been in effect for eight years) back to the more traditional aldermanic type. There was a growing

sentiment among residents from working class and ethnic Irish and German areas northwest, west, and south of downtown that their interests were neglected under the newer form of government. They believed it placed a premium on nonpartisan, technocratic governance at the expense of shoe-leather politics and ward-level patronage better suited to meet the unique needs of each neighborhood.

Consequently, the loss of the south side fire station became a rallying cry for those who wanted a return to a more politically engaged and grassroots-style city government. On July 11, 1922, by a 57 to 43 percent margin, city residents voted to return to the previous form of government that placed a premium on retail politicking.

It took a few years, but continued pressure by South Hill residents to re-staff Engine House No. 4, at least until completion of the South Main Street viaduct, finally paid off. To much fanfare, the south side firehouse opened once again on Sept. 2, 1924.

And even after the South Main Street viaduct welcomed public traffic for the first time on Dec. 13, 1925, Engine House No. 4 stayed open another fifteen or so years, remaining all that time the city's only neighborhood fire station.

The south side station closed for good as a firehouse around 1941, and over the years it has seen more than a dozen businesses come and go.

Since the 1980s, for example, it has been home to Raymond D. Fairchild Jr.'s various enterprises, such as Fairchild's Hubcap, Tires and Wheels, as well as Frank Wright's many ventures, including Wright's Painting & Window Cleaning Co. and AAA Wright's Small Engine Repair Shop.

Despite the many changes over the years, the building remains recognizable as a firehouse. Most unmistakable is the original "No. 4" still visible over the front door.