

Hot News in Boylston

"April 1908 News Flash"

By Judy Haynes

In April 1908, Boylston was filled with exciting news. Plans were underway for Easter celebrations at the Congregational Church (3rd Meeting House). On the 19th April a "Special to the Telegram" described the decorative potted plants of lilies and ferns, the organ and the music from the choir that enhanced the Easter service.¹



Third Meeting House
Congregational Church
Boylston, Massachusetts
BHSM Photograph Collection

However, not all the people received the message to live in a Christian manner as an illegal sport, cockfighting, took place in the area of Ball Hill and East Woods. Although Massachusetts had been the first state in the United States to ban cockfighting in 1836, Officer Charles S. Knight received word in the night or early morning, April 20th 1908, that a cockfight was underway at the Hennessey Farm. With the assistance of George A. Hastings, Selectmen George L. Wright, George H. Prouty and Walter A. Brigham, a raid was carried out between 3 and 4 a.m. where Mr. Knight estimated 175 men were being entertained. They suddenly fled as the officers arrived and put an "unhappy ending" to the event. Four arrests were made. "Seventeen live cocks and a dead one was seized. Two horses and wagons were captured, and a lot of cockfighting paraphernalia was gathered in."² The culprits – both men and birds – were taken to the Clinton police station. Sounds of "cock-a-doodle-doo emitted from the station, causing hundreds to ask if Chief Tom Murphy had started a municipal poultry yard." The chief "assured his friends with his usual smile that he was not in the hen business." Sadly, it was expected the judge would order the "birds seized" to be killed, and the men bailed out at \$50 a person.³

Cockfighting wasn't the only 'hot news' in April. Just a week before on April 11th 1908, a fire engulfed two adjoining tenement buildings on Scar Hill Road, both owned by George A. Flagg, a 53-year-old wealthy Boylston citizen, who had quite an estate. He had "made a fortune... in cider" with his cider mill and successful cattle business, thereby becoming the largest resident tax payer



Flagg Children who survived the Fire (top left)
Mrs. Flagg shown with the remnants of the tenement building (center)
BHSM Scrapbook Collection

¹ Special to the Telegram, Boylston, April 19, 1908.

² Special to the Telegram, Boylston, April 20, 1908.

³ Ibid.

in town. Mr. Flagg's behavior had become odd and unbearable to his wife Mary Flagg; thus, she took her five children to live in one of these tenements owned by her husband.

Days after the fire, on April 13th, Mr. Flagg was brought to Clinton and arraigned at the district court before Judge Jonathan Smith on two counts of arson. "He appeared not to be well and walked about the guardroom ... using a cane for assistance." Two doctors examined him and determined he should be committed to the hospital. "Mr. Flagg had been thought by many to be unsound for months."⁴ Sensational headlines dubbed him "Firebug Flagg."⁵



The Flagg Tenement Building (on left)
Center School which is the current location of Boylston Public Library (center)
Hastings Tavern (on right)
View from Main Street, Boylston, Massachusetts
BHSM Photograph Collection

If the baby hadn't needed tending to, Mrs. Flagg might never have awakened in time, but when flames were discovered, she alerted the other families in the building. Fortunately, the four families: Flaggs, Petersons, Brusos, and Warrens (14 individuals) from the two buildings got out alive. The fire spread quickly and fiercely and it took neighbors creating a bucket brigade to wet down and save their own neighboring homes. Just a few rods away Herbert H. French, after receiving a telephone call, looked out and saw the flames running up the rear of the Flagg building, whereupon he ran to Mrs. Flagg's aid, and helped with the children. In the immediate aftermath, the true spirit of Boylstonians was demonstrated as "the four families were cared for by the neighbors" in their time of need.⁶

Two weeks later, on April 27th, a Special Town Meeting was called "to see if the town will procure a chemical engine or other apparatus, or take any measures for protection against fire."⁷ The recent fires likely prompted this call for a meeting as Boylston had to call upon Worcester and Clinton to assist with the tenement fires.

Thus, an end came to an April month with some devastating events many preferred not to be repeated again in their lifetime, fortunately for those who reside here, in times of trouble, neighbors in the Boylston community always came together to aid one another.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Boylston Historical Society & Museum newspaper collection, Worcester Telegram, April 14, 1908.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Special to the Telegram, Boylston, April, 1908.