

FIREWORKS FACTORY BLOWN TO SPLINTERS

By ELLEN KNIGHT¹

With a series of explosions creating one prolonged roar which shook the town for miles around, a fireworks plant located in a hollow about 200 yards off Cross Street was blown to splinters in 1913.²

The plant, operating under the name of the New England Fireworks Company, had been in business for several years, furnishing fireworks for celebrations in Winchester and other communities. On July 19, 1913, the small frame building and a storehouse surrounded by a high stockade of planks contained a quantity of fireworks for several upcoming celebrations. More were being made.



Newspaper photo of the site immediately after the explosion

At about 4:15 p.m., townspeople were startled by a huge explosion which reportedly rocked houses all over town, threw about dishes, and broke many windows even as far away as the Calumet Club on Dix Street. Detonations were also reportedly heard in Stoneham, Woburn, and Arlington.

Immediately, hundreds of excited people rushed from their homes, and the fire alarm sounded. A dense cloud of black smoke rose over the site, and the roads to the place became filled with people, teams, and automobiles.

It was a Saturday, and the downtown was thronged. A baseball game on Manchester Field stopped, and a crowd of spectators walked up Main Street to the scene. The sudden use of the telephone by hundreds of people almost swamped the telephone office, which had to send out for every available operator.

On arrival, the Fire Department found a hole in the earth and some splintered wood but little to extinguish beyond embers and smoldering hay (used for packing). There were accounts of men running from the building. Some said there were three men; others said four.

Three men, burned and stunned, were found and transported to Winchester Hospital (then

located in a rented house on Washington Street). The manager, Ernest Borelli,³ could not be found, and it was unclear if he had been in the building until his wife, in a hysterical condition, showed up and declared that he was.

It was feared he had been blown to bits after searchers first found his watch and coat under part of the wreckage and another search party then found his glasses. Two hours later he himself was found, exhausted and stunned, lying in some bushes.

Reportedly, the force of the explosion hurled him through the air for 20 feet. Dazed, he was able to get up and run to a clump of trees half a mile away. When found, he was stunned and shaken but uninjured save for one cut.

Borelli reportedly said the four men were working at the plant when he suddenly detected a tiny spark shoot out from a finished pin-wheel. He yelled a warning to his assistants, and all four raced out of the building. (One report said they attempted to put out the fire, during which they were burned.)

Two of the men reportedly made a wild dash toward Cross Street with their clothing on fire. Residents who had been attracted by the explosion stopped them, threw them to the ground, and extinguished the flames. Passing automobiles were hailed to take the three workers to the hospital. Sadly, five days after the explosion one of the injured men, Luigi Franco of East Boston, died.

Borelli, 28, a native of Italy who had immigrated in 1908, settled in Winchester, and managed several of Winchester's July 4th and Labor Day displays,⁴ was taken to his home on Holland Street. He was unable to explain the cause of the explosion, since, he said, no one had been smoking and there was no light burning in the place.

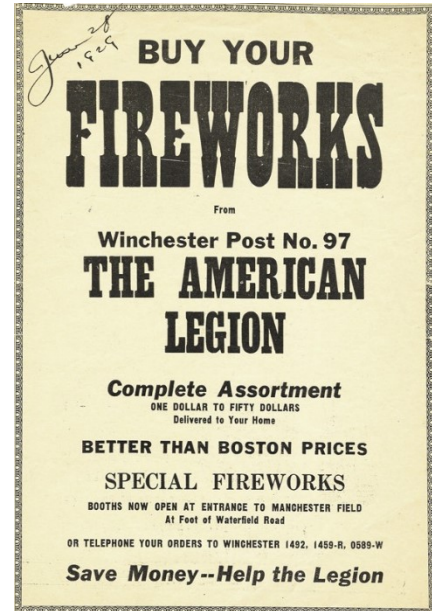
Police Chief William R McIntosh immediately began an investigation and called upon the services of a state inspector, an expert in explosives. To make a fireworks wheel, tubes were filled with gunpowder and iron fillings and closed with clay through which a hole was bored to the compound. The expert's report suggested that, while boring the hole, a drill struck a metal substance in the clay, which caused a spark which caused an explosion from which more sparks caught on fireworks under manufacture.

What residents heard was first an explosion followed by about a half dozen lesser vibrations in quick succession. A final explosion was believed to be that of the storehouse which housed kegs of gunpowder.

It was reported afterward that Borelli would erect a new building and continue to manufacture fireworks. That August, he did, in fact, apply for permission to build a new fireworks business on a property near Forest Circle and the Stoneham line. However, several residents spoke against the proposal as too dangerous, and the Board of Selectmen refused the petition. Borelli left town by April 1914.⁵

At the end of 1913, the story dropped out of the newspapers. Borelli's subsequent history is unknown. His time in Winchester was brief. During that time, according to various local sources, he was occupied in town as a manufacturer of fireworks, a gelatin maker, and a laborer.⁶ The history of his company is also unclear. A company with the name New England Fireworks Company located in Boston was incorporated in 1912 and was dissolved by the General Court in 1915. Perhaps this was his. Another New England Fireworks Company carried on business in Springfield from at least 1927 through about 1930. It owned a plant in Thompsonville, Conn., which had three explosions between 1928 and 1930 (one with four fatalities). The last explosion destroyed its four buildings.

Whether the Winchester plant was related to the Springfield company or not, they had at least one connection—the dangerous nature of the business of manufacturing fireworks.



After the explosion, Winchester preferred its fireworks brought in rather than made in the town.

¹ This article © 2019 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on July 3, 2013. This revision supersedes all previous articles. This history is based on articles published in *The Winchester Star*, July 25, 1913, *Boston American*, July 20, 1913, and *Boston Globe*, July 20, 1913. There is some confusion about the names of the injured workers and some variation in the details presented; however, the outlines of the main event tally in both reports.

² It was reportedly located near “the Schneider place” and Nelson’s ledge. Since the William Schneider family lived at 99 Cross St., the factory must have been at the far western end of Cross Street, where there were few buildings in 1913.

³ His name is spelled in various sources either Borelli or Borrelli.

⁴ While those who crafted fireworks displays were often not identified, in 1911, 1912, and 1913 Borelli was credited in *The Winchester Star*.

⁵ Borelli’s name disappears from the poll lists at time. Those of his employees do not appear in the residential lists at all.

⁶ Sources include the 1910 federal census, Winchester street directories, and Winchester poll lists.