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The Name-Dropper: Gamewell Street in Hackensack

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Gamewell Street in Hackensack is a quiet, off-the-beaten-track road named after John Nelson Gamewell, a 19th century telegraphy enthusiast, a postmaster and a telegraph operator. In working to improve the telegraph, he raised the level of fire reporting from a loud shout – "Help! Fire!" – to a sophisticated telegraph-like alarm system that automatically informs the fire department of the most critical factor in an emergency call: Where's the fire?

It is a system that remains in use in many fire departments around the nation, said Hackensack Deputy Fire Chief Stephen Kalman.

Gamewell installed his system in Boston and was set to canvass the country for more customers when the Civil War began and sales visits were off, according to the Firefighters Hall and Museum in Minneapolis.

Gamewell, a Southerner, was born on Christmas in 1822 and raised in the small town of Camden, S.C., not far from Columbia. As the opening salvos of the war were fired, Gamewell returned home to serve as the superintendent of a Southern gunpowder mill. For this, the Union seized his many patents, and he would not win them back until after the South's surrender at Appomattox as well as prolonged litigation.

With the end of the war, Gamewell and his wife, Sarah Ann, moved north, arriving in Hackensack in 1866. They had several children, one of whom, the Rev. Frank Gamewell, later would spend 49 years in China as a Methodist missionary, physics professor and church builder.

Sales of his fire alarms made John Gamewell exceedingly wealthy, although at one point he lost an estimated \$400,000, the result of speculation in real estate and railroads, The New York Times reported.

Still, Gamewell bankrolled the purchase of a piece of real estate on State Street near Central Avenue and then underwrote the construction of a new Methodist church on the site. Soon after opening, the church was destroyed in a fire – bitter irony considering Gamewell's life's work.

His fire alarms generated many jobs, for at one point it seemed as though the entire country was equipped with his system. Despite his siding with the South in the war, he was revered by many in Hackensack, perhaps due to his willingness to spend on local philanthropic concerns.

John Gamewell was "an exceedingly generous man," the Bergen County Democrat newspaper wrote.

Not to be outdone, The Hackensack Republican paper declared that Gamewell "always held the esteem of his neighbors" and always was concerned with "advancing the interests of Hackensack."



DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Gamewell Street in Hackensack

Gamewell Street is a two-block stretch that runs from Union Street to Railroad Avenue. It's lined mostly with two-story homes. The Leco Corp., which manufactures various plastic products, is at Gamewell and Railroad. The tracks of NJ Transit's Pascack Valley Line are just across the intersection. Fittingly, Gamewell Street is a short walk from fire headquarters on State Street.

Sarah Ann Gamewell died in 1889.

On July 12, 1896, the Times reported that John Gamewell had been ill and was confined to his bed. He died seven days later, possibly of a heart attack.

John Nelson Gamewell is buried in Hackensack Cemetery, not far from the graveyard's outsized memorial statue to Hackensack firefighters.

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