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Sentinel Heights is the little fire department that could

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Jim Commentucci / The Post-Standard

Sentinel Heights volunteer firefighters Jamie Farewell and his sister, Melissa Mott, at the department's firehouse in the town of Onondaga.

I kidded Keith Gage a little about his firehouse.

It sits on about 25 acres of swampy land on Dave Tilden Road, in Sentinel Heights, in the southeast quarter of the town of Onondaga. The Sentinel Heights fire station is a modest structure, one-story, with room for department's two pieces of equipment, with a "drive-through" feature and a

large meeting room. No extra floors, no turrets or other fancy bells and whistles, or million dollar budgets. "We're pretty low-key down here," Keith is saying. "We keep a low profile."

Sentinel Heights is one of eight departments in the town of Onondaga. It was founded in 1946. This is its 65th year. The anniversary will be celebrated Sept. 10 with events at the firehouse.

Reading the department's history, I see the approach has always been set low. "The founders had little knowledge of the fire protection and even less money," back in 1946, the account reads. Residents just felt the need for fire protection.

They cobbled up a firehouse in a garage, bought a pumper that had been used in Syracuse and "put together" another rig by converting an old trunk. The first alarm system was a modest siren and a network of firemen's wives, who used their phones to alert firefighters.

"We've always had a strong sense of community here," Keith explains as he shows me around the fire house.

The department is a nonprofit corporation operating under a contract with the town of Onondaga. There are 17 active members, with a board and fire commissioners. The present chief is James Farewell, a Syracuse firefighter. His sister,

Melissa Mott, is the deputy chief. Both are grandchildren of one of Sentinel Heights charter members, the late Paul Craw.

"We have a lot of father-son relationships in the department," Keith explains. James' and Melissa's dad, Ron, was Craw's son-in-law.

Keith is treasurer of the department and a former president. He's lived in the district 38 years and has been a member of the department more than 30 years. He's a retired science teacher at Corcoran High School and a LeMoyne soccer coach. His wife, Kathy, was a Corcoran English teacher.

Sentinel Heights we know for its impressive elevations and all of the antennas. One, a TV transmission tower, rises more than 900 feet. Jane Tracy, the town historian, says it is one of the earliest portions of Onondaga. A Sentinel Heights Pioneer Cemetery, on Bull Road, had its first burial in 1816.

The area sports many names, across its history: "Indian Orchard," "The Reservation," "East Hill," "Toothbrush Hill" and finally, about 1920, Sentinel Heights.

Jane Tracy reports in her book of Onondaga stories, "God's Green Acres," that the name originated with Emaline Seymour of Syracuse, an artist who visited The Heights summers. She admired the woods and hills and decided to paint them. One of her paintings she called "The Sentinels," for the many tall trees she saw.

The land for the cemetery – as well as a schoolhouse and Methodist Church – was donated by a Revolutionary War soldier named Andrew Share, who is buried in the plot, which is marked and maintained by a neighbor. A list of those buried in the cemetery, and a map, is posted on the front gate. It was contributed by Pam Priest, archivist at the Onondaga Historical Association, whose ancestors were among early settlers on Sentinel Heights.

The fire department covers a territory of about three miles by two miles. That includes of a stretch of I-81, from the city line to LaFayette, which accounts for many of the "hits," or fire calls. "Sometimes we're just talking about someone's car engine overheating," Keith explains. "I had to get out of bed the other morning for a call like that."

Most of Sentinel Heights hits are ambulance calls. They move on one serious fire about once every two years. They own no chiefs' cars and run on an annual budget of about \$120,000. The building is used by the community for such events as karate practice and Scout meetings.

Those Dempseys

The Dempseys were a Near West Side family. The late Mary M. and William H. Dempsey raised 10 children and attended St. Lucy's parish. William fixed cars. They lived on Seneca Street, near Blodgett School.

All of the Dempseys' children have passed away, but their grandchildren, great-greats and great-great-grands gathered at Santaro Park on Onondaga Hill Saturday, undaunted by the threat of Hurricane Irene, for a family reunion.

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