

A Brief History of the Easton Fire Department

The Borough of Easton was without a fire department of any sort when in, 1793, the Borough Council met and discussed -among other topics -the need for a fire engine. It was three years later, in 1796, when action was finally taken and a pump was ordered from Philip Mason.

On February 14, 1797, the Humane Fire Company was organized. The thirty-five members became Easton's first fire company. When the Borough's new pump arrived in May of 1797, the men of Humane Fire Company were granted permission to use it. After the Batt house on North Fourth Street burned down, the fire company decided it would be necessary to raise money for the purchase of eighty feet of fire hose to use with the fire engine. In 1867, the Humane Fire Company acquired their first steam-powered fire engine. This piece of apparatus was purchased from the Northampton Fire Company. However it was replaced only three years later in 1870 since some of the firemen were not particularly happy with it. When the second steam-powered fire pump was determined to be too heavy, it was promptly replaced a third steam-powered pump that was somewhat lighter in weight.

The Humane Fire Company was first located on North Third Street near the Lutheran Church. They later moved to a location only around the corner on Church Street, where they remained until relocating one again to Centre Square in 1851. When the City's paid department was established in 1879, the members of the Humane Fire Company continued to hold annual meetings in which they recounted the long and illustrious service they provided as the Borough of Easton's first fire company.

During the period of time between the founding of the Humane Fire Company in 1797 and the establishment of the full-time paid department, numerous other fire companies appeared in the Borough. The first of these was the Phoenix Fire Company. Organized on January 24, 1824, they were first housed behind the old County House. In 1858, they moved to the 200 block of Ferry Street. There are two events in the history of this organization that are of particular interest. The first took place in 1858 and concerned the purchase of the first alarm bell in the city. The second event, occurring in 1865, was the purchase of the first steam-powered fire engine in the Lehigh Valley. This piece of apparatus was a horse-drawn engine modeled on the Amoskeog pattern. Several years later, a horse-drawn carriage of the same pattern was purchased. In order to pay for this equipment, the members of the Phoenix Fire Company hauled merchandise and sprinkled the Borough's streets with water.

A third fire company, the Washington Fire Company, was organized in January 24, 1840. Located first in the 600 block of Walnut Street, they later moved to a house on South Sixth Street between Pine and Ferry Streets. The members of this company operated one hand pump. In 1862 they moved to a brick house, also located on Sixth Street. In 1869 the old hand pump was replaced with a steam-powered engine, and a year later, in 1870, an alarm bell was added to the house. When the city's paid department took over fire protection services, this same building became Central Fire Station, and the alarm bell was purchased

by the city for continued use.

On August 5, 1856, the Southwark Hook & Ladder Company Number 1 was formed. Originally founded as the Southwark Hose Company Number 4, their first piece of apparatus was hose carriage purchased from the Southwark Company in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 1869, the members decided they would rather operate as a hook and ladder company; thus the name was changed to Southwark Hook and Ladder Company Number 1. The Borough Council agreed to purchase a hook and ladder for the company and moved them from their house on South Third Street to a newly constructed house on Lehigh Street. The Keystone Fire Company Number 5 was organized on June 2, 1856. In 1857, they were housed on the corner of Third and Bushkill Streets. Their original equipment consisted of a hand pump and a hose carriage which had been made in 1852 by Charles Dudley of Easton. Keystone Fire Company was the first fire company in Easton to adopt the red shirts and regulations hats worn by the New York Fire Department. The doors of the fire house were closed from April 1861 to September 1863 while the men volunteered their efforts in the Civil war. Like many of the other volunteer companies in Easton, Keystone disbanded in 1879 when the paid department assumed fire protection responsibilities.

Other volunteer fire companies continued to organize late in the nineteenth century even though all indications pointed to the establishment of a full-time paid department in the not-too-distant future. In 1872 the Jackson Hose Company was organized; and in April of the same year, their name was changed to the Lafayette Fire Company. They purchased a Silsby steam-powered engine in June of 1879; but when the city's paid department was established later in the year, the Lafayette Fire Company disbanded.

The last volunteer fire company organized in Easton was the Liberty Fire Company. This company was organized in October 1878. The Borough Council built a house for them on the corner of Twelfth and Spruce Streets and even made arrangements for them to purchase the old Humane steam-powered engine; however, like all the other volunteer companies, they too disbanded late in 1879.

It is important to note also the volunteer fire companies located in the Borough of South Easton since this area was annexed to the City of Easton in 1889 and is now known as South Side Easton. The first of these was the Franklin Steam Engine Company Number 1 which was originally organized as the Pocahontas Company sometime around 1860. Two more companies were organized in January 1889 -Citizen Hose Company and Liberty Hose Company. The last of these volunteer companies to be organized on South Side was the Columbia Hose Company which was organized in March 1896.

At midnight on October 30, 1879, the fire service in Easton underwent a significant change. On November 1, the new full-time paid Easton Fire Department took over the responsibility of fire protection for the borough. It should be noted that Easton was the second municipality in the state to establish a full-time paid fire department. There was much concern among the citizens of Easton as to whether a small fire fighting force could provide adequate fire protection for the borough. When we consider the fact that only thirty-four paid fire fighters replaced two hundred and ninety-eight volunteers, such concern is easy to understand.

The thirty-four fire fighters that assumed responsibility for protecting the lives and

property of the citizens of Easton on November 1, 1879 were the founding members of what is today the Easton Fire Department. Seven of the fire fighters were considered 'permanent' fire fighters; that is, they were on duty twenty-one hours a day, and were allowed three hours off for meals. They worked a schedule that consisted of nine days on duty, followed by one day off. The other twenty-seven men were available as 'call-in' men. All of the fire fighters served under the command of the department's first chief, John J. 'Jack' Smith. Engine Company Number 1 was located at the corner of Sitgreaves and Ferry Streets, Engine Company Number 2 on South Sixth Street, and Hook and Ladder Company Number 1 on Lehigh Street. All three stations were former houses of the old volunteer companies they replaced -Phoenix, Washington, and Southwark Hook and Ladder Companies respectively. In 1882, a new larger Central Fire Station was constructed on North Sixth Street. This became the new home for Engine Company Number 1. Engine Company Number 2 was relocated to Twelfth and Spruce Streets; and a third engine company, Engine Company Number 3, was placed on New Street in the College Hill district of the city.

In 1888, the department increased its manpower from thirty-four to thirty-eight fire fighters, and changed all the 'call-in' fire fighter's status to 'permanent'. The department was equipped with seven horses, three engines, three hose carriages and a patrol wagon. The effectiveness of the department was greatly enhanced by the arrival of a sixty-five foot Hayes Truck in July of the same year. Manufactured by LaFrance Fire Engine Company, this piece of apparatus was received with great fanfare. Other equipment listed by the department at that time included five thousand feet of fire hose, seventy-one hydrants, twenty-four call boxes and six telephone call boxes. Additional equipment continued to be added to the department, and, in 1896, the fire fighters had at their disposal one more hose carriage, a chemical engine, an ambulance wagon, and six more horses. When South Easton was annexed to the city in 1889, the department added two more companies to cover that district: Engine Company Number 4 at Reynolds and Berwick Streets, and Engine Company Number 5 at Foulk and Kleinhans Streets.

The first motorized fire truck in the City of Easton was placed into service in 1912. This particular apparatus was a combination hose wagon and chemical engine. Over the next seven years, more and more motorized equipment was added to the department; and in 1919, the last horses were retired and all of the horse-drawn equipment was taken out of service.

There have been six line-of-duty deaths in the history of the Easton Fire Department. The first was Fire Fighter George Collier who died from injuries sustained while fighting a fire at the Masonic Temple on January 6, 1885. On May 11, 1899, twenty-nine-year-old Fire Fighter Frank Rath died from smoke inhalation at a Washington Street fire. Fire Fighter Edward Freyhart fell from a ladder while fighting a fire on Northampton Street on December 3, 1901. He later died from injuries received in that fall. He was forty years old at the time of his death. Fire Fighter Edward Arnold suffered a heart attack and died while en route to a fire on February 5, 1918. He brought his engine safely to a halt on the street, but he died before a doctor could reach him. Fire Fighter George Muller died of a heart attack while on duty on February 11, 1953. His death was attributed to injuries received while

fighting a structure fire at the Grube & Betts Building during the previous week. Captain George Keck suffered a heart attack while fighting a fire on the roof of the C.K. Williams Company on North Thirteenth Street. He was rushed to the hospital, but never recovered.

On February 1, 1919, the work schedule for the men of the Easton Fire Department was modified with the implementation of the two-platoon system. This eliminated the twenty-four hour system that had been in use, and reduced the fire fighters' work week to eighty-four hours per week.

In November 1941, Chief Otto Johnson reported in Fire Engineering Magazine that the department was staffed with thirty-two men, two captains and one chief. Their equipment consisted of four pumper, a combination hose and chemical wagon (probably the same one acquired in 1912), a city service truck and an emergency truck.

The fire fighters' schedule was modified once again in 1952. On January 1, a three platoon system was placed in effect after a state law was passed reducing the fire fighters work week to fifty-six hours. This system remains in effect today.

The Easton Fire Department is currently staffed as follows: one chief, one deputy chief, three captains, three lieutenants, and thirty-six fire fighters. Each of the three platoons is staffed with one captain, one lieutenant and twelve fire fighters. At Central Fire Station on North Sixth Street, the captain, the lieutenant, and eight fire fighters man one rescue truck, an engine company and a ladder company. In addition, two fire fighters man an engine company each of the substations one of which is located at Porter and Parsons Streets on College Hill, and the other at Berwick and Reynolds Streets on South Side.

Easton has changed a great deal since the Humane Fire Company was organized here in 1797. The fire department has changed along with it -everything from the tools and apparatus we use to the types of fires we fight and emergency situations we respond to has changed. Even so, as the members of Easton Fire Department today, we feel that we are indeed the heirs of a long, noble tradition of fire fighting here in Easton. We are proud to follow in the footsteps of the volunteers who filled the ranks of such companies as the Humane Fire Company, the Phoenix Fire Company, the Southwark Hook and Ladder Company, and the many others who served this community before us. We are equally proud to follow in the tradition of those first seven men who stood duty twenty-one hours a day in 1879. We consider it a great honor to be numbered among all those who have called themselves Easton Fire Fighters.