

Firefighting in Colonial America (vs.3f)

By: Paul Hashagen

The history of firefighting in America can be traced all the way back to Jamestown, VA, the first permanent English settlement in the New World. Founded in 1607 by colonists from the London Company, Jamestown was under the command of Captain John Smith. It did not take long for fire to begin taking its toll on the new settlers.

In January 1608, a devastating fire destroyed most of the colonists' provisions and lodgings. Smith made a concise assessment of the situation: "I begin to think that it is safer for me to dwell in the wild Indian country than in this stockade, where fools accidently discharge their muskets and others burn down their homes at night."

Three hundred ninety years later, Smith's read on America's safety issue is not that much different than today's. Our headlines still feature the same two elements-fire and guns.

The population of the New World continued to rise as shiploads of immigrants stepped ashore looking for a fresh start in a new land. Cities began to take shape, and the problems Smith found in the small stockade multiplied as more and more structures were added. The fire load in these cities increased as forests were cleared and wooden homes and buildings were constructed.

The communities that sprang up around three of the best harbors-Boston, New York and Philadelphia-soon faced a number of social problems involving housing, sanitation, water supply and the danger of fire. These three cities, and the firefighters who eventually stepped forward to protect them, set the course early on as to the direction and shape the American Fire Service would take.

In 1648, New Amsterdam (later New York) Governor Peter Stuyvesant stood firmly on his peg leg and appointed four men to act as fire wardens. They were empowered to inspect all chimneys and to fine any violators of the rules. The city burghers later appointed eight prominent citizens to the "Rattle Watch"-these men volunteered to patrol the streets at night carrying large wooden rattles. If a fire was seen, the men spun the rattles, then directed the responding citizens to form bucket brigades. This is generally recognized as the first step in organized firefighting in America.

Even earlier, Boston's city fathers took the first steps in fire prevention when Governor John Winthrop outlawed wooden chimneys and thatched roofs in 1631. Forty years later, Boston suffered a series of arson fires and finally a conflagration in 1676. The small "ingine" built by local ironmaker Joseph Jynks, probably a syringe-type pump, had little effect on the swelling wall of flames. Shortly after the fire, Bostonians sent for the "state of the art fire engine" then being made in England. The three-foot-long, 18-inch-wide wooden box arrived with carrying handles and a direct-force pump that fed a small hose. The tub-like section of the engine was kept filled with water by a bucket brigade.

The need to coordinate these efforts brought about the establishment of the first engine company in colonial America. Twelve men and a captain were “hired” by the General Court to care for and manage the engine and to be paid for their work. On January 27, 1678, this company went into service. Its captain (foreman), Thomas Atkins, was actually the first firefighting officer in the country.

Two Newsham engines arrived in New York in December 1732. Jacob Turck was appointed to take charge of the engines and to keep them in repair at his own cost after a 10-pound salary was advanced him. Turck also worked on a pump of his own design, perhaps the first mechanical fire pumper built in America.

Most notable among the famous Americans who helped shape the country and the fire service was Benjamin Franklin, a writer, printer, philosopher, scientist, statesman of the American Revolution-and a fireman. Franklin helped draft the Declaration of Independence, served as a diplomat, and invented items that ranged from lightning rods to bifocal eyeglasses. In 1736, Franklin founded the Union Fire Company in Philadelphia, which became the standard for volunteer fire company organization.

Two important “tools” utilized by early American firemen were the bed key and salvage bags. With firefighting apparatus able to supply only a small stream of water, a fire that began to gain any headway was soon out of control. Arriving firemen quite often opted for immediate salvage efforts in the fire building and surrounding exposures. The bed key was a small metal tool that allowed the men to quickly disassemble the wooden frame of a bed, quite often the most valuable item owned by a family, and remove it to safety. Other household goods of any value were snatched up, placed in salvage bags and carried to safety.

The first attempt at fire insurance went bust after a devastating fire in Charlestown, MA, in 1736. Ben Franklin then organized the “Philadelphia Contributorship” to insure house from loss by fire in 1740, a venture that was a success. The company adopted “fire marks” to be affixed to the front of the insured’s property for easy identification.

With rules to provide for buckets, hooks, ladders and the formation of volunteer companies, firefighting started to become formalized. The chain of command fell in place as officers of various ranks were established. Firemen devised new and better ways to accomplish their mission; everything from helmets to hoses were invented or improved. Firemen in Philadelphia, New York, Boston and other cities made major advances in the technology and theory of firefighting.

The legacy of colonial firefighters can still be seen in fire department operations and organizations across the county to this day. The wooden hydrants are gone but the iron willed determination of American firefighters is as strong as ever.

About the Author: Paul Hashagan is a fire service historian and author of several books about the history of firefighting. He is a FDNY firefighter assigned to Rescue Company 1 in Manhattan, and as assistant chief of the Freeport, NY Fire Department.

Fire and Firefighting in Colonial America

(VS.3f, VS.4c)

Fire was a very real, ever-present threat to colonial communities. Every uncontrolled fire endangered lives and property. Residents needed to work together to prevent fires from breaking out and to extinguish those that did. As the eighteenth century progressed, colonists took advantage of technological advances and new equipment to dramatically improve their firefighting capabilities. Still, by the time of the American Revolution, fire remained a serious threat to growing colonial towns.



Fire played a role in the very founding of Williamsburg, the capital of Virginia. In 1699, the legislature selected Williamsburg as the site for a new Capitol after fire burned the statehouse at Jamestown for the fourth time. This final calamity provided an ideal opportunity for officials to abandon low-lying Jamestown in favor of the healthier and more easily defended inland location of Williamsburg.

Eighteenth-century Americans depended on the controlled use of fire throughout their daily lives. Fireplaces provided heat for cooking meals and warming homes and shops. Fireplace fires and candles gave off the light necessary for day-to-day activities. With so many people using fire every day, damage resulting from accidents, carelessness, or neglect often occurred. In urban areas, where buildings were constructed close together, blazes could spread easily. In 1731, for example, a fire consumed most of Charleston, South Carolina. Nine years later, the most serious fire yet experienced in the colonies devastated Charleston again, burning more than three hundred dwellings and numerous shops and warehouses.

Though Williamsburg avoided disasters of such scope, several destructive fires occurred there during the eighteenth century. Despite their brick construction, public buildings in the capital city were the victims of fire on several occasions. In 1705, the Wren Building at the College of William and Mary burned. The Capitol suffered a similar fate in 1747. The Capitol fire allegedly started in an “upper retired room without Chimney, or Wainscot.” By the time the fire was discovered, it was too late to save the building. The Capitol was rebuilt and ready for use again by 1753. In April 1754, the Capitol was threatened again when a nearby fire destroyed Mr. Palmer’s house, a storehouse, and Mr. Walthoe’s house and badly damaged Marot’s Ordinary. Daniel Fisher, an English coffee merchant who then occupied Marot’s Ordinary, described the scene of the fire:

With any tolerable management, the fire might easily have been extinguished, but nothing was sure for a great while but uproar, confusion and disorder. . . . the rope to my well, the nearest and only water within a good way, was broke or cut after drawing the first or second bucket. Mr. Palmer's well indeed was close by the room where the fire kindled, but the Cry of Gun Powder hindered that from being used till it grew too hot to stand at all in that place. . . . [Had Mr. Walthoe's house] been covered with wet bags or blankets, that would have preserved it, but for more than an hour not a ladder (or other useful implement) could hardly be met with. My Pails, Buckets, Tubs, Axes, Spades, etc. etc. were indeed delivered immediately, but except the well bucket which was secured at the bottom of the well, I never received one thing any more. The Capitol tho' more than 200 feet distant was by its eastern situation in great danger of being burnt a second time, the shingles catching several times. But that being attended and supplied with water, etc. etc. it was preserved, tho' at considerable expense, the assistants there being well paid: whereas, save Mr. Walthoe gave out of his own Pocket to Persons who pretended to have aided at Mr. Palmer's and his own house, the recompence of the helpers in general, consisted in what they ran away with, of the substance of the sufferers. . . . I would not suffer any of my goods to be removed out of my house, which was then beset by a great numbers of lazy negroes, calmly viewing the Bon Fire. I spoke to a knot of those, exhorting them very civilly to assist in drawing or fetching water, etc. but received a surly reply with an Oath of who will pay us?



Toward the end of the Revolutionary War, both the Governor's Palace and the President's House at the College of William and Mary were consumed by fire. Fire also destroyed private structures, including Dr. Peter Hay's apothecary shop in 1756, Dr. William Carter's stable in 1767, coachmaker

Charles Taliaferro's stable and coach house in 1771, and a tenement house rented by cabinetmaker Peter Scott in 1776.

During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, firefighting equipment in Williamsburg consisted largely of buckets, ladders, and sheer manpower. In 1716, authorities at the College of William and Mary resolved to order from England two dozen leather fire buckets and "1 Engine for Quenching Fire"—probably a small hand pump. After a nearby fire threatened the newly rebuilt Capitol in 1754, the Virginia Council purchased a fire engine and four dozen leather buckets from London to provide better protection for the capital city. By 1756, a fire engine had arrived in Williamsburg. The newly acquired engine helped to prevent the spread of flames from the fire that destroyed Dr. Hay's apothecary shop.

Although the original Williamsburg fire engine no longer survives, it was probably a Newsham engine. In 1721 and 1725, Richard Newsham obtained patents for his design of a "new water engine for quenching and extinguishing fires." His engines were remarkable advances over earlier, more primitive machines. Newsham's fire engines were long and narrow, allowing them to pass through an ordinary doorway (less than three feet wide). And, unlike the earlier fire engines, which delivered water in erratic squirts, Newsham's engine was designed to provide a

continuous stream of water up to a distance of more than 150 feet. The two-cylinder machine was actuated by hand levers and foot treadles. Several men worked the levers and treadles to pump water through an air vessel and out a pipe, or branch, aimed at the fire. The largest of Newsham's engines was capable of pumping two hundred gallons of water per minute. Available in six sizes, Newsham engines also came with detailed instructions for use and maintenance.

Newsham's fire engines were popular both in England and abroad. The city of London used them until 1832, and provincial towns such as Dartmouth acquired them as well. In the colonies, the city of Philadelphia ordered two Newsham engines in 1730, as did New York City a year later. A Newsham engine imported into Salem, Massachusetts, at mid-century is now housed in a museum there. Evidence that Virginians were familiar with Newsham engines comes from early nineteenth-century policies issued by the Mutual Assurance Society of Richmond. The policies contain an engraving of a Newsham engine.

In the twenty years preceding the American Revolution, several Williamsburg residents urged their neighbors and local officials to take additional steps to improve fire prevention. In 1768, a citizen identifying himself as "Timothy Telltruth" wrote to the newspaper, the *Virginia Gazette*, advocating the acquisition of another fire engine or two and the appointment of a night watch to deter both fires and robberies. Others echoed his recommendations. In the summer of 1772, the City Council made provisions for:



a WATCH, to consist of four sober and discreet People, who are to patrol the Streets of this City from ten o'Clock every Night until Daylight the next Morning, to cry the Hours, and use their best Endeavours to preserve Peace and good Order. . . . They are likewise to have the Care of the FIRE ENGINES, and to be ready, in Cases of Accidents by Fire, to give their Assistance towards extinguishing the same.

The men who were hired made themselves useful the following November. They saved the Public Gaol from burning down after a prisoner set the floor on fire and escaped with the help of accomplices outside.

As the Gaol fire indicates, not all fires in colonial communities were accidental. Criminals sometimes used fire to create diversions or to mask their crimes. In 1768, for example, robbers broke into the post office in Williamsburg. Before departing, they attempted to burn down the building by throwing hot coals on a bed located inside the office. Luckily, the mattress feathers smothered the fire. A few years later, a planter who lived outside of Williamsburg reported that someone had set fire to the tobacco barn on his York County plantation. He wrote, "As this is the second Time I have suffered in this manner, within a few Years, I have the greatest Reason to believe I have some secret Enemy that intends to do me all the Injury he can." An individual convicted of arson, a capital crime, could be sentenced to death.

If fires sometimes revealed tensions within colonial communities, then firefighting efforts illustrate cooperation in the face of common danger. Organized firefighting efforts required preparation and teamwork; as many as eighteen men were required to operate a Newsham engine. In addition, neighbors helped rescue people and their possessions from the flames.

It appears that the fire engine in Williamsburg fell into disrepair or was removed to Richmond, which became the new capitol of Virginia in 1780. In 1781, when fires broke out in several buildings used to house soldiers, firefighting equipment was difficult to find. In a letter to General George Washington, General Rochambeau, the commander of French troops stationed in Williamsburg, described a dire shortage of both water and buckets.

In 1788, the Virginia legislature passed "An act to authorize the establishment of fire companies." This act made it lawful for residents of a town to form firefighting groups whose members agreed to be responsible for obtaining equipment, learning how to use it, drilling regularly, and extinguishing any fires that did break out. This act represented another step toward organized fire prevention as we know it today.

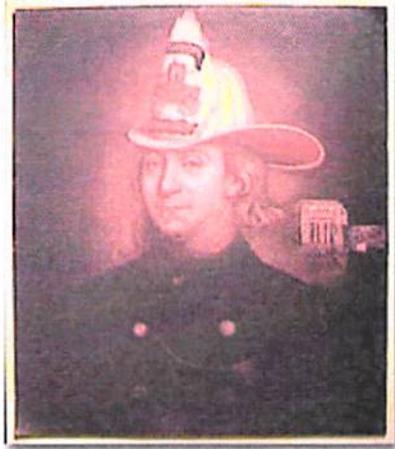


From neighbors helping each other with buckets to fire companies manned by local residents to professional fire departments supported by local taxes, firefighting has changed along with population growth and the expansion of local government. The growth and improvements in fire prevention efforts of colonial residents of Williamsburg provide insight into the evolution of community life in America.

This essay originally appeared in the teacher's guide for the Colonial Williamsburg Electronic Field Trip "Backdraft."

Fire Department (Reading 4.3d, 4.5f, 4.5i)

An ounce of prevention ... a pound of cure



19th c. image of Franklin as firefighter.



Fire company emblems.



On a visit to Boston, Benjamin Franklin noted that the inhabitants of his native city were far better prepared to fight fires than the natives of his adopted city, Philadelphia. Upon returning home, he consulted the Junto, a benevolent group dedicated to civic and self-improvement, and asked for their suggestions on better ways to combat fires.

Franklin also sought to raise public awareness about the city's dire need to improve fire-fighting techniques. In a Pennsylvania Gazette article of 1733 Franklin noted how fires were being fought in Philadelphia. "Soon after it [a fire] is seen and cry'd out, the Place is crowded by active Men of different Ages, Professions and Titles who, as of one Mind and Rank, apply themselves with all Vigilance and Resolution, according to their Abilities, to the hard Work of conquering the increasing fire."

Goodwill and amateur firefighters were not enough, though. Franklin suggested a "Club or Society of active Men belonging to each Fire Engine; whose Business is to attend all Fires with it whenever they happen."

For the February 4, 1735 issue of The Pennsylvania Gazette, Franklin sent an anonymous letter to his own newspaper entitled Protection of Towns from Fire. Writing as an "old citizen" he admonished:

In the first Place, as an Ounce of Prevention is worth a Pound of Cure, I would advise 'em to take care how they suffer living Coals in a full Shovel, to be carried out of one Room into another, or up or down Stairs, unless in a Warmingpan shut; for Scraps of Fire may fall into Chinks and make no Appearance

until Midnight; when your Stairs being in Flames, you may be forced, (as I once was) to leap out of your Windows, and hazard your Necks to avoid being oven-roasted.

He further urged that chimney sweeps should be licensed by the city and be held responsible for their work. He noted that a neighboring city (Boston), "a club or society of active men belonging to each fire engine, whose business is to attend all fires with it whenever they happen." He noted that via practice and regular meetings, the firefighters' skills improved.



Leather bucket used to fight fires.

Under Franklin's goading, a group of thirty men came together to form the Union Fire Company on December 7, 1736. Their equipment included "leather buckets, with strong bags and baskets (for packing and transporting goods), which were to be brought to every fire. The blaze battlers met monthly to talk about fire prevention and fire-fighting methods. Homeowners were mandated to have leather fire-fighting buckets in their houses.



Other men were desirous of joining the Union, but were urged to form their own companies so the city would be better protected.

Within a short span of time, Philadelphians witnessed the birth of the Heart-in-Hand, the Britannia, the Fellowship, as well as several other fire companies.

Thanks to the matchless leadership of Benjamin Franklin, the dire fear of fires expired in Philadelphia which became one of safest cities in the world in terms of fire damage.

Adapted from: <http://www.ushistory.org/franklin/philadelphia/fire.htm>

EARLY AMERICAN FIREFIGHTING

Reading SOLs: 4.6b, 4.6c

Writing SOLs: 4.7a, 4.7b, 4.7c, 4.7d, 4.7g

Discussion/Critical Thinking

Discuss with your class the ways early Americans fought fire 100, 200, or 300 years ago. Remember that the colonists had no fire departments, no fire trucks, no hydrants for water, and no fire hoses. People got water from wells or rivers in leather buckets, and the whole town helped to put out a fire.

"Who am I"?

A very famous early American started fire departments. He signed the Declaration of Independence. He invented bifocals, a fire-safe stove, and lightning rods. He discovered electricity during a thunderstorm by putting a key on a kite string. He started the Union Fire Company in Philadelphia in 1736 which owned its own equipment, such as ladders and buckets. Who is he? (Benjamin Franklin)

Research

When talking about fire safety, Benjamin Franklin said, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." He wanted to prevent the terrible fires that hit Philadelphia. Ben Franklin understood that the growth of the new country depended on the ability of the American people to stay safe and to prevent large fires from destroying their property. **Research Benjamin Franklin's life and write a short report on his life and some of his accomplishments.**

Reading 4.6b, 4.6c

Writing 4.7a, 4.7b, 4.7c, 4.7d, 4.7g

