

Alexandria Times

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Alexandria
COMMUNITY MEDIA

Friendship and Alexandria's community of firefighters

On Saturday, the Friendship Fire Company marks its 252nd year with the Friendship Firehouse Festival along the 100 block of Alfred Street.

Friendship, established in 1774, was the first volunteer fire company in Alexandria. At a time when open flames were used for many tasks, blazes small or large had to be checked, as the likelihood of fire spreading was a constant threat. Other companies were soon organized: Sun in 1775, Relief in 1788, Star in 1799 and Hydraulion in 1827.

Townspeople, and sometimes neighbors, assisted with firefighting. It was a community effort. City ordinance required fire buckets to be kept and maintained on every floor of homes and buildings.

Furthermore, at the first alarm, citizens were obligated to take these buckets to any fire for communal use. The volunteer fire companies acquired and maintained fire engines and provided leadership at fires.

In the aftermath of the Sept. 24, 1810, fire that consumed the block between Prince and Duke streets along the waterfront, the Common Council recognized the assistance of African Americans who "distinguished themselves by extraordinary exertions in the late fire," and Friendship's Minute Book discussed compensating these men "who



PHOTO/OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

The 2025 Friendship Firehouse Festival.

aided and appointed in working the Engine during the fire which took place on the night of the 24th."

On Jan. 18, 1827, the conflagration that became known as Alexandria's Great Fire started in an alley off the 100 block of South Royal Street. It spread to a roof on Prince Street and continued toward Union Street with a powerful wind kindling the flames. The weather was well below freez-

ing – the dresses of women passing buckets in the bucket brigades froze.

Georgetown fire companies and hundreds of Washington Navy Yard employees came to assist the community firefighters, but 53 buildings were lost. The destruction was so extensive that on Jan. 24 the U.S. Congress appropriated \$20,000 in disaster relief for Alexandria.

The night of Nov. 17, 1855, the community responded to a

fire on the third floor of Dowell's China Store on lower King Street. Friendship was on the scene with its hand-operated suction fire engine, displayed today by the Friendship Firehouse Museum.

The outcome of this blaze was devastating. A wall collapsed, injuring three townspeople and killing six members of the Star Fire Company, as well as one from Friendship. A year later, Alexandrians came together for a procession to Ivy Hill Cemetery, where they dedicated the Firefighters Monument in honor of those who lost their lives.

In the latter half of the 19th century, the volunteer companies fought fires less frequently, as career firefighters and the paid city fire department were organized. The Friendship Fire Company changed its name to the Friendship Veterans Fire Engine Association early in the 20th century and continues today as an active philanthropic and public service organization.

This year's Friendship Firehouse Festival is Saturday from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. For more information, please visit alexandriava.gov/museums/the-annual-friendship-firehouse-festival.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.