

Alexandria Times

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Alexandria
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A brief history of fires on Union Street

A new sign on South Union Street between Duke and Prince Streets highlights the 19th-century fire history of one block, which experienced devastating fires in 1803, 1810 and 1827. The sign focuses on the brave Alexandrians who helped fight the fires and the fires' effects on Alexandria today.

Alexandria in the 19th century was at constant risk of fire. Residents required open fires for lighting, heating, cooking, brewing, smithing and other activities. During the span of the three fires, Alexandria had four privately-run fire companies: Friendship, Relief, Sun and Star. These companies were only open to white, male volunteers, who took responsibility for organizing fire response efforts and operating fire engines.

Firefighting at the time required more labor than that for success, which is why all Alexandrians, regardless of race, gender or class, participated in fighting blazes. The Friendship and Sun companies compensated Black men for helping to work the engines. A letter to the Alexandria Gazette after the 1810 fire highlighted

the "extraordinary and efficacious exertions of a black man named Campbell" who climbed to the top of a chimney and put out a fire that the fire engines could not reach.

Accounts of the 1827 fire noted that the bucket brigade included women who worked "until their dresses were frozen stiff" in 13 degrees Fahrenheit. The 1803 fire exposed the need for large numbers of volunteers, regardless of social station, when an outbreak of yellow fever caused half the population of Alexandria to flee into the surrounding countryside. Efforts to contain the blaze required much more time than the other two fires.

Although Alexandrians extinguished the last of these fires almost 200 years ago, their effects are still with us today. Alexandrians whose homes and business places burned down switched from wood to brick in an attempt to make them fire-resistant or "fire-proof."

The city made a concerted effort to combat fires, although they returned with devastating effect for many decades. In 1800, City Council required all dwellings and commer-

cial buildings to own one fire bucket for each story of the building. They also required that members of each dwelling bring their fire bucket to the fire or throw it into the street so it could be taken to the fire. Failure to do so meant a steep \$100 fine for each instance.

Following the 1810 fire, the fire companies asked that residents be mandated by law to maintain functioning and accessible water buckets. After the 1827 fire, the city appropriated funds to support the firefighting companies. It was the start of the process of professionalizing firefighting in Alexandria.

The Friendship Firehouse Museum is one of the City of Alexandria's eight museums. The annual Friendship Firehouse Festival, co-sponsored with the Friendship Veterans Fire Engine Association, is held on the first Saturday of each August and is a favorite community event that brings together antique fire apparatus, public safety officers and vehicles, community booths, hands-on activities and an opportunity to tour the museum.

This April 22, Historic Alexandria and the Friendship Vet-



PHOTO/ANDREW MCCABE

Alexandria's Friendship Fire Company was established in 1774.

erans Fire Engine Association will be raising funds through Alexandria's day of giving – Spring2ACTion - to reimagine the exhibit installation in the Friendship Firehouse Museum. Your gift through Spring2ACTion will support the research, design and installation of a new exhibit. For more information on how to donate, please visit: www.spring2action.org/story/fcxxdg.

Learn more about Alexandria's firefighting history at www.alexandriava.gov/fire-department/fire-department-history.

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