



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

Friendship Fire Company's Suction Pump

Alexandria Times, June 12, 2014

Image: Suction Pump, 1931 . Photo, Library of Congress.

Once an example of cutting-edge firefighting technology, the suction engine that belongs to the [Friendship Fire Company](#) now stands as a reminder of a time when Alexandria depended on volunteers to put out its blazes. The company purchased the engine they referred to as "Suction" in 1851 from the manufacturer John Rodgers in Baltimore for just over \$1,000. This 1931 picture shows the pump with former custodian G. William Humphries.

At the time, the hand-operated pump was an advanced piece of technology, replacing earlier engines that required a bucket brigade to fill its reservoir and then pump water through a nozzle. The company's new equipment used suction pressure through a hose on one side of its water reservoir and forced the water out through a hose on the other side. Instead of a bucket brigade, the suction engine required between 16 and 20 operators in total — four to six on the ground on either side of the engine and four men on each of the fold-out platforms. However, pumping the water by hand was exhausting and replacements had to relieve their colleagues every two to three minutes.

Not only did the volunteers pump by hand, they also had to pull the engine themselves. Despite this, "Suction" shot water more powerfully than its predecessors due in part to developments in water power. The formation of the Alexandria Water Co. in 1852 and the addition of a water main, pipes and hydrants throughout the city allowed firemen easy access to water. At the same time, the pump gave them a competitive advantage because it could use water from any source and did not necessarily require a hydrant at a time when other companies would try and prevent each other from using them.

During the Civil War, the Union Army brought two steam-powered fire engines with them for the duration of the occupation of Alexandria. The engines generally needed only four men to operate, as opposed to the 16 to 20 that the hand-pumped engine required. They were, however, much more expensive and required horses to pull them.

In 1875, the city bought a steam engine from Philadelphia and encouraged the Friendship Fire Company to merge with other fire companies to form one organization. The majority of the membership





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

decided that maintaining a separate identity was more important than using the new technology, and they continued to fight fires alone into the 1880s.

Those who volunteered their time and effort to the Friendship Fire Company did more than just fight fires. The company was an important fraternal organization that provided its members with social opportunities and space when not performing public service. The company organized parades, picnics, excursions to other cities and performed ceremonial duties for civic events. Starting in 1839, the company has marched in the George Washington birthday parade every year.

The company also served as a support network. Upon the death of a fireman, whether in the line of duty or not, the company participated in the funeral and assisted in looking after his family.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.