



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

The saga of Belle the Houdini fire horse

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Image: Horse-drawn fire wagon in Alexandria, from the Charles Sampson Collection at the Alexandria Library.

In the winter of 1907, The Relief Hook and Ladder Company in Alexandria faced a puzzling mystery. Acting Driver Edward Fornshill was up to the challenge of solving the conundrum. Fornshill, as driver, was the only paid member of the company. On several occasions, while Fornshill was on the second floor of the firehouse, someone opened the door of the stall occupied by Belle, described in *The Washington Post* as “one of the handsome grays that draw the truck.” Not only the stall door, but the big doors at the front were open and Belle could be found across the street.

There was much discussion about this mystery among the members of the company who would congregate in the firehouse at night. They believed it to be the work of a practical joker and Fornshill was determined to catch whoever was letting Belle out of her stall – and out of the firehouse – at night.

On Feb. 19, 1907, Fornshill hid near Belle’s stall and waited for the joker to arrive. After a short time, he saw Belle “catch the wire that throws open the stall door in her teeth and give a sudden jerk that liberated her.” Belle then made her way to the front doors, “repeated the operation” on the wires holding the heavy bolts, and “in less time than it takes to tell it, Belle was ambling to her favorite spot across the street.”

The *Washington Post* concluded that Fornshill covered the wires with strips, and “Belle will now have to possess herself with patience until the regular hours for exercising.” Fornshill made it into the newspaper in other horse-related incidents as well, though the other stories lack the charm of Belle’s evening escapades.

In 1897 a horse pulling a wagon fell on Fornshill, though he was not injured. The *Alexandria Gazette* noted, “The Horse is supposed to have had a fit.” Several years later, in 1911, he was “bitten on the left cheek by a horse he was feeding.” The horse in question was likely not Belle, as Fornshill had moved to Reliance Steam Fire Engine Company at 115 N. Patrick St. by that time.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

The Relief Hook and Ladder Company building where Belle lived is now a private residence. Another 19th-century Alexandria firehouse, however, is now a museum. Friendship Firehouse at 107 S. Alfred St., is open 1 to 4 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays, though it pre-dates horse-drawn fire engines.

“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 staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.