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Out of the Attic

Look sharp: Uniforms of the Friendship Fire Company

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Images: Friendship Fire Company hat, circa mid- to late-19th century, and cape, circa late 19th century. Friendship Fire Company

Although the Friendship Fire Company dates to 1774, it did not have a uniform until 1796. Imagine being at a fire and not knowing who's in charge. The first uniform was a black cap with an upright white front. This did not change until 1839 when they wore fire caps, costing three dollars each, and matching hat badges, which were worn for the George Washington Parade.



In 1846, the uniforms changed to a “Green baze [sic] trimmed with Red & Red Belt,” but that did not last long. By Nov. 21, 1851, the Friendship Minute Book notes, “On motion it was ordered that the Co. wear a black cap, belt, pants, & blue frock coat, & afsemble [sic] at next meeting in uniform & that notice of said meeting be published in Alex. Gaz.”

Jacobus Turck is credited with inventing the first fire helmet in the 1730s. Resembling a stovepipe hat, it was leather with a high crown and wide brim. In 1836, Henry T. Gratacap designed a helmet similar to the one we recognize today. Reinforced dome-shaped leather with a front shield and brim rolling to a long back tail, the firefighters' heads were afforded some protection from falling materials and water that ran off the back of the helmet. The brass eagle, which holds the top of the front piece to leather helmets, can be traced to around 1825 when an unknown sculptor created a commemorative figure for the grave of a volunteer firefighter. It has since been part of fire helmets.

Here at Friendship, it appears they used the hat for much longer before transitioning to a helmet. The hat became part of their parade uniform. For instance, the Minute Book remarks, on March 21, 1853: “The committee on hats reported & on motion ordered that Mr Warring make the hats for company and Mr Enswipel paint them.” On August 16, 1858: “On motion it was Resolved that we parade in glazed caps. The Axemen excepted wich [sic] shall wear fire hats.”

In order to keep costs down, the company bought second-hand when they could. In 1860, they purchased hats from the Patapsco Fire Company of Baltimore. In 1871, it is written, “On motion of S. S. Brown That a committee be allowed to correspond with parties in Philadelphia in regards to cap and belt furnished to the company cheaper than by bying [sic] here in town which was granted.”



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

In the late 1850s, the Firehouse Minute Book mentions new uniforms but no details of what they looked like. The entry on April 17, 1865, is the next mention of the uniform: “On motion it was resolved that we attend the funeral of the president on motion J Powell was appointed marshal for the occasion on motion was adopted that we wear red Shirts black pants Black Hats.”

The last change of uniforms comes in June 1871, when the Minute Book states: “Report on committee on uniform Reported by adopting red flannel shirt and white belt trimmed with blue and raised letters on the back to red [sic] the word friendship The buckle to be in the shape of 2 hands to Represent the motto of the company.”

Although we’re not certain what made them change, it appears they changed uniforms when an event was upon them – a parade, a ball or an excursion with another company. Regardless of what they were wearing, we know the uniform defined the company, distinguishing between the stations, and gave the men a sense of belonging.

In preparation for the Friendship Firehouse Festival on Saturday, August 4, 2018, the Office of Historic Alexandria has highlighted some of the company’s history. The festival is from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. in front of the firehouse at 107 S. Alfred St.

“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.