



Summer 2002

Forming a More Perfect Community: An Early History of the Friendship Fire Company

by T. Michael Carter, Ph.D.



As we mourn the deaths of so many of New York City's firefighters on September 11, it may be appropriate to reprint here John Muir's history of the Friendship Fire Company, and to remember some of Alexandria's own "fallen heroes."

John Muir, the proprietor of a hardware and cutlery store in the 200 block of King Street and Alexandria's Mayor from 1853-54, joined the Friendship Fire Company in 1835. He became the company's Clerk and quickly focused on the history of the city's

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first volunteer fire company. In 1836, he recorded in the company's Minute Book a chronological listing of all the company's members. In 1838, he listed the yearly important incidents in the company's history. It was quite in his nature then, to write a history of the company in 1857—the second anniversary of two momentous events: one of great pride for the Friendship Fire Company, one of profound tragedy for all of Alexandria's citizen-volunteer firefighters.

The Friendship Fire Company was organized in 1774. The company purchased the city's first fire engine the next year from Mr. Gibbs of Philadelphia. The engine was kept in a structure on Royal Street on Market Square until 1838. In that year, the company merged with the Crescent Fire Company and moved to the north side of King Street near Columbus Street. In 1851, the company moved to the present location on South Alfred Street. The engine house at that time was a two-story frame house with a steeple. This building was "greatly damaged" by fire in March 1855. On April 5th, the company appointed a committee to petition the City Council "to have built for us a two story brick Engine House." Events moved quickly, and the company held the first meeting in the new engine house on October 29th of that year. The cost of this new building was paid for by grants from the City Council, banks and insurance companies, contributions from the members and citizens, and a "Fair held by the Ladies."¹ This Fair was held during the week of November 5, 1855 at the Sarepta Hall and raised almost \$600.00 of the total cost of \$2,000.00.

One week after the successful "Ladies' Fair," Alexandria suffered the worst tragedy to

befall their organized firefighters. Near midnight on Friday, November 16, 1855, the fire alarm was raised for a fire at J.T. Dowell's china store on the north side of King Street, between Fairfax and Water Streets (Union Street today). Contemporary accounts attribute the fire to arson. After battling the fire for almost four hours, and saving the adjacent buildings, the citizen-firefighters were inside Dowell's store in a desperate attempt to save the building. The west brick wall of the building collapsed, crushing seven of the firefighters: James Keene of the Friendship Fire Company; George Plain, Robert J. Taylor, John A. Roach, Jr., Carson Green and G. David Appich of the Star Fire Company; and William L. Evans who was not a member of any fire company.

It seems to be human nature to observe anniversaries of important events. We "celebrate" happy events and "solemnly commemorate" sad or tragic events. It's clear that John Muir felt both emotions as he composed the following lecture in the fall of 1857. The lecture was printed in full in the *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser* in two editions of the paper.

Friendship Fire Company²

A LECTURE upon the origin, progress, and present condition of the FRIENDSHIP FIRE COMPANY, delivered in the Company's Hall, Nov. 17, 1857, by J. Muir. [Published at the request of the company.]

Fellow Firemen. – Though the circumstances under which we have assembled this evening may be well calculated to cause a feeling of sadness to oppress our spirits, yet, we hope that our meeting together at this time may not be wholly unprofitable.

This day, as you are probably well aware, is the second anniversary of that most afflictive mischance, which so unfortuitously hurried to the city of the dead a number of those with whom it has been the wont of many of us to labor, side by side, when

“Flame on flame went battling through
the air,
Hissing in fury, and blinding with
their glare.”

I appear before you now, however, not for the purpose of referring particularly to our friends and associates, who, while in the active discharge of their perilous duty as firemen, were so suddenly swept across Time’s river, but merely to congratulate you upon being in the quiet possession of this beautiful and commodious Engine House, and in an unpretending manner to post you, in some measure, as to the most prominent antecedents of the Friendship, which has recently taken a fresh start in its career of usefulness.

ORGANIZATION. — To be somewhat familiar with one’s own genealogy, and with the leading incidents relating to the Institution with which we may happen to be identified—be it social, religious, or political—would seem to be a natural impulse; yet, it is surprisingly true, that but few persons, comparatively, interest themselves in matters originating anterior to the age in which they chance to live. The *present* is that which mostly—and very properly—engrosses the attention of mankind; the *past* being among the things that were, and the *future* being generally regarded as fully adequate to take care of itself. Said an Alexandrian, not long since, when requested to aid in an undertaking involving the interest of coming generations, let posterity take care of itself, it is as much as I can do to take care

of myself. This, however, is not the sentiment of your speaker, nor should it be that of any other person, as we should all endeavor, so far as we have ability, to

“Aid the cause that needs
assistance,
And right the wrong that
needs resistance.”

Whether a curiosity exists or not with the members of the Friendship in reference to the origin, progress and present condition of the company with which they are associated, no exception, I am sure, will be taken by any one to the present effort to acquaint them therewith, however hastily undertaken or inaptly expressed.

The Friendship Fire Company was organized in 1774, or just 27 years after George the Second had decreed “that there be erected at the Great Hunting Creek warehouses, in Fairfax county, in the Colony of Virginia, a town, to be called Alexandria;” and two years before the Declaration of Independence, when George the Third claimed the right to tax our tea; and who, by the way, though he began his reign 14 years before the organization of our company, did not die until all, save one, of its original members, 11 in all, had “slept the sleep that knows no waking.” Thus our venerable institution can claim to have existed under five distinct political organizations—first, under a Colonial Legislature, while subject to a British King; second, under the *Nation* of Virginia, pending the Confederation; third, under the *State* of Virginia, subject to the Constitution of the United States; fourth, immediately under said Constitution as a part of the District of Columbia; and fifth, again under the State of Virginia, because of retrocession; thus

constituting a political record that but one other Fire Company of our city can boast—the Sun, or big 2, having probably, nearly a like history. As regards the *Nation* of Virginia, it may, possibly, not have occurred to many of you that the Constitution of the United States was not adopted until 13 years after the Declaration of Independence was proclaimed, nor until 7 years after the battle of Yorktown, which ended the revolutionary struggle. Pending this interval, each State exercised a distinct nationality, as under the Articles of Confederation, each of the then 13 States was sovereign and independent, but this nationality became merged, measurably, in our present Federative government.

The Company's book, containing its proceedings from 1774 to 1810, has, unfortunately, been lost during the last ten years; but, luckily, your speaker, while Secretary of the company, and for over 20 years he has been an officer thereof, compiled from said book a chronological statement of the leading incidents relating to the company from its origin to 1838. This record is now before me, and must ever prove instructive to those who take an interest in the Friendship's history, and, also, will remove all cavil as to its exact antiquity.

In connection with this compilation, is the name of every person who belonged to the company from its beginning until 1835, and the year in which each joined.

MEMBERSHIP. — During the first ten years of the company's existence, only 24 persons had attached themselves thereto. Peter Wise, Wm. Paton, and Wm. McKnight—many of the descendants of each of whom are still residents of our city—aided in organizing the company, and Law. Hooff

joined in 1778, the first and last named being personally known to some of the present members of the Company, neither of said persons having died until about 1830. A. Jamieson and E. Evans joined in 1787, and the latter was a member in 1828.

J. McGuire and B. Bryan joined in 1796, and the first was an officer of the company in 1839. C. McKnight, recently deceased, and J. Cohagen—our venerable and estimable fellow citizen—joined in 1800. The name of the first appeared on our record for the last time in 1839, and that of the last in 1829, and stands recorded as having “lent the Company a sufficient sum of money to pay all its debts.” For many years associated in membership with some of the original members of the company, may he long continue to enjoy the title of being the oldest fireman in our city, and when finally his age mature receives the common doom of mortality, may not only the Friendship, but every fireman in Alexandria, join in the obsequies to one who is probably the only survivor that, in a military capacity, (Captain of Militia) aided in escorting “the last of earth” pertaining to the immortal Washington to its final resting place. M. Robinson joined in 1795, and was the Company's clerk for 32 years, and during his incumbency the meetings were seldom omitted; but after his death, in 1828, very few meetings were held until 1835, when the company was re-organized, and the meetings resumed. J. Longden joined in 1780, and was a trustee in 1829. Dr. Carson, recently deceased, joined in 1810, and continued a member until his removal from town in about 1845, and he was the owner of the fireman's cape that so long graced our hall. R. Brockett, W. Devaughn, and W. Morgan joined in 1816, and Wm. Gregory, S. Bartle, and J. Churchman in 1819—these,

with Mr. Cohagan, being the only persons hereabouts who were members of the company prior to 1833. In 1810, the company numbered only 26 members, of whom only 10 belonged thereto prior to 1800. From 1821 to 1833, only six persons joined, and eleven left or died. Up to 1822, new members were added every year, with two exceptions. The whole number that had joined up to 1833 being 101, at which date the company numbered only 20 members. In 1835, some 35 persons joined, but in 1837 the number was so small that a force could seldom be raised to convey the engine to a fire—horse power having been sometimes used for that purpose. In 1837, only eight persons belonged to the company who were members prior to 1833, and of these but one, Mr. Churchman, is now living, all, all having verified the averment—

“All that live must die,
Passing through nature
to eternity.”

In 1840, the Company numbered 146 members—now our name is legion—though I fear, many have a name on our list whose indisposition to run with the “machine” and man the brakes, scarcely entitle them to a place among us.

Wm. Mankin and myself now head the list of active members, all of our predecessors being either dead or missing—40 of the 146 having died, and many of the residue are merely nominal members. Of 18 who signed the constitution in 1835, ten have died. When the Company was first organized each member was required to furnish two buckets and a bag, which he was obliged to carry to every fire or be fined. The dues were per month, which were mostly spent in refreshments, the Company usually meeting at a tavern, until 1821, when the meetings were

held in the old town hall. No one was allowed to join the Company if two members objected; the initiation fee was \$2.50, and 50 cts. quarterly thereafter, and any member who refused to pay his dues was expelled.

In 1780, there was received at six meetings, for fines and dues, \$1500 of the old continental issue, \$1 of which was only worth, at that time, 8 cents, but after it became so depreciated dues were required to be paid in specie. Of this continental money \$927 was annually reported to be on hand until 1827, when it ceased to be noted, no reference to it having been made after the death of the old Secretary, Mr. Robinson. In 1826, the initiation fee was lowered to \$1, the old rate having, doubtless, tended to prevent accessions to the Company, its membership, long limited to 45, never having exceeded 30 at one time until 1838. The initiation is now 25 cts.

MEETINGS AND OFFICERS. — The meetings of the Company were held monthly, until 1799; quarterly meetings were then adopted, and continued until recently, when monthly meetings were resumed. In 1781, a meeting was omitted because, as the record states, the clerk had “gone in pursuit of an enemy’s boat,” thus directly identifying the Friendship with the revolutionary struggle. Under the old rule, and until lately, the members were required to meet monthly to try the engine. For many years each member in rotation had to serve as clerk for three months, and for the ensuing three months had to act as President, or find a substitute. A President was not regularly elected till 1838, when C. Koones was appointed, his successors being J. Muir, J. Mankin, B. Thomas, and J.W. Atkinson. A Treasurer was elected quarterly; commanders, regulators, and property-men

being appointed for the first time in 1785, and a stated clerk at a salary of \$5 a year, in 1789. This rule as to officers was continued until under a compact made in 1796, between the several companies, three commanders, three directors, three regulators, and three trustees, were required to be appointed annually by each company. These officers were “obliged to wear, at times of fire, by way of distinction, black caps with upright white fronts.” This compact, now before me as printed, was, I believe, never annulled, and continued to be conformed to until 1838, when our officers, as now designated, were required to be elected.

ENGINE HOUSES AND LOCATION. — The first Engine House built by the Company was erected in 1775, and cost exactly £4 or \$11—a much less imposing structure, as you may well imagine, than the one in which we are now assembled. That, however, was a utilitarian era when “what will serve is fit,” was regarded as the *rule*, and not, as now, the exception. This unpretending house, shed, or shanty was displaced in 1784, for a one story frame building, about 10 feet high, 10 feet wide, and 12 feet long, and without any interior finish, which cost £28 or \$93. The Company continued to occupy said house until 1838, when it was sold and removed to the wharf, near Prince street, where it remained until the building of the Messrs. McVeigh’s warehouses, but whether it was destroyed or again removed, I know not. This house, with the first one, was located on Royal street, at the entrance of the alley adjoining the Market House, the lot 15 by 36 feet, having been granted to the Company by the Hastings Court, 10 lbs. tobacco being paid by the Company for an order to that effect. The Company in 1838, having determined to change the location of its apparatus, erected on King street, north side near Columbus

street, a two story frame Engine House, with a steeple, costing \$400, of which \$150 was paid by Council, and the residue was raised by the Company. This building was removed to Alfred street, our present location, in 1851, at a cost of \$75, of which Council paid \$50, the lot on King street having been merely a grant for ten years, without charge, from Dean & Co.; and on being greatly damaged by fire in 1855, was sold and removed to Payne street, where it was occupied as a dwelling, until recently destroyed by fire, giving place to the present imposing brick edifice, with its towering steeple, lofty stories, mastic front, massive doors, iron columns and veranda, spacious engine room, and commodious and handsomely furnished hall. This structure cost over \$2000, of which \$500 was paid by the City Council, \$250 by Insurance Companies and Banks, \$537 was raised by means of a fair, the residue being generously contributed by the Company and citizens generally. The present house is 20 feet wide, 45 feet long, and 40 feet high, the entire height, including the steeple, being 100 feet. The lot now occupied by the Company was bought in 1851 by the City Council for \$325, the lot vacated on Royal street, by increasing the width of the entrance into Market alley, being fully equivalent, as a public accommodation to the sum so paid. The old house was damaged by fire in March, and the new one was occupied in November ensuing.

Friendship Fire Company³ by J. Muir

ENGINES. — The first Engine owned by the Company, was a small spouting or gallery engine, built by Gibbs, of Philadelphia, in 1775, and was constructed so as to be filled by buckets, or by means of a spout, the wheels being made very low, to admit of the engine being placed under a pump.

This engine cost £81, or \$272, and was sold in 1809 for \$75. The second engine, usually called "Blue Dick," was built by Lyon, of Philadelphia, in 1799, and cost \$500. This engine was always trusty and true; rarely, if ever, being called into service without rendering efficient duty, and was sold in 1851 to Mr. Rodgers, of Baltimore. On the union of the Friendship and Crescent Companies in 1838, the former came in possession of a tolerably effective engine, of about like size and model of "Blue Dick," styled "No. 2," and which, on many occasions, rendered effectual service in staying the fiery foe. This engine formerly belonged to the Sun or Star, and was bought in 1824 by the "King Street Company," subsequently styled the "Crescent," and in 1855 was sold to Mr. Carr, in part payment for a bell.

The beautiful Suction Engine now owned by the Company, was built in 1851, by Mr. Rodgers, of Baltimore, and cost \$1100, of which the Corporation paid \$800, and it was repaired and repainted in 1855, at a cost of \$300, Council paying \$180. This Engine is of the most substantial construction, having a mahogany box, balloon shaped air vessel, levers and arms of best style, and wheels of unusual strength, as best suited to a rapid movement over our rough streets -- the whole constituting an engine of decided beauty and efficiency.

REELS AND HOSE. — The first Hose Reel ever owned by the Company, is the large and cumbersome one now belonging to it, that was built in 1839, by Mr. J. Summers, of Alexandria, and cost \$150, which was paid by the Corporation. The small Reel, or "Plug Catcher," was built in 1851, by Mr. Rodgers, and cost \$75, which was paid by the Company, and another handsome four wheel Reel, is now being built by Mr. Prettyman, by order of the City council, at a cost of \$350.

The first Hose owned by the Company was granted by Council in 1839, when the Friendship received 300 feet, the Sun 300 feet, and the Relief 100 feet. In 1840, the Friendship received 100 feet more, and in 1851 about 200 feet of rubber hose was received from the Corporation—some 350 feet of rather indifferent hose being all that is now in possession of the Company.

BELLS AND BANNERS. — The first bell owned by the Company, or by any Alexandria Fire Company, was bought in 1839, at auction, for \$34, and weighed 186 lbs. This bell originally belonged to a light boat, and was rendered useless by the fire which took place in 1855. A new bell, weighing 350 lbs., and costing \$150, was bought of Mr. Carr, same year, the old bell and engine being taken in part payment. This bell was accidentally broken in saluting a visiting Fire Company, shortly after being swung, and the present finely toned bell, weighing about 500 lbs., and costing, with its fixtures, \$220, was bought of Register & Webb, Baltimore—the injured bell being taken in part payment.

The handsome green Banner of the Company was purchased in 1839, and cost \$50; and "the star-spangled banner" that has so frequently waved from our flag staff, was bought the same year.

AXES AND TORCHES. — Axes ever formed a part of the Friendship's fire "fixins," and our axemen have usually been very prompt in wielding them, if not quite so judicious at all times as might be desired.

The first Torch owned by the Company, was bought in Baltimore, in 1814, by C. Pascoe, for \$3, and T. Shields was appointed to take charge of it; and this is the

only torch known to have been in the Company's possession up to 1839, when four handsome brass torches, costing \$3 each, were bought, and are still in use, though two are frequently untrimmed when needed. R.F. Prettyman was appointed a torch-bearer in 1835, and was the first minor that joined the Company, and is still a member. Hooks and ladders were in possession of the Company as early as 1777, to which hooks and chains were attached in 1787; but these very useful "fixins" have not been in possession of the Company for many years.

BADGES AND UNIFORMS. — Prior to 1839, badges were used only by the officers, a plain yellow badge, with black letters, denoting the position of the member. In 1839, large fire capes, costing \$3 each, and a hat badge to correspond, were adopted and generally worn, but soon fell into disuse. Subsequently, a blue frock coat, with metal buttons, met with a like fate. In 1852, a general distribution was made to all the Fire Companies, by order of Council, but these, also, have nearly disappeared. The uniform of the Company now is a blue jacket and handsomely painted hat.

FRIENDSHIP AND CRESCENT UNION. — On the organization of the Hydraulion Fire Company, in 1827, and the location of its Engine House and Engines in the Market Square, it soon became apparent that an efficient membership for three companies—the Friendship, Sun, and Hydraulion, whose apparatus was so contiguous—could not be maintained, and hence at a meeting, in 1838, of 14 members of the Friendship, six of whom have since died, on motion of J. Muir, it was "resolved, that the interest of the Company, and the wishes of the community, require the removal of the Engine to some eligible location west of Columbus street." The

expediency of this removal was the more apparent from the fact that, excepting the Crescent—which was organized in 1824, and had a large membership but rather unreliable apparatus—there was no Company west of Washington street, and the Crescent, moreover, was desirous to unite with the Friendship, provided its location was changed. This resolution of the Friendship was immediately responded to by the Crescent, which agreed to unite with the Friendship, provided the members of the former would be received as members of the latter without any initiation fee. On this being agreed to, the two companies became united, and the Friendship at once received an accession of 48 members, of whom probably not over five persons can now be regarded as belonging to the Company. The Engine was then temporarily removed to the Crescent house, which was located on the south side of King street, between Fayette and Henry streets, and was about like size and model of that vacated on Royal street—the lot being the property of Wm. Veitch. So ended the Crescent.

MISCELLANEOUS. — In 1807, staffs, shaped like handspikes, were used by the regulators, and were so used until 1838. In 1825, the Secretary presented a claim of \$125 for services, and ten shares of bank stock, held by the Company, were sold to pay him.

In 1833, an effort was made to re-organize the Company, but one meeting having been held during four years preceding. In 1839, a complimentary letter, enclosing a voluntary donation of \$50, was received from an Insurance Company, because of services rendered at the City Hotel; and the first and most imposing firemen's procession that ever occurred in Alexandria, took place the same year. Hose were used in our city for the first

time in 1827, when they were used by several companies who came down from Washington, to aid in extinguishing the great fire which occurred that year. Leather buckets were used more or less until 1840, when all our companies obtained hose. Under the old *regime*, every occupant of a house was required by a law still extant, though now obsolete, to "provide as many fire buckets, made of leather, and to hold 2 ½ gallons each, as should be equal in number to the stories of such house."

These buckets were required to be taken or sent to every fire, and were usually filled at a pump and passed by hand to the engine, which was placed near the fire, and from thence again returned to the pump, thus making a complete and often tedious circuit through a double line of men and boys extending from the pump to the engine.

CONCLUSION. — Such are some of the many incidents relating to the Friendship Fire Company, the recital of which may not be inappropriate to the present occasion—tending as they do to show the rise, progress, and present condition of an Institution whose decline, it is hoped, no one present will have occasion to recount.

The Company has just completed the most important of its many undertakings—the erection of an edifice that is truly creditable to the Company and ornamental to the city, and, being entirely paid for, is one of which the Friendship may well be proud—if that pride begets, as it should, an enduring Friendship upon the part of its members for each other, and "the rest of mankind"—

"For only *Friendship* among men is the true republic,
Where all have equality of service and all have freedom of command."

FELLOW FIREMEN — I thank you for your respectful attention, and hope, if you have not been particularly interested or instructed, that you do not regret your attendance. On some future occasion, if you will favor me with your presence, I may make some reference to the duties of a fireman, both as regards himself and the public generally, and, also, as to the duty of the public in respect to firemen.

Pending the delivery of the lecture, frequent reference was made to the Company's records, for the purpose of verifying many of the lecturer's statements.

After 24 years in crisis management, Dr. Carter is now enjoying his retirement as a part-time museum aide at Friendship Firehouse and is working on a project to identify names and occupations of early volunteer firefighters in Alexandria.

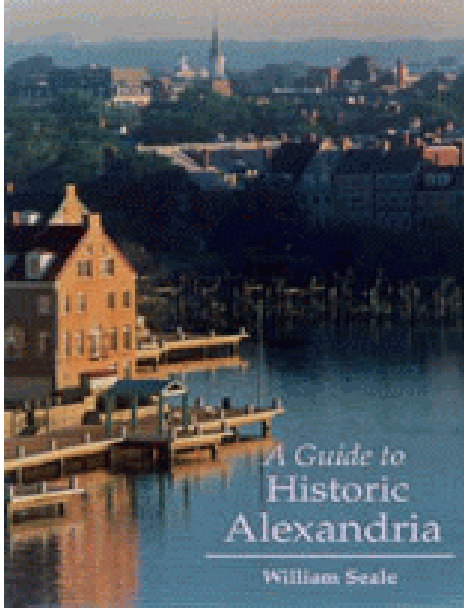


Notes:

¹ *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, November 3, 1855.

² *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, November 21, 1857.

³ *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, November 23, 1857.



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is published by the Office of
Historic Alexandria.
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