

Firefighting in Colonial America



By Paul Hashagen - Firehouse® contributing editor

History

The history of firefighting in America can be traced all the way back to Jamestown, Virginia, the first permanent English settlement in the New World. Founded in 1607 by colonists from the London Company, Jamestown was under the command of Captain James Smith. It did not take long for fire to begin taking its toll on the new settlers.

In January 1608, a devastating fire destroyed most of the colonists' provisions and lodgings. Smith made a concise assessment of the situation: "I begin to think that it is safer for me to dwell in the wild Indian country than in this stockade, where fools accidentally discharge their muskets and others burn down their homes at night."

390 years later, Smith's read on America's safety issues is not that much different than today's. Our headlines still feature the same two elements - fire and guns.

New World

The population of the New World continued to rise as shiploads of immigrants stepped ashore looking for a fresh start in a new land. Cities began to take shape, and the problems Smith found in the small stockade multiplied as more and more structures were added. The fire load in these cities increased as forests were cleared and wooden homes and buildings were constructed.

The communities that sprang up around three of the best harbors - Boston, New York and Philadelphia - soon faced a number of social problems involving housing, sanitation, water supply and the danger of fire. These three cities, and the firefighters who eventually stepped forward to protect them, set the course early on as to the direction and shape the American Fire Service would take.

1600s

In 1648, New Amsterdam (later New York) Governor Peter Stuyvesant stood firmly on his peg leg and appointed four men to act as fire wardens. They were empowered to inspect all chimneys and to fine any violators of the rules. The city burghers later appointed eight prominent citizens to the "Rattle Watch" - these men volunteered to patrol the streets at night carrying large wooden rattles. If a fire was seen, the men spun the rattles, then directed the responding citizens to form bucket brigades. This is generally recognized as the first step in organized firefighting in America.

Even earlier, Boston's city fathers took the first steps in fire prevention when Governor John Winthrop outlawed wooden chimneys and thatched roofs in 1631. Forty years later, Boston suffered a series of arson fires and finally a conflagration in 1676. The small "engine" built by local ironmaker Joseph Jynks, probably a syringe-type pump, had little effect on the swelling wall of flames. Shortly after the fire, Bostonians sent for the "state of the art fire engine" then being made in England. The three-foot-long, 18-inch-wide wooden box arrived with carrying handles and a direct-force pump that fed a small hose. The tub-like section of the engine was kept filled with water by a bucket brigade.

The need to coordinate these efforts brought about the establishment of the first engine company in colonial America. Twelve men and a captain were "hired" by the General Court to care for and manage the engine and to be paid for their work. On January 27, 1678, this company went into service. Its captain (foreman), Thomas Atkins, was actually the first firefighting officer in the country.

1700s

Two Newsham engines arrived in New York in December 1732. Jacob Turck was appointed to take charge of the engines and to keep them in repair at his own cost after a 10-pound salary was advanced him. Turck also worked on a pump of his own design, perhaps the first mechanical fire pumper built in America.

Most notable among the famous Americans who helped shape the country and the Fire Service was Benjamin Franklin, a writer, printer, philosopher, scientist, statesman of the American Revolution - and a fireman. Franklin helped draft the Declaration of Independence, served as a diplomat, and invented items that ranged from lightning rods to bifocal eyeglasses. In 1736, Franklin founded the Union Fire Company in Philadelphia, which became the standard for volunteer fire company organization.

Two important "tools" utilized by early American firemen were the bed key and salvage bags. With firefighting apparatus able to supply only a small stream of water, a fire that began to gain any headway was soon out of control. Arriving firemen quite often opted for immediate salvage efforts in the fire building and surrounding exposures. The bed key was a small metal tool that allowed the men to quickly disassemble the wooden frame of a bed, quite often the most valuable item owned by a family, and remove it to safety. Other household goods of any value were snatched up, placed in salvage bags and carried to safety.

Fire Insurance

The first attempt at fire insurance went bust after a devastating fire in Charlestown, MA, in 1736. Ben Franklin then organized the "Philadelphia Contributorship" to insure houses from loss by fire in 1740, a venture that was a success. The company adopted "fire marks" to be affixed to the front of the insured's property for easy identification.

With rules to provide for buckets, hooks, ladders and the formation of volunteer companies, firefighting started to become formalized. The chain of command fell in place as officers of various ranks were established. Firemen devised new and better ways to accomplish their mission; everything from helmets to hoses were invented or improved. Firemen in Philadelphia, New York, Boston and other cities made major advances in the technology and theory of firefighting.

Legacy of Colonial Firefighters

The legacy of colonial firefighters can still be seen in fire department operations and organization across the country to this day. The wooden hydrants are gone but the iron willed determination of American firefighters is as strong as ever.