

## Firefighting History Timeline, 1608-1909

07/07/10 2581 W - + 8 - 8

Four years ago, Yours Truly [posted the following n the Firehouse forums](#). Last month the thread came alive, after laying or perhaps lying dormant for many months. Below is the original posting, and with reader replied information merged into same.

Firefighters Forum  
 February 13, 2006

I recently went looking for a detailed timeline on the early history of firefighting in the United States. I couldn't find one with enough detail, so I skimmed a bunch of books and a bunch of web sites and created the following. Please add, edit, correct, or debate anything. It's America-centric, alas. And is *not* annotated with sources.

### 1600

- 1608 (or 1607 or 1609) - First recorded fire in America, Jamestown, VA.
- 1613 - Dutch trading ship Tiger burns in New York Harbor, forcing crew to be first Manhattan settlers.
- 1615 - Crude hand pumps mounted on skids or wheels used in Germany by this time.
- 1623 - Fire destroys seven dwellings in Plymouth, nearly ends settlement.
- 1638 - First no-smoking law in America, MA. Due to numerous fires, residents not allowed to smoke tobacco outdoors.
- 1648 - First fire wardens appointed, New Amsterdam. The four are charged with the responsibility of checking residential chimneys and levying fines as necessary.
- 1653 - Boston burns, leads to laws requiring all houses having at least one ladder. Also leads to public purchasing of fire equipment.
- 1654 (or 1653) - First fire engine used in America, Boston.
- 1657 or soon after - First night watch created, New Amsterdam. Eight men walk the streets after dark, watching for fires and stopping anyone who looks suspicious. They carry rattles to sound a fire alarm.
- 1658 ? - First fireman in America.
- 1666 - Great London Fire inspires new firefighting techniques, such as using gunpowder to create fire breaks. Also inspires development of hand-powered piston pumps.
- 1672 (or 1673) - First fire hose / leather fire hose, Holland. Fifty-foot sections of leather hose stitched together like boot legs. Fifty-foot section lengths remain standard to this day.
- 1676 - November 27. Fire at Boston destroys large part of North End, including Increase Mather's church.
- 1676 or soon after - First state-of-art fire engine in America, Boston. Ordered from England after conflagration in 1876. Replaces small "ingine" built by local ironmaker.
- 1678 (or 1679) - First fire engine arrives, imported from England, in Boston.

### 1700

- 1711 - "Towne House Fire" in Boston.
- 1718 - Mutual Fire Society organized in Boston by progressive citizens, This first volunteer fire company in America only battled fire amongst its members homes.
- 1725 (or 1721) - First fire engine to throw continuous stream of water patented, England.
- 1736 - First volunteer fire company in America by Ben Franklin, Philadelphia.
- 1740 - Felt top hat adopted for firefighting by Jacob Turck, New York. Leather hat has high crown and narrow brim.
- 1743 - First successful fire engine designed and built in America, New York.
- 1750, ca - Cash awards for first-arriving (or was it first-water?) fire companies started. Companies begin racing each other to fire scenes.
- 1752 - First successful fire insurance company founded by Ben Franklin, Philadelphia.
- 1768 - First American fire engine manufacturing company formed, Philadelphia.
- 1776 - September 21 - New York burned. American patriots believed to have "scorched earth" for the British by fire that destroyed 493 buildings.
- 1788 - March 21 - New Orleans destroyed by fire on Good Friday. The fire was started by a curtain blowing over an open candle. Over

900 buildings (seven-eighths of town) burned.

- 1794 - First protective capes used for firefighting, Philadelphia.
- 1794 - Philadelphia-style apparatus developed.
- 1796 - First water main system installed, Boston. (Or did Manhattan beat Boston with same?)
- 1799 - First hook and ladder truck used, hand-drawn, Philadelphia.

## 1800

- 1800 - First fireboat, New York City.
- 1801 - First post-type hydrant, Philadelphia.
- 1803 (or 1807) - First hose wagon and hose company, Philadelphia.
- 1803, circa - First apparatus bell, Philadelphia Hose No. 1. [FE/FF]
- 1803, circa - First apparatus gong, Philadelphia Hose No. 1. Supplanted bell. [FE/FF]
- 1803, circa - First apparatus siren, Philadelphia Hose No. 1. Augmented gong. [FE/FF]
- 1803 - Fort Dearborn (Chicago) founded.
- 1803 - Volunteer fire department established in Cincinnati, OH.
- 1803 - Wooden hydrants installed in Philadelphia.
- 1805 - June 11 - Detroit, Michigan destroyed by fire.
- 1806 - In the aftermath of a major fire in Philadelphia, hydrant inspections began.
- 1807 - Early fire prevention activity in Washington, DC resulted in all chimneys being cleaned.
- 1807 - First metal-riveted leather hose, Philadelphia.
- 1808 - Fire Bucket Company formed in Cincinnati Ohio.
- 1808 - First two-wheel "jumper reel" developed.
- 1808 - NYC got first hydrant attached to underground water main.
- 1809 - The first fireboat (Engine 42 of New York) was hand-rowed and hand-pumped.
- 1810 - First professional firefighting organization formed, Paris.
- 1811 - Friendly competition between fire companies begins with formation of second fire company in Philadelphia.
- 1811 - May 31 - Newburyport, MA, burns. 250 buildings.
- 1811 - Philadelphia diverted water from storage trunks in the street for use in fighting.
- 1811 - Philadelphia Hose Co. formed.
- 1812 - First four-wheel hose reel.
- 1816 - Richmond, VA organized the Richmond Fire Society for the purpose rendering mutual aid.
- 1817 - Standards for manufacturing of leather hose appear.
- 1818 - First female firefighter, Molly Williams, black slave of Oceanus Engine 11 member, New York. [FE/FF]
- 1819 - All New York engines retrofitted with suction capabilities, now that strong suction hose is available. No more dumping water into apparatus by hand.
- 1819 - First booster tank, Boston. Quickly abandoned, as unfair advantage over fire companies not transporting water. [FE/FF]
- 1819 - Philadelphia organized a special fire patrol group to perform salvage work.
- 1820 - January 11 - Savannah, GA burns, 463 buildings. [FE/FF]
- 1821 - Rubber-lined cotton-web fire hose patented, America.
- 1823 (or 1810) - First apparatus manufactured with suction hose fittings.
- 1823 - December 1 - First firefighters strike, Boston volunteers walk off the job. [FE/FF]
- 1824 - Metal wire framework added to fire helmet.

## 1825

- 1828 - Leather fire helmet designed by Henry T. Gratacap with rear brim and curved sides, New York. [FE/FF]
- 1829 - Steam fire engine invented by George Braithwaite in London. No interest from English fire insurance companies, or American volunteers. Development of steamers stalled for decades. [FE/FF]
- 1829 - December 31 - Cincinnati burns, 33 buildings, all of downtown. [FE/FF]
- 1830 - First railroad to evolve into major system. Apparatus can now travel for competitions and mutual aid.
- 1832 - First fire horse, Mutual Hook and Ladder Company No. 1 in New York. [FE/FF]
- 1835 - December 16 - New York burns, some 674 buildings in a 17-block area of 50 acres. Losses exceed \$20M. Worst urban fire since London in 1666. [FE/FF]
- 1836 - Fire helmet brim bent downward and metal attached to top edge, New York.

- 1836 - New York volunteer brawling becomes increasingly violent. Other major cities also experience similar problems. [FE/FF]
- 1837 - June 10 - Broad Street Riot in Boston. Firemen fight Irishmen all day.
- 1837 - Milwaukee, WI formed its first volunteer fire company.
- 1838 - April 27 - Charleston, SC, burns, \$4M damage. [FE/FF]
- 1838 - Button & Company begin building piano-style hand engines. [FE/FF]
- 1839 - Electric telegraph fire alarm system invented, Dr. William F. Channing, Boston. [FE/FF]
- 1839 - First insurance patrol, Fire Police Force organized by New York Board of Fire Underwriters. [FE/FF].
- 1839 - Mobile, AL burns. 600 buildings. [FE/FF]
- 1839 or about - First rubber fire hose.
- 1840 - Red flannel shirt, blank pants, and fancy suspenders adopted by Old Honey Bees fire company in New York. Becomes traditional outfit in fire service. [FE/FF]
- 1840s-1850s - First facilities for hanging hose in fire stations.
- 1841 - First American steam fire engine built by Paul Ramsey Hodge in New York, used only a few months. [FE/FF]
- 1841 - John Agnew starts production on Philadelphia-style double-decker hand engines, with twin sets of brakes. [FE/FF]
- 1844 - Philadelphia riot involving volunteer firemen. Eight people killed, and several buildings burned. [FE/FF]
- 1845 - April 10 - Great Fire at Pittsburgh; 982 buildings burned, mostly dwellings.
- 1845 - New York burns, 300 buildings, 30 people killed including four firefighters. [FE/FF]
- 1845 - First insurance patrol wagon, for Fire Police Force in New York. [FE/FF]
- 1846 - July 13 - Fire in Nantucket; 300 buildings destroyed. Brought an end to the town's whaling supremacy. [FE/FF]
- 1847 - Dudley L. Farnham and Franklin Ransom patent row-boat style hand engines. Sold in Midwest. [FE/FF]
- 1847-1854 - 1,600,000 Irish immigrate following famine, many take to firefighting. Their sons and grandsons continue in the profession, and the Irish tradition in the fire service is born. [FE/FF]
- 1848 - Albany, NY, burns, 600 buildings. [FE/FF]
- 1849 - San Francisco. A conflagration caused by arson results in \$12 million in property damage. Following the fire, vigilante groups are organized to patrol the city and watch for more arsonists.
- 1849 - St. Louis, MO, burns, 430 buildings and 23 steamboats. [FE/FF]

## 1850

- 1850, circa - First use of fire horses.
- 1850 - Philadelphia burns. 400 buildings, 39 people dead. [FE/FF]
- 1851 - September 25 - Buffalo, NY, burns. 200 buildings. [FE/FF]
- 1851 - Library of Congress in Capitol Building in Washington DC burns. [FE/FF]
- 1851 - Cincinnati suffers major fire while volunteer firefighters riot. City commissions building of steam engine and organizes salaried department. [FE/FF]
- 1851 - May 4 - Worst of six big incendiary fires that swept San Francisco between December, 1849, and June, 1851. This one destroys almost the entire city.
- 1852 - First fire box alarm, Boston. Fire alarm system built by Moses G. Farmer. [FE/FF]
- 1852 - First fire-alarm telegraph central office and street box system inaugurated at Boston.
- 1852 - Patent issued for first sprinkler-perforated pipe system. This was the first recognized installation of fire protection equipment.
- 1853 - Cincinnati becomes first paid fire department, and full-time paid in 1873. [FE/FF]
- 1853 - January 1 - Cincinnati tests first successful American steam engine, built by Latta & Shawk. [FE/FF]
- 1853 - December 27 - Great Republic, biggest clipper ship ever built, burns in New York on eve of her maiden voyage.
- 1853 - Latta Brothers steam fire engine, "Uncle Joe Ross," revolutionizes firefighting. Cincinnati becomes the first American city to replace volunteers with the horse-drawn steam fire engine, and to form a paid fire department.
- 1857 - Louisville, KY, and then St. Louis, MO, become second and third fully-paid fire departments.
- 1858 - Crystal Palace fire, in New York City .
- 1858, Circa - Shanghais hand engines developed, used only in New York. [FE/FF]
- 1860 - February 2 - Elm Street Tenement Fire in New York City; 200 killed. Laws requiring fire escapes were passed as a result of this fire.
- 1860 - January 10 - Pemberton Mills Fire in Lawrence, MA, kills 115.
- 1861 - December 11 - Most of Charleston is destroyed by fire.
- 1861 - Fort Sumter attacked. Civil War begins. New York City firefighters organize the first Fire Zouaves regiments and leave for the battlefield.

1861 - Milwaukee establishes a paid fire company.

- 1861 - Washington, DC, fire department becomes a fully paid organization and installs a fire alarm telegraph.
- 1863 - Fire extinguisher patented.
- 1864 - Chemical fire engine invented, France. [FE/FF]
- 1864 - November 8 - "Southern Conspiracy" to burn New York.
- 1865 - April 27 - S.S. Sultana explodes in Mississippi River; 1450 killed.
- 1865 - July 31 - New York City forms paid fire department with 89 steamers, 11 hook and ladders, and 54 hose companies. Firefighters number about 500. [FE/FF]
- 1866 - July 4 - Great Fire in Portland, Maine. Firecracker starts blaze that destroys 1500 buildings.
- 1868 - First successful aerial ladder invented by Daniel Hayes, Superintendent of Steamers for San Francisco FD. [FE/FF]
- 1870 - Philadelphia forms paid fire department.
- 1870 - Rubber, cotton-covered hose developed.
- 1870 or so - Isolated residential districts are rare before this time.
- 1870 or so - Red brick architecture begins to dominate municipal buildings.
- 1871 - George Skinner patents apparatus-mounted, self-supporting aerial ladder. [FE/FF]
- 1871 - Great Chicago Fire. Killed 300 people. Destroyed 17,000+ structures and over 2000 acres in 27 hours.
- 1871 - Great Peshtigo Fire. Occurred same time as Great Chicago Fire. Killed between 1,200 and 2,400 people. Covered 1.5 million acres of forest.
- 1871 - Philadelphia forms fully-paid fire department. [FE/FF]
- 1871 - Quick horse hitch likely invented, firefighter in Saint Joseph, MO. [FE/FF]
- 1871 - Double-harness for two-horse hitches developed by Allegheny, PA, firefighters. [FE/FF]
- 1872 - Automatic sprinkler patented, Abington, MA.
- 1872 - Epizootic epidemic kills fire horses in Canada and northeastern United States. [FE/FF]
- 1872 - November 9 - Great Epizootic Fire, Boston. Burned 16 hours, destroyed 776 buildings, left 20,000 unemployed, 1,000 homeless, 14 dead including 11 firefighters, and \$76 million damage. [FE/FF]
  - Over 70 insurance companies go bankrupt as a result of the Great Fire of Boston. The surviving companies form the National Board of Underwriters and establish safeguards for insurance companies to follow.
- 1873 - First iron-hull boat built especially for firefighting, Boston. [FE/FF].
- 1873 - Hanging horse harness invented, Charles E. Berry, firefighter in Cambridge, MA. [FE/FF]
- 1873 - International Association of Fire Engineers holds first convention and adopts standard hose coupling size.
- 1874 - First high-pressure water system for fighting fires installed in Rochester, NY . [FE/FF]
- 1874 - First automatic fire sprinkler head invented by Henry Parmalee. [FE/FF]
- 1874 - American District Telegraph (ADT) Company in Baltimore offers telegraphic fire alarm box service to subscribers. [FE/FF]

## 1875

- 1875 - First water tower developed by Abner and Albert Greenleaf and John B. Logan, consisting of 50-foot mast sections assembled at scene and raised by cranks and gears. Patented 1876. Completed 1879. [FE/FF]
  - Slightly more than 100 built, last for Los Angeles in 1937. [FE/FF]
- 1876 - December 5 - Brooklyn Theater Fire; 295 killed.
- 1878 - Wooden fire pole developed by Captain David B. Kenyon of Engine Co. 21 in Chicago, IL. [FE/FF]
- 1878 - Seamless cotton hose appears by this time. The hose is also capable of being packed flat, unlike rubber hose which required rolling on a reel. Hose wagons are developed to transport the new hose.
- 1880 - First brass fire pole, by Captain Charles Allen of Engine Co. 1 in Worcester, MA. [FE/FF]
- 1880 - Frederick Grinnell improved upon the automatic sprinkler. Insurance companies cut rates to businesses installing Grinnell sprinklers.
- 1882 - Pompier/scaling ladder patented by Chris Hoell, Foreman of Hook & Ladder 6 in, St. Louis, MO.
- 1883 - First telescopic water tower developed by George C. Hale, Fire Chief of Kansas City, MO. Raised by hydraulic pressure. [FE/FF]
- 1889 - June 6 - Fire destroys 31 blocks in center of city and along the waterfront in Seattle, WA.
- 1895 - Gleason & Bailey begin making aerial ladders raised by drum and cable. [FE/FF]
- 1898, circa - Henry H. Gorter, mechanic of San Francisco FD, develops water towers raised by water pump. Pacific coast only. [FE/FF]

## 1900

- 1900 - June 30 - Fire sweeps through Hoboken, NJ, waterfront; 400 killed.

- 1900 - September 8 - Flood in Galveston, TX, kills 5000.
- 1901 - Spring-raised aerial ladder patented by Frederick S. Seagrave, Columbus, OH. [FE/FF]
- 1901 - May 3 - Fire destroys 1700 buildings in Jacksonville, FL.
- 1903 - Iroquois Theater burns, Chicago, spurs new fire inspection laws.
- 1904 - February 7 - Great Fire at Baltimore. 80 downtown blocks, 1343 buildings. Inability of mutual aid companies to connect hoses raises national attention for standardized hose couplings and threads.
- 1904 - June 15 - Steamboat burns in New York, killing 1,030, mostly children. General Slocum, excursion steamer with combustibles on board, catches on fire while cruising in New York's East River. Fire lead to inspection of ships in New York Harbor.
- 1904 - Successful breathing apparatus invented, but not adopted for a number of years.
- 1906 - Motor apparatus appears in America, notably Waterous pumper entering service in Wayne, PA.
- 1906 - San Francisco earthquake and fire.
- 1907 - Gasoline-powered motors and pumps begin to appear in the fire service.
- 1907 - Invention of first pumper with a single engine for both driving and pumping.
- 1907 - Underwriters Laboratories initiated its factory inspection service and began to issue labels for "approved devices."
- 1908 - April 12. Conflagration in Chelsea, MA, burns 3,500 buildings and kills eighteen.
- 1908 - March 4 - Fire at Lakeview Grammar School in Collinwood, OH. 175 children and one teacher are killed.
- 1909 - First triple-combination apparatus, built by Tea Tray Company on American Motors chassis and delivered to Middletown, NY.

## Sources

- FE/FF - *Fire Engines, Firefighters* by Paul C. Ditzel.

---

Fayetteville org. in 1895....Didn't know if this was the first dept. in NC

**Fire-Dogg132** - 07/07/10 - 23:08

Name: (real name preferred)  
E-mail: (optional)  
Web Site: (optional)

Remember personal info?

Yes

No

Comment:

/ [Textile](#)

Comment moderation is enabled on this site. This means that your comment will not be visible on this site until it has been approved by an editor.

To prevent spam we require you to answer this silly question

**What are the FIRST TWO LETTERS of the word 'fire'?**

[\(Register your username / Log in\)](#)

Notify: Yes, send me email when someone replies.

Hide email: Yes, hide my email address.