

QUEST FOR PITTSBURGH FIRE DEPARTMENT HISTORY

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No proper history of the Pittsburgh fire department exists, and it is possible that none ever can be produced. The materials are missing. Fires, floods and human carelessness have destroyed them.

Now and again the need for such a book is expressed by a public official or an antiquarian scholar interested only in the philosophical aspects of the theme. In recent years it has been suggested several times that a fire department history be written by a person familiar with the subject from having, like Shakespeare's dyer, worked in it. The difficulty involved, however, soon was realized to be, in effect, insuperable. It simply is not feasible to make an authentic, truly useful history out of non-existent data.

But some primary documents still survive and are available. In 1945 The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania staged an exhibition of relics of the big Pittsburgh fire of April 10, 1845. It observed the centennial anniversary of that conflagration not only by displaying souvenirs of the disaster but also by publishing a 40-page pamphlet of carefully garnered facts about it, including a comprehensive list of descendants of citizens whose properties were destroyed.

Most important, though, was evidence brought together in this booklet to indicate that the 1845 holocaust was of a sudden incidence and of a devastating violence so dynamic that no firefighting organization could be effective against it. The story of the disaster that reduced to ashes nearly one thousand buildings and their contents is not an account of what resistance there was to the fire but rather an admission of the sober truth that the flames raged unchecked for seven hours.

Pittsburgh had been ready to burn. Even the weather contributed

Mr. Fawcett, a native of Pittsburgh, has been writing for newspapers and magazines since boyhood. His recent researches have included studies of the language of the Declaration of Independence, the causes and results of the Allegheny Arsenal explosion of 1862 and the Homestead strike of 1892; historic Pittsburgh "firsts"; and the genealogies of the Roe, Noble, Lindsay, McCune, Byerly, Hays, Herron and associated families.—Ed.

to the catastrophe. "The wind each day blew a gale from morning until nightfall. There had been no rain for two weeks . . . Someone indeed may have reflected that the wind was alarmingly high, the town mostly built of wood, that there were only two water mains in the lower town . . . and that the reservoir on Quarry Hill was dangerously low. It may have been some consolation to know that there were many volunteer fire companies . . . Much of the fire hose, however, had been condemned months before, and in any event there was not water enough for all the engines to pump at the same time."¹

Just where and exactly when the fire started nobody knew then and certainly nobody knows now. The usual rumors were current while the flames still raged, and some of these were revived at the time of the centenary; but the mystery remains unsolved. What is definite is that Pittsburgh had a lesson in the peril of potential fire hazards which the community was reluctant to learn and, generally speaking, soon forgot. Even in 1966 existing dangers are all-too-commonly ignored.

But, fortunately, there always has been and probably always will be a few people who care. Pittsburgh began as a timber-built outpost. As Fort Duquesne, it was burned by the retreating French in November 1758.² The British rebuilt the stockade, and gradually the place became a village — a residential community of a primitive sort, subject to destruction by what Leigh Hunt called "the most tangible of all visible mysteries." By 1790 Pittsburgh "town" had 376 inhabitants, the whole of Allegheny County 10,322. With the exception of a very few homes built of brick, every house was a fire risk to itself and its neighbors.

That this circumstance was not entirely ignored is manifest from the fact that by 1810, when the population of the "town" had risen to 4,768, there were men interested enough in the problem of fire protection to be willing to volunteer to serve as firemen. Writing under the title "Our Firemen" in 1889, Charles T. Dawson, then or soon thereafter a reporter on the staff of the *Pittsburgh Post*, said:

The Pittsburgh Volunteers did noble service in the early days of town and city . . . A glance over the list of volunteer firemen of Pittsburgh shows the companies to have been composed of leading members of the community, whose only fault, when they had a fault, was that they were full of zeal and ambition to win distinction and earn the gratitude of their fellow-citizens.

¹ Charles F. C. Arensberg, "The Pittsburgh Fire of April 10, 1845," *THE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL MAGAZINE*, XXVIII, 11.

² *History of Pittsburgh*, edited by Erasmus Wilson (Chicago: H. R. Cornell & Co., 1898), 58.

It is the opinion of the same authority that: "The first organized company of which actual data can be obtained is the Eagle Fire Engine and Hose Company. This was organized in 1794, while Pittsburgh was yet a village . . . The engine was a 7½-inch double chamber, built in Philadelphia, from whence it was sent to Pittsburgh in wagons and in pieces." John Johnson — sometimes spelled Johnston — was the first engineer of the Eagle group, with Jeremiah Barker and Robert Magee as assistants.³ Dawson declares: "The company for the first sixteen years of its existence was managed by elderly men, the first citizens of the village, and none but residents of good standing, sober age, and unquestionable respectability were admitted to membership."

The Eagle firehouse or engine-house was a small building "near the corner of First street, now First avenue, and Chancery Lane, between Market and Ferry streets," according to Dawson. "It was always kept locked, Messrs. Barker, Johnston and Magee, who lived near at hand, each having keys." Specifically, they were neighborhood societies, and "meetings, in the early days, were as decorous as a modern Presbytery or Conference." As the older men retired, their more youthful successors reorganized the company. William Eichbaum was first engineer from 1811 until 1832, when the Pittsburgh Fire Department was established and he was elected its first chief engineer. Meanwhile, members of prominence included: Alexander McClurg, Thomas Short, Isaac Harris, James R. Butler, Dennis S. Scully, Harmar Denny, Anthony Ernest and George Boggs.

Second of the Pittsburgh volunteer fire-fighters brotherhoods appears to have been that known as the Vigilant Fire Company, established May 31, 1811, with the following officers, as listed in Riddle's Directory of Pittsburgh, 1815: William Wilkins, president; Thomas Baird, vice-president and first engineer; Archibald Shaw, inspector; John Liggett, William Lecky, Thomas McKee and J. W. Trimby, axe men; J. B. Clow, Joseph Oliver, John Hannon and Thomas Davis, property men; Thomas Fairman, Thomas Bracken, John Darragh and Robert Patterson, watermen; Henry Parry, John Fearis, Edward Goudy, Thomas Leggett, John McPherson, Abner Updegraff, William Semple and John McGrew, laddermen. The number of members was limited to sixty. Admission fee was three dollars, monthly contributions twelve-and-a-half cents.

But fire fighting in Pittsburgh was never entirely on a volunteer basis. It was part of each soldier's duty at Fort Pitt to guard against

³ Charles T. Dawson, *Our Firemen: The History of the Pittsburgh Fire Department* (Pittsburgh, 1889), 20-21.

conflagrations which might be started by an enemy or perhaps merely by the carelessness of comrades. But civilians also were expected to help to prevent fires and to assist in extinguishing them when they were accidentally caused. Russell Errett, writing in Warner's *History of Allegheny County*, 1889, explains :

The old borough of Pittsburgh compelled every householder to keep a certain number of leathern buckets always on hand. When a fire occurred each householder repaired with his leathern buckets (with his name painted on them) to the fire, where a double line was formed from the fire to the nearest pump, well or stream and the buckets, as filled, were passed up one side of the line and returned empty down the other side. This was a miserable provision for putting out a fire, but it was the best that could be made then. Fortunately, each house was detached from all others and, clumsy as this method was, it generally served to confine a fire to the premises on which it began. After 1808, when a small hand fire-engine was in use, the bucket brigade was still used to furnish water to the engine. It was not until a long time afterward that the city furnished a water supply and so ended the services of the bucket brigade.

If the bucket line in those days was democratic and obligatory, a different rule none the less prevailed in the volunteer companies. In Riddle's 1815 Directory of Pittsburgh it is made plain regarding the Eagle Company that : "To admit anyone as a member it requires the unanimous vote of those present after being proposed by some one of them." Money to purchase equipment for the volunteers also had a connotation of status. For example, Frank C. Harper, in *Pittsburgh of Today*, 1931, reports that James Horner "seems to have contributed 100 pounds of Pennsylvania currency toward the cost of the first fire-engine, September 12, 1792." This machine was the Eagle company's exclusive facility. It must have been costly since "all [citizens] of any position in the community" gave "according to their means." Still another sign of aristocratic atmosphere in the volunteer groups is to be found in the professions and business connections of leading members. Thus, John Caldwell was a tanner and lumber merchant, Joseph Rosenman a famous chairmaker, Samuel Douglas an attorney, William Hill a merchant, Dennis Scully owner of an auction and commission store, James R. Butler a gentleman who had been a captain in the Pittsburgh Blues in the War of 1812.

The sons of important citizens followed their fathers into fire-fighting. Among the number were : William Eichbaum, Jr., who was heir to his parent's wire and glass factories and himself a director of the Farmers and Merchants Bank, and William Graham, Jr., who was a merchant, like his father, in his own right.

It was no accident that there were firemen in the cavalry troop that Captain Magnus M. Murray led out to welcome Lafayette to Pittsburgh in 1825.

The Neptune Fire Company may have been organized as early as 1808. It definitely was in existence in 1815, according to Harper's researches.⁴ He believes that the Neptune engine was built in Pittsburgh, the body by "Squire" John Sampson of Manchester, the rest by John Arthurs. It was a 9¼-inch double-chamber contraption and was housed at Sixth Avenue and Wood Street "on the lot of the First Presbyterian Church." Later, it was located in a "barn" of a sort, at Cherry Alley and Sixth. A "more modern" engine was built by Smith & Minis, and members of rival companies attended a demonstration of its powers at Second and Grant streets in 1832(?). The officers of the Neptune Company in 1837 were: John McQueen, president; John Irwin, vice-president; R. Porter, secretary; William Edgar, captain; T. Myers, treasurer. There were eighty members then.

In 1841 the Neptune engine again was reconstructed, "retaining the old Smith & Minis works, dispensing with the water boxes and adding two side streams, besides lengthening the levers." Four years afterwards, additional improvements were made, the cost being \$690.87.

Some of the tinkering was conspicuously ill-advised. In 1856 a steam fire engine was put together by Joseph C. Lowry of the Neptune Company, but Harper insists: "It was too large and cumbersome to be of practical use." Then, a new hand engine was built by William M. Jones of Baltimore in 1857(?), the expense being \$2,700; but "the levers broke."

Naturally, the dimensions of the fire problem expanded as the population increased. Thus, only 2,400 people were involved in 1800, but the number rose to an estimated total of 9,000 in 1815. Changes in official attitudes logically were noted. As early as 1816, people were regarded as responsible for fires and for protection against unwanted fires, and an ordinance was published reading: "If the chimney of any person or persons within the . . . city shall take fire and blaze out at the top, the same not having been swept within the space of one calendar month next before the time of taking such fire, every such person or persons shall forfeit and pay the sum of three dollars."⁵

The years 1823-1824 appear to have been unlucky for the Eagle Company, as the minutes quoted by Harper in *Pittsburgh of Today* contain some depressing allusions to "our former high standard" and

⁴ Frank C. Harper, *Pittsburgh of Today* (New York: The American Historical Society, Inc., 1931), I, 218.

⁵ *Pittsburgh in 1816*, compiled by the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (1926), 11.

prevailing "lack of efficiency"; but about 1825 conditions began to improve and talk about a new engine resulted in the purchase of one in 1827. City Councils subscribed seventy dollars of the money needed, members of the company paid an assessment of twelve-and-a-half cents a month toward the purchase for over a year and a half, and the banks supplied the remainder of the nine hundred dollars required. In the light of these facts, a document discovered recently in the archives of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania by Librarian-Editor Prudence B. Trimble assumes particular importance. It reads:

To the Select & Common Councils of
the City of Pittsburgh —
Gentlemen:

The undersigned have been appointed a committee, by the Eagle Fire Company, to address the councils, on the subject of procuring a building for the Eagle engine.

This engine has cost the company and the city upwards of nine hundred dollars. It is now protected from the weather, by the house of the Allegheny fire company. — This company are preparing to purchase another engine, in which events, the engine of the Eagle company must be turned out. — As it is public property and for the common benefit, — we respectfully ask the councils to make such provision as will secure this property — and in such way as their wisdom may direct. —

We remain

Your fellow citizens

Ross Wilkins
J. R. Roseburg
Geo. W. Jackson

Com. of Eagle Fire Company

May 26, 1830

This still sturdy, easily read "scrap of paper" obviously is history in the best, the most convincing, the most notably beautiful sense of the word. It dramatizes Harper's report that: "In 1832 . . . the Pittsburgh Fire Department was organized . . . [and] the Eagle was merged into that . . . Department."⁶

Of equal value to modern readers is another of Miss Trimble's finds in The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania archives which bears the endorsement: "In Common Council, June 28, 1830. Read, adopted & Committee discharged. E. G. Roberts, Clerk. In Select Council read & concurred in June 28, 1830. Sam. H. Scott Ck." The full text of this second new discovery is:

The Special Committee to whom was referred a communication from the Mayor dated 25th of January last, have given that communication and the objects therein noticed a full consideration, beg leave to offer the following as their report. —

The first object referred to by the Mayor is the false alarm by unruly boys "in imitation of the cry of *fire*," the punishment for which it is suggested should be provided for by an ordinance.

⁶ Harper, I, 217.

The first section of an ordinance (Chap. XVI) passed 7 September 1816 imposes a fine of four dollars "for raising and creating any false alarm of fire." Any greater fine or other enactment on that subject your committee deems inexpedient at this time.

The attention of your committee was next called to "the collection of boys and young men grouping themselves together in the evenings &c." Believing as your committee do, that the acts of Assembly have made sufficient provision for the suppression of riotous or noisy conduct by disorderly persons if properly administered, are of opinion that any interference by Councils is uncalled for and would perhaps be considered as assuming jurisdiction more properly belonging to the State Legislature.

The breach of the Sabbath day "by collections of boys in the streets or skating on the ponds and canals," does not in the opinion of your committee come within the province of the City Councils. The sanctity of that day being already guarded and protected by our State Laws, which if rigidly construed and enforced can be made sufficiently vexatious and oppressive without any interference of ours.⁷

Your committee readily concur with the Mayor that the organization of a city watch and the establishment of suitable watch-houses is a desirable object in the arrangement of our city police, yet there being other improvements more immediately necessary for the convenience and health of the citizens, such as paving and lighting our streets, extending the benefits of our waterworks, &c, that will require all the resources of our treasury for some time, and until the pecuniary affairs of the city are more ample your committee deem it inexpedient to take any measures relative to the organization of a city watch.

With submission to Councils your committee therefore ask leave to be discharged.

Wm. Hays
Abishai Way
John Sheriff

Here again surely is a precious fragment of the veritable fabric of history — good, strong handmade paper ; clear, legible penmanship ; unfaded ink ; natural phonetic spelling ; unquestionable authenticity.⁸

The dates 1820-1830, let it be mentioned in passing, are significant in relation to events in the town of Allegheny as a distinct community. Especially is it important to know that on December 7, 1829, an ordinance was enacted by the Allegheny Town Council to erect a market house and to buy a fire engine. In consequence of that proceeding, "in 1830 two small hand engines built to operate together were purchased." They were called Columbus and Hope, "names dear to the firemen of the day." To shelter them, an engine-house was erected on the southeast corner of Federal and Ohio streets, adjoining the market or at least within sight of it.

But the Allegheny Council was not satisfied with these developments. On July 16, 1833, it is believed to have appropriated \$3,500 for "public improvements" including "a fire engine and additional hose,"

⁷ In the original manuscript, as found by Miss Trimble, the words "vexatious and oppressive" have been crossed out by a different and later hand, yielding a lead pencil, and the word "efficient" written in.

⁸ William Hays, first signer of this document, was a tanner and later, in partnership with George Adams, a manufacturer of iron on Grant's Hill.

also "a house for fire apparatus" — two stories in height, with two rooms on the second floor, "one to serve as a council room" and the other "for the use of the fire companies." John Hamilton was awarded the contract "for the sum of \$900." The new structure was finished January 2, 1834. It was built of brick with a cupola, and it was called Town House.⁹

There is some reason to suppose that the Allegheny Council bought yet another fire engine in October 1833 — a machine known as the Phoenix and constructed by the Phoenix Engine and Hose Company of Philadelphia.¹⁰

Competition, it seems, was keen among fire apparatus builders at the time indicated. Allen Humphreys Kerr, in his unpublished manuscript, *The Mayors and Records of Pittsburgh, 1816-1951*, says: "When Mathew B. Lowrie was Mayor of Pittsburgh (1830-1831), a delegation is supposed to have been sent to Cincinnati to see a steam fire engine work and Pittsburgh purchased an engine known as the Citizen."¹¹

In 1832 the Firemen's Association of the City of Pittsburgh was formed with three delegates elected annually by each of ten constituent companies; and Harris' *Pittsburgh Business Directory* for the year 1837 mentions its officers for that year as: W. M. Shinn, president; William Eichbaum, first engineer; John McFaden, second engineer; H. D. King, third engineer; George R. White, treasurer; J. P. Bakewell, secretary. The member groups listed were: Eagle Engine and Hose Company, Allegheny Engine and Hose Company, First Pittsburgh Hose Company, Union Hose Company, Neptune Engine and Hose Company, Phoenix and Juniata Engine and Hose Company, Northern Liberties; Vigilant Engine and Hose Company, Phoenix Company of Alleghenytown, Columbus and Hope Company of Allegheny. Exactly nine hundred men were stated to belong to these

9 The Town House of Allegheny was the subject of a painting by L. D. McCandless, done in 1864, now in the Members' Room of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, to which it was presented by James M. Magee in 1923. Mr. McCandless was superintendent of the fire alarm electrical system of the Allegheny fire department in 1871.

10 *Story of Old Allegheny City*, compiled by the Workers of the Writers' Program of the Works Project Administration (Pittsburgh: Allegheny Centennial Committee, 1941), 96.

11 This manuscript was completed in 1951 but was not published because of an obvious need for changes in the text which Mr. Kerr, a Pittsburgh lawyer and member of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania who died February 27, 1953, did not live to make. His working copy is in the Society's archives and has been helpful to many scholars interested in municipal history. Perhaps someday it will be revised and printed.

fire-fighting fraternities. They operated a total of eight engines with 6,580 feet of hose on ten carriages. As might be expected, there was a close connection between the volunteer companies and fire insurance brokers.

Progress in fire fighting also is readily discernible, as for example in the fact that a so-called Niagara Fire Company was in the field, with headquarters in Penn Avenue near Fifteenth Street, in 1838. Its president was John Ralston, a tanner, and its captain Colonel Samuel McKelvey, later of Sewickley. Their first engine was built by E. & F. Faber and rebuilt, in 1848, by Joseph Kaye. This was the machine credited with saving the Third Presbyterian Church from destruction in the terrible fire of 1845.

The Niagara Company disbanded in 1853, allegedly "through internal disagreements started and fostered by persons envious." But it was reorganized in 1854 with Joseph Arrick as captain, William Porter first engineer and A. J. Cupples first hose director. John Steel was chosen captain in 1858. During the next year the Niagara adopted steam and the Worthington pump. Mr. Kaye had associated with him in the making of the new gadget a Mr. French¹² and James Hemphill, also John H. McElroy. They worked at the Knapp plant, and the fruit of their labors was conceded to be worth \$2,300, subscribed by neighboring manufacturing concerns and some insurance dealers.

Fire fighting then as now had a certain magnetic appeal to youth. That was apparent when, in December 1838, the firemen supported William Little in his campaign for Mayor of Pittsburgh, the *Gazette* referred to them as being "very young and some of them little better than boys."¹³ Perhaps the reasons for their candidate winning the election included the fact that he was only twenty-nine himself, a Lieutenant in the Duquesne Greys.

Contention between rival factions may have been created in some parts by the age differentials, too. Harper records that these fights "reached their height about 1840." So bitter was partisan feeling that men who "on ordinary occasions were regarded as pillars of the church and ornaments of society" were "betrayed into taking a hand with the boys against a rival engine company . . . The fights, disgraceful as they were, proved the interest taken in the engines of the different companies by the members and in fact it appears from the

¹² Mr. French apparently was Joseph French, engineer at the Water Works, who boarded at the Washington Hotel and is the only French mentioned in Thurston's *Directory of Pittsburgh*, 1859-1860, 85.

¹³ Mr. Little was elected by a majority of 244 votes, January 8, 1839.

records that the period of the most violent rivalry and furious fighting was also that of the greatest efficiency.”¹⁴

Internecine dissension split the Vigilant Company in 1842, and the seceders formed the Duquesne Company, while the Vigilant “faithfuls” adopted a new constitution and were in active service again in February 1843. By July 1, 1861, a Vigilant committee consisting of Robert C. Elliott, Eugene Alexander, James Petrie, B. C. Sawyer, Sr., and James Irvin purchased from the Amoskeag Company a new steam fire engine which threw two streams “each 205 feet.” Excuse, if any were needed, for buying expensive apparatus could be found in what happened to the Western University of Pennsylvania on July 6, 1849. Having lost their original home in the big conflagration of 1845, the professors had built new buildings in Duquesne Way to accommodate their classes. These structures were insured for \$8,000 with \$500 additional for “furniture and philosophical apparatus” — which was fortunate, indeed, when the University’s whole establishment went up in smoke on the hot mid-summer day in 1849 cited above.

The Civil War, of course, disturbed the firemen as it did most other people. As early as April 21, 1861, a fire fighters legion, Company C, 12th Regiment, Pennsylvania Reserve Volunteer Corps, left Pittsburgh, first to protect Harrisburg, then to go into Federal action.

It soon afterwards was the choice of the Niagara Fire Company to become part of the 102nd Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers, and with it through many hardfought battles including Antietam, Wilderness and Winchester went the company dog mascot, Jack, twice wounded, three times taken prisoner. This “poor brute hero” lived to march in the Grand Review in Washington after Appomattox Court House, to have his portrait painted and to resume his career as a station pet, still living in 1870.¹⁵

Conditions in Western Pennsylvania were changed, not always for the better, after the War between the States. Civic troubles in Pittsburgh were common enough by 1869 to frighten citizens into

14 On occasion rivalry led to arson. In 1855 a member of the Duquesne Company was arrested for having set fire to the stable of William Phillips. “He acknowledged his guilt and said that his motive was to get the Vigilant engine ‘up there’ so as to raise a fight.” Harper, I, 237.

15 The story of Jack, the Niagara Company bulldog, is told on page 267, Volume VI, *WPHM*. Other fire fighters also had mascots. Every company owned horses who commonly were treated as pets. In November 1872, there was a horse disease prevalent throughout the country and men and boys were called upon to drag engines to fires. Harper, I, 229.

action against vandals. "A large number of fires, undoubtedly of incendiary origin," alarmed property owners in East Liberty. They organized a group known as the Rescue Company, and there also was a hook-and-ladder group which operated in the same neighborhood and to the same purpose and effect at the same time. The Rescue men were paid for their services. They met at the stables of George McComas on Liberty Street and subsequently at the Union Hotel on Frankstown Avenue. William Wilson was foreman; John Trapp, Charles Long, Daniel W. Thompson and James L. Lloyd members.

Meanwhile, other volunteer companies were: The Independence, in the 10th Ward; the Good Intent, on Wylie Avenue near Logan; and the Good Will and the Fairmount. Some or perhaps all of these had a reputation for belligerency.

On the South Side, the Hydraulic Company existed in 1836, the Hope Company from about 1840 to 1863, the Mechanic Company in 1866, the Walton Company, the Ormsby Hose Company and the South Pittsburgh Hose Company at later dates until 1873, when the paid department was extended south of the Monongahela.

Just why fire fighting remained so long a volunteer affair and concern may be subject to several explanations. It always had obligatory community involvements. But not even the 1845 disaster convinced the people of Pittsburgh that they needed a municipal fire department with paid personnel working under official direction and control. Harper declares: "With the jurisdiction of the city covering an area of 22 square miles, and the river fronts and principal streets lined with costly manufacturing and business structures, the thinking people of the City of Pittsburgh decided, in the latter part of 1869, that the time had come when proper protection against fire could only be obtained through the organization of a fire department whose members should be paid and who should give their whole time to the work of fighting fires." ¹⁶

Legislative sanction, the same historian explains, "was obtained without difficulty." On March 23, 1870, Governor John White Geary signed an act empowering the Councils of the City of Pittsburgh "to establish, organize and control a Fire Department for the city and to provide for the expense thereof." A supplementary act a year later decided that the new department had right of way comparable with that of the United States mail.

Management of the department in theory was the responsibility

¹⁶ Harper, I, 226.

of nine Fire Commissioners who "should receive no pay." The property of the volunteer companies was to be turned over to these Commissioners. Department employees were to be: Chief Engineer, \$1,200 a year; Assistant Engineer, \$840; foremen, \$840 each; steamer engineers, \$820; steamer drivers, \$750; other employees, \$720. It was stipulated that Fire Department personnel were to cooperate with the police force. The first Board of Fire Commissioners was to consist of: Henry Hays, R. W. Mackey, Robert Finney, John J. Torley, W. M. McKelvy, M. K. Moorhead, John H. Stewart, Thomas Reese and Mr. McElroy of the Niagara Company. Mr. Hays was chosen president of the Board, B. Neepers secretary, Mr. McElroy chief engineer, William J. White assistant chief engineer, S. T. Paisley superintendent of the fire alarm telegraph system. R. C. Elliott was clerk of the Board temporarily, with William J. Diehl as his successor.

Mr. McElroy was in public estimation the hero of the Fire Department drama. A brother of Samuel McElroy, Jr., foreman of McIntosh-Hemphill & Co., he was widely popular as a cannon borer during the Civil War, a founder of the Republican Party and part proprietor of a drug store in Wilkinsburg. His reputation as a skilled fire fighter was unequaled, and there was no serious protest against paying him a salary of \$3,000 annually — "one of the highest in the city."¹⁷

By January 1, 1871, "an effective fire department" was operating: six steam fire-engines with hose companies, one extra hose company, two hook-and-ladder trucks, 24 horses, 69 employees. There were 410 fire plugs, 65 miles of signal wire, 97 signal boxes. Annexation of the boroughs on the south side of the Monongahela in 1872 increased by nine square miles the area to be protected. Expenditures for the department rose to \$104,651. But Harper says: "There was no complaint at this . . . as the fire loss had shrunk to \$146,482. One-half of this loss was caused by one fire, of which the department was not notified until the flames had gained great headway."¹⁸

The railroad strike and riot of 1877 included the burning of property later estimated to be worth \$5,000,000. Fire was started by the mob of strikers and sympathizers on Saturday evening, July 21, and continued until Sunday evening, July 22, unchecked. Freight cars

¹⁷ Mr. McElroy had earned \$3,000 a year as superintendent of the Pittsburgh Gas Company, later the Philadelphia Company. *Annals of Old Wilkinsburg and Vicinity* (Wilkinsburg, Pa., Group for Historical Research, 1940), 522.

¹⁸ Harper, I, 229.

were set ablaze in the yards and allowed to run down-grade to the roundhouse where National Guard troops from Philadelphia were assembled.

An official report to the State Legislature says: "Soon after the first car was set on fire, . . . the alarm of fire was given, and the firemen with their engines at once turned out and arrived in the vicinity of the fire about 11 o'clock, but were not allowed to attempt to stop the destruction of the railroad company property. They tried several times to lay their hose, so as to play on the fire, but the mob cut their hose and threatened them with death if they persisted."¹⁹

The same document specifies:

The officers of the fire department testify that the firemen were well-organized at the place of danger, ready to do their duty at all times, and that this department was the only one in the city that was organized trying to do its duty during the time of the riot. The firemen, after some remonstrance on the part of a portion of the rioters, were allowed to save private property, and to this fact may be ascribed the safety of a good portion of the city, for the fire from the railroad property communicated to the adjoining property of individuals and but for the labors of the firemen there must have been a very extensive conflagration throughout Pittsburgh.

Damage caused by the strikers and their partisans was summarized by the legislative committee as: "About 1,600 cars (mostly freight), including passenger and baggage cars, with such of their contents as were not carried away by the thieves; 126 locomotives, and all the shops' materials and buildings, except one or two small ones, of the railroad company, from above 28th street to the Union Depot."

The Allegheny County Commissioners paid eventually in settlement of riot damage claims the sum of \$2,772,349.53, every penny of which amount came out of the pockets of taxpayers.

But a far greater loss to the Pittsburgh community was the intangible but very real damage done by the riot and fire of 1877 to the good name of the city. Thus the troubles incident to the Homestead strike of 1892 included certain repetitions of behavior patterns of fifteen years earlier. For example, the Homestead rioters had recourse to fire in their endeavor to destroy the tugboats carrying the Pinkerton guards up the Monongahela River to the Carnegie Company's property.²⁰

Meanwhile, on May 7, 1882, Allegheny County had another lesson about fire to learn when the Court House on Grant's Hill burned and most of its archives were destroyed. It certainly is to that

¹⁹ Harper, I, 267.

²⁰ Leon Wolff, *Lockout* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 100-126.

conflagration that Western Pennsylvanians owe the stately beauty of Henry Hobson Richardson's architectural masterpiece. But that grandeur did not contain adequate storage facilities for historical materials. Vaults were added after the dedication of the building, September 24, 1888, but they long since were proved inadequate for archival uses. Tons of old records of manifest value to historians — and to their readers — exist in the still unfinished "attic" of the Court House. They have survived not because they were properly cared for, but rather because they have been neglected. Their condition, naturally, is deplorable. Three decades ago the Works Progress Administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's era attempted to solve the problem but failed through no fault of its own.

A similar observation may be offered with regard to City archives, scattered when the old City Hall in Smithfield Street was taken down in 1952.

The quest of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania for primary data regarding the Pittsburgh police and fire departments has proved that a central City-County Library is needed for the proper systematic arrangement and preservation of historical documents in harmony with the accepted principles of modern library science.²¹

²¹ Fire Department leadership in 1966 includes Chief of the Bureau of Fires Stephen P. Adley, Deputy Chief William J. Martin, Fire Prevention Chief John T. Brickley and Adjutant Thomas A. O'Rourke, to all of whom grateful thanks are returned by the author of this article.

PITTSBURGH FIRES: 1758-1965: A Check List

- 1758—Fort Duquesne blown up by the French; chimneys of some 30 houses left standing, November 24. Wilson's *Pittsburgh*, 58.
- 1801—Michael Adams' house burned, July 3. Wilson's *Pittsburgh*, 910.
- 1812—Market Street, between Front and Water, 20 houses more or less, "awful calamity," July 23. Wilson's *Pittsburgh*, 911.
- 1819—"A large frame house took fire in this city a few nights since, and, terrible to relate, a young lady and two children, six and eight years old, perished in the flames," Pittsburgh item, Niles *Register*, November 29, 1823.
- 1826—Wood Street between Fifth and Diamond Alley, 16 buildings, April 2.
- 1827—Devastating fire in St. Clair Street, March.
- 1832—Cotton factory of Breed & Brewer in Northern Liberties.
- 1833—Eagle Woolen Mills, Allegheny; 13 killed, October 4.
- 1845—"Great Fire," 56 acres, 982 buildings burned, April 10.
- 1849—Western University of Pennsylvania, Duquesne Way, July 6.
- 1849—Allegheny's "first great fire," striking firemen allowed blaze to destroy First Presbyterian Church and many other buildings, July 16. *Story of Old Allegheny City*, 98-100.
- 1851—Mechanics Street Bridge, January 25. Wilson's *Pittsburgh*, 916.
- 1851—Fifth Presbyterian Church, March 6.
- 1851—St. Paul's Old Cathedral, Fifth and Grant, May 6.
- 1853—"Large fire among warehouses," old Canal Basin, June 22.
- 1854—Seventeen houses in Allegheny, "incendiary," January 7.
- 1854—Johnson glass house and 49 other South Side buildings, May 22.
- 1854—Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Monument Hill, Allegheny, January 23.
- 1854—C. Ihmsen's glass house, South Side, "immense fire," March 26.
- 1854—Fahnestock's drug house, October 2.
- 1856—Phillips, Best & Co., flint glass works, Try Street, Second ward, 50 houses destroyed.
- 1859—Ten steamboats burned at Monongahela Wharf, May 7.
- 1862—Allegheny Arsenal explosion and fire; "at least 79 civilian workers" killed, September 17.
- 1862—Irwin & Co. rope works, Allegheny, December 4.
- 1863—3,000 barrels of oil at Point burned, April 13.
- 1865—Atheneum Variety Theater, April 4.
- 1865—Explosion of steam tug *Nimrod*; 4 killed, September 22.
- 1866—Ardesco oil works, 27 Irwin between Liberty and Duquesne Way, August 18.
- 1867—Explosion of rolling mill of Reese, Graff & Dull, November 8.
- 1868—South Third Street, South Side; Captain James Charlton killed, December.
- 1870—"Great petroleum fire," Sharpsburg bridge burned, June 28.
- 1870—Pearl flouring mill, August 22.
- 1870—Fifth ward school, Allegheny, December 21.
- 1871—St. Bridget's Church, Enoch Street, Seventh ward, April 8.
- 1871—Steamer *Chautauqua* exploded; 8 killed, August 14.
- 1871—McKnight's rolling mill, South Pittsburgh, December 8.
- 1874—Federal Street, Allegheny, four acres burned, estimated 199 buildings destroyed or damaged, July 4. *Story of Old Allegheny City*, 53, 103-104, 125.

- 1877—Railroad strike and riot; depot, hotel, grain elevator, roundhouse, freight and passenger cars, locomotives, etc., destroyed; 25 to 61 persons killed, July 21-22.
- 1877—*Daily Dispatch* building, 67 Fifth Avenue, November 18.
- 1882—Allegheny County Court House, Grant's Hill, built 1836, burned Sunday, May 7.
- 1883—Frame Industrial Institute Exposition Building, Manchester, Allegheny, October 2. (Old Arabian B & O engine and Stephenson streetcar ruined.)
- 1887—Campbell & Dick dry goods store, Fifth Avenue, and adjoining buildings, August 12.
- 1888—East Liberty Presbyterian Church, Penn and Highland Avenues.
- 1890—Maginn cracker factory and L. H. Harris drug house, 913-923 Liberty Avenue; one fireman killed, December 5.
- 1891—Grocers Supply Company warehouse, Christ Methodist Episcopal Church and Pittsburgh Female College, Penn Avenue at Seventh, May 5.
- 1896—Casino Building, Schenley Park.
- 1897—T. C. Jenkins building and Joseph Horne store, Penn Avenue and Cecil Way; one fireman killed, May 3.
- 1897—Edmundson & Perrine warehouse, Smithfield Street; two firemen killed, August 26.
- 1897—Union Trust Company and Stock Exchange.
- 1898—Pike Street fire, Chautauqua Lake Ice Company and W. A. Hoeveler Storage Company, caused by chemical explosion; 18 persons killed, February 9.
- 1898—Tenement, 614 Webster Avenue; two killed, March 6.
- 1899—Simen block, Spear furniture warehouse and New York Biscuit Company, Penn Avenue and Garrison Alley, January 30.
- 1899—Germania Bank, Wood and Diamond Streets, March 13.
- 1899—Western Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf, Edgewood, December 14.
- 1899—St. Michael's School, South Side, December 18.
- 1900—"A dozen fires" in different parts of Pittsburgh, January 1.
- 1900—Eight houses on Mount Washington destroyed by gas explosions, January 2.
- 1900—Wickersham School, South Side, January 3.
- 1900—Joseph Horne store, second fire in three years, April 8.
- 1900—Armstrong-McKelvy Lead and Oil Co., Wood Street and Second Avenue, building collapsed; three persons killed, April 12.
- 1900—Eichbaum Printing Co., 242 Fifth Avenue and adjacent buildings, June 22.
- 1900—Best Manufacturing Co., 28th Street and Allegheny Valley R. R., brass fittings factory and warehouse; one fireman killed, 13 persons injured, June 29.
- 1900—T. G. Evans & Co., glass and china dealers, Oliver McClintock Co., carpets and draperies, and Goodard, Hill & Co., wholesale jewelry, Fifth Avenue; 6 killed, July 7.
- 1900—Four houses destroyed in gasoline explosion, Allegheny, August 7.
- 1901—Armstrong Cork Co. and Totten & Hogg Iron & Steel Foundry Co., 24th Street and Allegheny Valley R. R., third anniversary of Pike Street fire, February 9.
- 1901—Main Western Pennsylvania Exposition building, adjoining industrial buildings and 20 dwellings; one fireman killed, March 16.
- 1901—Barker-Williams Furniture Co., 817 Penn Avenue; one fireman killed.

- 1901—George E. Lorch & Co., department store, 1600 block Carson Street, South Side, and other buildings, April 29.
- 1901—Dilworth, Porter & Co., Ltd., manufacturing plant, Bingham Street between South Fourth and South Sixth Streets, South Side, 4 acres, November 6.
- 1902—Barker, Williams & Co., burned out again, March 2.
- 1905—Avenue Theater, Fifth Avenue, June 2.
- 1908—Boyd trunk factory, Isabella Street, North Side, "tallest building" in Allegheny, and four adjoining houses; 11 girls and one man killed, February 25.
- 1912—Library Place Apartments, Federal Street, North Side; two persons killed, December 13.
- 1913—Capt. Samuel S. Brown's mansion, Squirrel Hill.
- 1914—St. Agnes Church, Fifth Avenue, Soho, January 21.
- 1917—Frank & Seder store, McCrory's store, Grand Opera House (Grand Theater), Fifth and Smithfield, January 27.
- 1923—Spear & Co. East End store.
- 1938—Old Walton Hall, Liberty at Stanwix.
- 1939—Herr Island Stock Yards, two fires.
- 1946—Wabash Terminal Building, Liberty and Fourth, March 22.
- 1947—*Island Queen* pleasure boat exploded and burned; 19 killed, September 9.

This list, of course, is incomplete. Compiled principally from newspapers, old scrapbooks and almanacs, it lacks detail because of shortage of space. Data, including letters, clippings, photographs and personal recollections of readers, sent to The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, will be accepted with gratitude as material to improve existing files.