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The Friendship Fire Company

BY TIM WINKLE AND
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In 1774, volunteers formed the Friendship Fire Company, Alexandria's first firefighters. Today, the company lives on as the Friendship Veterans Fire Engine Association, dedicated to preserving the past and supporting the future of firefighting in Alexandria.

Friendship went from a handful of early volunteers to hundreds of members, and from a small engine shed at the corner of King and Royal Streets to the sturdy firehouse on St. Asaph Street. The building, constructed in 1855, housed the fire apparatus and hose, and the second floor served as a meeting hall.

Friendship volunteers fought fire, of course, but also met to ballot new members, elect officers and plan big events, like visits to other cities and local parades. New prospects paid \$1 to join and

\$1 in annual dues. These funds allowed the company to buy equipment and keep their firehouse and vehicles in good working order. Recruits also signed an oath of allegiance to the Friendship Fire Company against all others in the city – rivalries between fire companies were serious business. Finally, members supplied their own uniforms and two leather buckets at each fire.

Firefighting duties ended after the Civil War, but the company carried on. At first, Friendship was an independent auxiliary to the city's first paid city department, formed in 1866. But unable to keep up with the latest technology, the company shifted to boosterism. Members in old-style uniforms paraded the 1850s suction engine on special occasions. Between the 1875 centennial and the 1899 anniversary of George Washington's death, interest in local and national his-

tory grew, as Alexandria and nearby Mount Vernon became tourist destinations.

By 1904, Friendship shifted focus again, this time to preservation. The new Friendship Veterans Fire Engine Association "was determined to repair and improve the company's house." The Association undertook repairs and renovations, including swapping packed earth for brick floors on the first level. In 1921, it opened the firehouse doors to the public, hoping it would be, as an Alexandria Gazette headline proclaimed, a "Mecca for hundreds of tourists visiting this city."

The Association operated the firehouse as a historic site until 1988, when it was gifted to the city. Today, it operates as one of the many museums under the Office of Historic Alexandria.

Membership in the Friendship Veterans Fire Engine Association has changed as well.

Gone are the loyalty oath, uniforms and obligatory fire buckets. The old suction engine is still kept at that sturdy firehouse, but as a museum object rather than a parade piece. Annual dues now fund the many Association activities, from museum conservation efforts to yearly scholarship awards for firefighters and their families. Meetings are still held at the firehouse and still used to plan big events, such as the annual Firehouse Festival – this year on August 5 – and a breakfast event that kicks off every President's Day in Alexandria.

The Association supports the Alexandria Fire Department, as well, from providing meals at stations during the pandemic to participating in the annual Firefighters Memorial Service every October.

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