

Alexandria Times

Denise Dunbar
 Publisher & Executive Editor
 ddunbar@alextimes.com

Margaret Stevens
 Sales Director
 mstevens@alextimes.com

Caitlyn Meisner
 Managing Editor/Reporter
 cmeisner@alextimes.com

Wafir Salih
 Reporter
 wsalih@alextimes.com

Lexie Jordan
 Intern

Dylan Jaffe
 Intern

Laura Van Pate
 Intern

ADVERTISING

Margaret Stevens
 mstevens@alextimes.com

Marty DeVine
 mdevine@alextimes.com

Patrice V. Culligan
 pculligan@alextimes.com

Tina Franco
 Office Administrator
 tfranco@alextimes.com

GRAPHIC DESIGNER

Jessica Kim
 graphics@alextimes.com

CONTRIBUTORS

Kerry Boyd Anderson
Kim Davis
Andrew Dunbar
Thompson Eskew
Mark Eaton
Kim Gilliam
Mae Hunt
Kim Jackson
Louise Krafft
Jim McGrath
Kaitlin Murphy
Dr. Vivek Sinha
Dr. David Weintritt
Amy Will

ALEXTIMES LLC

Denise Dunbar
 Managing Partner

The Ariail family
Suzanne Brock
William Dunbar

HOW TO REACH US

1199 N. Fairfax St. Suite 401
 Alexandria, VA 22314
 703-739-0001 (main)
 www.alextimes.com

How fires were fought in the 1850s

In honor of the National Fire Protection Association's annual Fire Prevention Week, Friendship Firehouse Museum will be open Saturday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Built in 1855, the museum originally housed the Friendship Fire Company's fire fighting equipment and included a meeting room where they met and held events. Fighting fires was a bit different in the 1850s than it is today.

No one lived in the firehouse. When a fire occurred, a member would go to the firehouse and ring the bell to alert the rest of the company. The company ordered that "The Bell shall be tolled preparatory to each meeting and rung when there is a fire indicating by distinct strokes the ward in which it occurred." Thus, how they rang the bell communicated generally where the fire was located. They also rang it when their fire-fighting apparatus returned from an alarm.

The two major pieces of fire fighting equipment stored at the firehouse were a hose reel carriage and a suction engine. When called to fight a fire, the members of the company would haul each piece of equipment to the fire location – they did not use horses. Horses were expensive to maintain, and the firefighters hauled together as a team to get to the fire.

When they got to the scene



PHOTO/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Fire in Philadelphia is a circa 1820s look at how fires were fought in that era.

of the fire, the company members had different jobs assigned to them. A Jan. 21, 1853, article in the Alexandria Gazette lists the different jobs of the Friendship Fire Company members. At that time, there were four commanders of the engine, three engineers, two commanders of the hose, 24 hosemen, four ax-men, four property men and eight torch bearers. Alexandria fire fighting companies at the time only admitted white men as members, though community members sometimes joined in to help fight a fire.

At the scene of the fire, the members would attach a hose to one side of the suction en-

gine and hook it into a water source, such as a hydrant, well or cistern. They would attach another hose to the other side of the engine to spray the fire. The suction engine had retractable platforms that some of the company members would stand on and handles called brakes that, when pumped, would create enough water pressure to shoot water at the fire.

Sixteen to 20 men at a time would pump the brakes and members took shifts at the laborious task. Friendship's suction engine, built by John Rodgers in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1851 could throw water more than 150 feet. That

suction engine is currently being restored in Pennsylvania and will return to the museum in the near future.

Usually, the main job of the fire fighters was to protect surrounding property and keep the fire from spreading. As home or business owners pulled their valuable possessions out of the burning building, the property men would ensure the safety of the items – making sure no one stole the property. Ax-men would chop their way through obstacles such as walls, doors and windows to gain access to the fire. The torch bearers lit the scene during nighttime fires.

To learn more about 19th century firefighting and to see examples of some of the tools and equipment firefighters used, including Friendship's recently restored 1858 hose reel carriage, join us Saturday at Friendship Firehouse Museum.

Since 1922, the National Fire Protection Association has sponsored the public observance of Fire Prevention Week. In 1925, President Calvin Coolidge proclaimed Fire Prevention Week a national observance, making it the longest-running public health observance in the country.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.