

Alexandria Times

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Fighting fire with friendship for 250 Years

As the City of Alexandria marks its 275th anniversary, one of its oldest organizations is celebrating its own milestone, as well. The Friendship Veteran Fire Engine Association turns 250 years old in 2024, tracing its origins all the way back to 1774, when Alexandria's first fire company was founded.

Alexandrians came together to establish the Friendship Fire Company in 1774, just a year before the start of the American Revolution. Firefighting in 1774 was very different from the image we often have of men in helmets sliding down poles in the firehouse to answer an alarm.

To begin with, there was no firehouse. Early fire companies often purchased simple fire engines and kept them in sheds until needed, as did the Friendship Fire Company. They bought an engine from Parnell Gibbs of Philadelphia for around £80 and housed the apparatus in a small structure – built for £4! – at the corner of King and Royal Streets. There was no room for bunks – Friendship wouldn't have a proper firehouse until 1838.

When the church bell tolled the alarm, volunteers would have come running from their homes and shops in whatever they were wearing, as there were no helmets until the mid-



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Friendship Fire Company's firehouse and suction pumper dating to the 1850s, with the foundation date of 1774 above the entrance.

1900s. They pulled the engine by hand to the scene of a fire, supplying leather buckets and axes as well. While the Friendship firefighters may have operated the hand-pumped machine and directed the efforts, every citizen would have taken part.

Alexandrians were required by law to have buckets in their homes and businesses, and everyone – men and women, old and young, enslaved and free – would have used these to form bucket lines to bring water from the nearest source to fill the pumper. In this way, fire was everyone's fight.

Friendship Fire Company was founded by a cross-section of citizens, brought together

by this community spirit. There were some 24 members in the first years of the company. These Alexandrians were all volunteers, from all walks of life, though drawn only from the white male population.

There was William Paton, a Scottish Quaker and hardware merchant. Peter Wise and Benjamin Shreve were local merchants. William McKnight, a tavern keeper, was an Irish immigrant and a war veteran. There were silversmiths and carpenters, shopkeepers and butchers.

While later fire companies had somewhat upper-class membership, Friendship was made up of tradesmen, artisans, and merchants, who saw

firefighting as both a duty and a signifier of their status as virtuous, hard-working citizens.

The company elected officers from their ranks and created rules and regulations to keep the company running as smoothly as possible. Volunteer companies like Friendship bought much of their own equipment, and some of the funds for this came from fines paid by members who missed meetings or didn't maintain their buckets in good order. The cry of "Fire!" could come at any time, and everyone needed to be ready.

Today, the Friendship Veterans Fire Engine Association continues the legacy of these early firefighters. The Association brings together volunteers from across our community to provide charitable support for the Alexandria Fire Department and the Friendship Firehouse Museum. Even after 250 years, fire is still everyone's fight.

Alexandria's 2024 Friendship Firehouse Festival is Saturday from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. on the 100 block of Alfred Street. Admission is free. For more information, please visit alexandriava.gov/museums/the-annual-friendship-firehouse-festival.

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