

THE AMHERSTBURG FIRE DEPARTMENT

PAST AND PRESENT

Many people have wondered about the origins of the Amherstburg Fire Department, and what some of the long ago firefighters looked like, how it has evolved to its present state.

Research for this task is an ongoing venture, as a great deal of information is available, but yet to be gleaned. That which has been compiled comes from our local paper "The Amherstburg Echo" (which boasts a great deal of history of its own) As well as the "Marsh Collection Society" both of which I would like to acknowledge in advance, particularly Eleanor Gignac Warren, whom without her help this would not have been possible.

Randy Sinasac.

DEPARTMENT FORMATION

Though the Amherstburg Echo has been around for many years, often times the information written concerning the fire department was limited to a notation of who the fire fighters of the town were, or whose house burned down the night before. Specific facts are vague, yet plausible, when researched thoroughly. The earliest listing of names of people who were "members" of the No.1 Fire Company is dated February 14, 1841. The list read as follows: "George Bullock, Captain, Richard Hadwick, Lieutenant, Alexander Wagner, Secretary, George Thomson, Treasurer, Richard Watson, Branchman, Simon Bertrand, Branchman, James Findley, Branchman. Alexander Jones, Branchman, John Hamilton, Branchman, Antoine Meloche, Branchman, Thomas Horsman, Branchman, James Love, Branchman, George Watson, Branchman, Rowland Wingfield, Branchman, Antoine Racicot, Branchman, William L. Shultz, Branchman, Henry Middleditch, Branchman, John Turk, Branchman, Joseph Girardin, Branchman, Felix Drouillard, Branchman, Israel Beneteau, Branchman, James Brown, Branchman, Charles G. Fortier, Branchman, Thomas Nicholson, Branchman, Christopher Kenden, Branchman, George Baker, Branchman.

Back in 1841, Amherstburg did not have what one might call an "official" fire department. The members of the No. 1 Fire Company were considered more to be members of a "social club", and were consistent with all fire brigades of that timeframe, throughout North America. The purpose of this company was not only to put out fires, but to also arrange local functions, such as dances and charity bazaars. In 1870, the No. 1 Fire Company, also referred to as the Fire Brigade, had a new set of members. A picture, taken of them in 1870 or 1871 (the exact year is up for debate), dressed in their new blue and white uniforms, along with the list of names of the members, appear on the web page.

On March 14, 1879, the Amherstburg Echo wrote a 10 paragraph story on the official recognition of the Amherstburg Fire Company No.1. During a meeting, held in what was called the Firemen's Hall on Dalhousie Street, the officiating took place. Several citizens had signed a petition requesting the proper organization of "a fire company for better protection against fire". A Mr. Lauler was the chief advocate for this proposal, and with his twelve years of experience in Strathroy in connection with both hand and steam fire engines, serving a considerable portion of that time as Chief of the fire brigade there, he was made Captain of the new Amherstburg Fire Co. No.1, which, by the way, was an amendment of a Mr. J.H. Legget and a Mr. John Harriss to call it Lafayette No.1. A committee to draft by-laws for this new company was made, and date for practice sessions for all fire company members was established.

The fire department, even after official recognition, underwent many changes. Re-organization of officials within the department was constant. In 1882, the Echo, dated January 13, announced that a new fire company had been established. A list of names of the members can be found at the end of this history paper. On this date, it was also decided to call the steam fire engine the "Walter Lambert", in honor of the late Mayor Lambert. On March 28, 1919, another re-organization took place. At this time, a man by the name of John Hamilton was the Captain in charge, having replaced Samuel L Lauler, the former Chief. The paragraph read as follows:

"The activities of Capt. John R. Hamilton has resulted in the re-organization of the local fire brigade, and the

appointment of men who will no doubt take a more active interest in the fighting of the few fires that Amherstburg has, but whose work at these times is just as necessary as if fires were of a more serious nature. In addition to these new appointments, the brigade of 12 men is divided equally among the three wards, with a captain over each, whose duty it is to see that the hose carts are kept adequately supplied with efficient hose, and other fire fighting apparatus properly looked after. This ought to result in a greater efficiency all round, and give the people of the town more confidence in their fire department. A roll will be called after each fire, and absentees reported to the council."

There was a very good reason for this re-organization. At this time, there were a series of fires that had taken place in town. Another article from the Echo, bearing the same date reads that it seemed a "fire bug" was operating throughout the vacant houses in town. It continues that this was "the second fire of that nature, it being within 10 days of another...". The article ends, "It is plain to see that it is the work of an incendiary." At the same time, yet another article from the Echo bearing the exact same date reads as follows: "When submitting the report of the Fire and Light Committee, Mr. Denike explained that the Deslippe account for drying hose was contracted for the No.1 hose, which, when the R.C. School fire broke out, was unreeled at Wm. Finlay's, and was being used by him. He thought the account should be paid in full, and a portion charged back to Mr. Finlay."

The article continues "Mr. Denike said that the Fire Brigade was at loose ends regarding the appointing of firemen. He said the firemen should be divided into three wards, with a captain over each, responsible for each hose reel... Moved by Mr. Denike, seconded by Mr. Laramie, that none of the fire fighting apparatus be taken out of the hose houses except for fire purposes. On three different occasions lately, hose was taken for private purposes, and the town had to pay for drying and putting it back. Motion put, and carried."

So it seems, from the reading of these articles, that some of the towns people were taking it upon themselves to make use of the fire hoses whenever they pleased, and letting the town pick up the expense of having them dried and put back into their hose houses. Back then, the hoses; were on three different streets, and the water was brought to the fire, unlike now, where the water supply is on the street and the hoses, are brought to the fire. Due to the lack of "action" to correct this situation, reorganization took place, with the hope that with the rules spelled out and trusted people put into positions of responsibility, the townspeople would come to rely on, and most importantly, respect their local fire department.

EQUIPMENT

The equipment of the days, prior to 1800, consisted mainly of a ladder and a bucket, which was the custom for houses to each own and keep on their premises. The ladder had to be long enough to reach the roof since chimney and roof fires were the most common at that time. This said that as early as 1779 there was a twohanded pump in operation to protect the Fort Malden buildings. It was originally the property of the British government, and placed at the Old Fort Malden when Imperial Troops were garrisoned there. It was equipped with leather hoses and brass nozzles. The soldiers were generally expected to assist in putting out any fires with the use of this pump. Early hand-pumped fire engines did not suction their own water. "Cisterns" were kept filled with water, which was taken from the river, by being passed in buckets from man to man, extending from the river to the scene of the fire. As the town grew, the "pass the bucket" idea changed to the idea of these cisterns being kept filled by rain water, or, during draughts, water-carts hauling water from the river to the cistern.

From 1840 on, the two fire companies or "social clubs", as they really were, were equipped at their own expense with hats, and a hand- powered fire engine that required 12 men to operate it at full power.

In 1875, the municipality took charge of the company, and fitted it with a large, horse-drawn steam powered fire engine that could suction its own water and throw it over the buildings. This engine was kept filled by a steam pump located at the foot of Rankin Avenue. The engine was purchased second-hand from the city of Detroit.

The next recollection of a change in fire fighting equipment is a comment made by Chief Hamilton at his party for 25 years of service as the Fire Chief. He stated that when he joined the fire department 32 years ago (in 1910), "We had only a couple of hand reels, and they were not very much use as fire fighting equipment."

In 1939, it is recorded that the Amherstburg Fire Department was in ownership of a hook and ladder truck. However, they decided that a rescue truck might come in handy. So a group of fire fighters, knowing that there was no money in the town's budget to purchase a rescue truck, decided to build one from scratch. The men had to lift the rather ancient vintage sedan they had purchased, and with a lot of strenuous shifting, maneuvered it through the fire station door. They tore the car apart, clipped the top off, and proceeded to construct the perfect rescue truck. They even sprayed it with three coats of vermilion paint with the use of vacuum cleaner attachments. Once finished, everything was set to roll the car out for all of Amherstburg to admire. Just one problem. There was an L-shaped corner that was needed to get around. The fire hall door was too narrow to drive the truck out, and the truck was now too heavy to lift out. So there it was. A nice new truck and no way to get it out of the fire hall. At the time the truck was built, it was presumed that the town council would vote them enough money to widen the door in time for the grand presentation. It is safe to presume that the door was eventually widened because a photo, taken approximately 1949-50, shows this hand-made rescue truck, along with two other Fire Department vehicles, outside of the old Town Hall.

Other changes in the equipment saw the transition from old "Petch" coats, to modern bunker gear, old style "smoke eater" firefighters, to mandatory use of self contained breathing apparatus, discontinued riding on the outside of the apparatus, and a myriad of other changes consistent with the industry standard.

Currently, the Amherstburg Fire Department is in possession of custom made, apparatus and equipment to service the town's needs.

FIRES

There have been several fires in the town of Amherstburg over the years, but there are two that seem to stand out in the "minds" of the newspaper field. The first was what is now known as "The Great Conflagration of 1875". It took place on Murray Street, between Ramsey and Dalhousie Streets. At that time, the Amherstburg Echo reported that there was a total of \$25,000 worth of damage sustained, and only \$13,000 (1875 dollars) was covered by insurance.

It was about half past 2 o'clock on a Sunday morning when an alarm was sounded. A man by the name of J.H. Crawley was the first witness of the beginnings of this disaster, and sounded the alarm. A large two story building, occupied by a Mr. Gilbert Lafferty was engulfed in flames, and soon began to consume the neighboring buildings, which housed general stores. Next, it leapt across the street to the tailor shop. It also burned the News Store, owned by a Mr. John Brown. Next came the local barber shop, the Prince Albert Hotel, the butcher's stalls, owned by a Mr. C. Kemp, the stores owned by Mr. Joseph Reaume, who was a harness-maker, and the grocery store, owned by Mr. Louis Cadaret. Bungey's Hotel caught fire, along with Smith's barber shop, two vacant stores, and two barns.

A building occupied by Conroy & Co. soon caught fire, and fell in, which then transferred the flames to a restaurant and fruit store, and on to a brick hardware store owned by Mr. J.G. Kolfage. The residence of John R. Park Sr. was also severely damaged.

The other major fire took place on the afternoon of Tuesday, November 11, 1887, on the corners of Ramsey and Richmond Street, spreading to the north side of Murray Street. The fire began on the inside of the southwest corner of a store owned by a Mr. G.T. Florey. Before anyone could attempt to go in the store for the purpose of removing goods, it was in a blaze. The flames caught on to two small cans of gun powder, and exploded. It blew out the plate glass windows, and cut the heads of several people who were about to enter the building. The breeze spread the flames in all directions, catching the brick-lined building of Balfour & Auld, and the residence of James Hamilton, as well as the large roller rink. Flying cinders hit the roofs of a Mrs. Wendell's house, the Bruce Block, the Echo office, Gasco's Grocery, Reaume's harness shop, as well as some houses as far as

Dalhousie and Gore Streets. There was slight damage to Mr. C.M.S. Thomas' drug store. Other houses sustained water damage, peeled paint due to heat, and removal of doors, barns, fences and any outside objects that could feed the fire. The total loss in this fire was \$12,000), with insurance covering \$6,850 (1887 dollars).

Some of the recent large dollar loss fires of the modern day department include the "Hearn" warehouse fire on "Thomas" Rd. as well as the "Bellwood" poultry processing plant fire, both in 1999 and both with losses that ran to the millions of dollars.

CHIEFS OF THE AMHERSTBURG FIRE DEPARTMENT

There have been at least three Chiefs in the history of this department, however with additional research, a fourth was found. At times he was referred to as a Captain, but towards the end of his charge of the department, he is spoken of with the title "Chief". So officially the list reads: Chiefs Samuel Lauler, J.R. Hamilton, Melvin Mailloux, and Chief Richard Murray. The exact number of years Mr. Lauler served as Chief is not quite clear; however Mr. Hamilton served for 50 years, Mr. Mailloux for 24 years, and at time of writing Mr. Murray 14 years. The amalgamation of the former Anderdon and Malden departments saw the addition of "district Chiefs" Graham Rose (Malden) and Noel Meloche (Anderdon). District Chief Rose has since retired, but District Chief Meloche is still active with the department at time of writing. R.W. Sinasac is currently the Deputy Chief of the Amherstburg Fire Department.

REQUIREMENTS & TRAINING

The requirements to become a fire fighter in the early days were as follows: be fit and able in body and mind, be known to be of good spirit, and be willing to defend the town and neighbors' property from the threat of destruction by fire. Since the beginnings of the fire department consisted mostly of community work, such as

fundraising, church bazaars and town festivals, it helped to be well known within the town.

It is recorded that during the late 1870's and 1880's the Mayor would call the fire brigade out for "practice runs", which usually took place at 7 p.m. The engine was pulled out, the fire lighted and the team of horses, owned by a Mr. W.K. Wright, hooked to the steam engine and run down to the Gore Street dock. The Amherstburg Echo, of March 5, 1886 reports, "45 lbs. of steam was raised in 9 minutes from the time the fire was lighted, and two streams of water were thrown through two lengths of hose in less than ten minutes. The engine did her part in good shape this time. Engineer Hunt had everything in good condition for a trial, and if everything would always work as well, there should be no fear of alarm by any insurance association."

By 1939, Fire Chief J.R Hamilton had the department practicing 16 times a year. In the 80's under Fire Chief Mel Mailloux, the Amherstburg Echo, dated May 19, 1982 shows that the department had increased the practice drills to two times per month and that "all the men were expected to attend. There were only two reasons for missing a drill: a death in the family, or their own illness." The pay at that time (an honorarium) was 500.00 per year. The fire fighters added a new piece of apparatus by putting together their own rescue vehicle, adding it to the present two pumpers, and a ladder truck.

After Chief Richard Murray's' appointment to his position, (the first fulltime Chief of the department) the fire fighters practiced once a week, on Thursday's and took courses on various life-saving methods such as CPR and basic first aid. They also train constantly with all the various pieces of equipment they may possibly use during a fire. In an interview with Chief Murray at that time he stated that when a person first approaches the department with their desire to join the volunteer team, they must take an aptitude test, and be closely supervised and trained by a veteran fire fighter. They are put on probation for one year, and observed to see if there are any signs of claustrophobia, vertigo, inability to control the fire hoses, or carry a fellow fire fighter out of a dangerous situation, or an inability to think quickly and clearly in a stressful situation. If after one year they still have the desire to be a firefighter, and they have faired well in all areas, they become part of the Amherstburg Fire Department.

The late 80s and early 90s see some further changes to the department, as the interview Chief Murray continues. "80-90% of the fire departments in Ontario are run on a volunteer basis. Our municipality just cannot afford to pay for fulltime firefighters. Fortunately, we always have had willing volunteers. There is a set amount of money that is paid to each firefighter, once a year, to cover personal costs. It is in no way a paying job. The breakdown of pay for firefighters are as follows: Deputy Chief - \$ 1,900 per year, Captain (of which there were 5 at that time) 1,700 per year, Lieutenant - 1,600 per year, and last but not least, the very dedicated crew - 1,500 per firefighter. All but 500 of the re-imbusement pay is taxable. The one person who considered fulltime and on the books so to speak is the Chief."

After Chief Murray's' appointment to his position, some further re-organization of the department took place. A comprehensive evaluation and review by the Chief, in consultation with the office of the Fire Marshal, saw the implementation of a "Master Fire Plan" which dealt with all aspects of the organization. Some of the major effects of that review saw changes in training, equipment, and apparatus with the emphasis on modernizing the department. A new station was built in 1993, and continues to meet the needs of the department as headquarters. More emphasis was placed on training, and a standardized Province wide curriculum was implemented, for training the firefighters.

The next major shake up of the department, was the amalgamation of the two neighboring communities, Malden and Anderdon townships, with the town of Amherstburg in 1998. This essentially saw the blending of three departments into one, to serve the previous "tri-community", as was the trend in the Province at the time. There were previous attempts at doing this, as early as in the 1970s, and the blending of the communities, although not without bumps in the road, was done with relative ease after the commissioners order, primarily because of the close working relationship between the communities, and therefore the fire departments.

The departure from a completely volunteer department, for the most part, began with the hiring of Chief Murray fulltime; however a more complete departure from that type of Fire Department, happened after the amalgamation took place. This saw the recommendation and implementation of a Fulltime Deputy Chief, (writer) as well as the former Anderdon Township's department had 3 fulltime personnel. This firmly entrenched the present department into its present "composite" status. The department's description and functions as listed are

consistent with these last changes, and see the department operating three stations, ten fire apparatus, ten captains, and three Chief Officers.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

As noted earlier, this is an ongoing work in progress, and additional information may be forthcoming. Some of the newspaper accounts have information which is puzzling to the writer, for example the title "Branchman" after an early list of the firefighters, (of which I could not find a definitive applicable definition). Use of additional photos is always, welcome and appreciated. We certainly welcome any comments, or additional information which anyone can add. Most of the old photos are being added to the web page, however there are many to view at station #1 as well as the compiled newspaper accounts from which most of this is written.

R.W.Sinasac

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