

RELICS OF OLD-TIME FIRE-FIGHTERS

Collection Made by Veteran Firemen's Association Given to the Bostonian Society—Once Ornamented the Houses of Volunteer and Hand-Engine Companies

THE Boston Fire Department nowadays is a paid department, and the average citizen looks upon it as an investment for protection which is to be met from our city treasury and drawn from taxpayers; he has no further concern in it.

But this was not the state of things in the earlier days of Boston. There are still living citizens who well remember the days when every inhabitant of the city, from the small boy up to the prosperous business or professional man, took a keen personal interest in its gallant firemen, and enthusiastically applauded the appearance of a favorite "tub" as it noisily rattled over the pavement.

No man considered himself too nice to man the ropes or work at the brakes. For years their only compensation for service and perilous duty was found in the consciousness of right-doing. The character of the companies varied in respect to their social standing, but all worked together for the common cause.

From the beginning of the department a custom prevailed among the firemen of collecting relics of all kinds connected with the fire service. During the days of hand engines and volunteer departments almost every company and fire society had on the walls of its headquarters relics, consisting largely of old fire hats, belts, hat fronts, relics taken from fires, etc.

With the advent of steam fire engines and a paid department this custom went out of existence. Then these collections were transferred to the rooms occupied by the veteran firemen's associations, where they remained as reminders to the members of interesting incidents of former days.

The collection in the possession of the Boston Veteran Firemen's Association, which disbanded last year, has been given to the Bostonian Society, and is now displayed on the upper floor of the Old State House.

The first veteran firemen's association of which there is any record was organized Dec 30, 1833.

It was not organized for social and beneficial purposes, as were the many veteran associations of the present time, but for reserve duty. Its constitution provided that its purpose was "To man any engine destitute of a company for the term of one month, so that the city shall have the service of the engine while a company is forming for it, also to assist any part of the department, or perform any duty they may be called upon to do by any engineer."

Seven years before, the Fire Department had been entirely reorganized by Mayor Josiah Quincy. The destructive fire at the lower end of Beacon st, corner of Charles, had aroused the city to a need of doing something. It was not, however, until the disastrous conflagration of Kilby and Central sts in 1825 that the citizens came to a determination to establish a Fire Department.

It was organized in April, 1826, with Samuel D. Harris as chief engineer. The old-time Board of Fire Wards was succeeded by a Board of Engineers.

The original members of the Veteran Association consisted of those who had served as active firemen during the entire seven years the department had been under the new system, which established the seven-year term of service to entitle one to receive a veteran's certificate, a custom which is in operation at the present time.

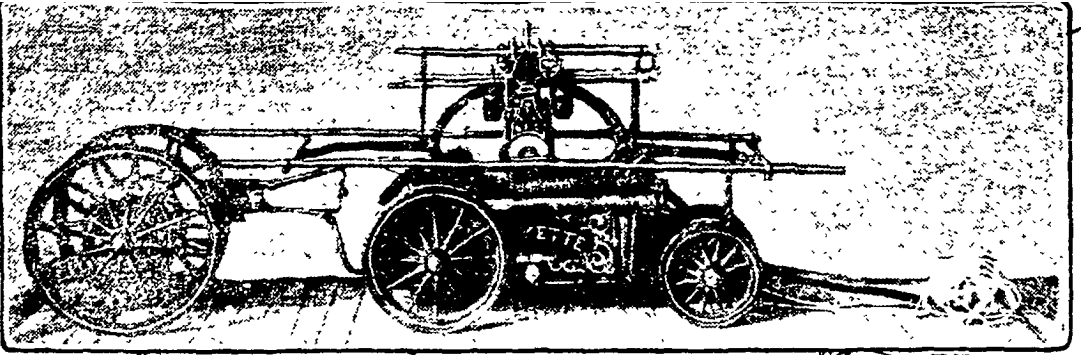
The original members of the Veterans' Association were not all ex-members of the department. Many were in active service, and a number of its officers and directors were prominent department officials.

Who originated the idea of its organization cannot be ascertained, but its prime movers and organizers were undoubtedly among those who were elected as its first board of officers.

Dec 30, 1833, the organization of the association was completed by the adoption of a constitution, and the election of the following officers: Pres William G. Eaton, Vice Pres William Willet, Sec A. Alonzo J. Lefear, Treas Thomas C. Amory; directors, Charles I. Claiborne, David Parker, John Hammond, J. N. Cushing, Parker, R. A. Newall, S. W. Cushing, Rufus R. Cook, Elephat Jones, F. W. Eridge, Peter C. Jones, Horace Williams and Aaron Rand.

The association took part in the parade of the department, June 17, 1834, after which it dined at the old Marlboro Hotel on Washington st. It went on a harbor excursion a few days before this and enjoyed many festive occasions afterward, the last recorded being its fifth anniversary, which was celebrated at Concert Hall, corner of Court and Hanover sts, Jan 24, 1838.

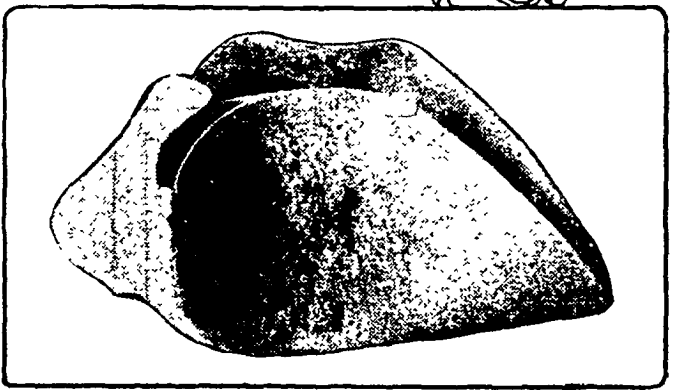
There are no records of its meetings after that date, but the records of the Charitable Association of the Boston Fire Department show that David Weld was elected a trustee from the Boston



MODEL OF LAFAYETTE NO. 18



AN ORNAMENT OF THE FIRST FIRE BOAT



COCKED HAT OF FIREWARDEN MELVILLE IN 1779

Veteran Fireman's Association from 1841 to 1877, inclusive.

A number of veteran firemen who served in the old hand-engine department, some of whom were members of the Veteran Firemen's Association, used to gather at the shop of Capt Oliver L. Roberts of old Lafayette Engine No. 18, at 7 Franklin av, corner of Cornhill, for a chat.

The reorganization of the veteran association and reunion of the veterans was frequently mentioned, resulting in a call issued to those whose addresses were known, to assemble at the American House, March 6, 1878, to take the matter under consideration.

Those most prominent in issuing the call were Capt Roberts, Jas W. Allen, Allen H. Jones, Thomas Walker, James H. Mills, Henry L. Champlin and Thomas H. Roberts.

Some 50 veterans responded to the call. It was voted to have a reunion of the veterans and a dinner of those who served under Chief William Barnicoat, from 1838 to 1854, at the American House, March 21, 1878.

At another meeting at the American House, April 9, about 100 vets attended. The association was reorganized with the following officers: President, Otis Munroe; vice president, Charles H. Stearns; secretary, James W. Allen; treasurer, Ex-Chief John S. Damrell.

The constitution provided that "those who were formerly connected with the Fire Department of the city of Boston" were eligible to membership. A number of the officers and members were members of the organization in 1835.

In July, 1879, members were admitted "who were connected with the Fire Department of the city of Boston and annexed suburbs previous to 1873, or who may serve in the present department of this city for five consecutive years."

Until Aug 1, 1890, the association met in the basement of the old State House. Aug 5, 1890, it first occupied its quarters at 1019 Washington st, corner of Cobb st, where it remained until it disbanded last year.

Although disbanded it still retains its charter, it being incorporated March 1, 1898, the officers being: President, Samuel Abbott, Jr; first vice president, Calvin C. Wilson; second vice president, Henry M. Hawkins; secretary, Henry Daniels; financial secretary, Hartford Davenport; treasurer, John Taylor.

The other members at the time of disbandment were John A. Allen, Joseph C. Barrus, Fred H. Brackett, William E. Barger, William G. Carley, H. W. Cherrington, John A. Collicott, Benj. W. Carpenter, Walter F. Delano, James T. Fitzgerald, Bradford Gay, Thomas W. Gowan, Rustus Gordon, J. T. Greenwood, Frank A. Greenleaf, George E. Hamilton, F. D. B. Hill, Mellen R. Joy, Eugene M. Johnson, John C. Kelly, P. Keavan, James H. LeFavor, J. J. McCarthy, Albert S. McIntosh, Leonard Murdock, Charles T. Murry, G. H. Nichols, Alvah H. Peters, George A. Palmer, John Preston, U. Putnam, John W. Rankin, George A. Sanford, Frank P. Stengle, Felix Smith, H. E. Thompson, George H. Twiss, Benj. F. Underhill, George W. Woodworth, Benj. Williams, William A. Wood.

The collection that the association has passed over to the Bostonian Society is very interesting, and will increase in value as time passes. Of photographs there are a number, including portraits of the old-time chief engineers and their assistants; engine companies, apparatus, fires, etc. broadsides, embracing a copy of the resolution and object of a fire protective association, organized in 1741, for mutual operation; a return muster sheet of the Fire Department of 1827; a policy of the Massachusetts Fire and Marine Insurance Company of 1802; several of the first seven-year veteran firemen's certificates, dated 1833, and signed by Mayor Wells; also certificate of members after reorganization in 1826, signed by Mayor Quincy.

An eagle holding down a snake, carved in wood, and over four feet high, was for years in the fire house near the corner of Dover and Washington sts, after which it adorned the first fire boat. A model about two feet long of Lafayette Engine No. 18, is protected by a glass, as is a cocked hat worn by Mayor Melville in 1779. He was of the famous "Boston Tea Party," a fireward for over a generation, and the subject of O. W. Holmes' poem, "The Last Leaf."

In front of the case containing this relic is a painting of the Melville tombstone, on which are two square spaces, on one of which is painted "T. M. ob. Sept 16, 1832," and on the other, "F. M. ob. Apr. 12, 1833." Back of each space is fastened a lock of hair of Mayor Melville and of his wife, Fressella.

Then there are many hat fronts of black leather with white letter letters and numbers, giving the name of the company, its number, and the initials of the wearer, and in some cases his work.

Of particular interest is the exhibit of fire hats. These include almost all

shapes of these articles that have been adopted by the service. The "plug" hats have gaudy painting on front and back. The helmet worn by members of the Franklin Fire Company in 1761 has a hood attached that covers the shoulders.

Deluge Engine No. 4's men wore a helmet with a red felt comb or pompon extending from end to end. Old North Engine Company No. 1 sported a leather cap similar in shape to those worn by soldiers in the War of 1812.

Members of Torrent Engine Company No. 6 had their heads protected by a helmet that was the origin of the style now worn. One of the hats was worn by George Abercrombie of Engine 7, killed at the fire in America Hall, July, 1862. Another was on the head of John W. Tuttle when he lost his life at the Grant & Warren fire on Federal st, May 2, 1858. Two hats are sad reminders of the death of Joseph Quigley and Joseph Pierce of Engine 4, at the Beach-st fire, Aug 13, 1881.

Each member of a fire club and fire society—and there were many in those days that were organized for the purpose of assisting in saving the property of its members in case of fire—was compelled to have in his home a fire bag, bed key and two fire buckets, which upon an alarm of fire they carried to the house or store of any of its members, and removed the contents of the burning premises to a place of safety.

The bags were used for carrying out what light things could be secured. They were made of bagging, capable of holding about two bushels.

The beds used at this period had four posts. In each corner there was a screw about five inches long. It took eight screws to hold the posts. The bed key was used to unscrew the bed.

The fire buckets were made of stout leather, with a ball or handle. They were painted in bright colors with the owner's name, name of club and date, and would hold about two gallons. They were hung on the wall. When the owner heard the cry of fire he would take his buckets easily when he came down stairs. The bag and bed key were always in one of the buckets.

On arriving at the fire two lines would be formed, one passing the full buckets from the well to the burning building, the other line returning the empty ones.

Oftentimes these buckets contained something stronger than water. A member of the club who resided near the fire when it was nearly extinguished would repair to his home and fill the bucket with rum punch.

The collection contains several of these buckets, fire bags, bed keys, fire axes, hose butts, lanterns, metal name plates that were attached to engines, hose spanners, life-line guns, etc.

Not the least interesting is a painting on wood of Ship st, now Commercial st, from Chelsea Ferry to Clark st, in 1837, in which is shown Boston Engine Co No. 15 returning to quarters.