The Early Years

The Antietam Fire Company had its original roots in the old Lafayette Company which first formed in 1808 and became known by its current name in 1835. During the early 19th century, Hagerstown began organizing fire companies. At this time, the town was officially named Elizabeth Town, incorporated in 1791. There were over 200 houses, mainly of log with a population around 2,000. The area was developing commercially and becoming a transportation center boosted by the construction of the National Road. As the larger cities had already discovered, building expansion created a greater threat and incidence of fire. Wood was the only fuel and all of the roofs in town were constructed of wood.

A chimney sweep was the only means of preventing chimney fires. In February of 1793 a town ordinance was passed, fining homeowners seven shillings and six pence for chimney fires. The first fires were fought by bucket brigades composed of every able-bodied individual, losses were usually high. As a result of the destruction of both a house and barn of a prominent citizen, the first organized volunteer fire company (the United Fire Co.) was formed on New Year’s Day in 1791. By the year 1803, the firemen divided the town into two districts using two hand - pumper engines. Regular meetings were held and attendance was mandatory under penalty of a fine of 25 cents, and $1 for directors.

Still, firefighting at this time was ineffective. Dark streets at night pose problems for firemen getting to the scene of fires. Citizens were requested to help by placing lighted candles in their windows upon hearing a cry of fire. In 1822, another fire affecting a prominent citizen prompted the forming of the First Hagerstown Hose Company. In May 1824, an ordinance was passed requiring all white male taxpayers to assemble and form themselves into fire companies. Also, every owner of a dwelling worth $300 or more was required to provide two black leather buckets with their name and fire ward on them. Individuals were fined $1.00 per month without the buckets and .50 cents for using the buckets for other things.

When the Antietam Fire Company was incorporated in May 1835, Hagerstown had five fire companies.

The organization of the incorporated Antietam Fire Company in 1835 consisted of engine men divided into three divisions with 48 men total. There were three captains, four axe men, six hose guards, four ladder men and four hook men. They ordered badges for "thirty-four colored men to work the suction engine". On May 2, 1835, the company purchased a lot adjacent to the Court House for $125. A building costing $150 was then erected (not the present site). The Antietam Fire Company owned the only city fire bell from the I850s -70s. Purchased in 1850, the bell was struck in the little cupola in the company's first building located in Court House Row. The bell was still in their possession in 1894.

During this period, the fire company obtained revenue from imposing fines on members who failed to show up for meetings, fire alarms, or fires. The early minutes of the Antietam Fire Company records long lists of names and fines. In November 1835, a committee was appointed to collect fines and appropriate them for buying more hose.

However, honorary members could pay an annual fee of $1 to $2.50 and be exempt from any fines. Also, fines were sometimes waived if the absence occurred on a false alarm. In the mid-19th century the Antietams had a large pumping apparatus which required 40 men to operate. Perhaps this was another reason for fining members who did not show up for alarms.

Some additional funds came from the city of Hagerstown. The funds collected were used to buy additional equipment such as hose, lamps, ladders, and fire buckets. Improved firefighting was essential not only for the safety of the community, but to maintain the company reputation. Efforts at efficiency were reflected in the minute records of the l83O's and 40's reporting that exercise meetings were held to perform practice runs to check the equipment as well as various cisterns throughout the city. In April 1842, the men were divided into three classes: large engine, suction, and reel hose.

Socialization of the firemen at this time was an important factor. Companies became like fraternities or clubs. Meetings were adjourned to the "Brew House" for camaraderie and refreshment. Firemen's parades were also a popular public event and the March 1842 Antietam Fire Company minutes detail discussing a meeting with the Hagerstown Hose Company to have a firemen's procession. Hose battles in the Town Square brought the firemen out for competition, as well. These battles stopped before World War II due to an injury sustained by one of the firemen. Hagerstown companies no longer compete as in days gone by although some cities still do in some manner.

During this time visiting other fire companies were the early version of political or business conventions in which one department would host another for a few days of business and pleasure. The celebration would include parades and receptions with the highlight being firefighting competitions. The first tournament on record in Hagerstown was in 1851, when the Antietam Fire Company welcomed the Independents of Frederick on a visit. A contest of water throwing was held in front of the Court House and the Antietams beat the visitors by twenty- five feet. The Antietams performed well in competition through the years. In 1907, the reel team won a victory in Annapolis. They won another competition in 1912 according to the Minute Books. The 1914-15 Fire Company Minute Book entry dated July 1, 1914 hails congratulations to the Reel Team on establishing a new world's record of 36 1/4 seconds in the Hose Race at Westminster, MD.

The 1880's was an active time for the Antietam Fire Company as evidenced in the Minute Book, 1883 - 85. Invitations were received to several fairs and a parade. However, rowdiness was apparently a problem. The February 1884 minutes mention the suspension and attempt to expel members for disorderly conduct at Greencastle, PA. On July 7, 1885 they voted to have a convention with the other Hagerstown fire companies to discuss working together. The Company again supported improvements in firefighting with in the city in 1908. They adopted a motion to endorse a conference with the Hagerstown fire companies to investigate the possibility of establishing rules and fire lines with in the city limits. Brawling and competitiveness was not unique to the Antietam Fire Company. It had been a national problem aggravated by the monetary rewards often paid to the first company at the scene of a fire. In addition, fire companies were politically powerless and the rowdiness was overlooked.

The Antietams held themselves to a high standard of behavior which is still continued today. The old minute books have numerous examples of meetings held in which members were disciplined and/or expelled for misconduct, theft of company property and breaking the "law of the land".

Today, the Antietam Fire Company, Inc. is managed by a small core of volunteers; 15 active firefighters and 30 active members out of a membership of over 600. They come from a variety of careers. A random look at the membership records for the 20th century reflect the various industries located in Hagerstown, civil servants, and middle management. As fire companies’ nation wide made the transition from volunteer to paid departments in the second half of the 19th century, the era of the social fraternity began to wane and prominent citizens played less of an active role as volunteers. The city of Hagerstown has incorporated the volunteer companies within the city fire department.

Thus, the Antietam Fire Company is a combination company. It relies mostly on its volunteers to fight fires but has city owned equipment and city paid drivers for the engine. Training for fire fighters has changed through the years with the change of technology. Gone are the days of the practices and contests in the town square to sharpen the skills of the men. Today, the volunteers must pass a basic Fire Fighting I course given by the University of Maryland in order to ride the apparatus. Written and physical tests are also given to ensure that firefighters meet professional standards. Their skills are kept current with monthly training sessions.

The active members of the Antietam Fire Company take their training and their jobs as firemen seriously. They want to be known for their contributions to the fire service in the areas of training and technology such as the introduction of the use of new equipment. Overall, they want to continue to be recognized for their professionalism (Sprecher, July 21, 1999), a trait that the members of the company have guarded well throughout their history.

Throughout the 200 years of our fire company, we have lost two members in the line of duty. They were Walter Sharer and Fred White. Walter Sharer died from injuries sustained during a fire and Fred White passed away from a heart attack while on duty.

THE FIRE HALL

The Antietam Fire Station is known to have inspired the design of the nation's only War Correspondents Arch, a memorial to U. S. war correspondents'. The original front facade of the building dates back to 1895 and survived two fires in the early 1900's. The building houses the Antietam Fire Company, Inc., the second oldest incorporated fire company in the history of Hagerstown. The fire station is part of the Hagerstown (National Register) Historic District which includes a variety of functions from commerce/trade and industry to social and government uses. During the time of construction, Hagerstown was experiencing massive industrial growth. The elaborate Romanesque exterior is typical of the era following the 1893 depression known as the "golden age of architectural design for firehouses". The interior of the fire station has been modernized through the years and is still a working firehouse. A second floor has been rented to various local businesses since 1897.

In May 1889, the Antietam Fire Company purchased a lot where the present fire station stands for the sum of $1,100 from Martha and Rebecca Middlekauff. The construction of the building took place in 1895. The bids ranged from $6500 to $12,000 which was higher than the company had expected. The Building Committee cut the proposed cost by $1,100.

They intended to propose new plans to closely model a Washington engine house. However, it is not certain whether this happened. In fact, John H. Middlekauff was named as taking the contract in the Daily Mail newspaper on May 4, 1895, but according to an article from the same source dated January 2, 1896, Clifton Lamkin was listed as the architect.

Nevertheless, the design of the Antietam fire hall depicts the building period of 1890-1918 known as "castles and palaces". Leading architects were hired to design elaborate fire stations as tributes to the heroic firemen and their service.

This "golden age of fire station design" set fire stations apart from other public buildings. In addition, the construction was during the height of Hagerstown's industrial, transportation, and building boom.

The year of 1914 was disaster for the Antietam Fire Company. On October 28 a raging fire spread from the roof of the adjacent Sherlay Building to the fire hall. The entire structure was destroyed except for the front facade at a loss of $30,000. The second floor served as the armory for Company B of the Maryland Regiment. The Hall was occupied by the Pioneer Hook and Ladder Company as well.

The Antietam Fire Hall drawing plans were approved in June 1915 at a cost of $125. Unfortunately, another fire occurred within the Antietam Fire Hall in 1920. The extent of damage is unknown at this time; however, it is believed to have been less severe.

Despite the tendency to design elaborate firehouse exteriors, the interiors were generally plain. Towers were built to hang leather hoses to drain and dry. A second floor served as a bunk room during the 1880's and 1890's since horses were brought inside the firehouse to save time hitching them to the engines. The Antietams themselves, had horse-drawn fire equipment by 1890.

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Fire Fighting Apparatus

The Antietams had two horses John and Jim to pull the hose wagon until they were killed 1912 by downed electrical wires on in their way to a fire. The stalls were in the fire hall until 1910 (Minutes, 4-6-1910) at which point the company paid to have them pastured and boarded. The remains of the automatic horse harness apparatus can still be seen hanging from the ceiling of the north bay. The horses would automatically move under them at the sound of the fire bell. When the horses were killed, the era of the motorized apparatus was ushered in. The company asked the Mayor and City Council for funds for an automobile fire truck (Minute Book, 7/19/12).

The first motorized fire apparatus was a 1913 Knox combination pumper. The Company’s next pumper was a 1924 Ahrens-Fox Model N-S-4 followed by a 1948 Model HT Ahrens-Fox.

In 1961, a Mack Model B95 pumper replaced the 1948 Ahrens Fox which became the reserve engine. In 1982, a Mack Model CF was purchased and the Ahrens Fox was sold.

In 2004, a KME pumper with a totally enclosed cab was purchased due to the fact that firefighters were no longer allowed to ride on the tail board or in jump seats. The Company contributed $130,000.00 toward the purchase of the new engine.

Today

2007 also presented another first. The Antietam Fire Company alone, has never purchased a motorized vehicle since the use of horse drawn equipment. In the past The City of Hagerstown had been responsible for all motorize vehicle purchases.

During the summer of 2007, The Company commissioned Plastisol Composites to build a utility type vehicle. On November 4th 2007, The Antietam Fire Company officially put into service Special Unit 32.

Special Unit 32 is built on a Ford F-550 super duty, 4-wheel drive crew cab chasses. It is equipped with 4-scott 4.5 scba's, extinguishers, absorbent, step clocks, and an assortment of hand tools. The unit is equipped with A 1500-amp inverter, 2 100' cords and quartz lights.

As in the past tradition, Special Unit 32 was pushed into its quarters by the members and volunteers of The Antietam Fire Company.

This was a historical event and shows how fund-raising can benefit the community. The Antietam Fire Company purchased the Ford F-550 with funds raised throughout the years. This unit now provides additional support to the Hagerstown Fire Dept.

2007 brought great change to The Antietam Fire Company. A new bunk room was built to accommodate our active volunteer firefighters. For the first time in the history of the company the volunteer firefighters had their own living quarters, if they choose to spend the night.

During our 200 years, many changes have occurred. They began using bucket brigades and moved to hand pumpers with leather hoses, then from horse drawn steam engines to motorize apparatus. They also progressed from All Service Mask to Chemox Breathing apparatus and then to Self-Contained Breathing apparatus.

Additional changes brought with it Thermal Imaging Cameras, female firefighters and the Incident Command System. Our 200 years have seen many improvements but the heart of the company has never changed and that is because of our volunteers.