

Providence Institution for Savings

Established 1819

A Mutual Savings Bank

where interest is allowed
from day of Deposit to
day of Withdrawal

MAIN OFFICE
86 South Main Street

OLNEYVILLE BRANCH
1917-21 Westminster Street
Olneyville Square

EMPIRE-ABORN BRANCH
Between Westminster and Washington Sts.

Open all business days and Tuesday evenings
5 to 8:30. Olneyville Branch open
Saturday evenings also.

"The Old Stone Bank"

THE J. C. HALL CO., PROV., R. I.

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FIRE! FIRE!



Presented by

"The Old Stone Bank"

Providence, R. I.

December 5, 1932

Fire! Fire!

THE universal interest in fires and in the head-long dash of fire apparatus to the scene of a conflagration is a human weakness either inherited directly, or acquired through association with those whose ancestors were all "smoke-eaters". If it were not for present-day fire regulations very few men, or boys, would hesitate a minute before getting into the thick of action at a fire—there would be plenty of volunteer hands for ladders, hoses, axes (especially the axes) spanner wrenches, pikes and life-nets. It is the most natural thing in the world for the average person to want to help save property threatened with destruction by fire, chiefly because the protection of life and property is everyone's concern, and also because it has been only a few generations since fire-fighting was a public duty, an exciting duty that our ancestors willingly and efficiently performed. The history of fire-fighting in Rhode Island is filled with many tales of heroism and splendid records of faithful service by volunteer and paid firemen, and today all cities, towns and fire districts in the state can boast of equipment and fire companies that should be a source of



genuine pride on the part of every Rhode Island citizen.

Apparently, the year 1754 marked the beginning of organized fire-fighting in Providence. Then the citizens of the more densely populated area of the town petitioned for power to purchase a "large water engine". Obadiah Brown and James Angell were appointed a committee to "rate the housing and all other things in the compact part of the town of Providence which are liable to be destroyed by fire" a sum sufficient to purchase the engine petitioned for. A law was also passed by the Colony requiring each house-keeper to be provided with two good leather buckets containing at least two gallons of water, and that the name of the owners be distinctly painted upon them. Many of these old leather buckets have been preserved in historical museums and by private collectors in Rhode Island, and they are today regarded by many as choice prizes. The painting of the names on the buckets was not for the purpose of beautifying personal property with fancy lettering, but was a practical means of unscrambling and identifying the buckets after the fire had been checked and the flames quenched. These buckets always hung within easy

reach in the "front entry" of Providence homes and were used only in case of fire, and, if no man happened to be at home when the alarm was sounded for a fire in the town, they were quickly taken out and placed on the steps or on the "front stoop" to be used by the first passer-by. These buckets were inspected annually by the town sergeant or by one of the town constables, and all delinquents were promptly fined for failure to keep these crude but efficient water containers in first-class condition.

The destruction of a public building by fire, in 1758, aroused the town's attention to the fact that fighting flames with buckets alone presented a serious danger to life and property in a growing community. Therefore, steps were taken immediately to provide greater fire protection, and the Assembly soon gave the town the power to establish fire wards and appoint presidents of each unit. The first engine was purchased in 1759, and in December of the following year the town authorized the purchase of a second piece of apparatus; engine-men were first appointed by the town in June, 1763, and this really marked the establishment of the first fire department in Providence. The fire ward presidents directed efforts to

arrest the spread of conflagrations often times using gunpowder to blow up buildings in the path of the flames. The fire wardens shouted orders to the willing fire-fighters through huge speaking trumpets, those ornate voice amplifiers that remain today as the symbols of authority when flames roar, embers fly high and the excited throng edges its way closer and closer to the burning building. In this day and age, many fire chiefs and other officers of town and country fire departments carry these brightly polished trumpets when the companies are on parade, and, in many towns, it has been an annual inspection custom for ages, to carry the trumpet under the left arm with the bell of the instrument filled with a bouquet of sweet peas or other brightly-colored blossoms.

In 1792 four fire-engines were imported from London for use by the Providence department. No. 1 was stationed on North Main Street, across the street from the First Baptist Church; No. 2, at the south end of Benefit Street; No. 3, at the north end of Benefit Street; and No. 4, at the corner of Weybosset and Dorrance Streets. Some idea of the area of the built-up section of the city at that time can be gained by observing the dis-

tribution of these fire-fighting machines for the best protection of the community. These fire-engines from London were simple, oblong, plank boxes mounted on small wheels or rollers, and they were steered by tail-like levers, or tillers, from behind. Ropes were attached to the forward end of the device which, of course, was drawn to the fire by hand. Each machine had two brass cylinders containing pressure pistons worked by side bars, and each had a vertical air chamber surmounted by a platform on which the pipe director stood while holding the pipe. Sewed leather hose was first used, but not very successfully. This primitive hose burst easily, and the suction hose, also made of leather, was so porous that water could not be lifted from a well, cistern or river for more than a few feet. Therefore, the engines were placed as near to the burning building as possible, and the water was supplied to them for pumping by buckets handled by men arranged in a double line, one for passing along the full buckets, and one for returning them to be refilled. This hand system was called "forming a lane", and it is easy to picture the excitement, the noise, and the "hurry-up" orders from the fire warden when the little squirter began

to exert pressure and a steady stream climbed higher and higher to play upon a blazing roof.

In 1801, the town adopted a set of rules and regulations pertaining to the conduct of the inhabitants in cases of fire. The first of these rules required "that upon the cry of Fire, every person give information (if within his knowledge) *where the fire is*; and that the several Sextons repair immediately to their respective meeting-houses, and ring bells until the fire be extinguished." Other regulations outlined exactly the duties of those citizens entrusted with special activities in connection with the local fire-fighting equipment, and all other able-bodied male inhabitants were directed to "repair immediately with the buckets belonging to their respective families, to the fire; taking care, if in the night, to put on their clothes before they go out; and every house should have lights put in the windows, and carefully attended until the fire is extinguished, and the people returning". Before street lamps were introduced in Providence, in 1819, the year when the Providence Institution for Savings was founded, the trouble of the inefficient light of the tin lanterns was somewhat lessened by this law requiring all citizens to place lighted

candles in their windows in times of fire at night, and later was greatly improved by the use of torches by the fire companies as more effective substitutes for the dim glimmer of the tin lanterns.

Although fire-fighting was, by law, a public responsibility in those days, there was never any need for measures to insure the presence of a sufficient number of citizens to help fight a fire. The cry of "Fire", the ominous toll of a bell, or the shriek of a whistle was sufficient, and is today, to assemble a crowd of potential firemen. In early times, boys commenced service in the fire department by handling the empty buckets, and active women sometimes assisted in this duty in cases of great danger. The complete story of fire-fighting in Providence, from the water-bucket days to the present, is a long and interesting narrative, and offers the historian many avenues of research and study—this account merely attempts to present the reason why it is inherent in the average man for him to run to the window, race through the streets after fire-engines, and press, as closely as possible, to the crackling flames, the falling walls, and choking smoke.