



East Greenwich Fire District

History

OUR TOWN'S FIRE DISTRICT

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The farmlands of 60 years ago in East Greenwich have given way to residential developments bringing many newcomers who know little or nothing of the East Greenwich Fire District's heritage, and they should be interested.

The East Greenwich Fire District was incorporated in 1797 to serve the Village of East Greenwich (essentially the house and shops on Main, King and Pierce Streets). Unfortunately those early day records do not exist that could have given us a picture of fire protection 200 years ago. Col. Howard Allen, Fire District Moderator for over 15 years, stated in 1957 that he doubted if any but a very few ever existed since he had never been able to find any. Water from "the fountain" (adjacent to the Masonic Lodge on Division), was piped through bored wooden logs down to Main Street shortly after 1800. Perhaps there may have been more than one "tub" - primitive machines into which the water was poured and hand-pumped under pressure for a stream of water to direct at the fire. (The District Charter provided a tax credit for people or firms "maintaining a fire engine").

Recorded (or at least preserved) Fire District history could be said to start circa 1880, when the East Greenwich Water Company laid water mains in the village. By 1900 East Greenwich had its first real Fire Station downstairs in the Varnum Armory - as the Varnums were formed in the building 1 October 1907).

After water mains of the East Greenwich Water Company were laid, the Fire District's firemen - known as the East Greenwich Volunteer Fire Department - now equipped with a two-wheeled Hose Reel and a Hook and Ladder cart, plus another Hose Reel which was stored in a shed on Liberty Street and not in the 1875 (circa) Station on Montrose Street, changed its name in 1881 to the Columbia Hose Company! I believe this change of name indicates East Greenwich no longer had a hand-pumped Fire Engine, or "Tub". There was full reliance on the big steam pump at the brick pumping station of the Water Company at Hunt's River, to give firefighting pressure in the newly-laid water mains in the village,

making a hand pumper unnecessary. That this, however, didn't prove true, seems to be born out by the fact that within a few short years East Greenwich firemen changed their name back to the East Greenwich Volunteer Fire Department.

Sometime around 1900 a horse-drawn Hose Wagon was obtained and the two-wheeled Hose Reels, or at least one of them was sold to agent of Henry Ford and taken to his developing museum complex in Dearborn, Michigan. Those were the days of changing from manpower to horse-power in firefighting.

Some members of the Columbia Hose Company whose names Chief Dan Masterson mentioned to me were, William Parker, Frank Convery, Doc Sunderland, Mandus Skoog, John Keelin, John Mckenna, Edward Brennan, William Bennett, and Dan Masterson. Gus Miller and Arthur Earnshaw were Captains of the Company. Oh, that a colored movie of the Columbia Hose Company of East Greenwich Annual Decoration (now Memorial) Day Parade existed!! Clad in their distinctive red firemen's flannel shirts and blue serge pant, decorative gold eagle-peaked, molded leather fire helmets and patent leather belts, they marched well, turning complete wheels at certain points on Main Street, and carrying bouquets to place on the graves of departed Company Members.

The present brick fire station No. 1 on Main Street was built in 1= 914, but still contained only hand and horse draw fire apparatus - principally today's hand-pumper or Tub "The Volunteer" that the East Greenwich Veteran Firemen still pump in New England States Veteran Firemen Association Musters.

However, East Greenwich Fire District purchased, circa 1928, a gasoline engine White truck chassis Fire Pumper; and a gasoline engine and Ladder Truck - hung with 2 rows of black rubber Buckets; enough to equip a bucket-brigade to hand fill the round 125 gallon tanks on the trucks should suction on the trucks fail, I think, (or was it because the "Tub" was still being used as a back-up pumper? I don't remember.) But the era of that Hook and Ladder Truck was not long. The District replaced it with the latest model Ahrens-Fox Ladder Truck by 1932, when the accompanying [1933 photograph](#) of East Greenwich's Memorial Day Parade shows the Fox Ladder Truck carrying the flowers for Firemen's graves, and the White Pumper carrying Chief Dan Materson, and driven by the Chief's son. (The Cedar Hill Volunteer Fire Department, of Cowesett, forest fire tanker brings up the rear.)

The 1797 Fire District Charter was amended after World War 2 to include the whole town of East Greenwich including rural farming areas.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: The "fire engine" to gain fire district tax exemptions was in all probability single-barreled suction pumps that were set in squarish deep metal lined wooden box that stood on four tallish legs and with carrying handles on the ends of the box reservoir (which bucket brigades would keep filled with water).

No Town history I am aware of really tackles the Question of the "The Fountain ". What was it? In my time no evidence of a permanent pond or large flowing spring has been

seen at that site. Of course, the "Windmill Cottage's windmill" stood adjacent to "The Fountain's" site - across Division Street. Similar mills in Holland as well as England pumped water from large sources. But was "The Fountain" a large source of water? History sayeth not.

The East Greenwich Fire District is sincerely appreciative of Mrs. Holt's time and effort in writing this history of our Fire District. It may interest the reader to know Mrs. Holst, the owner of Clouds Hill Farm in Cowesett, is a direct descendant of the Allen family which received one of the original King's Grant of land from Greenwich Bay to what is now Bald Hill Road (Route 2). Mrs. Holst was the first woman Fire Chief on record in the United States, and the first woman Deputy State Fire Marshal in the State of Rhode Island; her department, the Cedar Hill Volunteer Fire Department of Cowesett, also owned the first airplane for spotting fires.

UPDATE: "The Fountain" was found to be in the area of the present Kent County Court House (circa 1805). According to Robert Austin from the Kent County Water Authority (who took over the East Greenwich Water Company - years ago), they found that the fountain was a large horse watering trough and was also used for supplying water for fire protection (bucket brigade). The source of the fountain was indeed at the Division Street site adjacent to the Windmill Cottage. According to the Water Authority they have traced back an old line (lead line!) to a "large" cistern in the woods. Based on the fact that this entire area is heavily supplied with spring fed ground water and basements are provided with numerous sub pumps, this cistern is supplied from a large source of water, so historically they were correct about the fountain. Kent County Water Authority is not sure if it was (or still is) used as a residential water supply, they still have many old lines running in the area. The windmill cottage (another story in of it self) was a windmill used for grinding grain, not pumping water.