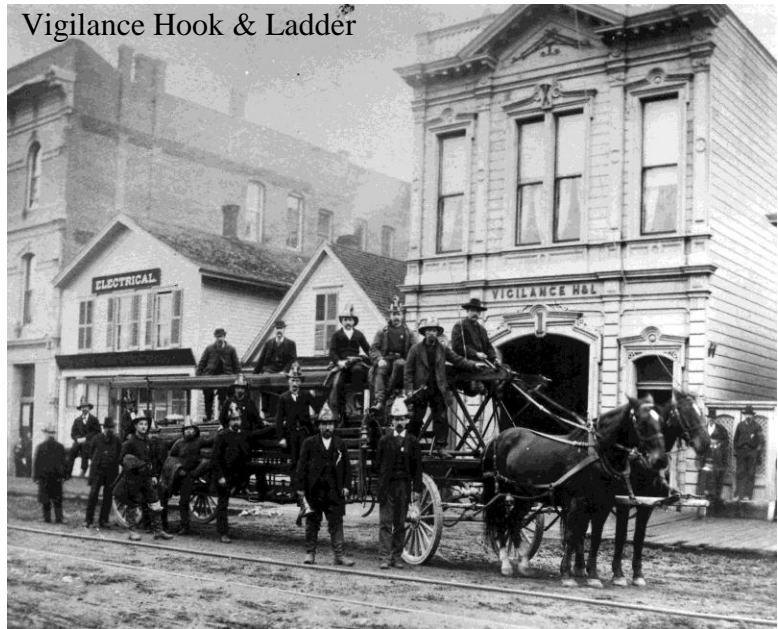


The Volunteer Era

"Portland Volunteer Fire Department"

Compiled by Don Porth

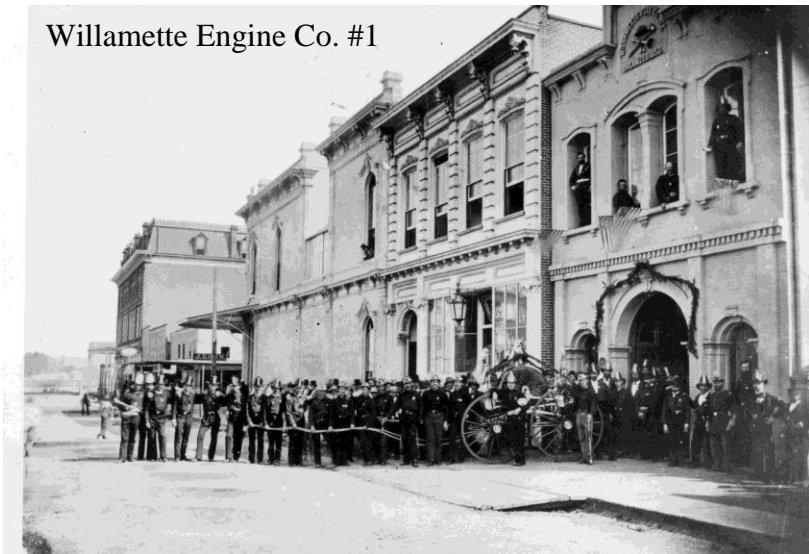
On August 2, 1853, with its constitution and bylaws in place, Vigilance Hook and Ladder became the first fire company to officially serve Portland. With 36 members on the roster, they were lead by I.B. Smith as Foreman, H.W. Davis as First Assistant, C.A Poor as Secretary, and S.J. McCormick as Treasurer.



Willamette Engine Company #1 was organized on August 3, 1853 but not admitted into the fire department until July 7, 1854. However, accounts show that Willamette had joined Vigilance in the firefighting effort four days later, on August 6th.

Willamette entered the scene with 44 members and a building lot for their engine house, which had been donated to the cause. They would be located on the North side of Yamhill Street by the firm of *Northrup and Simons*. With donated lumber, nails, locks, and other material, Willamette's engine house would be the first built in Portland. Willamette was led by Nelson Ham as Foreman, David Monastes as First Assistant, Asa Strong as Second Assistant, A.M. Berry as Secretary, and Charles E. Williams as Treasurer.

Willamette Engine Co. #1



City council had organized the city into districts for the different fire companies to protect. The city was divided by Washington Street establishing a North and South District. Vigilance Hook and Ladder was assigned to provide service to the entire city while an engine company would be established for assignment to each of the North and South districts.

A hook and ladder carried different responsibilities in firefighting than engine companies. Their role was to place ladders, effect rescue, and do other work to prepare the building for firefighting. Engine companies would bring pumps, hose, and firefighters to the scene to

pump water and use hose lines to fight the fire. To this end, only one hook and ladder was needed to serve the city in the early days.

Willamette would be assigned to the South district. For the North district, an engine company called *Northerner* was intending to begin operation soon after Willamette. They worked jointly with Willamette in the writing of their bylaws and constitution and had intended to become approved on August 8, 1853. They had considered the names *Protection* and *Cascade* but finally settled on *Northerner*. By September 13th, after several meetings they had a roster of 29 members but no engine house or fire engine. Too many issues were apparently undecided and the effort was dropped with no further historical accounts. The members aligned as officers were C.S. Silver as Foreman, Ben Stark (later a US Senator) as First Assistant, D.C. Coleman as Second Assistant, Charles Hutchins as Secretary, and Justus Steinberger as Treasurer.

Willamette had an engine house but needed a fire engine. David Monastes, was mechanically inclined and took on the task of refurbishing the old Farnham hand pumps that had been procured by H.B. Otway the year before. The lack of care had taken its toll on the machines and Monastes was only able to salvage one pump by combining parts from the two. This would become Portland's first fire engine. The wheel-less machine would be carried by volunteers to the fire scene, set in place, and the "brakes" pumped to move water.

The first test of the newly formed fire companies came on an autumn day in 1853. A building used to store hay on 1st Street just South of Yamhill caught fire. The cry of "fire" was called out and both *Vigilance* and Willamette responded. The equipment arrived at the scene and the Farnham engine was positioned for service. A bucket brigade was formed to bring water to the scene and the water was poured into the water box of the Farnham. As the brakes were pumped to move water through the hose, an errant corncob had somehow made its way into the pump and hose and eventually found its way to the nozzle, effectively plugging the hose. David Monastes worked feverishly to disconnect the hose and clear the obstruction but while doing so, the building burned to the ground.

The miscue at this first big fire did not dampen the community support of the fire department. The July 4th parade of 1854 featured the volunteer firefighters of Portland proudly marching down Front Street in their black pantaloons, red shirts, black cravats, and navy caps. In the tradition set by Pioneer three years before, firefighters were still known as "Redshirts."

Between May and October of 1854, the city became serious about safety and fire protection. The city required planking of certain streets as well as the removal of obstructions and hazards on streets and sidewalks.

Two years into the city's firefighting effort, new, state-of-the-art equipment was still lacking. In July 1855, Chief Fire Engineer H.W. Davis expressed concern to the city council that he feared the volunteer fire companies would disband if the city neglected to provide better equipment and facilities. The council decided to levy an additional tax to raise \$10,000 for the purchase of a fire engine, hose, and other equipment.

Later that year, the city directed Territorial Governor, George C. Abernethy, then in New York, to act as their representative in the purchase of the engine. At the city council meeting held November 10, 1855, the following information was disclosed:

Councilman Slater on the Fire Engine Committee gave information as follows: That means are now in New York City nearly if not sufficient to purchase an engine subject to the order of Governor Abernethy when any engine selected shall be pronounced perfect by an inspector engaged to inspect same. (The importance and seriousness of the transaction may be inferred from the extreme caution with which the City safeguarded her interests, as the following stipulation indicates.) Also to make the matter more sure, Maks-Diamond and Company, of New York, in the case of the death of Governor Abernethy are authorized to draw the money and purchase said engine. He also stated the engine might be expected in about five months . . .

Governor Abernethy apparently got the job done to the satisfaction of the city. The following is an excerpt from the council meeting of April 15, 1856:

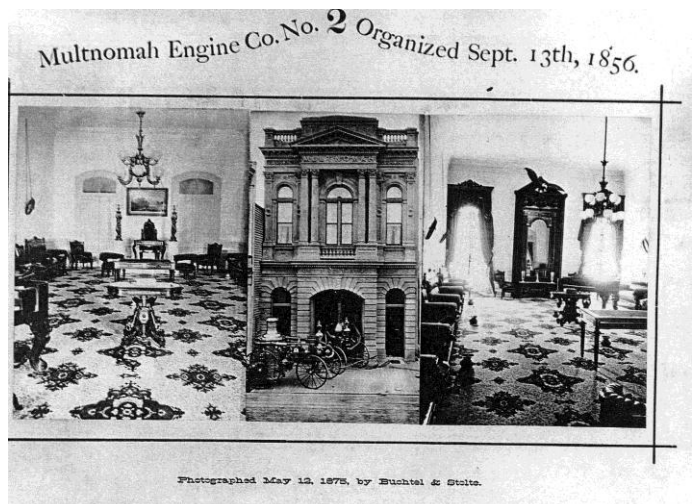
Communications and bills enclosed Concerning Fire Engine from Mr. George C. Abernethy, New York, received. At the hand of the Mayor were read by Councilman Slater and commented on with remarks highly complementary to Mr. Abernethy for the Interest (sic) he has taken in his Agency for the purchase of a Fire Engine for the City of Portland in which it was supposed he could feel but little interest.

The fire engine made its long journey "around the horn" before arriving in San Francisco in July, 1856. A resolution read at a meeting of the city council held July 26, 1856, was as follows:

Be it resolved that an order be drawn on the Treasurer for the sum of One Hundred and Thirteen Dollars and Forty Five Cents in favor of G. W. Vaughn for payment of Freight on Fire Engine & From New York to San Francisco . . .

In San Francisco, the fire engine was transferred to a ship bound for Portland. Once the Smith Hand Pump Fire Engine arrived, it was assigned to Willamette Engine Company #1 and became the pride of the city and the Northwest.

With the firefighting effort came the need for a reliable water supply. The early version of Portland sat close to the banks of the Willamette River, so water was not a significant problem. However, as expansion moved it farther to the west (and to higher elevations above the river), water supply became a more challenging issue. By 1856, the city began developing a water supply system that included cisterns, strategically located throughout the city and being fed by creeks located in the west hills.



While this was occurring, an additional engine company to protect the North district of the city was beginning to form. On November 25, 1856, Multnomah Engine Company #2 entered the scene. Their engine house would be located on 2nd Street between Oak and Pine. The fire engine that Multnomah would begin with was the same that allowed Willamette Engine Company #1 to get started. In 1857, Multnomah would receive a Hunneman hand pump fire engine that would serve them well for several years.

Two and one half years later, Columbian Engine Company #3 would be established. They began service on June 18, 1859 with an engine house located on Washington Street between 2nd and 3rd Avenue. They had a roster of 56 members. While history is not clear on the type of fire engine they may have used to begin service, city documents show an invoice for the purchase of a Jeffers Sidestroke handpumper. While it was purchased in July of 1859, it did not arrive until October 7,



1860, having been shipped from New York to San Francisco before making its way to Portland. Columbian was also outfitted with a hose cart containing 950 feet of hose. The manufacturer of this specific fire engine, William Jeffers, is profiled in Apparatus page of this web site. Regarding the Jeffers Engine, it would be sold to Pendleton, Oregon Fire Department in 1883.

It should also be noted that Columbian was possibly the first fire company to use horses. However, the horses were paid for by the members, not the fire department. This was unusual since horses would not become a staple for Portland Fire until 1883 when the city budget would provide for them. There are no known photos or images of horses with their apparatus.

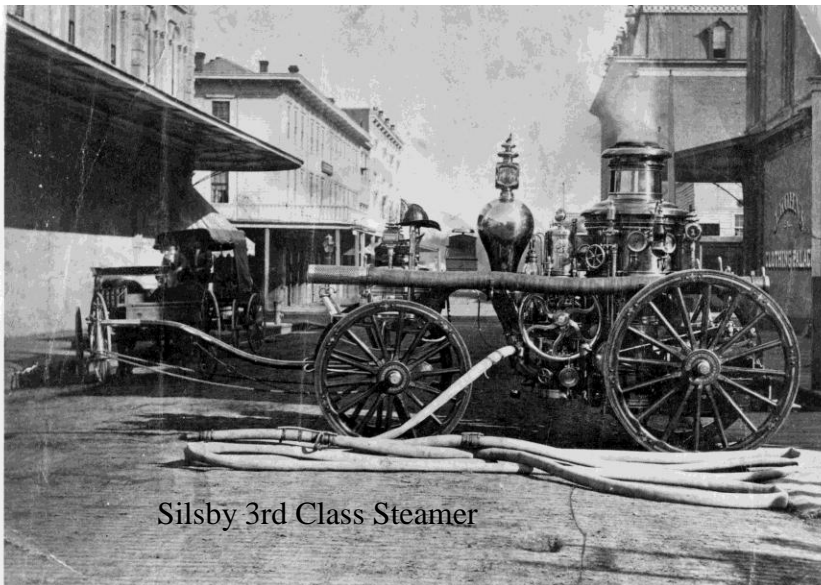
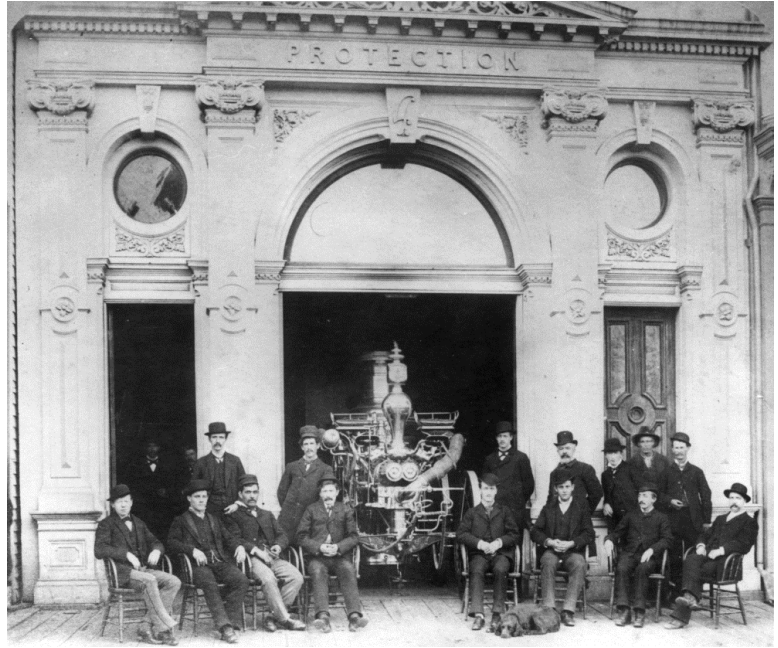
The first fire bell for the city was purchased in 1858. It weighed 1,040 pounds and cost the city of Portland \$518, plus freight for delivery. It would hang in the tower of the firehouse at 4th and Yamhill Streets in the tower over Vigilance Hook & Ladder's house. It would remain until the replacement following Black Saturday of 1873 arrived. It was a behemoth that weighed 4,200 pounds, 600 pounds of which were silver. It cost \$3,000.

The year 1860 also found the position of Chief Engineer becoming a paid position with the city. Additionally, firefighters in Portland were deemed "exempt" from jury duty and militia duty if they served seven years as a firefighter ("Exempt Firemen" certificates were issued when this landmark was achieved).

On November 12, 1862, a fourth engine company would join the fire department. Protection Engine Company #4 would be located at 273 First Street. Records indicate that a second Smith Hand Pump Fire Engine was provided to Protection. This meant that all four engine companies were now equipped with hand pump fire engines. However, technology would dramatically change in the coming years.

Firefighting with hand pumpers was an extremely labor-intensive task. Early accounts share not only the labor involved in early firefighting, but also describes the conditions faced in the frontier town of Portland.

In 1868, the city finally entered the steam firefighting era. The first steam fire engines were purchased and assigned to Multnomah and Protection that year. The vehicles were Silsby 3rd class (600 gallon per minute capacity) rotary pump engines. The vehicles of this era were automated by steam power, no longer requiring many people to pump the brake arms to move water. But they still needed human power to move to the vehicles to the scene of the fire. The luxury of horse power was still years away.



Silsby 3rd Class Steamer

The 1870s would provide significant challenges for the fire department and likely drove the shift from the volunteer era into the paid fire department era. Unfortunately, it took major fire losses for these needs to be realized.

December of 1872 found the first major fire conflagration in Portland. It would not be Portland's last big fire. Portland's largest fire would occur on August 2, 1873, a day

that would become known as "Black Saturday."

The 1872 fire would create the impetus for additional volunteer fire companies. Tiger Engine Company #5 was formed on February 13, 1873. They were given the Jeffers Sidestroke handpumper,

formerly used by Columbian, as their apparatus. Their engine house was located on 4th Street between Mill and Montgomery.

Couch Engine Company #6 would join the ranks in November 1880. They began service with no station or apparatus. In April 1881, Multnomah Engine Company #2 would transfer ownership of their Silsby steam engine over to Couch, which they would use until the end of the volunteer era in 1883.

The following descriptions of Portland's fire companies were found in various sources:

Vigilance Hook and Ladder Company #1 (approved August 1, 1853 - began service August 2, 1853)

On the evening of July 29, 1853, Vigilance Hook and Ladder was formed and officers elected. At a subsequent meeting held on August 1, 1853, the constitution and bylaws were adopted and the Company went into service the following day.

Northerner Engine Company (never fully organized, 1853)

Northerner was on the rolls but it never possessed equipment or a station house and for (according to sources) "shadowy" reasons, dropped from history.

Willamette Engine Company #1 (approved July 7, 1854 - began service August 6, 1853)

Willamette was organized on August 3, 1853 and was formally admitted into the department on July 7, 1854.

Multnomah Engine Company #2 (approved November 25, 1856)

Multnomah was organized in August 1856 and admitted into the department November 25, 1856.

Columbian Engine Company #3 (approved June 18, 1859)

No specifics of their formation was found but their approval date was June 18, 1859.

Protection Engine Company #4 (approved November 12, 1862)

The need for an engine company in the southern part of the city led to the organization of Protection on October 17, 1862. It was admitted to the fire department on November 12, 1862.

Tiger Engine Company #5 (approved February 13, 1873)

Tiger was formed to strengthen the department as the size of the city increased. In February 1873, Tiger would be located in the southwestern portion of the city.

Couch Engine Company #6 (approved November 1880)

Couch was formed with no apparatus or station location in early 1880 and grew in membership before the department became paid in January 1883.

While effective, the era of the volunteer fire company would draw to an end in the 1880s. The following is an excerpt from the city council proceedings of January 4, 1882.

The volunteer force has been as efficient as could reasonably be expected for men serving without pay. The time has come when men cannot serve without pay for this arduous work. The services of the men in this department should be paid for. Horses should be provided for a

sufficient number of engines to enable them to reach the outer portions of the city in as short a time as possible to prevent the spread of conflagration . . .

One year later, the Portland Paid Fire Department was established, leading to a new way of doing business and fighting fire in Portland, Oregon.

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www.PortlandFireHistory.com