

THE KEENE FIRE DEPARTMENT

by H. Emile DeRosier

The Keene Fire Department predates March 22, 1808, when a group of 42 prominent citizens were original members of the fire society, first called Subscribers for an Engine. On March 22 the title was changed to Proprietors for an Engine; seven days later an act was voted at the General Court to incorporate the proprietors under the name of Keene Engine Company. This act was approved June 13, 1808. Fire equipment as needed was purchased with money from the members' own purses.

The first meeting of the corporation was held on February 6, 1809, at William Pierce's Tavern, site of the present Cheshire Block. Noah Cooke was chosen moderator; Albe Cady, clerk; Cady, Elijah Dunbar, and James Mann as a committee to draw up bylaws, rules, and regulations necessary for the governing of the corporation. These were accepted on February 21, 1809, and the society was incorporated under the name Keene Engine Company.

Of the 42 members, 20 were chosen to constitute the first engine company, with Josiah Willard as captain. The first firewards were James Mann, William Wyman, John Bond, and Daniel Adams. The first president was Noah Cooke.

On June 28, 1822, an act was passed by the State Senate and House of Representatives to change the name from Keene Engine Company to Keene Fire Society.

Of several companies formed at various times, the Deluge Engine and Hose Company was the first in service and is still in existence with the name Deluge Hose Company. Another, first called the Phoenix Hook and Ladder Company, is now known as the Washington Hook and Ladder Company, and dated from 1868 or 1869. In August 1883 a new company was formed called the Keene Steam Fire Engine and Hose Company and is also still in existence.

In 1847 the Board of Engineers became the official title of the fire service. Also at this time the town started to purchase from the society the fire equipment which would become town property. The Fire Department was to be governed by the selectmen. On April 12, 1856, the Board of Engineers adopted the title Keene Fire Department for the organization.

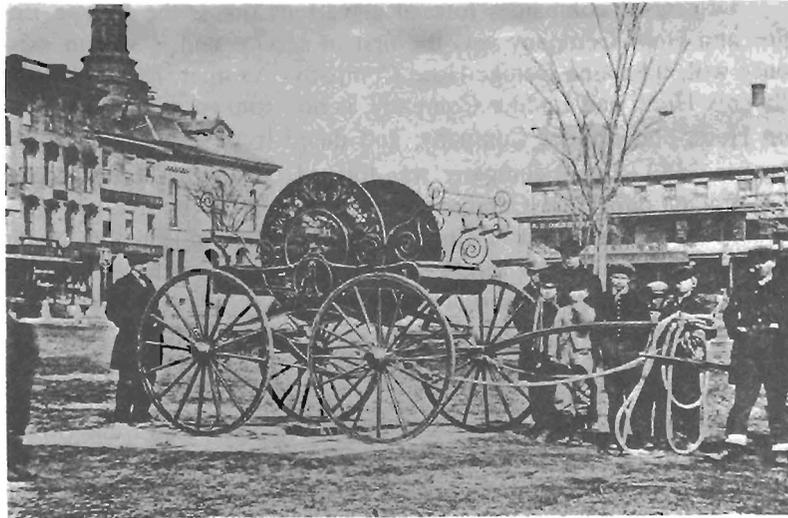
The first fire house, erected in 1808, was located on Main Street, slightly north of the old Sentinel building. Over the years the department headquarters moved to several locations, all unsatisfactory, and finally in 1884 the city purchased property on Vernon Street. Plans called for a building to accommodate three companies, Keene Steam Fire Engine and Hose Co., Deluge Hose Co., and Washington Hook and Ladder Co., with suitable stables for horses and rooms for the drivers. The new fire house was completed in February 1885.

On May 28, 1892, construction of an addition to the Central Fire Station was begun, and by the end of the year all the companies were housed in one building (the present fire station) for the first time in the department's history.

The men in the companies practiced firefighting and fire procedures once a month. In the early days every able-bodied man of the community played a role in firefighting. Each household was required to hang in a conspicuous place two leather buckets painted with the owner's first initial and last name, and these were used to form a bucket brigade at a time of fire. The buckets were made locally by Daniel Watson.

Over the years the town placed a number of wells within the area for a water supply for fires. By 1845 there were eight on Main Street, connected by aqueducts from a central well at the head of the Common. Here a pump was installed to keep the other wells supplied.

After years of discussion a new Deluge Engine hand tub was bought in 1848. This purchase was made only after a fire destroyed one of the town's oldest homes, built in 1775 and called the Major Willard house. The amount of property lost was 10 times greater than



Niagara Hose Reel—1863 photo

the cost of the engine. This engine, Number 348, is still operative in 1967. By 1853 the Neptune Company had two more engines.

One of the department's most interesting pieces of equipment was the Niagara Hose Reel, a four-wheel hose wagon purchased in 1862 for \$250. This brightly painted wagon had ornamental scenes on the ends of the reel. On the right side was a scene of a fire (Gerould Block) with spectators in the foreground and other citizens hard at work removing goods from the building while firefighters battled to subdue the conflagration. On the other side was a picture of Niagara Falls, after which the engine was named.

In 1864 all owners of dwellings were ordered to have in their possession a ladder or ladders to reach the highest part of their roof. These ladders were to be kept in good condition at all times.

Around 1868 flush hydrants were coming into use for firefighting; they were replaced in 1890 by post hydrants. By 1869 water from Goose Pond was delivered to the center of town by aqueducts made of hollowed-out logs to permit the flow of water. Many thought this would mean the disbanding of the fire department.

In 1874 a new four-wheel hose wagon was purchased for the Deluge Hose Company and located at Symond's Tannery. The Niagara Engine, with 300 feet of hose, was stationed in the South Keene Chair Shop and manned by a group of the employees. A small hose

carriage was placed in the west part of Keene and known as Station #7. A hose wagon was placed at Station #5 at the Hope Mills (Beaver Mills) on lower Railroad Street.

When the town became a city in 1874 the fire department, with a valuation of \$10,000, was turned over to the city government. Virgil A. Wright was the first chief under this new form of municipal government.

For years the Board of Engineers had talked of purchasing a steam fire engine. This was not accomplished until 1883, when the department bought an Amoskeag Steam Fire Engine, which was in service until the early 1930's. In 1891 the department consisted of three companies: Steamer Hose with 25 men, Deluge Hose with 20 men, and Washington Hook and Ladder with 20 men.

In 1902 a new (and final) horse-drawn ladder truck was put into service at a cost of \$1,250. In 1907 a new chemical hose wagon was added, the first of its kind in Keene. The chemical, a combination of soda water and acid, when mixed together formed foam to smother fires.

The Keene Fire Department became motorized in 1917 with the purchase of a Kissell triple combination (water tank, booster hose, and a ladder), followed by a 1919 Mack ladder truck. In 1923 the department purchased another new piece of fire equipment, a 1923 Reo chassis, and mounted the combination chemical and hose wagon from the horse-drawn wagon of the Steamer Company. Later altered to a brush fire truck, this is still being used by the department. As it is the oldest motorized vehicle still in service, it is called on for parades. In 1925 the first motor-driven pumper was put into service, an Aherns Fox 750 gpm, and this was followed by other modern pumpers.

Radio communication was introduced to the fire service in 1946. The first radios were installed in the chief's car and the 1933 Aherns Fox 500 gpm pumper. Later radios were installed in most of the other fire trucks.

When the railroad first came to Keene a new activity was added to the town, the Firemen's Muster. Train service made it possible for out-of-town fire companies to transport their equipment to the area for competition. Teams from Massachusetts, Vermont, and surrounding towns in New Hampshire attended. The first Keene muster mentioned took place on September 10, 1857, with 14 fire companies participating. A crowd of 12-15,000 spectators was on hand to witness this "first" in the history of the Keene Fire Department.



Each Fourth of July fire companies took part in the town parade, followed by a family picnic and a ball game between the fire companies.

In the fall of every year the fire companies held a parade and hose-laying contest as a demonstration for the townspeople. After the parade the companies returned to the fire house and waited for the bell to start the exhibition, when each company proceeded to Central Square with its apparatus and laid hose to see which could get water in the shortest time. This type of demonstration continued for years. The firemen would also try to see who could get water above the steeple of the First Congregational Church. This event ceased when someone left the trap door open in the steeple and water seeped into the organ, causing great damage. After this they held the exhibition at the Old Armory for a few years and then returned to Central Square until 1958. The next year the fire apparatus went to Robin Hood Park and tested the pumps with other town fire departments. In 1960 this was changed again. The fire companies now hold a Firemen's Muster at the Cheshire Fair Grounds the first Sunday of Fire Prevention Week, with as many as 50 pieces of motorized equipment.

Inspection Day for the Keene Fire Department is held on Thursday of Fire Prevention Week, a date established when the town became a city in 1874. The special activities include a parade with city officials, a tour of the fire house, a hose-laying contest, and a traditional scalloped oyster supper catered by the Ladies' Auxiliary. The day's events conclude with the Firemen's Ball in the evening.

The first Keene Fire Department mascot was a shaggy, white-haired canine named "Billy," who joined the department in February 1931. This little dog was a familiar sight running alongside the fire truck and barking all the way. At fires he kept children away from the fire trucks. He was a faithful member of the department for three years, and after his death was greatly missed by the firemen, as well as by all the citizens of Keene.

Not until December 1951 did the fire department acquire another mascot, a Dalmatian named "Smokey." He lived at the station and rode to fires on the front seat of the engine. "Smokey" was killed by an automobile on November 3, 1952. A short time later a second Dalmatian was given to the department. Also named "Smokey," he was mascot for six years, until his death from old age. There has been no mascot since.

Fire mutual aid plays an important role in fire service. It is an association of fire departments which by law has become a public municipal corporation. Although this type of system had been used in the area for more than a century, at first it was not compulsory for neighboring towns to assist free of charge.

Influenced by a fire mutual aid organization started in 1949 at Greenfield, Mass., a small group was determined to begin a system in Keene. On March 23, 1953, a meeting was held at the Keene Fire Department to which the chiefs of Cheshire County and neighboring towns were invited to study and formulate plans for a fire mutual aid system. A second meeting was held on May 23, 1953, and at this



time an association was formally organized known as The Southwestern New Hampshire District Fire Mutual Aid System, whereby the towns agree to give and receive assistance without charging for their services.

It was obvious at this time that a focal point to operate this system was needed. Keene, the only station manned 24 hours a day, was the most suitable location. With the helpful cooperation of Chief Walter Messer and the willingness of firemen on duty to handle the calls, this important step toward a central communication center was initiated.

During the period of development all calls for fire assistance were made by telephone. Before long it was found that two-way radios would increase speed and efficiency, and by 1957 this type of communication became an established fact within the fire mutual aid system. By 1962 the Southwestern New Hampshire District Fire Mutual Aid System had grown to include aid to towns in Vermont and Massachusetts.

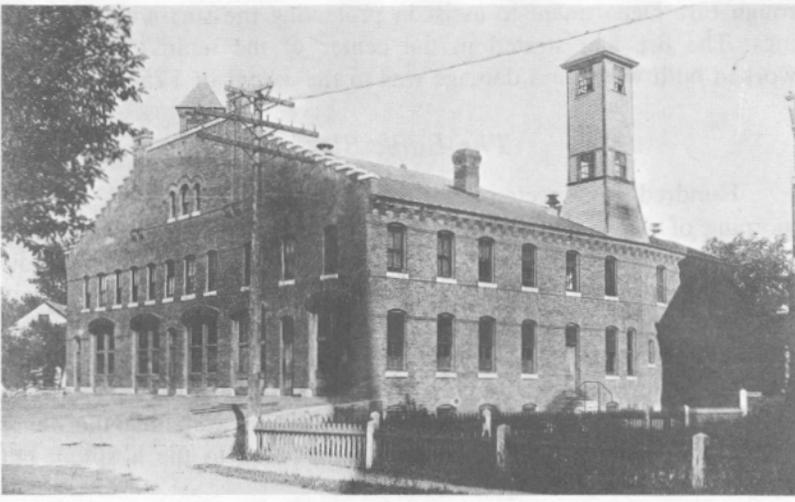
A FEW OF THE MORE SPECTACULAR 20TH CENTURY FIRES

The Patch

One of the most dangerous fires Keene had witnessed in many years occurred on a day when the temperature read 101° (July 6, 1911) in an area known as the Patch, at the lower end of Emerald Street, where a sawmill and storage section were owned by the Impervious Package Co. The fire extended from the gas house to Ellis Brothers Florists and from Ralston Street to the canal. Many homes were threatened by the blaze, which burned the house of Charles Burns, a three-story storage building owned by Humphrey's Foundry, and a number of wooden buildings of the Impervious Package Co. This company also lost its entire contents: 6,000 cords of staves, 300,000 feet of headings, and a large supply of logs. Ellis Brothers, to the south of the Patch, suffered a great loss in flowers. Sparks even set fire to the awnings of the Cheshire House Block at the corner of Main and Roxbury Streets. Many firemen were overcome by the intense heat. The fire burned for several days and left only ashes.

The Keene Fire Station

On May 29, 1914, early in the evening, a fire was discovered making headway in the rear of the Keene Fire Station, where stables



Fire Station, Vernon Street

for horses of the City Highway Department were located. All the animals were safely removed while the fire worked its way to the hay loft above and into the attic over the quarters of the Hook and Ladder Company. The fire alarm room, located on the second floor, received heavy water damage, and all the furnishings of the firemen were damaged or lost in the blaze. The fire burned the fire alarm wires entering the station, thus putting all the fire alarm boxes out of service. It was then thought advisable to build a fireproof addition on the northeast side of the station for the fire alarm room.

This fire was believed to have been set, as the shed was always open and anyone could walk through the passageway where the fire had started.

The fire station was again swept by fire on March 14, 1926. Heavy damage was done to the building before the blaze was brought under control. The station was rebuilt on an enlarged and improved plan.

The Burdett Chair Shop

On the morning of April 19, 1925, fire swept the three-story wooden building of the Burdett Chair Shop on upper Washington Street (opposite the present Sturtevant Chapel). The Keene Fire Department used all its available equipment, and called on the Marlbo-

rough Fire Department to assist in protecting the surrounding buildings. The fire had started in the center of the main building and worked both ways, and damage was to the extent of \$75-100,000.

The Bank Block

Hundreds of spectators watched a daring leap made on the morning of April 13, 1934. A fire had broken out in the Cheshire County Savings Bank Block on the fourth floor where Miss Addie Carter was a tenant. Miss Carter attempted to go down the stairway but fire blocked her escape and she received burns on her back as she warned others to escape. She climbed out of the window, hung from the window sill, and finally leaped to the pavement below, to be caught by her brother, Wright Carter, who was watching the dense smoke pour from the building. Both were taken to the hospital, but neither was seriously injured.

This was the third fire within a few weeks in this block, and it was believed the fire had been set. Tons of water were poured into the building and much water damage was done to the four floors.

W. L. Goodnow Store

On August 17, 1934, a fire broke out about 11:30 P.M., which caused over a half million dollars damage, completely destroying the E. F. Lane Block, which housed the W. L. Goodnow clothing store, several offices, and apartments. Several thousand dollars damage was also done to the adjoining Spencer Hardware Store. Firemen were hampered by escaping ammonia gas fumes and dense smoke, and Dr. Walter F. Taylor, who set up an emergency center near one of the trucks, treated many for smoke inhalation and injuries.

The firemen fought the blaze from all sides and adjoining roofs as flames were coming from all ends at once. Though every effort was made to keep the fire from spreading to the Spencer Hardware Co.'s upper floor where ammunition was stored, the fire reached some of the ammunition and hundreds of rounds exploded. Firemen fought the blaze all night and many remained on the scene the rest of the next day.

Robertson Motor Company

Thousands of spectators were on hand to witness the most disastrous fire since the Goodnow fire of 1934. With the temperature well

below freezing, firemen were called out at 2:30 Christmas morning of 1943 to put out a blaze which had broken out in the building of Robertson Motor Co.

The fire destroyed the three-story garage. At this time the top floor was occupied by the International Narrow Fabric Co. Near the burning structure were many wooden dwellings which were damaged slightly by the fire. The lack of wind was a blessing, as sparks had skyrocketed high into the air and cinders from the fire reached as far away as Beaver Street. Losses amounted to the extent of \$100,000 to each of the companies.

Bloomer & Haselton

One of the most spectacular fires in Keene for many years destroyed the two-and-one-half-story building of Bloomer & Haselton at 21 Winter Street to the extent of \$60,000 damage. The fire broke out early Sunday afternoon, July 4, 1948. Every available piece of equipment was used, and firemen fought the blaze from all sides, but it took more than two hours to bring the fire under control.

A second and even more disastrous fire struck the Bloomer & Haselton building late on the night of September 9, 1967, and burned into the following morning. The building then housed 20 apartments



Keene Fire Department, 1966

and four businesses. Though the fire made quick headway through the building, there was no loss of life. Hundreds of onlookers watched as Keene firemen battled the blaze with help from the Marlborough and Meadowbrook Fire Departments. The building was gutted and the loss was estimated at \$100,000.

Dalbolt, Inc.

Explosion rocked the building of Barker Realty, Inc. on West Street, formerly the Faulkner & Colony Mill, at 12:20 P.M., June 30, 1964, blowing out 15 windows on the West Street side and all the windows on the Island Street side. The blast lifted the roof of that section of the plant, setting the support column awry, and causing part of the roof to cave. A portion of the back wall on the south side was blown out.

The blast occurred inside a 120 foot gas drying oven of the Dalbolt Co., located on the west end of the third floor. The oven was being used for drying cloth printed by the company. Parker Patch, Jr., aged 36, superintendent of production, succumbed to severe burns received in the blast. Damage was estimated at approximately \$125,000.