



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Alexandria's suction pumper fire engine

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The Friendship Fire Company was Alexandria's first fire company, founded in 1774. Friendship's early firefighting was typical of that time. Buckets of water were used to douse flames to prevent fire from spreading. As the company moved through the 19th century, it continued to grow and acquire new technologies.

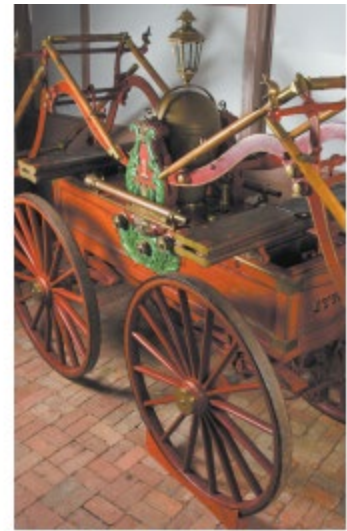
In 1851, Friendship purchased a hand-operated suction pumper fire engine for \$1,008 from John Rodgers in Baltimore. It is preserved in the Friendship Firehouse Museum and will be leaving this month for conservation treatment.

The new engine was a great leap forward in the technology of firefighting. Suction pumper fire engines were far more sophisticated and effective than earlier apparatus, and required significantly more manpower to operate. The company pulled the pumper and associated hose reel to fire locations. Once there, 20 to 22 men were positioned at multiple locations on the pumper, which had a reservoir to hold water.

The introduction of the Alexandria Water Company, and running water, in 1852 provided the teams with needed supplies of water. Operating the engine was hard work, so teams of men would switch out every few minutes to keep the pumper operating.

Engines like this were meant for both work and display. They were highly decorated with carvings and/ or pictures. The Friendship pumper has multiple carvings, including the clasped-hand symbol of the company on each side. These decorations made the engine a showpiece when the Friendship Fire Company participated in civic events and parades. Even after the company stopped fighting fires in the 1880s, their ceremonial and fraternal activities continued.

Technology is ever-evolving, and the hand suction engine was not the height of technology forever. The first steam-powered engines were brought to Alexandria by Union forces during the Civil War. These required less men to operate, but were more expensive and required horses to pull. These types of engines, and their cost, helped to push firefighting away from the older volunteer model to the more centralized version we see today.



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Left: The Friendship Fire Company's hand-operated suction fire engine in 1910. **Right:** The Friendship Firehouse Museum's hand-operated suction fire engine.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

The conservation treatment for the hand suction engine is possible thanks to donations by the Friendship Veterans Fire Engine Association, Alexandria Association, Historic Alexandria Foundation and many individual donors. The piece is in good condition for being 171 years old, but time has begun to take its toll. Friendship's engine is currently red, and it has been through several paint jobs over the years.

Red fire engines did not become popular until the 1880s. Identifying the various paint layers on the piece will be one objective of the conservation treatment. The conservator will open windows into the existing paintwork and choose a more historically accurate color scheme based on the findings. In addition to painting, metalwork needs to be replaced and woodwork will be repaired. When the hand suction engine returns, it will be more stable and more accurate to when it was fighting fires in Alexandria.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.