

Alexandria Times

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# Conserving Friendship's suction engine

The Friendship Firehouse Museum's hand-operated suction fire engine is on view in the historic firehouse after receiving professional conservation treatment. The Friendship Fire Company, established in 1774, purchased the suction fire engine in 1851.

John Rodgers of Baltimore, an Irish immigrant who became one of the most prominent builders of fire engines in the country, built the engine. Although made in Baltimore, the design for this type of apparatus was developed in Philadelphia. Appointed with ornate decorative moldings and sculptures, these powerful machines were suitable for both parades and firefighting.

Firefighters pulled the suction engine from place to place by hand. It has a two-cylinder brass piston pump, mounted in a wooden water reservoir, designed to suction water in from a hose on one side and then force it out through a hose on the other side. With the founding of the Alexandria Water Company in 1852, water was readily available.

Running the engine was hard work. 16 to 20 men operated the pumping levers to provide a constant output of even water pressure, and they had to rest every two to three minutes. Replacement firefighters would stand ready to



PHOTO/FRIENDSHIP FIREHOUSE MUSEUM

The hand-operated suction fire engine is delivered after conservation treatment.

take their place.

The engine's conservation treatment was possible because of generous contributions by the Friendship Veterans Fire Engine Association, Alexandria Association, Historic Alexandria Foundation and many individual donors. It included paint analysis, painting and stripping, repairs and polishing. Six historic paint layers were identified.

The analysis found the engine body's original color was a straw yellow with dark blue trim, and the ripple molding and leafy decorations on each side of the air chamber were gold leaf. By carefully sanding and priming the top surface, the layers of historic paint were preserved. New paint was then

applied to recreate the engine's original appearance.

Alexandria had a devastating fire on Nov. 16, 1855. Around 11:30 p.m., flames were discovered at Dowell's China Store on King Street. Friendship and the suction engine responded alongside all of the city's fire companies.

Efforts to extinguish the blaze continued until daybreak. Three non-firefighters were injured, and seven firefighters were killed, one from Friendship and six from the Star Fire Company.

Like other 19th-century volunteer fire companies, Friendship organized picnics, excursions to nearby cities and participated in civic events.

As early as 1839, the Com-

pany marched in Alexandria's annual George Washington birthday parade. Members also provided a support network. Upon the death of a fireman, his company assisted in caring for his family.

The legacy of these early firefighters continues today as the Friendship Veterans Fire Engine Association.

*Learn about fire safety in the past and present at the annual Friendship Fire Festival on Aug. 2. It takes place in front of the Friendship Firehouse Museum, on the 100 block of South Alfred Street, from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.*

*Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.*