

Paoli Fire Company: The First 101 Years

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The Firehouses

The volunteer fire company is an American tradition reflecting the ideals upon which our great nation was founded - "neighbor helping neighbor." An important part of this tradition is the firehouse, whose history reflects the history of the volunteer fire company in America.



On July 7, 1909, Paoli Fire Company took delivery of its first apparatus and found itself in need of its first firehouse. Through the generosity of Dewees and Bracken, owners of a coal and feed business, the horse-drawn pumper was housed in the stables on their West Central Avenue property. If Dewees and Bracken did not have a team of horses available to pull the pumper, horses were provided by John Eachus, who owned a livery stable where the Wawa store stands today.

It was not long before the Fire Company realized it needed its own firehouse. With generous contribu-

tions from the community, especially Robert Matthews who provided the down payment, the Fire Company purchased property on Lancaster Avenue where the Wachovia Bank stands today. While the existing building was being remodeled, the pumper was temporarily stored in Ralph Edwards' garage, located where Dunkin' Donuts now stands.

By 1921, a new and larger firehouse was needed. For \$31,000, the new firehouse was built. It also housed the Paoli Post Office and the town's only movie theater, where every two weeks "Flickers of the Flapper" were shown. Numerous dances and socials were held in the firehouse, which became the center for the town's social life. In 1925, the first of many additions and renovations were made to the firehouse. By the 1960s, it became apparent that a larger building was needed to house the equipment necessary to meet Paoli's growing demand for emergency services. With Chief Hughes as the motivating force, the fire company eventually purchased

property at 69 Darby Road, and the new firehouse was completed in 1972. The firehouse was no longer a social center. It had become a highly functional building which allowed for the storage and maintenance of seven pieces of sophisticated emergency equipment, and provided appropriate training facilities for the serious business of protecting lives and property.



Paoli Fire House 1950's

Through the years, the provision of fire, fire rescue, and

emergency medical services has become increasingly complex and specialized, which resulted in the need to purchase larger and more sophisticated equipment. By 2005, it became clear that major renovations to the firehouse were necessary in order to meet current and future needs. Spearheaded by Chief Dutter, the renovations were completed in October, 2010. The renovated firehouse has adequate space for the emergency apparatus and equipment, for multimedia training, for sleeping quarters, and for administrative offices. It is an environmentally friendly building, using such green technology as geothermal heating.

The Emergency Equipment

Paoli Fire Company took delivery of its first piece of fire apparatus on July 7, 1909; the one-cylinder gasoline-powered pump could be pulled by hand or by horse. Soon after the pump was delivered, a young Paoli physician showed the benefits of transporting fire equipment by motor vehicle. Dr. Robert C. Hughes would drive his Metz touring car to the firehouse to pick up one or two chemical extinguishers, then race to the fire to check the blaze before the pumper arrived. In 1911 a Locomobile chassis was purchased to carry the pump, and a local carpenter built a wooden hose bin.

Paoli's first motor-driven pumper was a Simplex fire truck which was purchased in 1921 from the Conshohocken Fire Company. A new pumper and a chemical wagon were purchased from Hale Fire Pump Company in 1925. In 1939, Paoli acquired a second Hale pumper and the 1925 pumper was remodeled. This equipment proved adequate through the postwar years until 1949, when a Ford Auxiliary Truck was purchased.

The 1950s brought several changes to the fire company which resulted from changes in the community's emergency service needs. A 1950 Mack pumper was added to the fire company's emergency equipment arsenal in order to assure the availability of an adequate water supply at the fire scene. The need for a four-wheel-drive vehicle to fight field fires prompted the purchase of a 1956 Dodge Power Wagon. In 1954, a Dodge Panel Truck was donated to the fire company to carry rescue equipment to the scene of automobile accidents. When hospitals stopped providing ambulance services during the early 1950s, the fire company purchased a 1941 Buick ambulance. During the 1950s, the fire company purchased a 1953 Cadillac, and in 1959 an International



Harvester ambulance was purchased. Further growth of the community resulted in the expansion and updating of equipment during the 1960s. The need for larger, more efficient pumpers led to the purchase of Mack pumpers in 1962 and 1966. The field truck was destroyed by a fire and replaced in 1962 by another Dodge Power Wagon. A 1968 Ford Econoline van replaced the rescue truck. Lack-

ing funds to purchase a badly needed elevated platform, the fire company made arrangements with the Snorkel company to convert the 1950 Mack pumper into an elevated platform at a modest price. During the 1960s, the ambulance service was updated by 1964 and 1966 Pontiac ambulances.

A dramatic increase in the community's emergency service needs during the 1970s necessitated several major acquisitions. A 1975 mini-pumper was purchased to provide more immediate response to vehicle accidents and small fires. With taller buildings and multifamily dwellings rapidly appearing, the fire company ordered an 85' Pierce elevated platform which was delivered two years later in 1976. The need for greater water capacity and space to carry specialized equipment resulted in the purchase of new Pierce pumpers in 1978 and 1979. During the 1970s, the ambulance personnel became capable of doing more than providing standard first aid and they found the old limousine-style ambulance offered inadequate space to carry the equipment necessary to provide their more skilled care. Consequently, the fire company purchased a 1973 Dodge van and later a 1979 Ford van.

The need to carry more sophisticated and specialized equipment resulted in the purchase of a Pierce tactical truck in 1980. Since the 1980s, the fire company has not expanded its fleet of emergency equipment, but it has regularly replaced and upgraded existing equipment in accordance with changing needs in the community, new hazards requiring specialized equipment, compliance with OSHA requirements for the safety of emergency personnel, and compliance with the requirements of the fire underwriters in order to help maintain lower fire insurance rates for the citizens of Paoli. Today, the fire company has one ambulance, a tactical unit, a traffic unit, two pumpers (one of which is also a rescue truck) and a 100' elevated platform. The fire company purchased its first pumper in 1909 at a cost of \$1650. The Mack was converted into an elevated platform at a cost of \$30,000. Paoli purchased its first ambulance for under \$1000. Today, an elevated platform costs approximately \$1,200,000, a new pumper costs between \$450,000 and \$600,000, and a new ambulance costs approximately \$190,000.

The Volunteers

The men and women from all walks of life who unselfishly give their time have always been the heart of the volunteer fire company. While there are probably many reasons one becomes a volunteer, one does not remain in the volunteer fire service without a strong commitment to the safety and welfare of his or her neighbors.

During the early years of the fire company, most volunteers learned to fight fires on the job and through occasional drills. Over time, training opportunities became more formal with organized courses and facilities like the fire school in Thorndale. Today's volunteer firefighter must complete an 80-hour Basic Firefighter certification program when he or she joins the fire company. Early training for ambulance personnel was a basic first aid course offered through the Red Cross. By the 1970s, the Commonwealth had introduced a basic course for Emergency Medical Technicians, and today's ambulance personnel must complete a 140-hour EMT certification course. Most fire and emergency medical personnel go on to take specialized and advanced certification programs. Drills have always been an important activity to teach new skills and hone previously learned skills. Drills have gone from gatherings which often turned into social hours, to formal weekly activities involving hands-on and multi-media instruction.

Throughout the history of the volunteer fire service, the volunteers have assumed major responsibilities in the repairing, routine maintenance, and cleaning of the firehouse, the apparatus, and the equipment. During the early years, most of these activities occurred when it appeared necessary, sometimes after a piece of equipment broke down. Today, the volunteers spend hours doing preventive maintenance, identifying problems before a piece of equipment breaks down, and maintaining the equipment according to clearly delineated schedules.

Of course, the primary responsibility of the volunteers has always been to provide emergency services to protect the lives and property of the citizens of Paoli. Since its founding, the fire company has gone from handling under fifty calls a year to over one thousand emergency calls a year. The volunteers stand ready to respond to calls 24 -7 in all kinds of weather. Unfortunately, the pool of potential volunteers has diminished during recent years. Fewer volunteers work within the community to be able to respond to calls at any time. At one time, employers allowed volunteers to leave work, and frequently paid them for their time while responding to emergency calls. Today, few employers can afford to allow emergency personnel to leave work and to pay them when they respond to emergency calls. Many who leave work lose pay. Due to the shrinking pool of volunteers, the Paoli Fire Company, like many other fire companies, has had to hire full- and part-time personnel to complement the volunteers.

At one time, the Fire Company had a relatively informal organizational structure. There were times the Fire Company had difficulty meeting financial obligations such as paying for fuel. Today's Fire Company is a business which must oversee and manage millions of dollars in assets. It must manage financial investments in order to assure the funding will be available when equipment needs to be replaced or upgraded. Responsible management of the business end of the Fire Company is shared by local business persons, professionals, and others who are elected by the Fire Company to serve as Officers and Directors. These administrative volunteers spend countless hours attending meetings and fulfilling other responsibilities to assure that the citizens of Paoli are provided with the best possible resources during an emergency.

Throughout its existence, it has been the commitment to





Paoli firefighters and Tower 3 pose in front of the recently remodeled firehouse on Darby Road during the 2010 commemoration of the fire company's hundredth year of service to the community.

“neighbor helping neighbor” which has resulted in the Paoli Fire Company being an integral part of the history of Tredyffrin Township.

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The Historical Society wishes to acknowledge the generosity of our Patron members for 2010:

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