

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 20 | Number 2

Article 3

6-21-1994

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Recommended Citation

Varnedoe, W. W. Jr. (1994) "Huntsville's Oldest Existing Fire Wagon," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 20: No. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol20/iss2/3>

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HUNTSVILLE'S OLDEST EXISTING FIRE WAGON

by
W. W. Varnedoe, Jr.

When the government of Huntsville was turned back to civilians following the military occupation during the Civil War, one of the first things the new government did was to appoint a committee to study and recommend fire defenses for the city. This committee recommended extending the water mains to the city limits and the purchase of a horse-drawn steam fire engine and a horse-drawn hose reel.

Minutes of the city show both recommendations were promptly acted upon, and in 1866-1867, the Silsby Co. of Seneca Falls, New York (later part of American LaFrance), delivered both a horse-drawn steam pumper and a hose reel complete with hose. This hose wagon cost \$836.

*How it
looked in
the 1870's.*



In the old days, there was no room on the pumper to carry hose, so it was necessary to have two appliances, the pumper to pump the water and a separate hose wagon to carry the hose. The hose wagon also carried axes, nozzles, firefighters and other tools. The water mains were wooden. In the event of a fire, the firefighters simply dug down to a wooden main and drilled a hole in it. They then drafted water from the resulting puddle. After the fire they hammered a wooden plug in the hole — our modern fire hydrants are still called, "fire plugs."

An old photograph in the archives of the Heritage Room of the Huntsville Public Library shows these two fire engines in front of the old Post Office that used to be on Green Street. The dedication plate on the Hose Wagon can be read in the photo with a magnifying glass; it names the Foreman (a rank now called Fire Chief) as John Spence, probably during the 1870's. Earnest Smartt has another photo showing this hose reel in front of the fire station, which was then on the southeast corner of Jefferson and Clinton streets. This early Fire Department was fully volunteer, except the Chief. Its name was The Huntsville Steam Fire Company. Their monogram can be seen in one of those photos.

*How it
looked
in the
1970's.*



The steamer has long since gone to the cutting torch as scrap. Somehow however, the old Hose Wagon survived, but was neglected. I found it, bent all out of shape and rusting away in a dump. I asked, and was given the old apparatus by Chief Tolen, when he was Fire Chief in 1970.

I completely disassembled it and, over a period of 10 years, put it back in working order. Although all of the metal parts survived, rusted and bent, including the nameplate, all of the wooden parts, including the wheels, were long gone.



*How it
looks
today.*

I used the old photos and some factory catalogs and documentation (which, amazingly, still exists) to rebuild the rig. The wheels came from an Amish craftsman in Indiana. The metal parts were hammered back into shape and there were some paint chips left on some parts to give the paint color. The reel axle was so deteriorated that a machine shop had to make a new one using the old as a pattern. The only things now lacking are the horse harness and some fancy scrollwork painting. The scrollwork on the reel can be seen in

the old photo, but, of course, not in color. Unless someone wants to donate his skill, this is likely not to get done. The Seneca Falls Historical Society and American LaFrance have furnished authenticating documents, but the old photos clearly identify this fire engine as one Huntsville used in the late 1800's.

The harnesses for fire engines were unique. The horse collar was split and hinged, so as to drop down on the horses, be fastened below, and thus, ready to go in a jiffy when the alarm sounded. One of these rare split horse collars is in the Harrison Brothers Hardware store.

If the Huntsville Fire and Rescue Department ever has a fire museum, then I will place this historic piece of old Huntsville in it. But for now it is in the Green Mountain Volunteer Fire Station, Huntsville Station No. 13, and can be seen by appointment.

Bill Varnedoe has been Chief of the Green Mountain Volunteer Fire Department for 24 years. He was an Engineer at NASA, now retired. The GMVFD was originally just in Madison County, but now that Green Mountain is wholly inside the city, it is Station 13, although still completely volunteer.

He has also been doing some research on the history of Green Mountain, but reports that little remains of the past to see. He would love to hear from other fire buffs and Green Mountaineers. His address is: 5000 Ketova Way, Huntsville, 35803.