

Fire Fighting in Arlington County

By LESLIE L. SHELTON*

The history of fire fighting in Arlington County and of the development of the County Fire Department has not previously been compiled. Written records are scanty and elusive. Much of the material which follows has been garnered through conversations with volunteer firemen whose recollections go back to the old days.

In our neighboring community of Alexandria, fire-fighting units were organized by the insurance companies in the 18th century. But Arlington was a rural area where fire protection amounted to cooperation between neighbors. Although over the years Arlington became increasingly less rural, there was no organized fire fighting in the County until into the 20th century. Former State Senator Frank L. Ball has told of the first big fire he remembers in his boyhood when William T. Burrows's barn burned and everyone for miles around came to help put out the flames. Fire protection was not taken on fully as a function of the County government until 1940, when the first paid fire fighters were employed, and even now volunteers are relied upon to render important service.

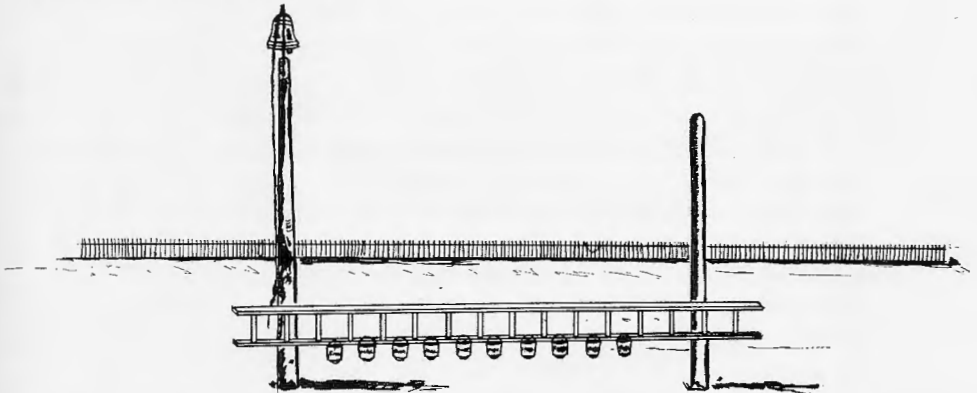
The earliest available existing record in the County concerned with fire-insurance risk is an application to the Hartford Insurance Co. for fire insurance on Arlington House (the Custis-Lee Mansion). It was signed by Robert E. Lee on October 17, 1859, the day on which Jeb Stuart delivered to him the orders from the War Department sending him to Harper's Ferry to subdue "one John Brown." (See p. 56.)

A serious fire in Cherrydale about 1904 or 1905 resulted in fourteen citizens banding together to form the first organized Fire Department under the direction of Ben Dye. This company was not only the first but has the most complete records of any of the various companies which have been established in Arlington. Its original equipment consisted entirely of one short ladder and ten leather round bottom buckets. (See fig., p. 51.) At what is now Lee Highway and North Monroe Street, two poles were erected to hold the ladder to which the buckets were attached. A bell to sound the alarm was hung on one of the poles. When a fire broke out, the men grabbed the ladder and buckets and headed directly on foot to the scene of the fire. Later a second company was organized on North Stafford Street about six houses south of Lee Highway. When fire calls had to be answered on foot, the area to which a company could serve was limited by the sprinting ability of its members.

In 1910 the two Cherrydale fire departments consolidated under a fire chief, Eugene C. Turnburke. Each department was headed by an assistant chief and a foreman. A dance was held at Schutt's Hall, the proceeds going for the pur-

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chase of a bell which was later to be placed on a pole in front of the Harris Store, then located at what is now Lee Highway and North Stafford Street. This site may have been chosen because of the difficulty encountered in finding a better location or because it was at the top of a long steep grade in that area, thus eliminating the long strenuous climb to the top pulling the hand drawn cart. The "Minute Book" of the County Board of Supervisors for June 11, 1912, notes that the Cherrydale Citizens Association "had requested the privilege of erecting a pole on the county road for the purpose of placing a fire bell thereon which request is hereby granted subject, however, to such restrictions as are required of telephone and telegraph companies placing poles along the said county road for their purposes."



GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF FIRE-FIGHTING EQUIPMENT USED BY THE CHERRYDALE COMPANY WHEN FIRST ORGANIZED. THIS TYPE OF EQUIPMENT WAS LOCATED AT WHAT IS NOW LEE HIGHWAY AND NORTH MONROE STREET.

The pole still stands, but the Harris store burned in 1913, the flames consuming the bell rope. The Fire Marshal's report dated December 5, 1913, states: "Cause of fire unknown," a phrase still current today.

A definite number of strokes of the bell signaled to the volunteers the area in which the fire was located: 2 strokes, Maywood and Thrifton Section; 3, Dominion Heights; 4, West Cherrydale; 5, Chain Bridge Road (now Military Road). All firemen were expected to respond.

Although the Board of Supervisors seems to have been somewhat stuffy about giving permission to put a pole on the County right-of-way, it had given some assistance to a volunteer company on an earlier occasion. The "Minute Book" for September 9, 1911, records a direction to the Clerk to reply to a request from the West Cherrydale Fire Department for a price on the windmill tower at the Court House (made obsolete by the installation of an electric pump at the well which supplied the Court House and Jail). The Clerk was instructed to say that "the Board was not in a position to quote a price, but that the Board would be glad to loan the same to the Fire Company for an indefinite period providing the same was kept painted and in good condition." One may speculate whether the "loan" was ever repaid.

In 1912 the Cherrydale Company acquired its first two hand-drawn chemical carts, at a cost of \$350. This prompted construction of a building to house them on the old Cherrydale School grounds. In 1913 a hand-drawn ladder truck was added to the equipment. Around 1917 or 1918 the first motorized equipment came into use by this Department. This required larger housing. A new house was built at North Taylor Street. An additional station was established in 1918 on property leased from the Thrifton family in Maywood. The present Cherrydale fire station was built in 1919. President and Mrs. Woodrow Wilson donated money for the building by "buying" a brick.

Early fire fighting was not without its untold incidents. In 1912, for instance, when a serious fire broke out at what is now 26th Street, North, and Old Dominion Drive, the firemen dragged the hose across the tracks of the Washington and Old Dominion Railroad. A commuter train came along and cut the hose. On the first motorized run to a fire made by the Clarendon Company, after moving to their present location the equipment turned over.

Though Cherrydale was the first community in the County to organize a fire department, others began to appear not much later. Ballston seems to have been the second, organized in 1908. At that time it boasted a hand-drawn "A"-shaped frame cart from which hung round bottom buckets, and a plowshare upon which the alarm could be sounded with a piece of metal. The buckets were made with round bottoms so that they could not be set down once they were filled with water. This stratagem was devised to speed up the motions of the "bucket brigade." The equipment was kept in an alley except during bad weather when someone's front porch was pressed into service as a station house. Later a hand-drawn cart known as "Little Jack" with two 30-gallon soda-acid tanks was purchased. The Ballston Company may have been the first in the County to use motorized equipment when it secured a 1914 Model T Ford truck to carry its soda acid tanks. The present station house in Ballston was built in 1921; the County contributed \$500 toward its cost.

The next fire department was formed in Clarendon in 1909 by the Clarendon's Citizens Association with which it was affiliated until 1925. Here again the early hand-drawn cart gave way to a chemical wagon. The station house was moved in 1920 from its first location on the north side of Wilson Boulevard where the Jones Building now stands to the intersection of present Fairfax Drive and Wilson Boulevard, and in 1929 to its present location on North Hudson Street.

The Columbia Pike-Glebe Road area, where the name "Arlington" was localized for many years before it was applied to the whole County, had a fire station on the Snoots Farm, where the Westmont Shopping Center is now. The volunteer group organized in 1923 and purchased a chemical fire engine through public subscription. The frame fire house was moved in 1926 to 2926 Columbia Pike at the rear of the Old Dominion Bank. In 1930 a modern brick building, still in use, was constructed on South Edgewood

Street, one block from Columbia Pike. The company was incorporated as Arlington Volunteer Fire Department No. 1 in 1924.

Falls Church had a village fire department as early as 1898, but the Falls Church Department we know today was chartered in 1925; in its early years it was not very active. Its sole piece of equipment, an old Ford, was moved from place to place, making it difficult to find when it was needed. One time when fire broke out in Herndon, the firemen after considerable searching, found the truck at Murphy and Ames lumberyard, hemmed in by lumber, the tires flat, and lacking both water and gas. They loaded it on a flat car, since it was so conveniently near the railroad tracks, and thus responded to the Herndon call in time to witness a few smoldering ashes.

The East Arlington Company was established in 1925. This area, known as "Hell's Bottom," has disappeared in the Pentagon road network. This department's usefulness was limited by the problem of keeping gasoline for the engine and coal in the station house to prevent the engine from freezing in cold weather. When the Pentagon was built, the equipment was moved to Hall's Hill.

The Hall's Hill station was also established in 1925. Its first station was on the grounds of the Langston School; the next fire house was located on Lee Highway. The present fire house on North Culpeper Street was built in 1934. This has always been a very active company. Its first fire-fighting apparatus was a two-wheeled cart with a 60-gallon chemical tank pulled by six men. In 1926, a 1917 Mitchell truck was purchased on which the tank was mounted. The first equipment placed here by the County was a pumper in 1932.

A fire department in old Jefferson Magisterial District appears to have been established quite early. The records of the Board of Supervisors show that in 1913 the "Rosemont" Fire Department asked for an appropriation to buy an engine and was granted \$250. Until the 1929 annexation by Alexandria, this area was part of the County. A second company was organized in 1924 in the Virginia Highlands portion of Jefferson District by the Jefferson Civic League which bought a 300-gallon-per-minute pumper. The first house in that area was in the 800 block of 23d Street, South, then moved to the 500 block. The present building was put up in 1928 when annexation appeared imminent, to house equipment moved from the territory lost to Alexandria.

Some of the early fire companies had short histories and left only vague traces of their existence. It is known that prior to 1923 there was a hand-drawn chemical cart at Fillmore Street (now South Walter Reed Drive) and Columbia Pike. This cart was also at times kept in the Penrose Section. There is no record of the names of the volunteers who manned it. Probably they eventually merged with the Arlington Company in the same general area. A company was organized in Bon Air in 1925, with equipment lent by the Ballston Company. The two companies feuded over who was to fight fires and where. Ballston was the stronger company and gradually the personnel of the Bon Air Department fell away for lack of funds and fires to fight. Ballston

took back the equipment which it had lent, and the station ceased to exist.

The community of Rosslyn is conspicuously lacking from this list of areas of the County where volunteer fire departments were organized. In the early days at least, none of the other departments were close enough—given the facilities of the time—to provide fire-fighting service in Rosslyn. The District of Columbia seems to have filled the gap on occasion. The “Minute Book” of the Board of Supervisors for February 2, 1907, records:

Resolved by the Board of Supervisors of Alexandria County, Virginia, [the name of Arlington County until 1920] that the thanks of this Board be extended to the commission and the fire department of the District of Columbia for the valuable service rendered the County and the village of Rosslyn during the recent disastrous fire at that village when but for the valuable service of the District Fire Department thousands of dollars' worth of property would have been destroyed and many families rendered homeless.

The thanks of this Board is also extended to the Arlington Brewing Company for the use of water from its plant on this occasion.

This last sentence reminds us that one of the handicaps from which the fire departments suffered—and one of the reasons for the heavy reliance on chemical carts—was the absence of a County-wide water system until 1927.

In 1926, when the question of a County-wide and County-owned water system came up, there were approximately twenty small communities located in the County's three magisterial districts, Washington, Jefferson, and Arlington. Five independent privately owned distribution systems were of steel pipe from 1½ to 3 inches in diameter, some without meters; the Aurora Hills system was of cast-iron pipe 4 to 8 inches in diameter with meters on each service connection.

During that year the Arlington County Board of Supervisors employed Asa E. Phillips as consulting engineer to investigate and report on a County-wide water system. The major problem was to provide an adequate supply of water economically. With this in mind, the possibility of getting water from the federal supply was agreed to be the proper solution. A committee was appointed by the Board to contact the U.S. Government for the purpose of obtaining this supply. The result was that there were two acts passed by the 69th Congress, one authorizing the sale of water from the federal water supply, the other authorizing the connection of the Arlington County water system to the federal water system.

Coming down into modern times, the Fairlington Fire House was built in 1943 when the Defense Homes Corporation built the large apartment project known as Fairlington. The Walter Reed Drive Station (1957) and the Rosslyn Station (1958), both built by the County, are the youngest units of the County Fire Department. For by this time fire protection and fire prevention had been recognized as a responsibility of local government in Arlington County. The development was gradual. Raising funds to cover their cost of operation was a major concern of the early volunteer companies. For instance, the Cherrydale Department held a country fair, at which they sold fire extinguishers to the citizens at a profit; held dinners, turkey shoots, and raffles

(dignified by the term "voicing off"); and sold yearly memberships in the Fire Department at 25 cents per person. In 1912 a second fair amassed funds to the extent of \$252.38. Reference has been made to a dance given by a Fire Department and to the device of "selling" bricks to collect funds to build a station house.

The volunteer companies also sought the aid of the Board of Supervisors. In January 1914 the "Minute Book" of the Board notes:

In the matter of requests from several of the volunteer fire departments of the county for assistance in purchasing new fire apparatus. The Board read and heard the petitions and stated that it appreciated the work being done by the several companies but at present was not in a position to consider giving such assistance. However, they promised to take this up at the time of laying the levy for 1914.

During that year the Board took several actions to render such assistance. On April 10, 1914, they directed the County Engineer "to have installed a red light globe in front of the fire engine house at Cherrydale and to have it so that the light on it could be operated by a switch from the residence of Mr. Vermillion." On May 12, 1914, the Board agreed to pay for a chemical engine for the Jefferson District Citizens Association and to purchase two chemical engines for the use of the Cherrydale Fire Department. It also appropriated \$638 for the Clarendon Fire Department. Over the years other sums were given either for the purchase of equipment or for building a station house. This was all on an "ask and you may or may not be given" basis.

The major support of the fire departments continued to be what they could raise from their own efforts. In 1932, however, the State Legislature outlawed games of chance, thus eliminating a main source of revenue for the volunteers. The Arlington County Board assumed legal control over all equipment, thus enabling it to provide necessary financial support. The only equipment not now owned by the County is housed at the Falls Church station. That is owned partly by the volunteers and partly by the City of Falls Church. This company runs into Arlington, Falls Church, and the County of Fairfax, and part of its operating expenses are paid by the City of Falls Church in the form of a reimbursement to Arlington County.

Although E. C. Turnburke was referred to in 1915 as the "County Fire Chief," what organization there was must have been a loose one. The first fire marshal to be paid by the County was Albert E. Scheffel, appointed in 1927 at \$1 a year. Early in 1937, the fire marshal became chief of the Fire and Safety Division and was placed on the regular County payroll. He had served since 1926 as Chief of Arlington Volunteer Fire Department No. 1. The first paid firemen (three persons to a station) were employed in 1940. At the present time, two stations, No. 9 at South Walter Reed Drive and No. 10 in Rosslyn, are manned entirely by paid personnel. The paid complement at the other stations varies depending upon the type and amount of equipment which they house. The Division of Fire Protection and Fire Prevention of the Department of Public Safety of Arlington County now has a Fire Alarm Headquarters, a Fire Prevention Bureau headed by the Fire Marshal, an or-

Hartford Fire Insurance Company, of Hartford, Conn.

The estimated value of Personal Property, and of each Building to be insured, and the sum to be insured on each, must be stated separately. When Personal Property is situated in two or more Buildings, the value and amount to be insured in each must be stated separately. When insurance is wanted on Personal Property, the same description should be given of the Building containing the property, as if insurance is wanted on the Building.

Application of R. E. Lee, U. S. A.

for Insurance against loss or damage by fire by the **HARTFORD FIRE INSURANCE COMPANY**, in the sum of Five Thousand Eight Hundred Dollars on the property specified: the value of the property being estimated by the Applicant.

	AMOUNT TO BE INSURED.	VALUATION.
On <u>Dwelling House</u>	5000	20,000
On <u>Barn</u>	800	1200

The Applicant will answer the following questions, and sign the same, as a description of the premises on which the insurance will be preferred.

Arlington

1. BUILDING—Is it stone, brick, or wood? How many stories high? Where situated? When built? Which part occupied by Applicant?
2. WALLS—Are the division walls of brick? Are they entire? Do they rise above the roof?
3. ROOF—What is it covered with? Are the gutters stone, metal or wood? Is there a scuttle and stairs to it?
4. Are the stoves and apparatus for using fire properly secured, and will you engage to keep them so?
5. Do the pipes enter a chimney? And is it built from the ground? Do pipes pass one or more wood partitions or floors? If so, how secured?
6. What fuel is used? And how are ashes disposed of?
7. What material is used for lighting?
8. For what purpose is the building used? How many tenants?
9. Distance and material of other buildings, within 100 feet of the one to be insured? And how occupied?
10. What other insurance is there upon the property, and at what office? Has this Company any other insurance within 100 feet of this risk?
11. Is the property mortgaged? And to what amount? Is there any insurance by the mortgagee?
12. Is there any other party interested in the property?
13. Has the building a lightning rod? If so, is it on the old or new plan?

1 Dwelling of Brick, main building two stories high, and wings one story, in Arling Va, built about the year 1820 - all occupied by applicant. The Barn is of brick, one story high, with a stone basement. The main building of the Mansion House is covered with slate and the wings with gravel. The Barn is covered with gravel. The gutters are metal. The division walls are of brick. There is not a scuttle in the roof of the dwelling. The Barn has a scuttle from the roof into the roof of a large pipe enters chimney. Chimneys built from the ground. No wood partitions. Stoves and warming apparatus well secured. Wood coal are used for fuel. Ashes are put out a safe distance. Burning fluids, or candles, or Kerosene Oil, or Gas are permitted. Dwelling House - one tenant. A one story brick kitchen to a one story brick store house, both covered with wood. The one standing West of the Dwelling on a line with the north line thereof, & the other on a line with the south line thereof, both distant 44 feet. \$5000. by the Home Ins. Co. No other risk within 100 feet. No other ins. on the Barn. Property insurance by the Home Ins. Co. Dwelling has a lightning rod. New plan. Barn has a lightning rod about 40 feet south east, and a scupper shed about 100 feet south of the main building.

And the said applicant hereby covenants and agrees to and with said Company, that the foregoing is a just, full and true exposition of all the facts and circumstances in regard to the condition, situation, value and risk of the property to be insured, so far as the same are known to the applicant and are material to the risk.

Dated October 17 1859

R. E. Lee Applicant.

For 1 year at 40 cents.
 . 1 . at 80 cents (See Note & diagram of the premises on the other side of this sheet.)

FACSIMILE OF APPLICATION MADE BY GEN. ROBERT E. LEE IN 1859 FOR INSURANCE IN THE HARTFORD FIRE INSURANCE CO. TO COVER HIS DWELLING KNOWN AS THE "MANSION HOUSE," ARLINGTON, VA.

ganization headed by a Fire Chief, an Assistant Chief, and three Battalion Chiefs. Total paid personnel now numbers 165.

There are now ten fire stations in Arlington County:

Number 1—Arlington
1041 South Edgewood Street

Number 2—Ballston
911 North Stuart Street

Number 3—Cherrydale
3900 Lee Highway

Number 4—Clarendon
1006 North Hudson Street

Number 5—Jefferson
501 23d Street, South

Number 6—Falls Church
6929 Lee Highway

Number 7—Fairlington
3116 South Abingdon Street

Number 8—Hall's Hill
2209 North Culpeper Street

Number 9—Walter Reed
1900 South Walter Reed Drive

Number 10—Rosslyn
1559 Wilson Boulevard

The Fire Division operates 20 pumpers (some having a 1,000-gallon-per-minute capacity), four ladder trucks (one of which has a 100-foot aerial ladder), and six ambulances with which the Rescue Squad answers emergency calls. These are all equipped with two-way radios. This is a far cry indeed from a "short ladder and ten round bottom, leather buckets." The volunteer companies still own seven of the ten station houses, and there are over 500 volunteers on the rolls but only about 10 percent are active.

Jokingly, the Fire Division boasts: "We seldom lose a foundation and we have never lost a lot."

Civil War Military Operations in Northern Virginia in May-June 1861

(Continued from page 49)

and Christian kindness delivered the lifeless bodies of six men who had been left behind during the hasty retreat. This gentleman, whose name was omitted from the report, was present during the attack and afterward gathered the frightfully mangled bodies, carefully folding each one in a blanket before delivering them to their last bivouac. An assistant surgeon and two soldiers accompanied the Vienna gentleman back to the small Virginia hamlet to get the last remaining soldier, John Volmer, who was dangerously wounded and could not be moved with the others.

Private Volmer recovered a month later at Georgetown Infirmary and returned to his home in Ohio. His nine comrades, killed or mortally wounded at Vienna, were the first soldiers from the State of Ohio to give their lives in the Civil War. They probably did not know that they too were the first in the history of warfare to use the railroad tactically in an engagement. These men from Zanesville and Portsmouth were buried at Camp Lincoln near the old cotton factory known at Roache's Mill. The location of their remains today is unknown, but perhaps someone living in the Presidential Gardens Apartment area will recall that some unidentified graves were uncovered by construction workers, and maybe a county coroner will remember where the remains were taken. Two questions could then be answered—one from the 1860's and another from the 1940's—and the final footnote could be added to our story.