



# History Of The Prescott Fire Department

By The Prescott Museum & Visitor Centre

## **The Police Boards Control of The Fire Department:**

Fire preparedness and brigades in Prescott are as old as the town itself. Incorporated as a Police Village in 1834, on March 6<sup>th</sup> of that year the board passed Bylaw XVIII to establish its first fire code. The new law allowed the board of police “the power to enter into and examine all dwelling houses, warehouses, shops, yards and outhouses, to entertain whether any such places are in danger with respect to fires.” The board also passed law XXIX allowing the board to borrow 1,000 pounds for fire related equipment, however it took years before those instruments were purchased.

In the following years more bylaws come into effect to prevent fires from occurring. In May of 1834, the board passed a bylaw “fining each resident of a home no less than 5 shillings each for failure to upkeep their chimney”. Another measure introduced that same year would ban the burning of wood shavings within one hundred yards of any building. Other precautions would ban candles and lamps from stables and ban stove pipes that were not covered by a stone or brick chimney. The first known person to be fined for non-compliance was a man by the name of Joseph Cowan who was fined a total of fifteen shillings in February 1841 for “allowing his stovepipes to be in a dangerous state” and for refusing fire inspector Thomas Baynham to examine his premises.

In 1835 the town purchased a dozen ladders and an unknown number of fire buckets which were distributed around the town in case of emergency. During the period of the police boards control of the fire department this was the only equipment purchased for the town.

In 1841 the board of police appointed Robert Headlam, Moses Murphy, Timothy Buckley, Robert Glasgow, Thomas Torr, and Peter Moran as fire wardens, who were tasked with creating and enforcing fire laws and regulations. In 1849 these tasks expanded to give them “the power to put down any building or property to prevent the spread of fire” and could not be held personally liable for any loss sustained. This bylaw stirred major controversy between the police board and the citizens of the town and was a major discussion point for the dissolution of the police board the following year.

During this era the town experienced a few fires, however, many details are unknown. One known fire took place in July 1849 at Sandy Hill Cemetery. After the blaze was put out Mr. Patrick, Michael A. Flynn, Stephen B. Merrill, and A. Smyth were all charged for non-attendance at the fire. Each man was charging a half shilling. Another fire was that of the home of Charles McCrea in September 1838. After Mr. McCrea’s home was destroyed, the police board put out a reward of ten pounds for the apprehension and conviction of the person who set fire to the building (although it was never confirmed to be an act of arson).

## **The First Fire Company:**

After the police board was dissolved in favor of a town council in 1850. The committee appointed by the police services board was dissolved the following year. Thos. Robinson was named the chair of the interim fire committee and was a vital member of the town's purchase of their first fire engine from Mr. George Perry of Montreal that same year.

In August of 1851, all bylaws regulating fire wardens were repealed and replaced with bylaw IXX, establishing a fire company for the town. John Rosamond became the first superintendent of fires on August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1851, while G. Scott and B. White were authorized to manage the fire company. The fire committee composed of W. Hillyard, C.H. Peck, Timothy Buckley, and Peter Moran, was announced on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1851, during the christening ceremony of the town's first fire engine named the Augusta. The Augusta would remain in service from 1851 to 1874. The first fire company ran from 1851 – 1865. The late 1850s proved to be a tough time for the fire company with the organization, with multiple captains taking helm of the organization through those years. The company constantly went through equipment malfunctions and poor practices that forced the town to invest in a new fire hose and waterproof coats for the crew.

An inquiry was held with the town council on February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1860, appointing a committee to investigate the internal working of the organization. On February 23<sup>rd</sup>, a report by the committee stated that the current regime was skipping out on meetings, and not safely storing equipment. After the report was published then captain Mr. Kilpatrick was fired from his position and then mayor Bartholomew White was tasked with assuming the role as interim fire captain and to organize a new fire company.

Mayor White served as captain of the fire company until 1861 when Edward Mundle (original captain of the fire company) was given the position. He served as captain until the dissolution of the original fire company in 1865. Although the fire service was running more smoothly after the inquiry, they still faced problems with equipment malfunctions. Bylaw 178 was passed in April 1865 which called for "the creation of a taskforce of 30 able bodied men, who will be paid no more than \$2 for every 6 months of service, with a premium of \$4 every calendar year of service." This law however would not come into effect until 1866 after some pushback from the old regime.

## **The Second Fire Company:**

Mr. Ward was appointed the first superintendent of the fire company in 1867. Under his regime the department grew exponentially in the following years. In 1867 the town purchased the first set of uniforms which were in use from 1867 – 1878. In 1875 the fire company also reached an agreement with the St. John's Market to store their fire engine in the south side of the building. An agreement that stood until the close of the market in 1960.

In 1874 the town purchased their first steam powdered engine which operated until 1894. Through the 1870s more fire prevention measures were introduced to the town such as the installation of more water tanks around industrial areas within the town.



*Members of the Excelsior Fire Company, as the Prescott Volunteer Fire Dept. was called in 1878, with their banner as the Best Uniformed Company which they won at an Eastern Ontario firemen's field day. Front row, left to right, are George Snider, Fred Sharp, Jim Allen, Harry Sharp (the dog Spot belonged to Jim Allen); centre row, A. Tripp, J. Slattery, S. Harris, Capt. W.J. Barnes, Jim Whitney, J. Prevost, Bill Scott; back row, H. Ranson, C. Cowan, Ed Crowley, George Shaver, Martin Delaney, Jack Hughes, Dan Kerwin.*

Throughout the decade the force shrank to 25 from 30 crew. L.H. Daniels was hired as the town's first teamster in August of 1878, and served as the head ambassador between the town and the fire company through the late 1870s and 1980s. That same month the company also purchased the town's first ever flame-resistant uniforms. These uniforms would win the department the award for "Best Uniformed Company" at the 1878 Eastern Ontario firemen's field day.

## **Excelsior Fire Company:**

By December of 1878, the fire company was known as the Excelsior Fire Company and held monthly meetings in the council chambers. The following February saw the creation of an official council committee consisting of fire company employees and town council members. Mayor William Dunn was head of the board while Mr. Mundle, Mr. Melville, and Mr. Carius served as the other representatives. As of that year it became customary practice for a member of the fire department to be involved in council meetings.

More fire prevention measures were introduced in the following years with the towns fire engine becoming winterized with the purchase of specialized ice runners in 1879, A partnership with the towns churches was also written that same year that allowed firefighters access to ring church bells incase of emergency

## **The Fire of St. Andrews:**

In January of 1892, a fire broke out at St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, burning the structure to the ground. This was the first major fire in Prescott's history. The fire company came under major fire due to their delay in service which resulted in further damage to the building. An emergency town council meeting was held the following day. After an inquiry was held it was determined that multiple factors played a role in the delay of the fire engine; it was concluded the cause of delay was due to a delayed fire alarm, and difficulties maneuvering the fire engine from the winter terrain.

After the St. Andrews fire, W.J. Gilmour, superintendent for the Bell Telephone Co. of Prescott was tasked with the installation of the fire town fire alarm system. These towers were installed in 1892 and served as the main form of communication of a fire within the town until 1900.

## The Prescott Volunteer Fire Department:

By the end of the WWI the fire department was then referred to as the Prescott Volunteer Fire Department. The first piece of motorized fire equipment was purchased in 1931 and was named the Bickle. As of recent years, the fire engine is still used in parades and other ceremonies across Ontario. The first driver of the Bickle was Gordon Miller, who was a member of the fire department from 1929 – 1979, with 13 years served as the chief of the department. In this 1967 photo Mr. Miller was captain of the department at the time.

In 1960 after the closer of the St. John's Market the fire department moved into the market building where they resided until the building's demolition in 1962. Since the 1960s the fire hall has now resided at the corner of Centre and Henry Streets. In the late 2010s the firehall went through major renovations to accommodate their ever-growing fleet of fire engines and serves as a permanent storage facility for the Bickle Fire Engine.



1967 Prescott Volunteer Fire Department: Front row, left to right, Luke Reid, 1st Capt.; Wray Dickson, Asst. Chief; Gord Miller, Chief; Allan Warren, 2nd Capt.; second row, Harry Bowers, Harvey Pitt, Ham Durant, Doug LaPorte, Foch Healey, Joe Doyle, Jerry Hunter, Albert LaPorte, Doug LaPorte Sr.; third row, Jack Hunter, Ron Merkley, Bill Countryman, John Annable, Bill McCurdie, Herb Mallon.

Since the 1960s the fire department has made major improvements to its fleet and is ever expanding its resources to suit the town's needs. In 1963 the town's first aerial ladder truck was purchased. The following decade seen the donation of the jaws of life by the Kinsmen Club, and the implementation of fire suits then provided by Dupont.



King Street Fire Hall Circa' 1960

The 1980s seen the department switch from canvas hoses to rubber ones, and the purchase of a Thibault pumper. The fleet would only grow in the following decade with the purchases of the town's first ever utility van and rescue truck. The fire department has focused on specialized training since the 1970s so "every firefighter is completely responsible and can be held accountable for the acts they take". A standard that has been practiced for over 50 years now. Since the 1980s the fire department has partnered in many community activities as well as participating in the "Learn Not to Burn" program which teaches fire safety to children. As of the current day the fire department consists of 29 dedicated individuals and is led by Chief Renny Rayner. We thank them for their dedication and service in keeping the town of Prescott safe.

**The Prescott Museum & Visitor Centre**  
**Open Wednesday - Saturday, 11-5**  
**202 King Street West, Prescott, ON**

