

# WET JACKETS & TORN BREECHES

## Perth's Early Fire Companies

If conception of the Perth Fire Department can be traced to a place and moment in time, it might be the frosty evening of Friday December 28, 1838 when a chimney fire broke out at the home<sup>1</sup> of John A. Haggart (1786-1855)<sup>2</sup>. *“Had it not been for the praiseworthy exertions of the inhabitants to extinguish the flames, who on all similar occasions display the same alacrity, the house would have been totally destroyed”*.<sup>3</sup>

Damage to the Haggart house that night was minimal. The large two-storey Regency style stone home, just completed in 1837, was only *“partially injured and the furniture slightly damaged”*<sup>4</sup>. The incident was, however, a repeat of many fires, large and small, that had kept the village of Perth on constant edge for two decades; fires that had too often resulted in much more serious consequences. In his next edition, an exasperated editor of the *Bathurst Courier* asked,

*Do the inhabitants yet see the necessity of subscribing for a FIRE ENGINE ... an important and necessary appendage to every town? For ‘the hundred-and-fifth time’ we would suggest that a meeting be held at the Court House to devise ways and means for procuring one. The paltry sum of 5s. from each householder would make a sum sufficient to purchase one, large enough, for this place.*<sup>5</sup>

That call for action drew nods of agreement but no concrete result. Then, four months later, the very core of the village came within a hair's breadth of total destruction. On the morning of April 23, 1839, stables behind the home and general store of leading citizen William Morris (1786-1856)<sup>6</sup>, were found ablaze.<sup>7</sup>

*The inhabitants rushed to the place, with such portable pails and buckets as were handy for carrying water, to quench the flames (the only means which the inhabitants of Perth have, of putting out fires, not being in possession of an ENGINE for that purpose).*

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<sup>1</sup> Haggart House survives at 41 Mill Street.

<sup>2</sup> John Haggart Sr. was a Scottish stonemason who worked on the Welland Canal and then became a contractor building Chaffey's Lock on the Rideau Canal. He came to Perth in 1832 and leased Dr. Alexander Thom's (1775-1848) grist mill on what was shortly known as Haggart's Island. He soon owned the site and built a complex of water-powered flour, oatmeal and sawmills on the main branch of the Tay, a carding mill on the Little Tay, and his home in between. He was the father of John Graham Haggart (1836-1913), Perth Mayor (1861-1864, 1871-1872), Member of Parliament (1872-1913), Postmaster General (1888-1890), and Minister of Railways and Canals (1892-1913).

<sup>3</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, January 4, 1839.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Perth's first merchant and in 1839 a member of the Upper Canada Legislative Council.

<sup>7</sup> 32 Harvey Street, southwest corner of Gore and Harvey Streets.

*It being apparent that all attempts to save the out-buildings would be labor lost, and there being a strong southerly wind at the time, the warehouse was the only concern of the inhabitants to preserve, as well as Mr. Morris' dwelling house; but it becoming evident that the store could not be saved, the whole of the goods in it were carefully removed, and but very little remained when those engaged were obliged to cease, and preserve their own lives by leaving the building which was then in flames, and in connection with the adjoining premises was totally destroyed.*

*It was alone owing to the vigilance of those present, and the incessant pouring of water on the roof that the dwelling house was saved, as also the Post Office, Robert Thompson's tavern and William Lock's Brewery, for they were frequently on fire, but put out ... Dr. Wilson's frame house, J. Harvey's store, and Captain McKay's building were also on fire at different times, all of which would have been a devastating ruin had it not been for the unprecedented and zealous activity of the inhabitants to protect them from the raging element.*

*The loss which Mr. Morris sustains is about £800. We are keenly of the opinion that had there been a FIRE ENGINE in the town with the advantages of water which we had on this occasion, the store would have been saved ...*

*If proof were wanting, we have had it, by a sad and dear bought experience, during the last six or eight months of the urgent necessity of a FIRE ENGINE for the town, and when villages of not half the population of Perth, are supplied by some means or other, with an Engine and all the apparatus complete, for the protection of property from fire. It is truly surprising then, that the District should have remained so long, heedless of the call made upon its enterprising inhabitants, without bestirring themselves, and making an effort to raise a subscription for the purpose of purchasing a FIRE ENGINE for the use of the town.*

Over the weeks and months following, the *Courier* was unrelenting in its campaign to secure a fire engine but failed to gain much traction until fire struck Haggart Island yet again on October 1, 1841. This time the flames completely laid waste to Haggart's grist and carding mills. The newspaper once again lamented that Perth had "... occasion heretofore to regret the lack of a Fire Engine, hooks and ladders, and the formation of an efficient company"<sup>8</sup>, but went on to report that loss of the mills had finally prompted action. The long called for meeting had been held and a public subscription was underway to fund the equipment necessary to defend against the scourge of fire.

### **1842 Murray Engine**

Merchants William and John Bell<sup>9</sup> came forward to manage the fund-raising drive, but also took the initiative to ensure immediate action. Advancing their own funds, they purchased a 'fire engine' from one William Murray at Montreal and the following spring shipped it via their barge *British Queen* to Perth.

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<sup>8</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, October 5, 1841.

<sup>9</sup> The Bell brothers, William (1806-1844) and John (1806-1849), were the twin sons of Perth's first Presbyterian preacher, Reverend William Bell (1780-1857) and his wife Mary Black (1773-1861). They established the W. & J. Bell merchant store at Perth in 1828.

In addition to the engine, the purchase included a set of ladders and carriage, four fire hooks with chains and tug ropes, 40 leather fire buckets and 12 leather fire caps. A sleigh for winter use was manufactured locally. The cost, including freight, amounted to £101 and when the subscription drive eventually raised £127, a public meeting decided that the surplus of £26 should be applied to building an 'Engine House' and purchase of a stove for drying hose.

The Engine House was erected on Market Square, near where the Town Hall now stands, and, over subsequent years, tanks or wells were dug at strategic points around town from which the fire engine could draw water. Among other locations there were tanks at the street corners of Wilson & Foster; Wilson & D'Arcy, Gore & Foster; Gore & Craig; Drummond & North; Drummond & D'Arcy, Drummond & Brock; Drummond between Foster & Herriott; Victoria & Glascott; and at Market Square.<sup>10</sup>



*1842 'Murray' Fire Engine. The 'brakes' or push-bars on the pump handles are much shortened versions of the originals.*

The same meeting also approved the immediate organization of a Fire Company of at least 70 young men. The engine required two gangs of about 36 hands each, enough to manually haul the engine, ladder, and hose carts to a fire, and then see half the squad work the pump handles and hoses while the other half plied the hooks, ladders, and buckets.

The apparatus was not an 'engine' in the sense that term later acquired. Tested and approved by the Montreal Fire Department, the Murray engine was a portable pump boasting a 2¾ inch cylinder and a 12 inch stroke, capable of discharging about 80-100 gallons of water per minute. It drew water by suction and ejected it at pressure, driven by the motive power of human muscle. The 'engine men' worked a long bar, known as the 'brake', mounted across the pump handles on each end of the machine, laboring in teams of about 12 at a time, relieving each other as exhaustion dictated.

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<sup>10</sup> Most of the tanks/wells were filled in when the Town's streets were paved in 1926.

## Living Flame

Over the years Perth would become a town of stone and brick, but in the 1840s most homes and business were still built of wood, attached to wooden outbuildings, and enclosed by rail or board fences. Stacked in each home's shed, or in piles nearby, were 50 or more cords of winter firewood, including cedar kindling or, later, an equivalent amount of coal and often a supply of hay for the family cow.

All heat and light came from a living flame. Transition from the open fireplace to an iron woodstove was underway, but fireplaces still spit sparks and embers, and even stoves presented dangers. If the stovepipes and chimney were not kept clean, creosote build-up ignited. Even a well-maintained chimney could throw sparks onto a wood shingle roof or an adjoining building and burn them to the ground in minutes. The most common cause of fire was hot ashes, removed from a fireplace or stove and spilled on a floor or porch or carelessly dumped too close to a fence, woodpile, or rubbish tip. Candles were still the only source of light in the 1840s and a candle knocked over or touching a window curtain could have devastating consequences. By the 1850s oil lamps represented an equal or greater danger.

Moreover, fire-centered enterprises like blacksmith shops, potasheries, bakeries, and foundries were scattered cheek-by-jowl among the town's residential and commercial properties. Even the surrounding forest threatened destruction when out-of-control bush fires swept through summer-dry cedar swamps to the very doorsteps of the village.<sup>11</sup>

As demonstrated by the Haggart and Morris fires of 1838-1841, over its first quarter century firefighting at Perth was a very ad hoc and ineffective businesses; simply a matter of neighbor rushing to aid neighbor with bucket in hand. From a total of less than 400, Perth lost an average of at least two houses annually to fire, a great many more were heavily damaged, and every fire presented the threat of a conflagration that could consume the entire village.

## The First Company

With arrival of the new fire engine eagerly anticipated, by January 1842 a Perth Volunteer Fire Company had been organized, its men benefitting from a recent act of parliament that exempted volunteer firemen from militia duty, serving on juries, or being deputized as constables, so long as they regularly discharged their duties, including monthly training, with the fire company. The bylaws of the new company stipulated that when an alarm of fire was given, the men would,

*... assemble at the Engine House and when a sufficient number were assembled to manage the engine, they would, under their officers (or in the absence of officers, someone elected from their own number to temporary command), proceed without loss of time to the fire, with their engine, hose, hooks, ladders and other implements, and work and manage the same until the fire is extinguished.*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See *The Long Swamp Fire*, Perth & District Historical Society, <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/long-swamp-fire.pdf> .

<sup>12</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, January 25, 1842.

Under penalty of a 1s 3d fine, the rules prohibited any fireman from leaving the scene of a fire without the permission of his Captain, until ordered to return equipment to the Engine House. Fines of 12½ ¢ were levied for missing a company meeting, leaving a meeting early, smoking during a meeting, swearing, unnecessary ringing of the Engine House bell, or climbing on the hose-reel without consent. Intoxication or disorderly conduct attracted a 13½¢ fine while loaning the Engine House key to a non-member was punishable by a fine of \$4 or expulsion from the company. A member disobeying orders was fined another five shillings and “*shall, if the offence is repeated, be liable to be expelled by a majority of the members at a general meeting*”.<sup>13</sup> Firemen were expected to conduct themselves with the discipline, decorum, and discretion of gentlemen.

Men aged 18 to 48 could join the brigade and membership bestowed a considerable degree of prestige. From the outset, the new organization, and the companies of later years, were essentially a ‘closed shop’. They jealously protected their independence and prerogatives and managed their affairs by the rules and rituals of an elite and exclusive fraternal brotherhood. Men wishing to join had to be recommended by at least one serving member and could not be admitted without consent of the majority of the members.



Sadly, what was begun with such enthusiasm and civic pride, very shortly crashed, and burned, the victim of mechanical failure. By February 1847, when separate fires on the same day completely destroyed the barns of Judge John Glass Malloch (1806-1873) and John Doran (1795-1850), killing livestock, consuming produce, destroying tools, and dangerously threatening the nearby houses, the *Bathurst Courier* reported that,

*... we never saw men at a fire work better or to more effect ... the fire company's hooks were of considerable service; [but] the engine [was] not in working order. Had these fires happened in the summer, without an engine the surrounding buildings could not have been saved. We would call the attention of our townsmen to the necessity of either getting the old engine repaired or getting a good one in its stead*<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, February 16, 1847.

The Fire Company volunteers continued to turn out with their leather buckets, hooks and ladders, but again in 1848, "... owing to the want of an engine and the scarcity of water [another house fire] was not subdued until totally burnt to ashes, as well as the adjoining building<sup>15</sup>. In reporting the incident, the *Courier* observed that "... had the calamity been worse, it would probably have more effectually convinced the inhabitants of the importance of a good fire engine, than any other thing we can say on the subject".<sup>16</sup> Through the late 1840s and early 1850s, as the ill-equipped Fire Brigade struggled to contain fire after fire, the threat of catastrophe loomed like smoke on the horizon.

With passage of the Upper Canada Municipal Corporations Act in 1849, the Town of Perth could anticipate gaining authority to raise its own revenue by taxation. From 1850 through 1852, as municipal incorporation, set for January 1, 1853, approached, the *Bathurst Courier* beat the drum in nearly every edition, urging that acquisition of a fire engine be placed at the top of the new municipality's agenda.

*... one of the first considerations of our town council [should be] to devise ways and means of procuring an engine for the safety of the property of the inhabitants in case of fire<sup>17</sup>.*

*... A public meeting of the inhabitants should take place without delay and see what might be done towards procuring an efficient Fire Engine for the Town .... We understand that the old Engine would be taken in valuation in part payment of a good and efficient one<sup>18</sup>.*

*We would draw the attention of the inhabitants of this place, and particularly the town Council, to the importance of procuring a good Fire engine for the use of the town .... There are several buildings in town, in which, if a fire were to break out, with a high wind, there would be no possibility, without an engine, of saving a single house. The town possess a good set of hooks, ladders, and buckets &c., but these are of little use without an engine. We are confident that a tax levied for such a purpose would be cheerfully paid – and enough should be levied to purchase a first-rate engine.<sup>19</sup>*

By 1852, without a fire engine around which to rally, the fire company of 1842 seems to have had ceased to exist as an organized brigade.

*A fire company would very soon be organized if the engine were procured. Will not our town fathers take this subject into their serious consideration at their first meeting – it is one in which they, as well as all the inhabitants of the town, are deeply interested and the corporation funds could not be applied to a better and more useful purpose. Come, take hold of the subject, and let an engine be procured as soon as possible.<sup>20</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, March 24, 1848.

<sup>16</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, March 29, 1850.

<sup>17</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, December 6, 1850.

<sup>18</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, January 10, 1851.

<sup>19</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, March 5, 1852.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

## Union & Fountain Fire Companies

James V. Thompson (1812-1912) and Charles Rice (1822-1901)<sup>21</sup>, the *Bathurst Courier* editors who had been agitating for fire engines since the campaign of 1841, must have been well pleased when one of the first actions taken by the inaugural Perth Town Council, elected in January 1853, was to purchase a 'Fire Engine'. A contract was signed with the Perry Pump and Engine Works of Montreal and on February 11th an advertisement in the *Courier* launched recruitment of the Perth Union Fire Company.

*A meeting of the Perth Union Fire Company will be held in the old Mechanic's Hall, on Saturday the 12th inst. at 7 o'clock p.m., when all those wishing to become Firemen are requested to attend. – Duncan Kippen, Secretary, P.U.F.C.*<sup>22</sup>

Although not fully operational for lack of a fire engine, on March 3rd, a delegation from the "New Perth Fire Company", led by its recently elected Captain Samuel Bothwell (1825-1900), attended a "Firemen's Festival & Ball" staged by the "recently organized Smiths Falls Fire Brigade".<sup>23</sup>

Then, in May 1853, as the Union Company still awaited arrival of its engine from Montreal, George Miller (1811-1860), partner in the local

foundry and machine shop of Murray, Miller & Morris,<sup>24</sup> rolled out a fire engine of his own creation. Although described as being "in an unfinished state, having only been temporarily put together for purpose of experiment"<sup>25</sup> the Miller engine worked extremely well. It threw a strong jet of water on the roof of a two-storey house, "sufficiently copious to have extinguished a fire." The Miller engine boasted a 4½ inch cylinder with a 9½ inch stroke and could throw a steady volume of water up to 120 feet. The *Courier* thought that,

*Judging from the present experiment we should think that Messrs. Miller could get up a first-rate engine; and as they are among the most enterprising of our fellow townsmen, they should be encouraged.*<sup>26</sup>

By the end of September, Murray, Miller & Morris had brought their fire engine to full operational status, and when,



<sup>21</sup> James Thompson was publisher/editor of the *Bathurst Courier* from 1837. Charles Rice was employed by Thompson at the *Courier* from 1839 until he purchased the newspaper in 1852 and ran it until 1862.

<sup>22</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, February 11, 1853. Duncan Kippen (1830-1926) would be a member of the Union Fire Company over the entire history of the Company's existence.

<sup>23</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, March 1853.

<sup>24</sup> Located at 10 Herriott Street.

<sup>25</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, May 6, 1853.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

*... the blacksmith's shop of Mr. Walter Hunter, at the west end of town, was discovered to be on fire, and before any effective efforts could be made to extinguish it, the entire building was enveloped in flames ... the fire engine manufactured by Messrs. Miller & Co. and a small engine<sup>27</sup> belonging to J. P. Grant Esq. were speedily on the spot and did most effective service in saving the surrounding buildings.<sup>28</sup>*

The creation story of Perth's Fountain Fire Company is not completely clear, but shortly after the Hunter fire, impressed by what local ingenuity could produce, a volunteer fire fighting force coalesced around the Miller engine. Why men joined the Fountain Company rather than the Union Company is uncertain. Some, no doubt, had failed to secure positions with the Union Company when it mustered that spring. Many of the rank and file, however, were men with personal or family connections to the 1842 Fire Brigade and apparently saw the Fountain Company as the resurrection and continuation of that pioneer force. Over the coming years, even though the Fountain Company came into being eight months after the Union Company, the Fountain men would always claim precedence and describe themselves as "*by far the oldest company in town*".<sup>29</sup>

When the Fountain Company first mustered in October 1853, the Murray, Miller & Morris Foundry still owned the company's fire engine, and officers of the Fountain Fire Company were all principals in the foundry firm; Captain John Murray (b.1821)<sup>30</sup>, Engineer George Miller, Suction Hose Section Foreman Charles Miller (1822-1879), and Company Secretary William Morris (1832-1907).<sup>31</sup> However, the new fire company immediately undertook to secure ownership of their engine. It first advocated for purchase by the Town Council, on grounds that Council had procured the Perry engine for the Union Company. Probably for the same reason, Council initially declined; two independent fire companies do not seem to have been part of the municipality's original fire protection plan.

Frustrated by the reluctance of Town Council, in early 1854, the Fountain Company simultaneously launched a campaign to finance purchase of the Miller engine by public subscription, as had been done to purchase the Murray engine of 1842. In the meantime, the manufactures of the Miller engine, the same men who were officers of the Fountain Fire Company, were advertising their engine for sale, publishing an advertisement in the *Bathurst Courier* over eight consecutive weeks between April and June of 1854.

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<sup>27</sup> Probably a one-man 'Fire Squirt' that functioned somewhat like a bicycle pump.

<sup>28</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, October 7, 1853.

<sup>29</sup> *Perth Courier*, July 23, 1869.

<sup>30</sup> John Murray seems to have lived at Perth only briefly, but he appears in the 1861 census, born in Scotland, aged 40 years, unmarried and described as an 'iron monger' with a capital investment of \$16,000.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Miller, and his father Charles Miller Sr. (1785-1842) had been members of the 1842 company.

**Fire Engine For Sale.**

**T**HE UNDERSIGNED offer for Sale a FIRE ENGINE, 4½ inch Cylinder, and 9½ inch stroke, with fifty feet Leading Hose, and twenty-four feet Suction Hose, and Hose Reel complete. New last August, and warranted in Good Working Order. Will be sold cheap, and liberal terms of payment given.

**JOHN MURRAY & CO.**  
Perth, April 11, 1854. 231f

Despite the rather murky 'on-loan' status of their fire engine, throughout this period, from 1853 onward, the Fountain Fire Company regularly fought fires, side-by-side with the Union Fire Company. Complementing the Miller engine, the Fountain men had brought with them, into the new company, the surviving ladders and carriage, fire hooks, chains, tug ropes, buckets, and fire caps that had equipped the 1842 brigade.

By the summer of 1855, the public fundraising effort had achieved some success, but perhaps generated more enthusiasm for the Fountain cause than actual cash. With a significant part of the population behind the Fountain Company, however, a deal was struck. At its September 1855 meeting Council passed a by-law "providing means for purchasing the Fountain Fire Engine".<sup>32</sup> That "means", however, was in the form of a £400 loan to the Fountain Company, but paid out in installments directly to the Murray, Miller & Morris Foundry.

The total price paid for the Miller engine is uncertain, but the loan must have represented the largest part of the total bill. By 1856-1857 Murray, Miller & Morris had turned their prototype into a manufacturing business and were advertising a line of fire engines at prices ranging from £10 to £400; the top price including "50 feet of leading hose and 24 feet suction hose, with hose reel complete".<sup>33</sup>

The Town Council loan of 1855, never repaid, would prove a source of confusion and dispute over the years concerning who actually owned the Fountain Company's engine and the extent to which Town Council could involve itself in the affairs of the Fountain Fire Company.

**FIRE ENGINES.**

Fire Engines manufactured from £10 to £400.—  
For the information of parties at a distance we sub-join the following Certificate:—

"We the undersigned have great pleasure in being able to state, that Messrs. George Miller & Co., have made two Fire Engines for the Fountain Fire Company of Perth, equal if not superior, to any other two Engines of the same dimensions which we have seen in the Province. To parties at a distance intending to purchase a good Fire Engine they can without hesitation recommend their make.

(Signed) **GEORGE COX, Esq.,** Chief Engineer,  
**DR. J. S. NICHOL, Esq.,** Mayor,  
**R. E. MATHESON, Esq.,** Warden,  
**R. DOUGLAS, Esq.,** Town Councillor,  
**JNO. P. GRANT, Esq.,** Postmaster,  
**R. ROBERTSON, Esq.,** Merchant.

A few of the articles on hand and manufacturing are comprised of Boring Machines, Tennoning Machines, Morticing Machines, Threshing Machines.—  
Also, all descriptions of Saw and Grist Mill Castings, and Gennening Machines.

All articles in the line made to order and with despatch.

**GEORGE MILLER & Co.**  
Perth, Dec. 26, 1855. 11m6

<sup>32</sup> Bathurst Courier, September 28, 1855.

<sup>33</sup> Bathurst Courier, April 14 through June 16, 1854.

In early November 1853, a few weeks after mobilization of the Fountain Company, the long-awaited Perry fire engine arrived in town. Delivered personally by its manufacturer, William Perry<sup>34</sup>, the new machine, slightly larger than the home-grown Fountain, boasted a 5 ½ inch cylinder driven by a 15 ½ inch stroke and when put on trial “*threw water 178 feet, in a body, not spray ... and after more practice it should throw another 20 feet*”<sup>35</sup>.

Following a public demonstration of its capabilities on November 12th, the Perry engine and its Union Fire Company were officially inaugurated at a ‘fireman’s dinner’ chaired by Union Company Captain Samuel Bothwell and attended by manufacturer “*William Perry, the Smiths Falls firemen ... Mr. Burley, Chief of the Smiths Falls Fire*

Engine	Cylinder	Stroke	Throw
1842 Murray	2.75 inch	12 inch	
1853 Miller Fountain	4.5 inch	9.5 inch	120 feet
1853 Perry Union	5.5 inch	15.5 inch	180 feet

*Brigade ... the [Perth] Town Reeve and Town Councilors, Messrs. Deacon and Grant*”. Representatives of Perth’s other fire company were, however, conspicuous by their absence and acknowledged only when Perth Reeve Richard Shaw (1822-1872) offered “*a toast our absent friends, the members of the Fountain Fire Company*”.<sup>36</sup>

Why the Town chose to import the Perry engine from Montreal, rather than support local industry by purchasing the equally serviceable Miller engine, remains a mystery. As does the fact that the citizens of Perth responded to the subscription drive and turned out their pockets to help fund the Miller engine purchase at exactly the same time their tax dollars were being expended on equipping the Union Company with the Perry engine.

Whatever social, religious, economic, political, personal, or other divide lay behind the duplication of Perth’s firefighting capacity, from the day of their creation the Union and Fountain Companies functioned in a high state of competition and the town doubtless benefited greatly from the efficiency and diligence that competition engendered. Both companies received an annual grant-in-aid and other financial support from Town Council and there were never incidents of obstruction, assault, or sabotage (e.g., hose chopping) so common among Montreal’s Catholic and Protestant aligned fire companies of the day. Less than two weeks after the Fountain men boycotted the firemen’s dinner, both companies responded to a fire at a derelict house in the north end of town. On that occasion “*... the ‘Fountain’ fire engine was speedily on the spot, and the ‘Union’ arrived shortly afterwards*”<sup>37</sup> but the building was too far gone for the companies to engage the flames. A few days later, however, on December 2, 1853, they jointly knocked down their first true fire.

<sup>34</sup> William Perry Jr. (1837-1930) was a son of William Perry Sr. (1784-1832), brother of George Perry (1838-1922) and nephew of Alfred Perry (1820-1900), all of whom had shops at Montreal producing pumps, fire engines and hose. Perry fire engines won medals at the Great Exhibition at London in 1851 and at the Paris Exhibition of 1855.

<sup>35</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, November 18, 1853.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, November 25, 1853.



*Union Fire Company's 1853 'Perry' Engine*

In February 1854, the Town of Perth sold the non-functioning 1842 Murray engine to the Murray, Miller & Morris Co., builders of the Fountain engine, for the sum of £7.10.0. The sale only took place, however, after some heated debate over the question of whether or not the municipality had the right to sell the old engine, since it had been purchased by public subscription and not by the so recently created municipal corporation.

In 1855 a purpose-built brick fire hall was erected, at municipal expense, on Herriott street with its back to the Little Tay. According to a Committee on Contingencies report, the facility was meant to house “*the two Fire Engines*”<sup>38</sup> but in the end it seems to have been home to the Fountain Company while the Union Company occupied the original 1842 ‘Engine House’ at Market Square. The Herriott Street Fire Hall would serve Perth’s firefighters until it was outgrown in 1953 and remains in public service today as an annex to the Public Library.<sup>39</sup>

### **Who’s Number One?**

The competition that seems to have surrounded their birth was sustained and intensified as the companies strove to outpace each other in the race to play first water on every fire. Perhaps dating to the Fountain Company’s fundraising drive of 1853-1854, the tournament spirit infected the citizenry at large, and the community was soon supporting one side or the other as they might today support a sports team. Reportedly, the Union Company came to be associated with the East Ward and the Fountain Company with the West Ward, while residents of Center Ward chose their favorite as they might.<sup>40</sup> The fire companies were even eulogized in poetry.

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<sup>38</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, June 30, 1854.

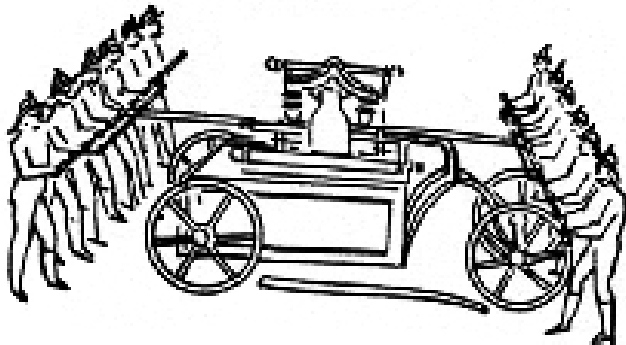
<sup>39</sup> A Perth Heritage Designated Property (1982) – Town of Perth By-law 2445.

<sup>40</sup> This description of neighborhood alliances is offered by Donald Fraser (1841-1933) writing in the *Perth Courier*, June 30, 1905. Geographically, it makes no sense as the Fountain Company, housed at the Herriott Street fire house, was located to the east of the Union Company, based at the Market Square, but may have had to do with the wards from which the majority of each company’s volunteers were drawn.

*Perth has a hundred firemen bold,  
Two companies of Red and Blue,  
In summer's heat, and winter's cold,  
Prepar'd their duty still to do.  
Our Firemen and our Volunteers  
Are worthy of three times three cheers!<sup>41</sup>*

While the companies were perceived to have an attachment to a specific ward, when an alarm sounded both responded regardless of the location of the fire. For much of the early history of fire fighting in Perth there were alarm bells at various locations around town: at the Town Hall, near the present-day United Church, at the corner of Gore and Brock Streets, at the Catholic Church and at various other locations at different times. The locations were selected so that sound of the bell would also indicate the approximate direction of the fire. When an alarm sounded, the firemen rushed to their respective Engine House and manually hauled their engines, hook and ladder wagons and hose reel carts to the scene of the fire. A squad of about a dozen men pulled at full speed for one block and then, winded, were replaced by a second squad, and so on in relay. Occasionally a passing teamster would volunteer or be compelled to hitch his horses to the carts and spare the men.

As most of Perth straddles branches, or is tucked into the curve, of the Tay River, access to water, within the limits of their pumping capacity, was not usually a problem for the early fire companies. There were also the municipal tanks or wells at strategic locations around town to provide an immediate source of water, and a town bylaw provided for payment to those who brought out their teams and hauled water from the river in barrels to keep the water tanks replenished. The bylaw also established a prize of \$1.00 for 'first water' and \$0.75 for 'second water' brought to a fire, the winner determined by the first Company Captain on the scene.



As set out in the original Volunteer Fire Company Constitution of 1842, the companies conducted training exercises at least once each month and, during spring, summer, and fall, often drilled more frequently. These exercises honed their speed and efficiency at placing the pump engine, laying hose from a water source to the engine and onward to the designated fire point, and bringing a full stream of water into play. The speed at which the engine could be brought into full operation, the volume of water thrown and the distance

over which an engine could throw it, were the metrics upon which company honor hung. The companies often coordinated their training days so that they competed head-to-head and thus provided some local entertainment in the process.

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<sup>41</sup> *Perth Courier*, February 16, 1866. Credited only to "A poetical Friend" but believed to be by Robert Jamieson (1848-1932).

In the run-up to May 24th celebrations in 1857 word leaked out of a large wager made between the Fountain and Union Companies, paying off to the company whose engine could throw water the greatest distance. Described by one town councilor as “a quarrel between the Fire Companies”<sup>42</sup>, the matter drew so much attention that Council felt compelled to pass a resolution “instructing the Captains ... to get their men to arrange the dispute without further difficulties.”<sup>43</sup> Council’s presumption to dictate Fire Company affairs drew the ire of at least one firefighter. Through a letter to the Editor of the *Bathurst Courier*, he denied any “quarrel” existed and complained that the Town Fathers were trying to deprive,



**Union Fire Company silver-plated speaking trumpet purchased in New York in May 1860.**

*... the firemen of an opportunity of showing the good people of Perth which company has the best engine ... I would like to know what right the Council has to interfere with the firemen even supposing they had some difference among themselves ... They receive no pay to bind them to our council, all they get is in the shape of wet jackets and torn breeches, so that their term of service may end at any time. The trial will come off, somewhere about the 24th May, and I hope to see every member of our council present to see the qualities of the Engines and also of the Companies ...*

*Your interference with the Fire Companies is uncalled for and calculated to do more harm than good ... I also believe that if the Council put their veto upon the trial, as some of their members wished to do, in 24 hours after they would have the engines but not a single man to work them ...*<sup>44</sup>

In preparing for fire or contest, the companies were constantly fine-tuning both their equipment and drill. For distance of water throw, the larger Union engine usually (though not always) outperformed the Fountain engine at trials, and when the Fountain engine required repairs in 1872 some town councilors complained that,

*... if the companies would not be constantly trying themselves to fix and improve the working of their engines, they would be in much better condition today ... The Fountain Company would not rest satisfied until they had an engine that could throw a stream as far as the Union”.*<sup>45</sup>

### Recreational Arson

Legend recounts that in their pursuit of excellence the fire companies set derelict buildings alight to provide opportunities for intercompany competition and training against live flames. There is, however, no documentary evidence, contemporary with the service of the Union and Fountain Fire Companies, suggesting this ever actually happened.

<sup>42</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, April 21, 1857.

<sup>43</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, April 17, 1857.

<sup>44</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, April 21, 1857.

<sup>45</sup> *Perth Courier*, October 4, 1872.

The first appearance of this so oft repeated yarn seems to be in a reminiscence by Donald Fraser (1841-1933) published in the *Perth Courier* of June 30, 1905, at the time of the Perth Old Boys Reunion. Fraser cites as an example the burning of St. Bridget's Roman Catholic Chapel in October 1860, at which George Miller, Fountain Company Engineer and builder of the Fountain engine, was killed. The fire was indeed attributed to arson<sup>46</sup>, but neither the Coroner's Jury nor news reports of the moment implicated the Fire Companies in any way, and those responsible were never identified.<sup>47</sup> Fraser also cites a fire that destroyed "*McFarlane's old foundry at the end of the Long Bridge*"<sup>48</sup> as another example of a training exercise, but no documented mention of that fire, or any other fire set by the Fire Companies for any reason, has been found. Claims that the Union and Fountain Fire Companies engaged in recreational arson, intentionally burning buildings for training and entertainment, are almost certainly false.

### High Days & Holidays

From the earliest days of their existence the Perth fire companies played a role in the community far beyond their primary mission of extinguishing fires. They functioned as a service club might today and were essential in organizing and staging events to celebrate high holidays such as the Queen's Birthday and Dominion Day. In keeping with their *raison d'être*, their contribution often involved elements of fire: festive bonfires, torchlight parades, fireworks and Chinese lanterns hung from trees and storefronts. Competition between the local companies or against visiting fire companies, ranging from firefighting skills to various sports such as foot races and baseball, were always preceded by a parade of decorated fire engines and hose reels, and were often the main entertainment of the day. On May 24, 1860,

*At 4:00 p.m. the fire companies assembled at the Union Engine [House] and proceeded to the tank at the center of Gore and Foster Streets to have a friendly trial of the Brockville and Perth fire engines. The Brockville engine was manufactured in the U.S. and is allowed to be the best of any engine in its capacity in Upper Canada. The Perth 'Union' engine was manufactured by Mr. Perry of Montreal but has not the same capacity of cylinder as the Brockville engine.*

*At the first trial the Brockville engine threw about 15 feet further than the 'Union'. At the second trial however, which was better arranged and a fairer test, Perth distanced Brockville by about 10 feet. The Brockville company tried repeatedly to gain lost ground but could not succeed. It is but justice to say that neither engine was in first rate working order and worked to disadvantage the Brockville engine.*

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<sup>46</sup> See *Perth Courier*, October 26, 1860. While there is little doubt St. Bridget's Chapel was a victim of arson, it is worthy of note that, in the 19th century, the *Courier* blamed arson for an exceptionally large proportion of all fires at Perth and area. Whether arson was actually as widespread as accounts in the *Courier* would indicate is impossible to say.

<sup>47</sup> Most evidence points to the fire being the result religious bigotry. See *St Bridget's Chapel: The Miscreant Has Murder On His Head*, Perth & District Historical Society <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/st-bridgets-chapel.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> *Perth Courier*, June 30, 1905. Each subsequent repetition of the recreational arson story uses almost exactly the same words used by Fraser in 1905, making a convincing case that the story originated with this article.

*In the evening, as soon as it got dark, the firemen assembled again at the 'Union' Engine House and formed in procession. With lighted torches and two brass bands playing appropriate airs the procession marched through the town presenting at a distance a very pleasing appearance; as the lights, like an innumerable multitude of stars, danced to and fro.<sup>49</sup>*

On such occasions Perth's firefighters turned out in full dress uniform, the Union Company wearing red shirts and black trousers, the Fountain Company attired in white trousers and blue jackets. The Fountain Company expanded its contribution when it organized a small dance band in 1870 and then a 16-member brass band in 1873 under the direction of one Professor A. Corazzi.

Should, by some failure in planning coordination, both companies have accepted invitations to participate in events elsewhere, holiday celebrations at Perth would be a sad to nonexistent affair.

On occasion these inter community competitions, mixing an excess of home-town pride with liberal amounts of liquid cheer, ended in some rather unsportsmanlike conduct. When an 1866 excursion group from Perth attended the Queen's Birthday celebrations at Brockville, a brawl between the Perth and Brockville firemen escalated into a minor riot that had to be put down by the fixed bayonets of the Brockville Rifle Company. As the *Perth Courier* reported the affray,

*... certain members of the Brockville Fire Companies, who had been stimulating rather freely, began picking quarrels with those belonging to Perth .... Indeed, it is said that the quarrel and subsequent attack was premediated, and that the firemen had three times the number of these handy little weapons called 'hose keys' in their possession than was required. The cowardly conduct of these roughs toward the guests of the town provoked retaliation, and the consequence was an onslaught on whatever people of Perth could be found, who defended themselves as well as their numbers would permit ... At length, the [Militia] Volunteers on the ground were ordered to fix bayonets and advance on the crowd for the purpose of quelling the disturbance, which they did after some trouble. Peace being with difficulty restored, and a number of the Fire Companies taken to the lock-up, the crowd gradually dispersed.<sup>50</sup>*

### **Independence & Prerogatives**

Following a Fire Committee inspection in April of 1869, Town Council expressed concern with the manner in which some of the fire fighting equipment was being maintained and with the cost of supporting two fire companies. They urged a reduction in manpower to just 26 men per company and drafted a by-law to appoint an 'Engineer' to oversee operations of both companies (effectively a joint Fire Chief). They asked the companies to nominate someone for the Engineer's job, but the firemen saw the plan as unwarranted interference in their internal affairs and a threat to their independence.

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<sup>49</sup> Perth Courier June 1, 1860.

<sup>50</sup> Perth Courier, June 1, 1866.

The Union Company refused to even consider oversight by a Chief Engineer and protested that reducing manpower would “*destroy the efficiency of the Company*”.<sup>51</sup> The Fountain Company took the position that, although the municipality provided an annual operating grant, the town fathers should keep their hands off because the Fountain engine did not belong to the town but to “*a portion of the townspeople, the amount expended in buying the engine being raised by private subscription, with the exception of a balance of £400 loaned by the Council*”.<sup>52</sup> Their case was somewhat undermined by the fact the loan had never been repaid.

Despite opposition from the firemen, Council proceeded to appoint the municipality’s Chief Engineer, Charles Meighen (1829-1917),<sup>53</sup> to the job of overseeing the fire companies, prompting the Fountain Company to howl even louder. Meighen was also Captain of the Union Company and the Fountain men contended that “*no member of any of the companies should be appointed Chief Engineer, for obvious reasons*”. Their resolution sent to Council, protested “*that a slur has been cast upon them by the nature of this appointment ... considering their past services – they being by far the oldest company in town – and their enterprise, labor, and expense entailed in organizing a company and procuring an engine, independent of all other things*”. The Fountain Company disbanded in protest, leaving Council to put Chief Constable Thomas Cosgrove (1821-1875) in interim charge of their abandoned engine and Fire Hall.

The Union Company had no objection to supervision by its own captain, but it was not until 1871, after Charles Meighen had been replaced as Union Company captain, that the Fountain Company came to terms with expanded municipal oversight and returned to duty.

*Fountain Engine Co. Resuscitated – Agreeable to a call of the Chief Engineer Charles Meighen, a meeting was held in the Fountain Engine House on Saturday evening last, for the purpose of re-organizing the Company, which about two years ago ceased to exist as such. Since then, the engine has been overhauled and thoroughly renovated and made as good as new – or rather as good an engine as there is in this town. The meeting was a very successful one, and a company of 41 members, which will no doubt be soon increased to 50, was organized.*<sup>54</sup>

The reconstituted Fountain Company selected John Lee (1842-1919) as its Captain, supported by Lieutenants W. M. Kellock (1847-1901) and John Thornton (1844-1901). According to the *Perth Courier*, when tested, the overhauled Fountain engine “*threw volumes of water 170 feet*”. If true, this would suggest the Fountain Company’s tinkering over the years had in fact increased the throw of their engine by 50 feet or nearly 30%, from about 120 feet in 1853 to 170 feet in 1871.

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<sup>51</sup> *Perth Courier*, July 31, 1868.

<sup>52</sup> *Perth Courier*, July 23, 1869.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Meighen is referred to in Council minutes sometimes as the town’s Chief Engineer, sometimes as Street Inspector and sometimes as Fire Inspector. He also served two terms as an elected member Town Council, 1867-1870.

<sup>54</sup> *Perth Courier*, April 21, 1871.



**Fire Hall, 34 Herriott Street, built 1855, expanded 1883.**

As part of the re-launch, the Fire Committee told Town Council that the Fountain Engine House “*had need of a bell*”. Hinting at lingering sensitivities, the committee further noted that the Union Company had a bell and pointed to the “*advisability of placing both Fire Companies upon equality*”.<sup>55</sup> A motion to buy the Fountain Engine House a bell was defeated, however, as most councillors thought the company “*could do very well without a bell just now as they had done hitherto [and] there were plenty of more useful places for \$25 to go*”.<sup>56</sup>

### **Close Calls**

In 1870 the village of Lanark purchased a steam powered fire engine, the first municipality in the County of Lanark to do so. That so small a community could outstrip the county seat in modernizing its fire protection was cause for some reflection, but Perth soon had more than municipal pride to think of.

That summer of 1870, a wildfire of epic proportion swept the Ottawa Valley, from Lanark County’s northern Ramsay Township, southeast along the Ottawa River, through Carleton County, and then back across Lanark County through the Townships of Montague, North Elmsley and North Burgess, to the very doorstep of Perth. Families hid in their wells as the inferno, driven by 100 Kph winds, roared over them on a front one to eight kilometers wide, laying waste to forest, farmsteads, and villages. At least 20 people died, and many thousands were left homeless. In the valley, no fire like it had been seen before nor experienced since and no natural disaster ever took so many lives before or since.<sup>57</sup>

As campaigns providing relief to the homeless and destitute victims of the valley wildfire occupied the winter of 1870-1871, the people of Perth eyed the punishment inflicted upon their neighbors and pondered just how close they had come to total disaster; the shock and awe of what had happened no doubt playing a role in the Fountain Fire Company’s returned to duty the following spring.

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<sup>55</sup> *Perth Courier*, April 28, 1871.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> And none caused as much property damage until the ‘The Great Ice Storm’ of 1998. See *Devouring Element: The Wild Fires of 1870*, Perth & District Historical Society <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/wildfires-of-1870.pdf> .

Then in October 1871 another mega fire made world-wide headlines when flames swept the city of Chicago, killing 300 people, destroying 17,500 buildings, causing \$222 million in property loss (a third of the city's valuation) and leaving 100,000 people homeless.

Looking over his shoulder at the valley fire of 1870 and shaken by what had happened to a city so large and rich as Chicago, George L. Walker (1839-1875), editor of the *Perth Courier*, stoked the concern of his subscribers by publishing a list of major fires and their cost that had occurred across Ontario that same summer; Sandwich \$30,000, Odessa \$25,000, Georgetown \$21,000 and Collingwood \$20,000; plus large fires of unreported total loss at Bobcaygeon, Chatham, Forrest, London, Markham, Oakville, Stratford, Streetsville and Windsor.<sup>58</sup> Then, on Sunday, November 5, 1871, Perth's worst fears seemed manifest when flames, driven by high winds, destroyed much of the block on the west side of Gore Street between Harvey and Craig Streets and threatened to spread the full length of Gore. The event even led to looting.

*Last Sunday afternoon, cries of "Fire" arose about half past four o'clock, instantly followed by the rush of many feet on the sidewalks, the hurrying of engines, the ominous noise of the bells that rang out incessantly for help and more startling than all by the spiral columns of smoke ... The flames were found to proceed from the shed of Mr. Thomas McCann<sup>59</sup>, hotelkeeper [130 Gore Street East], or that of Mr. N. Brown [1826-1888], tailor<sup>60</sup>; and had already made dangerous headway.*

*The fire engines were promptly on hand, and after the usual delays set to work at extinguishing the flames – the hose bursting again and again at the critical moment. The tank at the corner of Holliday's Hotel [Gore & Craig Street] was speedily drained clear to the mud at the bottom, and the Fountain was taken to the river at Holliday's Factory [Holliday Tannery, Basin Street], where, after some more delay in adjusting the hose, it acted as a feeder for the Union, which was planted at the Post Office corner [NE corner Gore & Harvey Street].*

*From this point both engines worked admirably and kept a steady stream on the flames which had in the meantime spread to McCann's Hotel, Brown's Tailor Shop and McLean's Oyster Saloon ... The fire was forcefully extending its arms to the double house to the left of McCann's, and this too was soon on fire.*

*All these, being wood-frame buildings, burned rapidly and sent forth a shower of sparks and cinders which were carried far southward by the strong wind that was then blowing to that point of the compass. M. T. Enright's<sup>61</sup> shed, and house, the Methodist Church roof, and Mr. William McLaren's house, shed and stable roofs were in great danger from the falling cinders, and embryo fires were time and again extinguished on each.*

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<sup>58</sup> *Perth Courier*, October 13, 1871.

<sup>59</sup> Probably the Thomas McCann (1843-1880), who died of smallpox, married to Anna Elizabeth Devlin (1854-1880).

<sup>60</sup> In Gus Quattrocchi's *The Merchants, Professionals and Tradespeople of Perth* (1998), Nathaniel Brown's occupation in 1872 is given as 'carter', while his 1888 Death Certificate shows his occupation as 'laborer'.

<sup>61</sup> 'M. T. Enright's' refers to a tailor shop run by Irish immigrants Michael and Timothy (b.c1835) Enright.

*But Holliday's (formerly Kennedy's) Hotel and the extensive sheds adjoining were in far greater danger than any from this source. At one time it was thought that it must go too, but by herculean efforts, the roof was kept wet, and the sparks extinguished almost as they fell.*

*The old Post Office [105-109 Gore Street East] with its brick wall formed a barricade against the advance of the flames westward[?], but great efforts were required to keep its shingled-roof from succumbing to the fire.*

*At length it was manifest that the fire was under control and so it proved. The pulling down of the burning front of Mr. Brown's house and an occasional round from the engine deadened its power to the north; and the steady stream of water from the engine and the efforts of the crowd prevented its further spread southward; and the building also owned by Mr. Brennan [1818-1875]<sup>62</sup>, and occupied by him, which almost touched its right hand neighbour, was saved, though it was also frame.*

*On the whole, we never saw a better working crowd. The brakes were always kept fully manned, and every roof in the neighborhood was covered by men fearless of danger and straining every muscle to stay the flames. There was no one seemingly afraid to lend a hand at the breaks. The venerable Judge<sup>63</sup> took his place there with the rest; and we noticed the Sheriff<sup>64</sup> and the Mayor<sup>65</sup> and his Reverence Dr. Chisholm<sup>66</sup>, all exercising their muscle at the hardest work. Mr. James Allan (hotel)<sup>67</sup> rendered invaluable service in drawing barrels of water to the fire, load after load, the whole time the fire was at its height.*

*Hundreds of willing hands had cleared the burning buildings of most of their contents and took them out of the way of the fire; but we are ashamed to add (for we blush to think that there are such infamous characters in the community), there were individuals in the throng, who as soon as darkness set in, began the work of plunder, and stole a great part of the goods and articles of the unfortunate sufferers that had once been saved. Better had they been burned than fall into the hands of such heartless wretches. Mr. Mclean's loss from this source alone will not fall far short of \$100. Goods from his shop, clothing, &c., were indiscriminately carried off. Others suffered in the same way. The widow Brennon lost a great deal in this way.*

*A good deal of unpleasantness was caused by the free flow of liquor among the crowd, many succumbing to the influence of this fiery element, after they had nobly put down the first. We regret that so much liquor was at the disposal of the assemblage, as its effects were of no creditable nature.<sup>68</sup>*

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<sup>62</sup> A grocer located at 128 Gore Street East.

<sup>63</sup> Judge John Glass Malloch (1806-1873), then 65 years of age.

<sup>64</sup> James V. Thompson (1812-1912).

<sup>65</sup> John Graham Haggart (1836-1913).

<sup>66</sup> Reverend Father James John Chisolm (1821-1878).

<sup>67</sup> Allan House, 64 Gore Street East.

<sup>68</sup> *Perth Courier*, November 10, 1871.

The hoses were not yet dry when, 48 hours later, firefighters were called out again to fight a blaze behind Croskery's<sup>69</sup> boot and shoe store on the southwest corner of Mill and Market Streets. James Mitchell, who discovered the fire, told the *Courier* he thought the fire "*might be the result of more carelessness, probably from someone's lighted pipe*" but embers carried the short distance over the Tay from the Sunday inferno could also have been to blame.

*The engines were soon on hand, and though the Union proved rather slow in getting started, the Fountain in very short order was pouring a good stream of water on the flames. There were the best prospects of a large fire, owing to the close array and number of frame buildings in the immediate vicinity; but fortunately, there was plenty of water close at hand, lots of help, and a total absence of wind, except that produced by the fire itself. The danger was sufficiently menacing to cause those living in the immediate vicinity to remove their effects to places of safety ...*

*Everyone on the ground in this instance also worked with a will and with a determination to put down the flames ... Mr. Croskery lost about \$250 worth of leather. Mr. Shamiour's stable will need a new roof. Mr. Griffin's shed was considerably damaged, as was also Mr. Robert Gemmill's [1810-1894].<sup>70</sup>*

The Croskery fire proved a minor affair compared to the destruction of the previous Sunday; it was quickly contained and was not accompanied by looting or drunken carousing. Nevertheless, two costly fires in the space of 48 hours, following closely upon the Ottawa Valley inferno of 1870 and the great Chicago fire of 1871 had the effect of clearly focusing minds at Perth on the subject of fire protection.

### **Waterworks vs Steam Fire Engine**

Everyone agreed something must be done, but public opinion, and that of its elected representatives, was deeply divided over the best means of achieving the objective. One party argued in favor of a waterworks system servicing hydrants, another proposed the purchase of a steam fire engine, and a third faction contended that both were required. Subject to who's opinion one valued, cost estimates for a waterworks ranged from \$20,000 to \$50,000 while, depending upon technical specifications, a new steam fire engine might cost \$5,000 to \$10,000.

With public opinion deadlocked, no immediate action was taken, and the debate dragged on for the next 12 years. Town council sent a delegation to Rochester, New York, in late 1875 to look over a used engine that city had offered for sale, but found it was "*twelve to fourteen years old [had] seen a good deal of service, [was] plainly finished [and] had a patched appearance*". Although it looked "*as well as some we have seen at Toronto, Whitby and Brockville*"<sup>71</sup> the delegation recommended against making a purchase.

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<sup>69</sup> Robert Croskery (1843-1881).

<sup>70</sup> *Perth Courier*, November 10, 1871.

<sup>71</sup> *Perth Courier*, December 3, 1875.

A month later John D. Ronald (c1832-1927) of the Ronald & Hyslop Steam Fire Engine Works<sup>72</sup> at Chatham, Ontario, appeared in town offering a brand new steam fire engine at a knock-down price of \$4,500. He had just delivered the machine to Arnprior but the local council abrogated their purchase contract at the last moment<sup>73</sup>. Perth Council agreed to pay the cost of transporting the engine to Perth for a demonstration. Everyone was impressed with its performance, but it sat at Perth for over year, until council finally instructed the clerk *“to inform Mr. Ronald of Chatham that the council cannot just now enter into negotiations for the purchase of a steam fire engine”*.<sup>74</sup> Ronald eventually sold the Arnprior engine to the City of Brockville.

Steam fire engine offers from the Ottawa Mills Supply Agency and R. B. Caldwell, both of Ottawa, and LaFrance Manufacturing, of Elmira, New York, were considered by the 1876 town council, but no action taken.

In August 1877, as the debate stumbled along without resolution, Perth had another brush with disaster when the lumber yard at the CPR depot went up in flames. Once again, the hand pump fire engines had to operate in tandem to cover the distance from water to flames. The Union engine lifted water from the river and fed the Fountain engine stationed near the depot, but they were overwhelmed.

*... the lumber had been accumulating for years<sup>75</sup> ... all of it as dry as tinder ... the large area of the yard was closely packed with dry boards piled from 10 to 15 feet high. The fierce heat, the extreme difficulty in moving the massive piles, and the effectiveness of one feeble stream of water from the hand engine upon the rolling up volume of fire can therefore be imagined. The lurid flames reaching far into the sky, the shower of sparks flying to windward, and the huge clouds of smoke hiding the heavens from view had a terrific aspect ...*<sup>76</sup>

At its peak, the glow of the fire could be seen 12 miles away at Lanark and Smiths Falls. A desperate appeal was sent to the Smiths Falls Fire Department who loaded their Silsby Steam Fire Engine<sup>77</sup> and 1,950 feet of hose aboard a CPR flat car and rushed to the aid of their Perth colleagues. *“The fear of further destruction was brought to an end thanks to the Silsby and a turn of the wind,”*<sup>78</sup> but until the arrival of the Smiths Falls engine and crew, and that shift in the wind, the fate of the entire town of Perth hung in the balance. As it was, the total loss exceeded \$31,000.

Yet again, citizens demanded immediate action, but a public meeting held in October 1877 was so equally divided between supporters of a waterworks and those in favor of a steam fire engine that a straw poll deadlocked and Mayor William Horatio Radenhurst (1836-1894) had to cast the deciding vote in favor of a steam fire engine. In doing so he reminded the meeting that *“even in places where waterworks exist, steam fire engines were still maintained to assure full*

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<sup>72</sup> The 'Ronald & Hyslop Steam Fire Engine Works' claimed to have built the first steam fire engine in Canada c1856.

<sup>73</sup> Ronald hinted in his presentation to Perth Council that a competitor had secured the sale by bribing Arnprior councillors.

<sup>74</sup> *Perth Courier*, December 8, 1876.

<sup>75</sup> The back-log of unshipped timber was the result of a sustained economic depression.

<sup>76</sup> *Perth Courier*, August 31, 1877.

<sup>77</sup> Purchased in 1874.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

coverage - such as *Ottawa and Kingston*<sup>79</sup>. In its next edition the *Courier* urged that the town should “either drop the steam engine scheme or the water works scheme, for one killed the other whenever the matter was publicly discussed”.<sup>80</sup>

The non-binding decision of the public meeting did not, however, much advance anyone’s cause. Council looked into a number of used engines available at Toronto and Peterborough but could not bring themselves to write a cheque.

### Competing Priorities

In 1879 the issue became even more complicated when it was overtaken by a new priority. The municipality entered into negotiations with the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) to pay a bonus of \$30,000 if the company located its car construction and repair shops at Perth. The money to fund a CPR bonus, a waterworks, and/or a steam fire engine would all have to be raised by debenture and the municipal corporation was in no position to do so for all three.

John D. Ronald, now representing his own company, the Brussels Steam Fire Engine & Agricultural Works<sup>81</sup>, of Brussels, Ontario, visited again in 1880 offering the town a medium size engine with 1,000 feet of cloth hose and full carriage equipment, for \$4,200 payable in 10-year corporation debentures at 6%. Council, however, thought that “*in the present state of the town’s finances it is not advisable to incur any expenditure for further fire protection, especially so, because of the unsettled state of the railroad [bonus] question*”.<sup>82</sup>

In January 1882 it seemed the fire protection dilemma would go unresolved forever when the ratepayers of Perth voted 271-5 in favor of a bylaw funding the \$30,000 CPR bonus. Construction of the CPR plant got underway almost immediately, near the rail line at the foot Herriott and Craig Streets, and in an unanticipated way Perth was fortunate that it did. Without the assistance of workmen from the Car Shops construction site, yet another huge fire, once again close to the very center of town, might have consumed all. On Monday July 31, a blaze broke out at Lillie’s Foundry, at the corner of North and Gore Streets,

*... and driven by a high wind, threatened to get completely out of control. The Smiths Falls Fire Department prepared to come to Perth’s assistance by transporting their men and equipment, including steam fire engine, via a special train. The CPR Car Shops, however, released their work force of 106 men to help fight the fire and it was eventually contained and extinguished.*<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *Perth Courier*, October 19, 1877.

<sup>80</sup> *Perth Courier*, August 2, 1878.

<sup>81</sup> John D. Ronald’s ‘Brussels Steam Fire Engine & Agricultural Works’ won medals for their steam engines at the Philadelphia Worlds Fair in 1876 and the Chicago Worlds Fair in 1883.

<sup>82</sup> *Perth Courier*, June 18, 1880.

<sup>83</sup> *Perth Courier*, August 4, 1882. In a gesture of appreciation, Perth Town Council voted the Smiths Fall Fire Department \$50 to compensate their men who, by preparing to come to Perth, had lost their shifts at the Frost & Wood Foundry.

When Town Council met a few days after the Lillie fire, Mayor Francis Alexander Hall (1843-1904) told the meeting that the blaze “*made more striking than ever that the town requires better fire protection than it had now*”.<sup>84</sup>

Three close calls, and a great many lesser ones, in the space of a decade finally proved enough to impose unanimity on a new Town Council. After very little additional debate, the Town Clerk was instructed to draft a debenture by-law for the purchase of a Steam Fire Engine, hose, and reels, at \$9,000, to be paid over 20 years at 5% interest. It was still a close-run thing, but on September 30, 1882, the ratepayers of Perth narrowly approved the Steam Fire Engine by-law by a margin of just 50 votes.

### 1883 Ronald Steam Fire Engine

Initially Town Council’s Fire Committee tried to arrange a local demonstration of competing models, but found they were in a sellers market, “*unable to bring about a competition between steam fire engine manufacturers in this town as, owing to the briskness of the trade, they are already behind with their orders and in consequence are not compelled to adopt this method of advertising their goods*”.<sup>85</sup> So, having appointed Walter Dittrick (1845-1885), of Dittrick Brothers Foundry & Machine Shop<sup>86</sup>, to serve as consulting engineer, they attended the test of a Silsby engine at Hamilton and then visited John D. Ronald’s factory at Brussels, Ontario, where they chose “*one of his medium-sized engines for the sum of \$3,515, he paying the expense of delivering the engine and reels to Perth free of freight*”.<sup>87</sup> In the last week of January 1883 Perth took delivery of its new fire engine.

*The new Ronald steam fire engine arrived in town on Tuesday morning last, and in the afternoon of the same day underwent a severe test. The engine was placed on Lock’s Bridge [big Tay at Gore Street], and two steams of water thrown over the dome of the Town Hall. The hose was then extended as far as Mr. Lillie’s bolt factory [corner of Gore & North and Streets] and was found to work equally satisfactorily.*

*The test was resumed on Wednesday, when the engine was placed on the Long Bridge [Drummond Street] and the hose extended to the Car Shops [east end of Herriott Street]. Altogether it stood the test well and has the appearance of being a first class engine. The Baker hose, of which there are about 300 feet, burst in many places during the test, and will be returned, but the Malton Cross (rubber) and Eureka (cotton) hose proved satisfactory. The net cost of the engine, including two hose reels, is \$3,515.<sup>88</sup>*

From the moment a match was struck in its fire box, the Ronald Steam Fire Engine could be brought into full action in less than 10 minutes. As the test results of January 1883 demonstrated, with the kindling lit under a cold boiler as the engine rolled out of the Fire Hall, it was fully operational by the time it reached the scene of a fire.

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Perth Courier*, November 3, 1882.

<sup>86</sup> 35 Wilson Street West.

<sup>87</sup> *Perth Courier*, December 1, 1882.

<sup>88</sup> *Perth Courier*, February 2, 1883.

1 minute            5 lbs steam  
5 ¾ minutes    45 lbs steam  
6 minutes        60 lbs steam  
1 ¼ inch nozzle on 1,000 feet of hose, threw water 105 feet.

With the Ronald Steamer brought into service, at their February 1883 meeting Town Council passed a motion to have the Fountain Company's Miller engine and hose reel sold. Ownership of the engine, and the Town's right to sell it even though it had been at least partly paid for by public subscription, does not seem to have been questioned, as had been the case when the 1842 Murray engine was retired. This acquiescence on the part of the Fountain Company men may be put down to the fact that it was largely the Fountain Company, not the Union Company, that was reconstituted under a by-law as the Tay Steamer Company and equipped with the brand new, Town-financed, Ronald Steam Fire Engine.



*The Tay Steamer Company c1885 with their 'Ronald' Steam Fire Engine and Hose Reel*

There also seems to have been no objection when the company's strength was, at the same time, cut from 50 to 30 men. As in past, however, the new company elected its own officers; Captain Richard Walker (1861-1920), 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant George Ferrell (1832-1912) and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Andrew Barrie (1859-1893). For its part, the Union Fire Company continued as a quasi-independent unit manning its Perry handpump engine, but also reduced to 30 men.

That summer a substantial pier of granite was built into the (big) Tay River at the northeast end of the Gore Street Bridge, to be used as a stand for the steamer when pumping to a fire. A contract was also signed with Messrs. Howie & McWilliams for an expansion of the Herriott Street Fire House at a cost of \$1,700. A second storey was added, caretaker living quarters attached to the west side, and a 50 foot brick hose tower built at south end. Thereafter, following a fire, the hoses were hooked to a rope and pulled to the top of the tower to ensure they were fully drained. Water spillage ran along a floor drain to a well outside the building. The hoses were then left to dry over a wood-burning stove to prevent rot.

Perth's new steam fire engine easily handled a number of smaller fires, but met its first major trial when, at about 1:00 a.m. on Wednesday, December 9, 1891, fire broke out in the storeroom of Henry Taylor's hardware and coal store, in the Douglas Block at 12-18 Gore Street East. A fierce south wind quickly drove the flames through the building from end to end, engulfing both the street level shops and second floor offices.

*... the steamer engine was fired up in its place in the Engine House, the hose stretched to the place, but delay arose in getting a stream of water to bear on the flames ... but chief and men exerted themselves with coolness and vigor, and streams of water both in front and rear after a time played constantly in the flames, assisted by one from the hand engine.*

*The wooden outbuildings in the rear increased the danger of the fire spreading in that direction, and to meet this contingency, as well the danger at other points, the Mayor of Smith's Falls was telegraphed to send up their fire steamer and a body of firemen to help our own firemen.*

*In an hour or less the Smiths Falls steamer and men, with the Mayor, Reeve and other citizens were at the station and soon after taking position at Dennison's Bridge [Gore Street over the little Tay], had streams playing on the flames also.<sup>89</sup>*

With two steam fire engines brought into play, and the Union Company's old Perry hand pump engine doing its bit, the blaze was finally beaten back. The Douglas Block<sup>90</sup>, however, was completely gutted at an estimated total loss of \$40,000 sustained by Henry Taylor's hardware store, M. R. Dodds' flour store, W. H. McIntyre's, photography studio, J. H. McCulloch's dental surgery, J. M. Poole's print shop, Andrew Barrie's butcher shop, and the Douglas estate.

Despite its slow start at the Douglas Block fire, from the day of its arrival in town the Ronald Steam Fire Engine provided excellent and reliable service. Nevertheless, the need and support for a municipal waterworks had not gone away. In September 1892 Council established a waterworks exploratory committee, and in August 1895 a contract was finally signed with the Stadacona Waterworks Company of Montreal. According to the agreement, that included of a 150,000 gallon 115 foot water tower, the Town would pay Stadacona \$2,000 per year for the service of 30 hydrants providing water pressure at 120 psi, capable of throwing a 2½ inch stream of water over the town's highest buildings. The *Courier* thought that,

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<sup>89</sup> *Perth Courier*, December 11, 1891.

<sup>90</sup> The Douglas block was totally destroyed and the Balderson Theater building later built on the site.

*If the works proved reliable the fire department could do without the steamer. By dividing the hose companies into three sections, with one section in each ward, with say 850 feet of hose apiece, the town would have a better protection than it ever had.*

Just as construction of the waterworks was about to begin, however, Stadacona abandoned the contract, and it took two more years to find a suitable contractor prepared to take over the project. In July 1897 Charlebois & Company of Montreal incorporated the Perth Waterworks Company and began laying pipe in August. They constructed the pumphouse on the Tay riverbank at the west end of Isabella Street and a waterworks hydrant was operational in time to flood the curling rink that winter.

### Companies Merged

In 1899 Town Council took full control of its fire department for the first time. The Union and Tay Steamer Companies were fully merged, becoming the Perth Fire Brigade, with Dennis Richard Noonan (1846-1906) appointed by by-law as the town's first official Fire Chief. The Union Company's Perry hand engine was retired and stored at the agricultural fair grounds until, in January 1900, Councillor Charles J. Foy (1867-1927) proposed that, "... as it was of no further use, there being sufficient fire appliances without it, it should be sold for what it would bring".<sup>91</sup> The following week an advertisement appeared in the *Perth Courier*.



*Fire Engine For Sale – The Union Hand Fire Engine for sale at a bargain. Is in good condition. Apply to Stephen Bennett [1860-1933], Chairman, Fire Committee.*<sup>92</sup>

There were, however, no takers and for the next 17 years the Perry engine sat nearly forgotten except when dragged from one storage shed to another. At one point, Councillor John Edward de Hertel (1863-1945) chastised the Fire Committee after he stumbled across "*this old and useful relict of the town lying neglected on the agricultural grounds and the hose and couplings scattered about*". He urged that it "*be fitted up for emergency cases before the parts were picked up by boys and sold for old metal*".<sup>93</sup> The Perry engine was never returned to service, but Council did instruct the Fire Inspector to have it properly cared for. At last, in June 1917, the Fire Committee were able to report that they had finally disposed of the "*old hand pump engine to Mr. J. A. Stewart for the sum of \$30.00*".<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> *Perth Courier*, January 12, 1900.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Perth Courier*, May 18, 1900.

<sup>94</sup> *Perth Courier*, June 15, 1917.

John Alexander Stewart (1867-1922), lawyer, inheritor of the John A. McLaren (1831-1901) whiskey fortune, canny entrepreneur, four-time Mayor of Perth, Member of Parliament and Cabinet Minister, was, in his day, the richest man in Perth. In sending the Town Clerk his cheque, Stewart included a letter explaining his interest in the derelict fire engine.

*Gentlemen: I enclose herewith my cheque for \$30.00 to cover the purchase price of the old fire engine. My reason for designing to purchase this engine is that I feel it should be preserved for the town and at the same time I feel that it should be someone's right to do this and to see that it is properly preserved and stored. I intend to have it restored as nearly as possible to its original condition and it will always be available on any occasion on which the firemen of the town desire it – Yours very truly, J. A. Stewart.<sup>95</sup>*

Stewart carried out his promise and thanks to his rescue the 1853 Perry Fire Engine, that faithfully served Perth with the Union Fire Company for nearly a half-century, has lived on for a century more.<sup>96</sup>

The Ronald Steam Fire Engine would prove itself just as reliable.

In July 1902, it was on the front line fighting a massive blaze at the CPR Car Shops, despite the fact the CPR had its own steam water pumps and hydrants and the municipal waterworks had been extended to the site three years earlier.

*Alarms were immediately sounded and responded to by the firemen and several hundred citizens. About ten lines of hose were attached to the hydrants ... but the fire had gained great headway and ... the adjoining wood mill was in flames several times, but the firemen worked hard and finally had the fire under control, but not before ... the blacksmith shop, machine shop, oil house, main offices, four box cars, together with a large amount of valuable machinery ... were totally destroyed by fire ...<sup>97</sup>*

Much of the complex was a complete loss, but the Perth Fire Department and its steam fire engine played a critical part in containing the fire and preventing its spread into the town.<sup>98</sup>

On repeated occasions during the early 20th century disaster was averted because Perth had acted upon Mayor William Radenhurst's observation that "even in places where waterworks exist steam fire engines were still maintained to assure full coverage". One of many such examples was a 1904 blaze that destroyed the former Stanley Carriage Works on North Street. Because of its location, adjacent to the James & Reid Foundry, the stone and timber building dating to the 1840s "caught fire every week and sometimes more frequently and was sure to be burned in the end"<sup>99</sup>. On September 12th, an ember thrown from the foundry chimney set the old building fully ablaze. The Carriage Works fire was,

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Perth's 'Stewart Park' is another of the many legacies left to the town by John A. Stewart and his wife Jessie Henderson-Stewart (1868-1956)

<sup>97</sup> *The Record*, Chesterville, July 10, 1902.

<sup>98</sup> The CPR immediately rebuilt the plant and within just two weeks it was operating at a rate equal to any time in its history.

<sup>99</sup> *Perth Courier*, September 16, 1904.

*... the worst since the car-shops conflagration ... The service of the waterworks was roundly condemned by the spectators ... The pressure was low and did not seem to be any greater than ordinary domestic pressure ... One [waterworks] pump was shut down because of low water in the river.<sup>100</sup>*

With the waterworks hydrants barely capable of replenishing the fire well, the Ronald Steamer provided four lines of water at high pressure from 3:30 p.m. until 6:30 p.m. when, as the flames were finally beaten back, it gave out.

*At an examination that evening five springs in the valve were found to be broken. They were repaired and the town's main protection was in working order again by 10 o'clock. The steamer is 22 years old and is certainly a great protection to the town.<sup>101</sup>*

### **A New Century**

Five years later, in 1909, the annual report of the Canadian Fire Underwriters Association (CFUA) found the waterworks company was still pumping at a pressure inadequate for firefighting, because only the domestic service pump was working. But it also found that the Ronald Steamer pumped only 400 gallons per minute, whereas, Perth having grown, the capacity should have been 600 gallons per minute. Nevertheless, when fire gutted the Perth Felt Mill in 1913, and hydrant pressure was too weak to adequately throw water, although it took the Ronald engine 19 minutes to get into action, it was critical in boosting pressure to a serviceable level.

On occasion, usually in connection with a training drill, the Steam Fire Engine, provided service not connected with a fire. In the spring of 1916,

*... the barge owned by Peter Cavanaugh, which has been in the basin all winter and spring full of water, was pumped out Wednesday evening with the aid of the town auxiliary<sup>102</sup> fire engine. The engine threw a stream of water through the hose of over 100 feet in height.<sup>103</sup>*

On another occasion, the Tay Steamer "was given a test using water from the public well at the corner of North and Wilson Streets<sup>104</sup>, which was incidentally given a thorough cleaning out ... the test gave the firemen an opportunity of flushing portions of Wilson and Foster Streets".<sup>105</sup>

By 1919 the Ronald Steamer had been in service with the Perth Fire Brigade for nearly four decades and, that spring, when conducting a regular monthly test, a hole was found in the bottom of the boiler.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> i.e., "auxiliary" to the waterworks hydrants.

<sup>103</sup> *Perth Courier*, June 9, 1916.

<sup>104</sup> The *Courier* also mentions that, in 1934, the North and Wilson Streets fire well was "one of the two remaining wells of former years, the other being at the Market Square, the site of the familiar main town pump". A later story mentions that by 1949, only the Market Square well remained.

<sup>105</sup> *Perth Courier*, May 4, 1934.

*Mechanics went to work and removed the grates. It may be necessary to send the engine to Brussels, Ontario, for repairs. The engine was manufactured in Brussels and has been a valuable asset of the town for the past 37 years. It is not known how long the town will be without fire protection from the old reliable, but in the meantime, townspeople are warned to take every precaution against an outbreak of fire.*<sup>106</sup>

The engine was side-lined for several months, but \$1,600 in repairs by the local firm of James & Reid, brought it back to full service later that year. Announcing its return to duty, Fire Chief James William Gamble (1868-1954)<sup>107</sup> told Council that *“The steamer is still a valuable asset to Perth. James & Reid re-plated the boiler and added some up-to-date improvement such as an injector, etc. ... It was tested and found doing as good work as when it came to Perth new.”*<sup>108</sup>

By the late 1920s agitation emerged in some quarters to update Perth’s fire fighting capabilities. Fire Committee Chairman George C. Townshend (1877-1953) told Council in 1928 that *“Perth is further behind in fire equipment than any other town”,* pointing out that *“Carleton Place possesses a chemical engine and other up-to-date fire appliance”.*<sup>109</sup>

At the same time, the Fire Brigade called for improvement to the fire alarm system. Chief James Gamble told council that *“15 men missed the recent McKenny fire because they did not hear the alarm ... a siren or something similar is needed ... a siren costing \$400 would be heard at two miles”.*<sup>110</sup> Councillor Thomas J. Devlin (1864-1937), however, opined that *“for 50 years the Town Hall bell had always been heard”*<sup>111</sup>. Councillor Peter J. Kehoe (1876-1930) told council that on the night of the fire in question he did not hear the bell either, even though he was in the Town Hall. Councillor Henry Montague Shaw (1865-1931) also thought a siren a good idea. It would be five years, however, before Council even sprung for a siren on the Fire Chief’s car and it was not until 1943 that an electric siren was finally installed on the roof of the Town Hall. It was controlled by a switch at the front entrance and could be heard at a distance of five to seven miles depending on the weather conditions.

In 1930 an inspection report on the 47-year-old Ronald Steamer, conducted by machinist Thomas James Thompson (1869-1934) and William Graham Howie (1888-1952), Town Engineer, reported that *“We have thoroughly investigated the condition of the steam pumping engine and found it as follows: boiler, good condition; steam cylinder, valve, piston, good condition”.* The inspectors also concluded, however, that *“the machine as a whole is about half the capacity for present day requirements”.*<sup>112</sup> The following year, the CFUA annual inspection found that,

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<sup>106</sup> *Perth Courier*, August 8, 1919.

<sup>107</sup> Fire Chief from 1891 to 1917.

<sup>108</sup> Fire Chief James Gamble quoted in the *Perth Courier*, December 24, 1920.

<sup>109</sup> *Perth Courier*, September 28, 1928.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Perth Courier*, May 16, 1930.

*the steam fire engine, which is nearly 50 years old, is rated at 400 gallons per minute, but at previous inspection has delivered only slightly more than half its rated capacity and at this inspection its pump failed to lift water and after several attempts the test was discontinued.*

Only minor repairs were required to see the Ronald engine returned to service, but the same underwriters report went on to recommend that the town,

*... should provide a combination hose and chemical wagon carrying not less than 1,000 feet of hose and 40 gallon chemical tank ... A new ladder truck should be provided carrying modern equipment including an extension ladder of sufficient length to reach the roof of the highest building ... For adequate protection there should be an engine of not less than 600 imperial gallons per minute and although there are facilities for supplying the engine at a number of points on the river and at a tank at the Fire Hall, it would be advisable to provide suitable connection by which it may be attached to hydrants ...*<sup>113</sup>

In September 1935, the Perth Fire Brigade found itself unable to respond to an appeal from Smiths Falls fire fighters for assistance at a barn fire on the Smiths Fall road, “... *due to the condition of the fire engine, it was impossible to make the trip. The rims of the wheels would not stand a long trip and therefore the Chief was unable to be of any assistance, much to his regret*”.<sup>114</sup>

The CFUA report of 1937 repeated and expanded upon its findings of 1931. It called for improvements to the waterworks pumping equipment and street mains and recommended a “*suitably equipped ladder truck, more fire extinguishers, some fully paid firemen and a fire alarm telegraph system be installed comprising a sufficient number of street boxes and alarm devices*”.<sup>115</sup>

### **1939 LaFrance Pumper**

Acknowledging that Perth’s Fire Department was burdened with antiquated equipment, in September 1939, after extensive debate, by a vote of 5 to 3, Town Council approved purchase of a new motorized LaFrance Foamite Fire Engine, for \$9,505. Rated to pump 600 gallons of water per minute, it was fitted with a 100-gallon water tank 1,500 feet of 2½ inch hose and 150 feet of one inch hose and a 40-foot extension ladder. The new pumper truck was also equipped with fire extinguishers, axes, pike poles, nozzles, gas masks, helmets, coats, mitts, and other fire-fighting essentials. In addition, council equipped it with a St. John Ambulance First Aid Kit. In mid-December, the new motorized fire engine was installed in the Herriott Street Fire Hall, displacing the Ronald Steam Fire Engine.

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<sup>113</sup> *Perth Courier*, February 27, 1931.

<sup>114</sup> *Perth Courier*, September 13, 1935.

<sup>115</sup> *Perth Courier*, February 18, 1938.

*A few days ago, the old steam fire engine, once a potent and vital factor in pumping and throwing steams of water at the times of fires, was removed from its accustomed place at the Fire Hall to the municipal storehouse where it will remain in future.<sup>116</sup>*

The 1883 Ronald Steam Fire Engine remained at the municipal storehouse for little more than a year. After more than a half-century of service defending the town against fire, in May of 1941 Town Council declared the machine surplus and put it on the block.

*For Sale – By the Town of Perth – Single cylinder fire engine pumper, capacity 300 gallons per minute. Boiler new. Perhaps a number of flues may need replacing. 25 feet of suction hose attached. Also, for sale, four hose reels. Address application to W. G. Howie, Street Engineer, Perth.<sup>117</sup>*



**Perth Fire Department's 1939 'LaFrance' Fire Engine**

Through the 1940s the Perth Fire Department acquired an ever wider range of equipment. In 1953 the neighboring Townships of Bathurst, Burgess, Drummond and North Elmsley established their own fire department (BBDE/FD) and a cooperative agreement was signed with the Perth Fire Department that saw a Township pumper stationed in Perth. In May 1957 Perth joined other fire departments in a county-wide Mutual Aid Agreement. As the century-old Herriott Street Fire Hall was no longer adequate, the former public market shed at the rear of Town Hall was remodeled to create a much larger Fire Hall. In September 1954, the Perth Museum was given use of the Herriott Street Fire Hall, with the Fire Department retaining use of the tower to dry hoses. In 1960, however, the BBDE Fire Department moved its equipment from the Town Hall facility back to the Herriott Street Fire Hall, where they remained until moving to their own Fire Hall at 14 Sherbrooke Street East in 1967.

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<sup>116</sup> *Perth Courier*, December 15, 1939.

<sup>117</sup> *Perth Courier*, May 8, 1941.

As the fire protection demands of a growing town and area increased, the pumper engine of 1939 and Township pumper of 1953 were supplemented by a third pumper in 1971. This in turn demanded firehall changes as the 1971 truck was too large to fit in the existing space. The decision was taken to tear down the facility at the rear of Town Hall, that had served since 1953, and build a new Fire Hall on same site as part of an overall \$500,000 renovation project of the Town Hall site. The new Fire Hall, completed in 1972, provided adequate space for all of the town's firefighting equipment and, for the first time, furnished the volunteer firemen with an office, meeting room, washrooms, and showers.

In 1993 the Town of Perth appointed its first full time fire chief in the person of David Bell (1942-2018), who would hold the post until 2004.

Over these years the department fought a number of serious fires. The Hotel Perth fire of April 1959 killed two hotel guests, injured several firefighters, and represented a property loss of \$20,000. Carson Farm Supply on Drummond Street was destroyed by fire in August 1961. In June 1959, the local department helped fight the devastating Lanark Village fire that destroyed several blocks of businesses and homes and caused \$2,000,000 in damage. In November 1972 it took seven hours to bring a fire in the Gore Street Erwin Block under control. Four businesses and as many second-floor apartments were lost at a cost of \$250,000. The interior of the Mathew's Building at 51-55 Gore Street East was completely destroyed by fire in 1979. In January 1980, despite the efforts of 50 fire-fighters working in freezing temperatures, the Perth Public Library was gutted in a major blaze that destroyed 62,000 books as well as paintings, antiques, maps and historical documents. Two months later, in March 1980 the IGA Supermarket on Wilson Street was also destroyed by fire.



*Perth Fire Department 2021*

## Twenty-First Century

By 1998 the Fire Department had once again outgrown its quarters and moved to a newly constructed municipal building, shared with the Police Department, at 1881 Rogers Road.

As the Fire Department entered the 21st Century it was comprised of a full time Chief leading a Deputy Chief, four Captains, 10 Driver/Pump Operators, and 16 firefighters. The department is equipped with a 2001 HME 1040 gpm<sup>118</sup> pumper, a 2014 Spartan 1500 gpm pumper, a 2004 Seagrave 100' aerial truck, 2011 Ford 450 equipment van and a 2001 Dodge half-ton truck.

The department's first motorized engine, the 1939 LaFrance Foamite Pumper, is still part of the department's fleet, although it was last used in 1980.



*Undated photo of the Ronald Steam Fire Engine being broken up - Perth Fire Dept. Collection*

The equipment inventory also includes the town's very first fire engine, the Murray hand engine purchased at Montreal by the Bell brothers in 1841. Declared surplus and put up for sale by the Town Council, it found its way back to the Fire Hall after it was purchased in 1854 by Fountain Fire Company Engineer George Miller, the man who had built the Fountain Company's engine.

The Union Company's Perry hand engine, that served Perth from 1853 through 1900, and was purchased and preserved by John A. Stewart in 1917, was also returned to the Fire Hall and survives today.<sup>119</sup>

The Union Company's 1860 silver-plated speaking trumpet, part of the Perth Matheson House Museum collection, is on display at Perth Town Hall.

The Fountain Company's Miller hand engine of 1853 was sold by the Town in about 1883 and disappeared.

The 1883 Ronald Steam Engine was retired and advertised for sale in May of 1941. It was reportedly "*dismantled during World War II*".<sup>120</sup> Many pieces of like machinery, especially those with components of copper and brass like the Miller and Ronald fire engines, fell victim to the scrap metal drives of the World Wars.

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<sup>118</sup> Gallons per minute.

<sup>119</sup> At the time of this writing (2020) the date "1908" appears painted on the Murray hand pump engine. That date probably refers to a date of restoration and should not be confused with the engine's 1841 date of production. The following appears painted on the Perry (Union Company) hand pump engine - "Built 1819 - Rebuilt 1918, 1967, 1976, 2016". The Perry engine was built at Montreal in 1853, not 1819. The dates of rebuild/restoration appear to be correct.

<sup>120</sup> *Over a Century of Firefighting 1878-1884* © 1984 Clyde Fire Department - Author Patricia Purdon, Editor Arthur Code, Assistant Editor, Susan Somerville.

## Fire Chiefs

Dennis Richard Noonan (1846-1916)	- Chief 1886-1909	- Fireman 1877-1909
Richard Walker (1859-1920)	- Chief 1909-1917	-
James W. Gamble (1868-1954)	- Chief 1917-1947	- Fireman 1891-1947
William G. Howie (1888-1952)	- Chief 1947-1952	- Fireman 1906-1971
Douglas Howie (1912-1958)	- Chief 1952-1958	- Fireman 1930-1958
George Scott Graham (1907-1987)	- Chief 1958-1974	-
Robert John 'Jack' Andison (1929-2020)	- Chief 1974-1990	- Fireman 1955-1990
David Murray Bell (1942-2018)	- Chief 1990-2004	- Fireman 1965-2004
Steve Fournier	- Chief 2004-2016	- Fireman 1990-2016
Trevor Choffe	- Chief 2016-Present	-

## Perth Volunteer Fire Company - 1842

John Doran, 1st Captain                      Malcolm McPherson, 2nd Captain,  
 Alexander Tait, 1st Lieutenant,         Robert Kellock, 2nd Lieutenant,  
 Duncan Graham, Treasurer and Secretary.

Henry Montgomery	David Tait	John Moir
Alex Ferguson	James Headrick	Moses Thornton
William Bell Jr.	William McLeod	Richard Williams
John Bell	James Allan	Richard Walker
Donald Fraser	Robert Allan	John Finnigan
Francis Holliday	Bernard McEloy (McElroy?)	Francis Sache
Peter Coyle	George Cox	William McCulloch
William Gill	George Graham	James Truelove
William Hogg	William Brown	Francis Hall
David Hogg Jr.	Timothy Bourke	Henry Phallington
Edward Hudson	Alex Kippen	Alex Cuthbertson
James Williams	William Campbell	John Garraw
James Flintoff	William Glascott	John Stacy
Patrick McDonough	John McEtyre (McIntyre?)	Christopher Bell
Thomas Bourke	John Hattin	William Poole
Patrick Brady	John McGuinness	Richard Paterson
Robert Moffatt	Charles Miller Sr.	William H. Eliot
Alex Spalding	Charles Miller Jr.	William Lilly
David Holliday	James Hicks	Bernard Dunn
Owen Stanly	Patrick Conway	Joseph Little
John Haselton (Hazelton?)	John McDougall	James Thompson
John Thompson	Bernard McSherry	John Moor
James Smith	Charles Paterson	William Likely
Robert Shaw	Lewey (Louis?) Bisset	Finlay McLaren
Alex Stewart	William Covean	William Thompson
James Templeton	James Anderson	Michael Fennan
John Hogan	John Montgomery	Alex McEachern
Thomas Tucker	William McLaren	

### **Officers of the First Fountain Fire Company - 1853**

Captain	John Murray
Lieutenant	John Mitchell
Secretary	John Haggart
Treasurer	William Morris
Engineer	George Miller
Foreman Suction Hose	Charles Miller
Foreman Front Brake	James Flanagan
Foreman After Brake	Edward Conolly
Leading Hose	W. Smitherman
Branchman	James Mitchell

### **Officers of the First Union Fire Company - 1853**

Captain	Samuel Bothwell
Lieutenant	Duncan Kippen
Secretary	George Graham
Treasurer	Robert Andison
1st Foreman	William Godkins
2nd Foreman	John Hogg
3rd Foreman	William Lock
4th Foreman	Michael O'Neil
Branchmen	William Graham and T. Hunter
Engineer	James Bodie

### **Fallen Firefighter**

#### **George Miller (1811-1860)**

George Miller, Engineer of the Fountain Fire Company, is the only Perth firefighter to have been killed in the line of duty.

Born at Glasgow, Lanarkshire, Scotland, on October 17, 1811, George Miller was the son of Charles Miller Sr. (1785-1842) and Elizabeth McEwen (1783-1851). His father, who had been born at Kirkintilloch, Dunbartonshire, was a saddler. Miller emigrated to Montreal in the late 1820s with his parents and brothers Robert (1818-1844) and Charles Jr. (1822-1879). The family arrived at Perth in about 1832.

Miller was a skilled metal moulder and machinist. In 1835, in partnership with his younger brother Charles Jr., he established a foundry at 10 Herriott Street. In about 1859 they were joined in the business by John Murray and William Morris, and when that partnership dissolved in 1863, George and Charles formed a new partnership with George's son Robert (1834-1900) and A. B. Simmonds in 1870.

In May 1853 the Murray, Miller & Morris Foundry first demonstrated the prototype of a new 'fire engine' designed by George Miller. With pressure generated by a 9½ inch throw on a 4½ inch cylinder the Miller pump engine "*threw a strong jet of water on the roof of Mr. Glascott's new [two storey] house, sufficiently copious ... to have extinguished a fire*".<sup>121</sup> By that summer the Miller engine was completed, in September it fought its first fire at Walter Hunter's blacksmith shop, and in October the Fountain Fire Company was formed to man it, with George Miller holding the post of Company Engineer.

Seven years later, at about 8:00 p.m. on the evening of Friday, October 19, 1860, an alarm summoned Perth's firefighters to the long-abandoned St. Bridget's Roman Catholic Chapel, at the corner of Harvey and Beckwith Streets. Both the Fountain and Union Companies were quickly on the scene, "*but the chapel being of wood, and water difficult to be got, the flames had made such headway that it was impossible to save the building, which was burned down; although good service was done in preventing the flames spreading to the adjoining houses.*"<sup>122</sup> As George Miller and his colleagues struggled to contain the blaze, "*a heavy piece of burning timber fell out from the building and struck him on the head, crushing him to the ground; and he died the following afternoon in consequence of the injuries he received*".<sup>123</sup>

The chapel had been set alight by arsonists, but the perpetrators were never identified.<sup>124</sup>

George Miller left a wife, Charlotte Donaldson (1813-1903), and 11 children, seven girls and four boys. Lamenting his loss, the *Perth Courier* described Miller as one of the town's "*oldest citizens ... universally respected and esteemed.*"<sup>125</sup>

George Miller's father and brother had both been members of Perth's first Fire Brigade and in 1853 he saved Perth's first fire engine, the 1842 Murray, from destruction by purchasing it from the Town Council and thus ensuring that it was returned to the possession of the Perth Fire Brigade.

In addition to being a volunteer firefighter, Miller was an active militiaman who, during the Mackenzie-Papineau Rebellion of 1837-1838, was among the 100 men of the 1st Regiment Lanark Militia mobilized under command of Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Fraser (1789-1872). Styling themselves the 'Perth Volunteers' they spent February and March of 1838 posted to the defense of Kingston and then Gananoque where, "*during the whole period he set a good example to his associates for steadiness, diligence, and zeal, for the service ever ready, and cheerfully doing his duty often under difficulties and many privations*".<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> *Bathurst Courier*, May 6, 1853.

<sup>122</sup> *Perth Courier*, October 26, 1860.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> Most evidence points to the fire being the result religious bigotry. See *St Bridget's Chapel: The Miscreant Has Murder On His Head*, Perth & District Historical Society <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/st-bridgets-chapel.pdf> .

<sup>125</sup> *Perth Courier*, October 26, 1860.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

Miller was buried in the Presbyterian section of Craig Street Cemetery on Tuesday October 23rd. His funeral, to that date, *“one of the largest ... ever witnessed in Perth. The Firemen appeared in mourning badges, and places of business generally closed, out of respect for the decease, while the procession was passing. In losing him, Perth has lost a valuable member of society, and his untimely and melancholy end cast a gloom upon our citizens generally”*.

George Miller is among the more than 1,600 firefighters who's ultimate service is recognized on the honor roll of the Canadian Fallen Firefighters Foundation <https://www.cfff.ca/EN/fallen.html>

- **Ron W. Shaw (2021)**  
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