

## **An Overview of the History of Firefighting in New Berlin, PA**

**by  
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Prior to the formation of the New Berlin Fire Company, the Borough owned some (non-motorized) equipment and a building, located on the northeast corner of Vine Street and Church Alley. The earliest known apparatus was a hand-pumping engine likely built in the mid-1800s. When the New Berlin Fire Co. No. 1 was formed in 1932 it was donated to the fire company by the borough. Within a few years the “fire wagon” as it was known was sold to the father-in-law of New Berlin resident Lewis Sassaman, who lived in Oklahoma. It was restored and used in local events there. Eventually a benefactor paid for its return and it was a highlight of the 2004 Fireman’s Parade. To do this a longer tongue had to be installed and horses strong enough to pull the engine had to be located. Area farmer Roy Marx agreed to bring his team, once he found help to feed the cows since the parade was the same time as milking.



Hand pumping engine before it was sent west.



Restored hand pumper



Hand pumper in the 2004 Firemen's Parade  
(three photos courtesy of Marvin Wagner)

The original firehouse was moved to the carnival grounds in 1949, where it is used as storage and serves as a carnival stand. Now equipped with an overhead door instead of the original hinged doors, it has also been sided to protect it from the weather. On July 14, 1932, the organizational meeting of the Fire Department was held in the town hall and officers elected: Russell H. Solomon, President; Emerson Seebold, Vice-President; Bruce M. Smith, Recording Secretary; Reno Maurer, Financial Secretary; Elmer M. Seebold, Treasurer.

On July 28, 1932, at the second meeting, all fire equipment and the Fire Engine House were accepted from the Borough of New Berlin. Elected to direct the Company at emergencies were: Russell H. Solomon, Chief, Bertram L. Albert, First Assistant Chief and J. F. Dunkelberger, Second Assistant Chief. Chief Solomon would serve until 1946; his successors are (in order) Ellsworth A. Snook, Carl Moyer, Ellsworth A. Snook Jr., Robert H. Maurer, Oliver W. Hummel, John S. Benfer, Harold E. Erdley Jr. and, currently, John S. Benfer.

Until 1949 (when a firehouse was constructed at 415 High Street) the old Evangelical Church (now the Integral Yoga Center) on the southwest corner of Market Street and Plum Street, then owned by Russell H. Solomon, served as meeting room and was used as a social hall for fund raising events, including Friday night movies.

On June 16, 1933, it was agreed to purchase a used Hahn Fire Engine from Hahn Motors, Inc. of Hamburg, PA. The truck would be fitted with a new 6

cylinder engine, new pump, new radiator, standard equipment and new tires, at a total cost of \$2,000.00. As the Firehouse was not heated, the Fire Engine was housed in Joseph VanHorn's Garage at 625 Market Street during the colder months, at a cost of \$2.00 per month. This truck would remain in service until replaced by a 1961 International/Central (which was, in turn, replaced in 1994).



Hahn Fire Engine in the 1951 Memorial Day Parade. (NB Heritage collection.)

In 1939, after purchase of a used Chevrolet Ambulance from the Americus Hose Company, Sunbury PA, the New Berlin Fire Company began to provide Ambulance service. President Stover Minnick appointed Russell H. Solomon, Reno Maurer and A. W. Nerhood to serve as an Ambulance Committee. As there was only room for one vehicle in the Firehouse, garage space was rented from Arthur Ritter for the Ambulance and an Emergency Patrol Truck, at \$20.00 per year. Mr. Ritter's barn was on the southwest corner of Union Street and Church Alley.

As the years went by, that first ambulance would be replaced by a used LaSalle Ambulance from the Beaver Springs Fire Company, in 1948; a new Chevrolet from Diehl Chevrolet-Cadillac, Lewisburg PA, in the mid-1950's; a used

Cadillac from the nearby Mifflinburg Community Ambulance Service in the mid-1960's; a new Dodge van in 1974, a new Ford/Blue Star in 1990 a 2001 Ford/Braun and the current model, a 2009 Ford/Braun.

Long before centralized dispatch centers, most communities relied on their own local system for reporting emergencies. May 1, 1947 was the first note of such a procedure here, where Kermit Maurer, proprietor of a funeral home at 321 Market Street, was accepting calls for ambulance service.



New Berlin firehouse in the 1950s. (courtesy of Marvin Wagner)

On February 1, 1951, Chief Ellsworth A. Snook reported difficulty among the truck drivers; they disliked taking the (open cab) truck out in cold weather. The Fire Chief had to drive it home from a chimney fire on January 26<sup>th</sup>, or leave it there. Several options were explored, including purchase of a new chassis to remount the fire truck body. On February 5, 1953, after a motion by G. R. Cornelius, seconded by Lester A. Snook, it was agreed to purchase a 1951 Hahn Fire Engine on a Ford F5 chassis, for \$6,750.00. This truck would be replaced in 1976 by an International/Maxim Fire Engine. Over the years, several developments in the community were positively affected by the Fire Company. The community band became the New Berlin Fire Company Band on February 3, 1938, until officially disbanded on October 2, 1947; in 1949, the instruments were sold to the Middleburg Legion Post. Beginning in 1946, and extending for an

unknown period of time, the Borough Council met in the Company's meeting room, and in the early 1950's, so did Boy Scout Troop 508. On March 1, 1951, William Dervin visited a monthly meeting and explained a proposed project to clean "the commons" (the Borough's nature park along scenic Penns Creek) and build a shallow pond for ice skating. The Company approved a motion by Ellsworth A. Snook, seconded by Paul R. Spangler, that they would donate services and money toward this proposal. In the 1950's, a baseball team from New Berlin was sponsored. In the 1990's, after purchasing a riding mower for use on the carnival grounds, the unit being replaced was donated for use on the new Little League fields, off the east extension of Water Street.



Fire Co. celebration -50 yrs -l-r Roy Kline, Harry D'Addario, Archie Miller, David Solomon, Carl Moyer, Ellsworth Snook. (New Berlin Heritage collection)

In 1970 a 1,200 gallon, 1963 Chevrolet Tanker was purchased. Tankers are used in rural areas without the support of fire hydrants; water is shuttled by Tanker from water sources to the fire. The first such vehicle used by New Berlin firefighters, it was replaced more than 20 years later by a 2,400 gallon tank on a used Ford chassis. That same tank was later nested on a 1990 Kenworth. As there was only room for three vehicles in the Firehouse in 1970, the Ambulance would be housed in Mrs. Mary Maurer's garage until a new addition was completed in 1971.

Courtesy of the Ladies Auxiliary, 6 tone activated radio receivers were purchased in 1975. Until this time, Ambulance crews were called by telephone. The Union County Sheriff's Office (and later, the 9-1-1 office of the Union County Office of Public Safety) could summon all personnel equipped with monitors simultaneously, by pushing one button. Today, all active members carry pagers.

In 1978, today's Social Hall was built, followed by new carnival buildings in the early 1990's. The Social Hall is rented for large gatherings, frequently for the purpose of wedding receptions. Over the years, the New Berlin Fire Company has become quite proficient at hosting meals for the profit of the Fire Company. The first meal was a sauerkraut plate in February 1934 that cost 35 cents. The first chicken and waffle dinner was served in February, 1935, also for 35 cents. Today's favorite dinner of ham or chicken potpie costs nine dollars.



Folks enjoy potpie, slaw, applesauce and dessert.



Wayne Resseguie ladles out chicken potpie.

Photos by Diane Lengle

On Mother's Day, a dinner of turkey, ham and all the trimmings are served, normally to a crowd in excess of 600. During the annual Firemen's Carnival, the Social Hall is used in the early evening as a platter stand, where crowds satisfy their appetites on a variety of fare, changing nightly. Later in the evening, after the food is all gone, bingo games are held in the Social Hall.

Pleased with the work done by their students' efforts on the Firehouse addition, the SUN Area Career and Technology Center was contacted in late 2002 and

construction was begun on an addition to the social hall. This addition provides needed storage, as well as some area to be used for the Carnival and a space to display the old hand pumper that was part of the original equipment once owned by the Borough and given to the Fire Company upon its formation.

Approximately half of the Firehouse was demolished, with new construction and rehabilitation of the remaining building done in the mid-1980's.

In the late 1990's, as a Paramedic Unit from Evangelical Community Hospital moved in, followed by the long term loan of a Brush Engine from the Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry (it stays here as long as we want it and it serves our purpose), we outgrew the building. The brush truck, a one ton pickup, was squeezed between the Engine and Engine-Rescue, while our Ambulance and the Paramedic Unit were crowded into the west addition, first built in 1971.

In response to this growth, an addition to the firehouse was constructed by students of the SUN Area Career and Technology Center, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Drive, New Berlin. Working only for the experience, the savings in labor cost enabled the Fire Company to complete the project for approximately one third of that estimated by the architect. The Engine and Engine-Rescue moved into this addition on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2002. This addition allowed one overhead door for each of the five vehicles in the fleet. It also provided a space with overhead door for the Paramedic Unit alone. Evangelical Community Hospital paid rent for an office in the Firehouse, which covered the expenses created by hosting their staff 24/7.

This was not considered a profit making enterprise, but a cooperative venture that resulted in advanced life support being readily available to the New Berlin area. This was discontinued the end of 2010, when the Hospital moved Paramedics onto Ambulances contracted for staffing and the local Paramedic service moved to Mifflinburg.

The fleet continues to modernize. The 1990 Kenworth Tanker is gone. The 1976 IH Engine is about to be replaced with a used combination Pumper-Tanker (so the Tanker and Engine are both being replaced by one vehicle). The brush truck is being replaced by a new Attack unit (again, this combines the benefits of several types of vehicle with one). Photos of these new units are in the

archives of the New Berlin Fire Company's Facebook page:

<<https://www.facebook.com/mobileprotection#!/pages/New-Berlin-Fire-Company/132291026836677?fref=ts>>. While equipment and volunteers have changed, for 81 years the New Berlin Fire Company has responded to the fire and emergency needs of the area and provided fellowship and civic leadership to New Berlin.

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ACCOUNTS Vol. 3, No. 1, 2013  
Union County Historical Society