

Notes on the History of Lewisburg's Cameron Fire Company

**by
Robert E Stackhouse**

With the amount of information I have to work with, I will attempt to allow the reader to have a better understanding how the early fire service has progressed in the last couple of centuries. It started in approximately 1831 with a small hand powered engine, which, to say the least, was very insufficient. As the town grew and folks demanded better fire protection from the borough, the Borough Council authorized the purchase of a used unit that was available from the city of Philadelphia. The early fire company was then called the Lewisburg Valiant Fire Company, and the hand pumper was also labeled the Valiant, purchased in Philadelphia. This piece was very cumbersome to operate. It took eight personnel, two on each corner operating the pump handles, to make it function properly, along with a constant line of folks using leather buckets to carry water to fill the reservoir on the pumper, keeping the pump supplied.



“The Valiant”, Lewisburg’s first fire-fighting apparatus (1831)

As happens in any organization, morale started to decline and remained in an up and down mode for some time because of personalities involved. The Borough Council, through their good judgment, decided that they had to try and improve the fire protection in the community as the Valiant was not very efficient. Other communities were buying more modern units that produced a greater flow of water with less effort and personnel. They looked into the possibility of acquiring a steam-operated pump. After much discussion among the Borough Council, probably in 1873 or 1874, they decided to look at a Silsby pumper which was one of the best being made at that time and had an excellent record as being a very reliable unit.

Through this period the Valiant Fire Company was renamed the Lewisburg Fire Company. In the year 1874 the Honorable William Cameron donated \$10,000 to the borough toward the purchase of the Silsby pumper. The Borough Council raised the remaining amount to enable the purchase of this unit. It came



The Silsby Steam-Powered Pumper (1874)

with three hose carts to accompany the pumper. At this point the morale of the newly re-named fire company rose to a very high level, normal when something is brand new. One problem that came about was that only a select few folks had a key to the engine house where the Silsby would be kept, which raised tension among some of the members as well as some folks in the community. This management dynamic still exists to this day in many organizations, when just a few folks feel that they are the only ones who run the organization.



Hose cart similar to the three Hose Carts purchased with the Silsby Pumper

With limited space, I will not go into the detailed requirements that the borough put on the Silsby Company specifying how far and how high the pumper could flow a stream of water. The one point worth mentioning is that it flowed water a number of feet above the Baptist Church steeple. This satisfied the Borough Council.

I am omitting much of the fire department minutes at this time as there was some argument about who knew what and the minutes are not really

complete, but a motion was made that the Lewisburg Fire Department name be dropped and, in 1916 in a motion that was not properly recorded, the name was changed to William Cameron Engine Company in honor of William Cameron who had given \$10,000 towards the purchase of the pumper. This is recorded in the courthouse.



Cameron Fire Engine Company, 1958 Left: 1941 Seagrave 750 gpm pumper.
Right: 1936 Seagrave "quad" 600 gpm pumper. ¹

We are going to leave the era of the steam pumper at around the year 1936 and, to my knowledge, this is the last time the Silsby actually functioned as a reliable working unit. The story goes that it was sent to Sunbury to pump out

¹ Left to right: Front Row: Ellis Kerstetter, Deputy Chief; Donald E. Walters, Chief of Department; Robert E. Stackhouse, Assistant Chief. 1st Row, David L. Arndt, Paul Bowersox, Charles R. Meachum, Harold Erdley, Ralph I. Ammon, Sr., C. Dale Schrader, A. Lake Yocum. 2nd Row: Mearns Arbogast, Anthony Kifilo, Oliver Hummel, Raymond P. Kline, Clarence Erdley, James Meachum. 3rd Row: Theodore L. Yocum, Charles Holtzapple, Guy Benfer, Clyde Ernast, Charles Parsons, Harold Herman, Walter Beaver.
A "quad" has a booster tank of water, and a complement of hose, a full bed of ground ladders, and a 600 gpm pump – four types of equipment.
Photo previously appeared in *The Borough Bulletin*, Jan. 1959, p. 7.

cellars after the 1936 flood and, because the water being pumped was contaminated with oil, sand, and other contaminants, the pump was made inoperable. In 1936 the borough purchased a Seagrave truck, known as a “quad.” In 1940, the last Seagrave pumper to go into civilian service was purchased by the borough. This was due to World War II. All subsequently manufactured apparatus went to the military.

After the war ended, fire service was making major changes in the way folks were trained and newer apparatus was being brought on the market. In the early 1960s the borough purchased a 1000 gpm (gallons per minute) Mack fire engine that was quite a change in what we had as running stock, and later on the borough purchased a new concept in aerial devices called a snorkel manufactured by the Putnam Corporation. It was the first one of this design delivered in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

The two older pieces of equipment were disposed of. At this time the fire company had an active contingent of approximately 35 to 40 members and this held into the 1980s, but as many volunteer-based organizations experienced, active members started to decline and, in the middle 1990s, the first paid personnel were hired. Now, in the year 2013, there are 22 paid folks on call 24/7 which one must realize does cost money to operate, but as mentioned before, volunteerism experienced by fire companies throughout the country was declining very rapidly and to obtain excellent fire protection this is what is happening throughout our state.

In this short communication one can see that we have come a long way from 1831 to 2013, but who knows where we will be in the next thirty years as we see many new electronic and other inventions coming our way?

Documenting our colorful history, a portion of the building on North Firth Street, known as the Administration Building, was set aside for a museum to house many of the articles that we had accumulated over the years. The biggest task that was taken on was in 2001 when a small group of fire fighters decided that they would see if they could restore the old Valiant. As they started this project, they soon discovered that almost every part had to be replaced and, after many hours of hard labor, the Valiant threw a stream of water for the first time in

over a century and a half. We feel that our small museum is worth your time to stop in and see where it all started. Appointments to visit the Liddick and



Some of the equipment used by the Cameron Engine Company today

Stephen Memorial Museum can be arranged by calling Chief Rick Sheesley, whose assistance in arranging the above photo is much appreciated.

Further Sources

Much information about the William Cameron Fire Company can be obtained by visiting the museum in Lewisburg, North 5th Street at Buffalo Road (Rt. 192).

Readers wanting to know more about the Cameron Fire Company can consult *The William Cameron Engine Company 100 Years of Service, 1874-1974*. A copy is available at the Union County Historical Society, Union County Court House, Lewisburg.

