A Brief History of the FDNY

by Jack Lerch

The FDNY, as we know it today, was born on midnight, January 1, 1898, with the merger of the Fire Departments of New York, Brooklyn and Long Island City. After two full years of this operation under one Fire Commissioner, the Department came into the year 1900 with a very optimistic look into the future. Fire Commissioner John Scannell, with an annual salary of $7500, headed the Department. Chief of Department Edward Croker, at a salary of $6000 per year, headed up the uniformed force.

Headquarters of the Fire Department, City of New York, was the ornate, six-story building at 157-159 East 67th Street which, after several modernizations, is now the home of Engine 39 and Ladder 16. In 1900, Brooklyn and Queens filed separate annual reports, a system that continued for several more years. There were 1386 officers and firemen, plus 137 civilian employees in the various Manhattan and Bronx units.

Deputy Chief John Kenlon (left) became Chief of Department in 1920. Chief of Department Edward F. Croker (right) held this position for many years, beginning in 1898.

all photos courtesy Mand Library

Of the 73 engine companies in those two boroughs, nine were double companies with separate apparatus and manpower in each section. Ten other engine companies were classed as combination engines and had a ladder truck assigned. Included in the 73 were four fireboats, known then as floating engines. There were 23 "hook and ladder" companies, three of which were classed as double companies with two separate trucks. There were three water towers in first-line service, as well as three boat tenders--all manned from the units where quartered. A new special unit, Searchlight Engine 1, entered service with a modified steam fire engine on January 4th at the quarters of Engine 20. The units in Manhattan and The Bronx answered 6334 alarms in 1900, with 5711 fires. The busiest engine was Engine Co. 17 with 691 runs and the busiest truck was Hook and Ladder 18 with 896 runs.

The only new companies organized in 1900 were Engine 72 in lower Manhattan on July 1st and Engine 73 in The Bronx on November 1st. In the previous year of 1899, three new engines were opened--Engine Companies 69, 70 and 71--all in The Bronx.

Brooklyn and Queens had 1050 uniformed officers and firefighters, plus 118 civilians. There were 60 land engine companies in those two boroughs, 11 of which were combination companies with a ladder truck also assigned. There were two fireboats, 17 hook and ladder companies and one water tower. No new companies were established in these two boroughs in either 1900 or 1899.

Equitable Building fire of 1912, with horse-drawn hose wagon and water tower in view.

In the major portion of Queens, the volunteer system still existed, with 64 separate volunteer companies comprised of 1999 volunteer firemen and officers. The paid force responded to 2929 alarms, which included 2694 fires, in the boroughs of Queens and Brooklyn. Engine Co. 126 (now 226) was the busiest engine with 219 runs. Hook and Ladder Co. 58 (now Ladder 108) was the busiest truck with 212 runs. Richmond (Staten Island) was still fully volunteer, with several separate departments, with more than 1500 volunteer chiefs, officers and firemen.

Ten years later in 1910, Edward Croker was still Chief of Department. The Fire Commissioner was Rhinelander Waldo. The combined uniformed force consisted of 4332 officers and firemen, plus 523 civilians. Total alarms were 15,729, 14,405 of which were fires. There were 173 engine companies, including 10 fireboats. Nineteen of these engines also had a ladder truck assigned and were classed as combination engine companies. There were 76 hook and ladder companies. There were also eight hose companies, all located in suburban areas of Queens. Special apparatus included five water towers, nine boat tenders and three searchlight engines. The busiest engine and ladder was again Engine Co. 17 with 977 runs and Hook and Ladder 18 with 1091 runs. There were still 13 volunteer fire companies in Richmond, with total personnel of 425 and 42 volunteer companies in Queens with 1850 members. Except for chiefs cars, the only motorized apparatus was the 1909 Knox high-pressure hose wagon of Engine 72. The department estimated maintenance and fuel cost for this vehicle at only $85 per year, whereas the maintenance cost of three horses to pull a high-pressure hose wagon was $600. Motorization was on the way; however, the department still had 1508 horses on its rolls at the end of 1910.

In 1920, FDNY had grown to 5996 uniformed officers and firefighters, with 771 civilian employees in various titles, including dispatchers, mechanics, fire marshals, fire prevention inspectors, clerical staff, etc. Thomas Drennan was the Fire Commissioner and John Kenlon was Chief of Department. The two-platoon system went into effect on October 1, 1920, and first-grade pay for a fireman was up to $2280 per year. The paid department consisted of 192 engine companies and 99 hook and ladder companies, which included the second sections of the double companies in both categories, plus one rescue company, three hose companies, nine fireboats (classed as engine companies) and six water towers. Alarms totaled 17,906 in 1920. Of these, 14,638 were actual fires. The volunteer companies in areas of Queens and Richmond (Staten Island) totaled five engines, two chemical engines, six hose companies and 13 hook and ladders. The volunteer force in those two boroughs showed a total of 773 members. The paid department was 75 percent motorized. However, 269 horses still were on its roster.

John Kenlon was still Chief of Department in 1930 and served in this top uniformed force position from 1911 to 1931. The Fire Commissioner was John Dorman. The strength of the FDNY in 1930 consisted of 6624 officers and firemen in the uniformed force, with 928 civilians. The various volunteer companies still existing were down to 221 members. Total alarms were up to 42,459, with 31,391 of these actual fires. Two new divisions and five new battalions were organized in 1930, with eight of the existing divisions and 28 battalions completely re-organized in their complement of companies. The department consisted of 217 engine companies, including the second sections of double engines, plus 123 hook and ladder companies, including the few second sections of those. Most of the hook and ladder companies now had aerial ladders, with only a few of the old city service ladder trucks still in service. The fireboat fleet was back up to 10 active boats and still known as engine companies. There were two rescue companies--one in Manhattan and the other in Brooklyn. Six water towers were in first-line service, with two others as spares. The

apparatus fleet of 689 motor vehicles, including spares, consisted of 249 pumpers, 10 tractorized steamers, 130 hose wagons, 121 aerial hook and ladders, 29 city service hook and ladders, four searchlights, one ambulance, eight water towers, three rescue wagons, 117 chiefs cars, three gasoline-oil fuel wagons, three coal fuel wagons and three boat tenders. The volunteer companies were down to three engines and four hook and ladders.

By 1940, the FDNY had grown to 10,393 officers and firemen in the uniformed force, plus 728 civilians in various capacities. The Fire Commissioner was John McElligott, who had come up through the ranks and held the dual titles of Fire Commissioner and Chief of Department since 1934, after being promoted to Chief of Department in 1933. During February of 1940, he relinquished his Chief of Department position. Assistant Chief Patrick Walsh then was appointed Acting Chief of Department on February 21, 1940. Chief Walsh was appointed Fire Commissioner and Chief of Department in the following year.

Companies in the department were working under the three-platoon system. Total engine companies, including the two remaining second sections, numbered 228. There were 126 hook and ladder companies, including two second sections. The department had four rescue companies, one in each borough except Richmond. The fireboat fleet still consisted of 10 large boats, plus a tender. There were still six water towers in first-line service, with two fully equipped spares. Special apparatus included four searchlights, four bridge chemical engines, two ambulances, one airport unit, three gasoline-oil fuel wagons and a smoke ejector and foamite truck. FDNY also manned four temporary engine companies at the New York World's Fair. Volunteer units were down to two, both in Richmond (Staten Island), and both still are in existence today.

The department responded to 40,497 alarms, of which 28,413 were fires. The world was on the brink of World War II. FDNY sent three of its members to England to study and observe the activities of the London Fire Brigade, in their ordeal battling fires started by aircraft bombs. *WNYF*, the official training publication of FDNY, published its first issue in 1940, a modest, eight-page bulletin without any special cover. The apparatus fleet, including reserves and spares, was up to 799 vehicles, made up of 292 pumpers, 164 hook and ladder trucks, 131 hose wagons, 131 chiefs and miscellaneous cars, 44 delivery and miscellaneous trucks, 13 hydrant service apparatus, eight water towers, five rescue wagons, four searchlights, three fuel wagons, two ambulances, one smoke ejector and foamite truck and one band wagon.

Frank Quayle was the Fire Commissioner during most of 1950, but resigned on November 30th and was replaced by George P. Monaghan. The Bureau of Fire was under the command of Chief of Staff and Operations Frank Murphy, with the Chief of Department Peter Loftus. Uniformed personnel totaled 10,526. The total of all alarms responded to was 62,021, 44,370 of which were for actual fires. The total number of engine companies was down to 221, with nine fireboats. There were 127 hook and ladder companies. The department now had five rescue companies, with one in each borough. Special units included six water towers, two smoke ejectors, four searchlight units, four bridge chemical engines, two gasoline-oil trucks, three department ambulances, a canteen field kitchen, a foam powder supply unit, an oxygen therapy unit and an emergency utility unit.

Several major changes had occurred in the department by 1960. Edward F. Cavanagh, Jr., was the Fire Commissioner and George David was Chief of Department. The former position of Chief of Staff and Operations, actually held by only one individual, was a thing of the past. Several companies had been disbanded or relocated, other new companies formed and a few special units terminated. The personnel quota for the uniformed force was down to 10,088. There were 214 engine companies, 128 ladder companies, eight squad companies, eight marine companies and five rescue companies. Special units included four searchlights, four department ambulances, a mask service unit, two gas-oil units, two field communications units, a brush patrol unit and an oxygen therapy unit. The department responded to 94,135 alarms, of which 60,941 were

September 11, 1919, fire at the Church of the Messiah, Park Avenue and 34th Street, Manhattan. Visible in photo are an American LaFrance pumper, water tower and high-cab Mack hose wagon and what appears to be Engine 14's Christie front-drive steamer.

fires, 16,868 were emergencies and 16,326 were for false alarms. This false alarm total had been rising dramatically for several years.

The well-known "big house" in Jamaica, with its three engine companies and one ladder, was broken up, with two of the engines moved to new quarters to better cover their territory. The apparatus fleet numbered 774 vehicles. There were 346 pumpers, including seven "quads" and 65 CD (civilian defense) pumpers, plus 161 aerial ladder trucks. Special rigs, which included spares, consisted of nine squad trucks, one hose wagon, 144 passenger cars, five hydrant thawing units, five rescue vans, four ambulances, four searchlights, three gas and oil units, two field comm units, three wreckers, a brush patrol unit, two mask service vans, 16 station wagons, an oxygen therapy unit, three mobile lubrication units and 57 repair and delivery-type trucks.

In 1970, Robert O. Lowery, who had come from the uniformed force, was now Fire Commissioner. John T. O'Hagan, who later became Fire Commissioner, was Chief of Department. The quota for all ranks in the uniformed force was up to 14,663. The department was preparing to move its headquarters from the antiquated Municipal Building to a modern office building at 110 Church Street in Manhattan. Fires in 1970 numbered 127,249, with an additional 45,999 emergencies. False alarms were up to 89,000. There were 225 engine companies, including six recently organized second sections, three Tactical Control Unit engines, 140 ladder companies, including four second sections, three Tactical Control Unit ladders, four rescue companies, six squad companies, six marine companies, a fireboat tender, a special unit boat, four department ambulances, three searchlights, five thawing units, two field communications units, an oxygen therapy unit, a utility unit, a foam unit, a brush fire unit, a mask service unit, a community news unit and the Super Pumper System, which consisted of the super pumper, super pumper tender and three satellite hose wagons. Two water tenders, both retrofitted fuel wagons, were taken out of service in May 1970, with Marine Companies 7 and 8 disbanded in August. The total vehicle count of department apparatus, including spares, was up to 819.

Charles J. Hynes became the Fire Commissioner at the end of 1980, replacing Commissioner Augustus Beekman, who retired in November. Chief of Department Francis Cruthers also retired at the end of 1980, with Assistant Chief John Hart promoted to Chief of Department to succeed him. In 1980, the FDNY responded to a total of 389,703 alarms, of which 127,876 were actual fires. Emergencies totaled 76,327, with false alarms up to a staggering 185,500. The uniformed force quota was down to 11,252 officers and firefighters. More ladder companies were being equipped with tower-ladders. The total vehicle count, including reserves and spares, was 909, including 272 pumpers, 106 aerial ladders, 77 tower-ladders, five rescue vans, the five-piece Super Pumper System, 255

sedans and station wagons and 189 special units, trucks and vans. There were 208 engine companies, 138 ladder companies, four rescue companies, four marine companies, one squad company, a foam unit, a high-expansion foam unit, one searchlight unit, the mask service unit, one field communications unit, six fire salvage companies, four brush fire units and the five-piece Super Pumper System.

At the beginning of 1990, Joseph F. Bruno was Fire Commissioner, but was succeeded by former Acting Chief of Department Carlos M. Rivera on January 22nd. Assistant Chief Joseph M. DeMeo was promoted to succeed Chief Rivera as Acting Chief of Department. Total responses for the year were 381,339, with 96,855 fires, 136,341 emergencies and 148,143 false alarms. The number of uniformed officers and firefighters was down again, to 10,710. There were 209 engine companies, 142 ladder companies, five rescue companies, four marine companies, one squad company, one hazardous materials company, one field communications unit, one mask service unit, four brush fire units, one foam unit, one high-expansion foam unit, six satellites (including the maxi-water unit), one high-rise unit, two tactical support units, three fire salvage units, five thawing units and three mobile medical units.

As the Department enters the year 2000, Thomas Von Essen is Fire Commissioner, with Peter J. Ganci, Jr., as Chief of Department. In fiscal 1999, FDNY answered a total of 447,148 alarms for fire and/or emergencies. False alarms, which were part of this, still remained a very high 62,089. Additionally, the EMS Command of FDNY answered 1,034,506 ambulance calls. The uniformed force totals 11,228 officers and firefighters. There are 2819 paramedics and EMTs. The civilian staff of the department totals 1890 employees in many titles. There are 203 engine companies, 143 ladder companies, five rescue companies, seven squad companies, three marine companies and one hazardous-materials company. Special units include eight brush fire units, one decontamination unit, one decon support unit, one field communications unit, nine foam units, including one hi-ex foam unit, one foam tender, two FDR Drive response vehicles, two high-rise units, one JFK (airport) hose wagon, one manifold hose wagon, one mask service unit (with four trucks), five recuperation and care units, six satellite hose wagons, one SCUBA support unit, two tactical support units, five thawing units, one utility support unit, two alternate fuel (purple-K) response vehicles, one collapse unit, eight hazmat technician units, one mobile command post, one mobile medical unit, one fireboat tender, two auxiliary rescue craft (plus two spares), four MERVs (EMS major emergency response vehicles) and one EMS emergency response squad. The motor vehicle count, including fire apparatus, ambulances, special and support vehicles, cars, etc., totaled 1890 in mid-December 1999. This includes first-line apparatus, reserves and spares.

As the Department approaches a new century, the outlook is again very optimistic for change, as it certainly was 100 years ago.

About the Author...

Jack Lerch was appointed an Honorary Deputy Chief in 1979, promoted to Honorary Assistant Chief in 1989 and became Honorary Chief of Department in 1996. Besides his work at the Mand Library at the Bureau of Training, he has written numerous published articles on the subject of FDNY fire apparatus. He is a regular contributor to WNYF *with his Blast from the Past feature.*

George F. Mand Library

by Acting Lieutenant Dan Maye

The Fire Department of the City of New York has included a library among its resources since the early days of the Metropolitan Fire Department. The first library was established by resolution of the Board of Metropolitan Fire Commissioners on the 27th day of December 1867, exactly 130 years before the opening of the George F. Mand Library. The original Department library was located in a large hall above the Headquarters offices of the Metropolitan Fire Department. Charles De F. Burns was the first Department librarian.

On December 17th, 1878, the Board of Fire Commissioners decided to break the Fire Department Library up into 10 Battalion libraries. These Battalion libraries were placed under the direction of the Assistant Foreman (Lieutenant) of the company where the libraries were located. Charles De F. Burns, Assistant Secretary of the Department, was named General Librarian and given the task of supervision over all Battalion Libraries. Unfortunately, the Battalion libraries eventually fell into disuse and their collections were scattered throughout the Department.

Reverend Edward M.H. Knapp, Chaplain of the Fire Department, was the driving force behind establishing the next FDNY Library. Reverend Knapp succeeded in promoting his plan to install technical libraries in every firehouse in the city, thanks to Mrs. Russell Sage. Mrs. Sage donated $10,000 for the construction of these libraries. The responsibility for selecting the books for what became the Sage Memorial Library was placed with Dr. John S. Billings, the Director of the New York Public Library. In recognition of his dedication to the FDNY Library cause, Fire Commissioner Waldo designated Chaplain Knapp as Chief Librarian of the Department.

George F. Mand Resource Center at Randall's Island houses a 5000-volume library, conference room, audio-visual resource room and memorabilia.
photo by FDNY Photo Unit

In 1938, FDNY Honorary Chief Clarence Meek began work on an FDNY Library at the Fire College located in the old Packard Building. Eventually, this library was moved to FDNY Headquarters at 250 Livingston Street where Honorary Chief Meek ran the library until his death on September 16, 1973. In honor of his dedication, the library was renamed the Chief Clarence E. Meek Library. Acting Lieutenant Paul Stolz took over the operation of the library after the death of Honorary Chief Meek. Paul Stolz had worked closely with him for many years. Acting Lieutenant Stolz eventually was designated Chief Librarian of the Department. The Chief Clarence E. Meek Library was disbanded shortly after the death of Paul Stolz in 1987.

Fortunately, the collections of the Meek Library were placed in storage at Fire Department Headquarters. The Meek Library, which incorporated much of the former Department library collections, now forms the foundation of the George F. Mand Library. Deputy Fire Commissioner George F. Mand, the benefactor of the current Department Library, collapsed and died at the scene of a third-alarm fire in the Bronx on May 1, 1965. A portion of the estate of George F. Mand was left to establish a resource center on the grounds of the FDNY Fire Academy. The result of George F. Mand's endowment is the George F. Mand Resource Center.

George Mand's vision of a modern library/resource center, located at the Bureau of Training, was fulfilled through the commitment of the Safir and later Von Essen administrations. The George F. Mand Resource Center encompasses a 5000-volume special library, conference room, audio-visual resource room and the George F. Mand memorabilia collection. The library maintains a close affiliation with the New York State Fire Academy Library and other fire research libraries around the world. Through resource sharing and collaboration, the Library is able to provide cost-effective and high-quality service to the FDNY.

The current administration's commitment to education and technology has allowed the Library to expand collections, upgrade software and modernize the computers. Soon, the Library's catalogs, indexes, full text materials and photographs will be available off-site through the Department's Web site. The Library is grateful to the Von Essen administration for its continuing support. The Library also acknowledges the previous librarians, whose dedication to the accumulation of fire service knowledge and tradition has made the George F. Mand Library the finest fire department library in the nation.