

Before There Was A Fire Department

Compiled by Don Porth

Portland, in the Oregon Territory, was a settlement with a bright future. By 1850, it had grown from a pioneer settlement to the largest European-American settlement in the Pacific Northwest. With over 800 citizens, it was just beginning to feel the growing pains of a politically important community.

Portland became an incorporated city through a grant of the Territorial Legislature of Oregon. The bill, which was presented to the Legislature December 30, 1850, passed the House on January 14, 1851, and was signed February 8, 1851. It became effective April 8th of that year. At the time of incorporation, the forest came down to the bank of the Willamette River, except many of the trees had been cut up to Front Street (Naito Parkway) between Burnside and Jefferson Streets.

From the very beginning, timber was an important industry. In the early days, it was due more to necessity than anything. To expand the town, logging needed to occur. To build the town, sawmills needed to be built. With so much available wood, the architecture of the city was based on wooden structures, wooden sidewalks, and wooden construction for most everything.

With wood buildings came the inevitable fire. In 1849, Portland's first sawmill was destroyed by fire shortly after its completion. This was likely the very beginnings of discussion about fire protection for Portland.

The discussion became more prominent when Thomas Jefferson Dryer arrived in Portland in November 1850. T.J. Dryer, one of Portland's most colorful founding fathers, was born in New York State in 1808. He immigrated to California and became the city editor of the *San Francisco Courier*.

Portland was an up-and-coming city of political significance; therefore in need of a newspaper. W.W. Chapman and Stephen Coffin, two prominent Portland merchants, heard of Dryer and invited him to come to Portland to take on the task. Dryer accepted and arrived in Portland with a battered old hand press and a political style that would polarize him in the community in many ways.

By December of 1850, Dryer had begun publishing the *Weekly Oregonian*. He quickly became known for his out-spoken editorials and public feuds with the editors of other Northwest newspapers. His conflict was not limited to other newspapers, though. Dryer reportedly challenged local merchant Daniel Lownsdale to a duel (with rifles) when Lownsdale failed to pay an advertising debt.

As the editor of the newspaper, Dryer's words carried political clout that likely reached the political leaders of Portland. His adversarial style was likely communicated in his writings. This may have set the stage for the regard he would later get from officials at city hall.

In April 1851, Portland was officially incorporated by an Act of Territorial Legislature. The Act was signed by notable Portland citizens such as L.B. Hastings, S.A. Clark, W.W. Chapman, John H. Couch, Finice Caruthers, A.R. Skidmore, James Terwilliger, and T.J. Dryer.

Like many prominent businessmen in Portland, Dryer realized the well-being of the city was a key to his business success. The sawmill fire of 1849 was still fresh in the minds of community members, including Dryer. It would come as no surprise that Dryer would begin the “agitations” for the formation of a fire department to protect the city’s interests.

Up to this point, firefighting, when needed, was a rather unorganized event. Citizens kept buckets in their homes and businesses, filled with water, ready to combat a fire when it would occur. When fire would break out, shouts of “fire” would rally the community. They would bring their buckets and form lines from the water source to the fire and pass buckets to and from with the most able-bodied men tossing the water-filled buckets on the fire. In a town of Portland’s wooden construction, this was usually a futile affair but likely better than standing and watching a building burn.

The first move toward an organized fire department was Pioneer Fire Company No. 1. They offered their services to the newly incorporated City of Portland and thus became a part of city government with a voice in municipal affairs. This was done at the ninth meeting of the Common Council, held May 6, 1851. A portion of the transcript of the Council proceedings is as follows:

Recorder Caldwell moved that the foreman of the Fire Company formed in this city be heard, which was carried. Thomas J. Dryer on behalf of Pioneer Fire Company No. 1, offered the services of said company to the City to aid in extinguishing fires. On motion of Councilman Thompson it was voted that the thanks of the Council be tendered to Pioneer Fire Company No. 1 and that the report of the Foreman be accepted . . .

Dryer had organized 37 volunteers to serve the community. They became known as “redshirts” for the red uniform shirts they would wear during service. Dryer also forwarded a petition to the city requesting a first class fire engine “capable of bringing water from the river to any portion of our town... and an engine house to preserve it in good order, and an upper room for the use of the company...(Also) hooks and ladders, fire buckets and axes.” The cost was estimated to be \$3,500, which included both the purchasing and shipping of the equipment from the east coast.

Twenty days later, May 26, 1851, an election was held in which a majority voted in favor of a tax levy for the purpose of purchasing a steam fire engine. At the 26th meeting of the Council, held October 22, 1851, the following action was taken:

That there be and is hereby levied a tax of one half of one percent upon all taxable property within the City limits for the purpose of procuring a fire engine as authorized by a vote of the citizens of said city at an election held on the 26th day of May, A.D. 1851 . . .

The much-desired fire engine, however, would remain only a future dream, as a transcript of the Council proceedings for March 22, 1852, would indicate and also show how the Mayor refused to sign the resolution:

The following resolution was offered by Councilman Slater and adopted by a vote of the Council: Be it resolved that the Mayor be requested to inform the Council what disposition has been made of the Ordinance levying a tax for the purpose of purchasing a Fire Engine and apparatus (sic). In compliance with the foregoing resolution, the Mayor submitted a

communication which was received and ordered to be spread upon the Records. The following is a true copy thereof: 'Gentlemen of the Council – In answer to your Resolution inquiring to know of me disposition I have made of the duplicates levying a tax to collect and raise a fund to purchase a Inigne and Hoes (hose) for the use of the City I will say for your information that they are in my desk without my signature. H.D. O'Bryant, Mayor.'"

The Recorder, W.S. Caldwell, evidently was ashamed of the unscholarly communication from the Mayor as he carefully underlined the word “true” in stating it was a true copy thereof.

While nothing is said about the reason the Mayor’s communication from the 1852 Council meeting would override the will of the voters, speculation might point to the adverse political styles of Dryer. Regardless, Portland was left without an organized firefighting force for the time being. It should be noted that a steam fire engine would augment, rather than supplant, a hand pump fire engine of that period. The hand pump remained in use for many years after the advent of the steam engine.

Whether due to lack of interest or lack of fires, no matters related to a fire department would hold the city council’s attention again until 1853.

Hand pump fire engines were very labor intensive. It took many men to pump the rocker arms up and down for the lengthy time of a fire operation. Firefighters could not be dedicated to this task since they were needed to raise ladders and forward hose lines to the fire. Manning the pumps became a requirement of able bodied men. Refusal to help was punishable by fines. Ordinance No. 11, dated May 22, 1854, stated in part:

That any person or persons may be called upon to assist the Fire Department and failure to comply with this order is punishable by fine . . . Physicians, whilst engaged in their professional duties, are exempt from this order . . .

Manning the pumps was not considered a privilege and would often fall to those considered to be lesser citizens. Portland had a large Chinese population (every fourth Portlander was Chinese, as late as 1860) and the hard work of pumping would be ordered upon the “Chinamen,” whether willing or unwilling. Interestingly, the second non-white member of the fire department would be a Chinese-American, but it would not be until 1915 that this would occur. The first non-white member of the fire department would be a man named Gus Waterford. He was an "extraman" and would serve with the fire department from the early 1890s until 1895.

On May 6, 1853, C.B. Pillow was chosen by the city council to be the city’s Fire Warden. A few weeks later, he appointed Dryer as the Chief Warden. By no surprise, this was under the new mayoral administration of A.C. Bonell. With Dryer at the helm, Portland would finally establish a formal fire department. A city resolution was in place by late summer that stated:

Resolved that the whole city be a district for the organization of a Hook and Ladder Company; and further, that all that portion of the city lying North of Washington Street, be one district for the organization of an engine company and all that part of the city South of that street be another district for the same purpose.

A committee was created to determine how to form and fund the fire department. Local merchants were approached to provide funding while the committee met to create bylaws and constitutions for the operation of the fire department and fire companies.

The city would be organized into districts for fire protection. The original fire limits of the city (Ordinance No. 1, April 7, 1854) were bounded as follows:

Beginning at the Willamette River and running through Jefferson Street to its intersection with Second Street, thence along Second to Ash Street; thence along Ash Street to the intersection of the Willamette River; thence along the water front to the place of beginning. The first district being that portion of the city lying between Jefferson and Alder streets; the second district being the portion between Alder and Ash streets.

By 1860, Dryer had been appointed head of the American mission to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) and left Oregon. In exchange for back wages and other debts, he passed the *Oregonian* on to a young assistant named Henry Pittock. Dryer returned to Portland some time later and passed away in 1879.