

A HISTORY OF THE THOMPSON FIRE ENGINE COMPANY Inc.

from 1832 to 2007



Written and compiled by Ron Tillen
based in part on the Company's Minutes from 1837

INTRODUCTION

Thompson emerged from its purely agrarian phase in the eighteenth century and began to enjoy the wealth derived from its turnpikes and new textile mills in the nineteenth. Social and community activities were centered on the hill. The first secular community organization of significance to emerge in the new century was the Thompson Fire Engine Company. Its formation was in part due to Thompson Center's position at the crossroads where inns, homes, stores, and a bank were located. In 1832 the leading businessmen of the day wished to protect their property and had purchased a fire engine. They then obtained permission from the selectmen and from the Connecticut General Assembly to form a fire company. Now, 175 years later, the Thompson Fire Engine Company continues to provide protection for its district and is also a focus for community spirit that cuts across distinctions of wealth, education, profession and religion. It plays a role that can be compared to that of the Militia in the 18th century.

This is an account of the Company's achievements and struggles to remain viable over the long period of its existence. The minutes have been recorded since the Company incorporated in 1837 and were used to provide the structure for this history. They only provide the bare details. of the attendance, administration and business but accounts of fires are not included. To add some substance, research was needed. As memories grow dim and the ink on paper grows faint it is appropriate to preserve and collate this information. The volunteer members of the Fire Company must spend many more hours in their activities than do most of the members of the other organizations. Membership is not a trivial commitment. The active members of the Company have to earn a living, attend fire school, take part in drills, run fund-raising chicken barbecues, train as Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) and respond to all emergency calls. These busy members do not have the time to indulge in the nostalgic exercise of reading old documents and collecting fading pictures and yellowing newspaper cuttings. Therefore, as a retiree and member for over 35 years, it is my privilege, with the permission of the Company, to attempt to put a history together. While this history is written primarily for the benefit of members of the Company, it is hoped that some of the supporters and local residents will also find this interesting. The Thompson Fire Engine Company has had and will continue to have a vital role in creating the history of the Town of Thompson.

Respectfully submitted
Ron Tillen, Thompson, March 2002,
Revised and updated 2008.
Reorganized 2023

CONTENTS

Chapter	Introduction	Page
1	The origins of volunteer fire companies	5
2	The Thompson Fire Engine Company	9
3	Thompson Fire Engine Company in the 20th. century	19
4	Nineteenth Century fires	29
5	Fires from 1901 to 2007	35
6	Calls for the services of the Fire Company	51
7	Members	57
8	Firefighting equipment	65
9	Parades and musters	71
10	Thompson libraries	73
11	Epilogue	79
12	Illustrations	81
	Acknowledgements	93
	Sources	95
	APPENDIX I	
	Thompson Fire Engine Company's rotary engine	97
	APPENDIX II	
	Equipment 1832 to 2007	103

Chapter 1. THE ORIGINS OF VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANIES

Fire risks in England and the Colonies

Fires in the closely packed cities of old Europe were devastating. In 1666 the fire of London demolished much of the old city including the original medieval cathedral of St. Paul's. The same building practices were followed the New World. In Philadelphia, for instance, houses were constructed very close together and they were very vulnerable to fire. Farm buildings, especially barns containing hay that might spontaneously ignite if stored wet, were equally at risk. In New England houses built by the Colonists often had a large central chimney and had wooden shingle roofs. Sparks from the chimney could lead to a fire. Chimney fires were such a risk that it was customary to use a straw fire to burn off the accumulation of tar as it built up on the inner walls in a controlled burn before it became a serious prospect.

Fire Insurance and Fire Brigades

Fire Insurance Companies were formed in England in the seventeenth century and offered policies to town and country alike. To mitigate the risk to the shareholders the Insurance Company equipped and staffed fire brigades whose charge was to save only those burning structures covered by a paid insurance policy. To help the Company Fire Brigade decide which house to save, fire marks¹ were placed on the wall in a prominent position. In the 18th and 19th century fire markers were prominently displayed on buildings to indicate that a fire insurance premium had been paid as the following quotation shows.²

"Though volunteer fire brigades responded to all fires, they had more compelling reason to fight fires at buildings bearing an insurance company mark. These fire marks served several functions. They indicated to fire companies that [the insurance company] would reward them for a job well done. Often, firefighters [were insured members]. The less damage to a building, the less deducted from their own premiums. However, if a house was uninsured, the fire would be put out regardless, despite what some modern historians and interpreters may claim. In any case, fire brigades would usually bill the uninsured householder or an insurance company with properties nearby to seek payment for their fine work in battling the blaze."

The English custom was also followed in Philadelphia, which was by far the largest city in the colonies in the 18th century. Benjamin Franklin instituted the formation of Fire Insurance and of Fire Brigades there. Fire Insurance Companies were local business affairs and geographical coverage was limited. Firefighting had to become a community affair. Everyone helped to set up bucket chains and to pull burning parts away from the structure using hooks or whatever came to hand. Leather pails or buckets were the principal items of fire fighting equipment. Manually operated fire pumps evolved and were imported from in England, where the industrial revolution preceded that in Northeastern United States.

In 1797 President John Adams joined a bucket chain when a fire broke out near his lodgings in Philadelphia³ He helped out again in 1801 soon after he moved into the White House when the Treasury building next door caught fire⁴. His son, and future President, John Quincy Adams in an address⁵ to the Massachusetts Charitable fire Society in 1802 spoke in great detail about the fire

¹ It will be shown that it is very likely that a fire mark was placed on at least one house in Thompson.

² Wainwright, Nicholas B. *A Philadelphia story - The Philadelphia contributionship for the insurance of houses by loss from fire.*

³ McCullough, David, *John Adams*, page 471 New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001.

⁴ Ibid. page 559

⁵ Adams, John Quincy, *An address to the members of the Massachusetts Charitable Fire Society, May 18, 1802.* Russell and Cutler, Boston 1802

hazards from closely packed wooden houses and urged that legal efforts be taken to stop further construction of such high-risk buildings.

Business owners might well prefer to set up their own fire protection. This practice was very appropriate for a mill. Factory fire brigades were formed and pumps were purchased that allowed a concentrated stream of water to be directed at the seat of the fire. Captain Vernon Stiles and the “proprietors” obtained such a fire engine and organized a fire company in 1832⁶ to protect his Inn and the other businesses in Thompson Center. A second fire company was set up in Masonville in 1833⁷ where a new mill had been built on the French River in what is now Grosvenordale. One mill had been destroyed by fire a few years earlier. At this time Thompson included the mill village of Rhodesville which became part of the new Town of Putnam in 1855.

Fire companies in Connecticut

The first recorded volunteer fire company in North America was formed by Peter Styvesant in the “New Amsterdam” which became New York. In Connecticut volunteer fire companies started in the larger towns. It is probable that the first fire company in Connecticut was founded in New London. In 1767 Mr. Nathaniel Shaw, a prominent citizen of that town acquired a fire engine⁸ that was for sale in Philadelphia. It was stored in a house behind the Congregational Church until 1781 when it was hidden in the woods to avoid capture during a raid by Benedict Arnold, who had defected to the British in 1780. Afterwards it was brought forth and used to save some of the burning buildings in the town. Later the town of New London took responsibility and voted to house the engine. In 1786 they organized a fire company. By 1795 the town possessed three fire engines. The Town law stated that “there shall be six fire wardens, whose duties it shall be in case of fire, to superintend and direct the management of the fire engines and other means that shall be used to extinguish fires, and it shall be the duty of every citizen to yield obedience to the direction which shall be given by said wardens.”

In 1940 the New London County Mutual Fire Insurance Company published a book to celebrate its 100 years of existence. This contains a detailed list of all the fire companies in Connecticut at that time. The oldest volunteer fire company listed was organized in Hartford in November 23 1789 to be followed by another in New Haven in December of that year. This document states that the New London fire department was first organized in 1850 not 1767. Perhaps the original department had disbanded. **Table 1.1** lists the chronological ranking of the early companies as given in the insurance company’s book with the addition of New London as number one.

Dates of organization of fire companies operating in Windham County in 1940 are shown in **Table 1. 2** Windham Center Fire Department notes that “The first fire engine in Windham County was purchased by the residents of the Windham Green (now Windham Center) on June 18, 1821 for the sum of \$180.00. Three fire wardens were chosen to enlist a fire company. The company was organized and met monthly for practice and exercise. Fines for absence or tardiness were rigorously enforced. The company disbanded around 1850 leaving Windham Center without an organized fire company. Fire emergencies were attended to by a group of unorganized residents and neighboring communities.”

Thompson was the tenth community in the state to organize and form a fire company. **Table 1.3** gives the dates of formation of the fire companies in the Town of Thompson. The Mill companies

⁶ The Putnam Patriot account of the Baptist Church fire in 1917 makes reference to the engine procured by Capt. Stiles in 1827 but he did not buy the Inn until 1830.

⁷ Ellen Larned “*History of Windham County*”. First published in 1880. References in this history are taken from the edition published by The Pequot Press, Chester, CT 1976, Volume II, Page 535. There is no further information on the Masonville Fire Company which may have been a factory brigade because there was a cotton manufactory there.

⁸ Letter in the Company file from the City of New London.

Thompson Fire Engine Company History

no longer exist. Currently there are five volunteer companies serving 9,000 people in an area of 7 miles by 14 miles in ten villages; Thompson Hill (once known as Thompson Center), Quaddick, West Thompson, Grosvenordale, Mechanicsville, North Grosvenordale, Wilsonville, Quinebaug, Fabyan and East Thompson.

Table 1.1
Fire companies in Connecticut

Chronological order	Town	Date organized
1	New London	1767
2	Hartford ⁹	1789
3	New Haven	1789
4	Weathersfield (still all volunteer)	1803
5	Middletown	1826
6	Bridgeport	1828
7	Danbury	1829
8	Windsor	1830
9	Bethel (still all volunteer)	1831
10	Thompson (still all volunteer)	1832

Table 1. 2

Volunteer Fire Companies in Windham County listed by an insurance company in 1940

Chronological order	Town	Date organized
1	Thompson	1832
2	Danielson	1870
3	Williamantic	1871
4	Putnam	1875
5	Wauregan	1890
6	South Windham	1911
7	Central Village	1913
8	Moosup	1921
9	North Windham	1926
10	Hampton	1928
11	Pomfret	1934
12	West Thompson	1937
13	Plainfield	1937
14	Dayville	1939

⁹ Dates for all but that of the New London fire company are as given in a private publication by the New London County Mutual Fire Insurance Company, published in 1940. There is a copy in the Thompson Fire Engine Company archives.

Table 1. 3
Volunteer and Mill Fire Companies in the Town of Thompson

Chronological order	Company names and locations	Date of inception
1	Thompson Fire Engine Company serving Thompson Hill and Quaddick -----organized -----chartered	July 4, 1832 June 10, 1837
2	Masonville Fire Engine Company, Thompson ¹⁰	1833
3	The ‘A’ and ‘B’ mill fire companies in Grosvenordale and North Grosvenordale were active. ¹¹	Date uncertain 19 th century
4	West Thompson Fire Company also serving Mechanicsville	1937
5	Community Fire Company serving the Grosvenordales and part of Wilsonville	March 24 1939
6	Quinebaug also serving Fabyan	March 27 1939
7	East Thompson also serving part of Wilsonville	September 1958

¹⁰ Ellen Larned “*History of Windham County*”. First published in 1880. (References in this history are taken from the edition published by The Pequot Press, Chester, CT 1976), Volume II, Page 535. General Mason and his associates built mills in what became Grosvenordale starting in 1829. The mill which may have occasioned the formation of the first mill fire company was built in 1831. The risk of fire in cotton mills was very high.

¹¹ Mutual aid from the Gros. Dale [Grosvenordale] Fire Co. and the Putnam Fire Co. were acknowledged in the minutes of January 1898.

Chapter 2. THE THOMPSON FIRE ENGINE COMPANY

Founding of the Thompson Fire Engine Company and its first Charter

As a young lady, Ellen Larned would visit Mrs. Styles at the Vernon Styles hostelry. One day as they were sitting and talking, they heard the sound of the church bell ringing. It was not a Sunday and no one had died recently so there was no funeral and that could only mean only one thing. There was a fire. “*Come on Ellen*” Mrs. Styles said “*We women can do something*”. This incident is related by Ellen Larned in a hand-written memorandum she wrote about 1850 called *Thompson fires and fire engine*, she went on to describe how emergencies like fires were dealt with in the mid-nineteenth century on Thompson Hill. At this time the Village Center in Thompson had become the hub of several thriving businesses being well placed on the turn-pike up from New London, Providence and Norwich to the South and on the road from Hartford to Boston. In 1805 there was enough commercial activity to warrant setting up a bank on the common. Joseph Gay, with other local worthies, promoted its formation and there was Ben Gay, who became the cashier. In 1832 the shop keepers and small manufactories on the hill recognized their vulnerability to fire. Important to the life on the hill were Vernon Styles, the inn keeper, the bank-administrating Gay family and Edward Shaw who had a small jewelry store down the road. There were shops for furniture and clothes and a wagon, cart and harness business. Just as later garages were needed to service automobiles a hostelry and a black smith were kept busy looking after horse drawn transportation requirements in this nexus of activity. Houses and barns were close together so there was a risk of fire and obviously, they needed something more than buckets of water to deal with them and protect their businesses and their stocks. In order to form a fire company and enlist men to operate a pump, approval was needed¹². Accordingly, the local business men met and persuaded other voters around the Village Center to instruct the Selectmen to seek permission from the Assembly in Hartford to form a company. An engine is no use until you have a team of well-trained men to do all the work. But able-bodied men had other obligations and a fire company would involve competing commitments. This was why authorization had to be obtained from Hartford

The selectmen in Thompson were authorized by the government in Hartford on July 4th. 1832 to meet at the house of Vernon Stiles on . The assembly was sympathetic and gave the village permission to see if there was support and if resources could be acquired. to organize the Company. Below, the details of the resolution are quoted as they appear in a printed copy in the Company archives.¹³

RESOLVE AUTHORIZING THE THOMPSON FIRE ENGINE COMPANY – PASSED MAY, 1832

Resolved by this assembly, that the Selectmen of the Town of Thompson be and are hereby authorized to meet at the house of Vernon Stiles in said Thompson on the fourth day of July, 1832, then and there to enlist a fire engine company by the name of “The Thompson Fire Engine Company,” to consist of sixteen persons, twelve of whom only shall be taken from the ranks of the militia, and all to be resident within the distance of one-half mile from

¹² Tillen, Ron “*A history of the Thompson Fire Engine Company. The first 170 years.*” Book written but unpublished 2007 but copies are in the library and with the Thompson Historical Society.

¹³ Ella Grasso, Secretary of State for Connecticut, on April 4, 1961, certified that the printed document in the archives is an authentic copy of the resolve by the General Assembly of May, 1832.

Thompson Fire Engine Company History

the meeting house in said village, with power to fill all vacancies that may happen, by voluntary enlistment; which company when so enlisted, shall have power to appoint their officers, and make all necessary by-laws and regulations for their own government as shall be deemed by them to be necessary for the attainment of the object of their association.

And said company shall be entitled to all the powers and privileges which are granted to fire engine companies in this state; except the members thereof shall not be excused from their poll tax, nor shall they be exempt military duty until an engine shall be procured for their use.

Provided, that this grant shall be subject to be altered, amended or repealed at the pleasure of the general assembly.

Accordingly, an engine was purchased with subscriptions from local business men and worthy members of the community¹⁴. Newspaper reports in the *Windham County Observer* and *Putnam Patriot* in 1917 and an old photograph in the Thompson Library archives refer to the “1827 Vernon Stiles hand engine” implying that the pump was manufactured in that year. It was not, that is the date of the patent being granted.



Five years after its formation, the Company was granted a Charter on June 10th of 1837. Jerome Crosby was elected to be the first Secretary of the Company and he copied the original charter by hand into what is now referred to as the first book of minutes. This book begins with entries in 1837 and concludes with those from 1852. Copies of the first two pages are included in the illustrations at the end of this history although the contrast has been enhanced digitally to make the elegant hand writing more legible; the original paper and ink are fading. The preamble in the handwritten copy is as follows:

“ The charter of the Thompson Fire Engine Company

At a General Assembly of the State of Connecticut holden in Hartford in the said State on the first Wednesday of May in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and thirty seven.”

Then the minutes are hand written to copy, word-for-word, the resolution in the official printed copy of the Charter which reads as follows

¹⁴ Allen Reynolds in his notes on the history of the fire company.

**"INCORPORATING THE THOMPSON FIRE ENGINE COMPANY
Passed 1837**

Upon the petition of Simon Davis and others inhabitants of the Center Village in the town of Thompson showing that they have purchased a good fire engine and praying for the establishment of a Fire Company as per petition on file will appear

Resolved by this Assembly that William A. Jordan, Vernon Stiles and Joseph B. Day of said Thompson and such other persons residing within the limits of said Central Village as they shall associate with them not exceeding twenty five in the whole be and thereby are, constituted a corporation by the name of the Thompson Fire Engine Company; which Company shall have power to appoint the necessary Officers for said Company, to make all necessary by laws for the regulation of said company and its concerns in order that said Engine may be preserved and worked in the best manner and providing the manner of enlisting members into said company : to fill any vacancies by voluntary enlistment that may happen in said Company and shall be entitled to and may exercise all the powers and privileges which are granted to fire engine companies in this State.

Secretary's Office

Hartford June 10, 1837

I hereby certify that the foregoing is

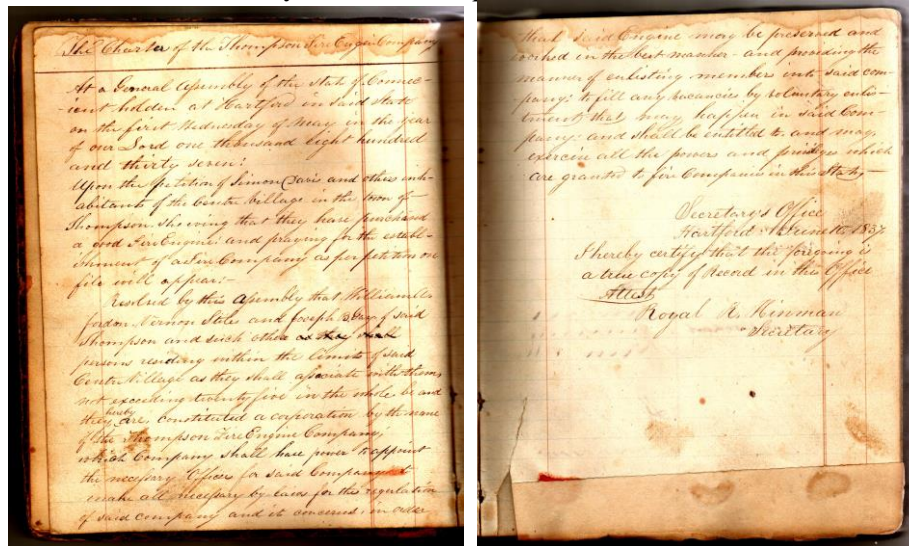
A true copy of Record in this Office

Attest

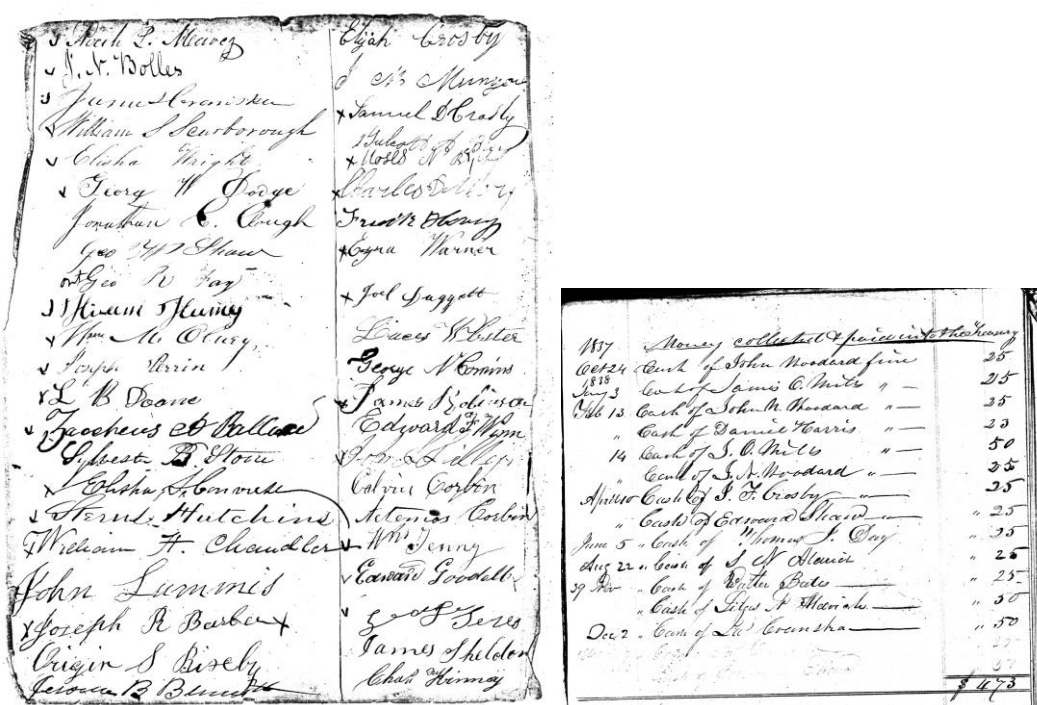
Royal R. Minman¹⁵

Secretary"

In accordance with this charter the company did agree to a set of by-laws. As noted in the Assembly report of 1832, Connecticut firemen did not pay the poll tax and no longer served in the militia. Ellen Larned reported that one member, probably William Chandler, said that these advantages were his reasons for joining. The charter was granted subject to the condition that "a good fire engine" had been procured but increased the number of members from sixteen to twenty-five. The engine had already been purchased by "the proprietors" including Captain Vernon Stiles, who had bought the Inn in 1830, and Benjamin J. Gay, who was the cashier of the Thompson Bank. A document in the archives, a copy of which is illustrated here, carries the signatures of forty-three men who, having read the proposed by-laws, applied for one of the twenty-five vacancies in the newly chartered company.



¹⁵ Royal Minman may have been the Secretary of the A



Right: Applications to join the company Left: Record of fines paid

The Company's history

To date, the minutes of Company meetings¹⁶ are contained in seventeen books and one folder. There are gaps in the 19th century minutes, for example from 1861 to 1862, for 1867, 1869, and 1875 and from 1880 to 1887. There are no minutes from 1903 to 1907 and no detailed records of monthly meetings again until 1936 although the list of members is complete. There is another gap for 1954. Nevertheless, there is sufficient information to show how Thompson volunteer firemen functioned over the last 170 plus years. Although the minutes rarely mention fires, Ellen Larned's *Thompson Fires and Engine* provides an authentic account of how the Company and residents behaved when there was a fire in the nineteenth century and excerpts are included as part of the chronological list of major fires that are known to have occurred from 1837 to 1900. The Company's activities from 1901 to 2007 are derived from old newspapers and later from living memories. In spite of the changes in the equipment and meeting protocol over the 175 years of operation, the members are recognizably the same in spirit and biographical information on some of the notable people who have belonged to the Company is provided. On record, in a separate appendix, there is comprehensive list of members, officers and board members from 1837 to the present.

Activities of the Company in the early years

From 1837 on the minutes of the company record that "the engine was worked" at the quarterly meetings. The engine consists of a wooden carriage with a waterproofed tank mounted on four wheels with a tow bar. A compact rotary pump is mounted on top with its axis horizontal with two long detachable handles. At a fire, water from the nearest well or pond was poured into the tub by the bucket brigade. Two or three firemen on each side turned the handles and the small pump sent a steady stream of water through a riveted leather hose to a brass nozzle with 1/2 inch diameter orifice. Rotary pumps were an improvement on the cumbersome piston cranked engines and were colloquially known as "coffee grinders"; they are lightweight and reliable but do need

¹⁶ A separate appendix gives extracts from each meeting recorded in the minutes from 1837 to 2007.

maintenance to keep the seals and hose in good condition and they can only be used by a limited number of men. They were very suitable for a small fire company.

Thompson Center was a compact village and there was no need to waste time harnessing a horse to pull the engine to the fire. Of course, if an outlying house or farm was on fire the engine could be carted to the scene. In action the pump was advertised to be capable of throwing 30 gallons of water per minute up to 80 feet distance. But to sustain this rate requires that the tub be filled with one full 3-gallon pail of water every 6 seconds. Burning shingles on a roof could have been reached and jets could have been directed to the seat of a fire from a safe distance. The minutes record that the engine would be worked for at least one hour four times a year. It was hard work; the handles had to be kept turning and the parade of buckets kept coming. It comes as no surprise to read that as time went by, especially if there had been no fires for a few years, excuses for not working the engine became more frequent. For example: “the weather not being favorable did not work the engine”(March 14th 1841). Sometimes, especially in the summer, the excuse was there were not enough members present (July 5th 1842) or more explicitly “but [it] being a busy season and a small part of the company present did not take out the engine” (July 7th 1851). On other occasions the members did not think working the engine was necessary e.g. “The company..... voted not to work the engine but saw that it was in good order in case of fire” (November 1st 1841). An example of a typical call to a meeting is as follows:

“Thompson, March 2nd 1842

The members of the Thompson Fire Engine Company are hereby notified to meet at the Engine House on Monday March 7th at 5 o'clock PM for the purpose of working the engine and for the transaction of any other business that may come before the meeting
per order Captain

Edward Shaw Clk. “

Working the engine must have been strenuous and rather boring. On occasion in 1878 things became a little livelier. “...after the first roll call the engine was exercised. Notable event occurred at the pump while the engine was being exercised Vis the tearing of LR Blackman's pants by H. Bellow's dog.”

Members were obliged to attend meetings and failure to do so resulted in a fine of 25 cents being levied. This appears to have been the sole source of income for the Company. There were variations and some times the Captain abbreviated the fine. The minutes record the names of members who were fined. There was discussion on whether to allow a reduced fine of 12 ½ cents for those arriving late and, perhaps for that reason, there were two roll calls, one at the beginning and one at the end of the meeting. Officers were elected as they have been until recently at the annual general meeting, which was associated with some refreshment or a “supper”. From 1832 to 1940 the elected officers were Captain or Foreman, 1st Lieutenant, 2nd Lieutenant, Clerk or Secretary and Treasurer. At a meeting in 1840 it was decided to combine the roles of Secretary and Treasurer. The post of librarian was added in 1855 and the job was generally combined with that of the Secretary. After 1940 the principal officer was titled Chief and in 1960 the posts of President and Vice-President were added. Later positions were created for Assistant Chief (1960), Deputy Chief (1988), Captain (1965) and Third Lieutenant (1992)

Dissolution and reformation of the Company in 1852

By January 1852 the engine was not in a good state of repair. At the annual meeting that year the company threatened to return the engine and the charter to the proprietors unless the equipment was put in good order “in case of fire”. Previously in January 1849 one of the proprietors was part of a committee of three set up to determine the expense of putting the engine house, engine and

the hose in proper order. Silas Aldrich and Jonathan Clough represented the company and Vernon Stiles represented the proprietors. Note that Silas Aldrich was one of the signatory members of the company and yet he was not a proprietor.

The proprietors apparently ignored the request of the company to repair the pump and provide good buckets, hooks and ladders. At the March 8, 1852 meeting there were no proprietors present and the Company voted to dissolve. In many cities householders were required to have buckets available to convey water to a fire. The houses in Thompson may have had a supply of buckets because the minutes for 1852 record that the Company merely owned one lantern worth 63 cents and one wooden pail worth 15 cents. The first book of minutes covering the period 1837 to 1852 ends with the sad comment "Thus died the Thompson Fire Engine Company for want of suitable tools." The assets of the Company, amounting to \$1.55, were used to buy refreshments. Five months later August 2, 1852 the Company reformed under the leadership of Walter Bates¹⁷. A new petition was made, a new charter with the same terms as those of 1837 was given and similar by-laws were agreed. But now the Company owned the engine and once again was able to protect the community from fire. It is remarkable that the proprietors failed to support the Company particularly since one of them, Captain Vernon Stiles, was a founding member and had served as its captain. By 1850 Thompson had become one of the wealthiest rural towns in the State and the most populous town in Windham County¹⁸ with 2,000 inhabitants. There was no excuse for frugality in expenditure on fire fighting equipment.

Company activities after reformation in 1852

The re-establishment of the Company in 1852 was a formality because during the interregnum members of the Company were able to save two barns that had caught fire. The insurance company was grateful and wanted to find a way to donate \$25 to the Company in recognition of their efforts. Apparently the charter of the insurance company did not allow more than \$10 to be donated to any one company or individual therefore the money had to be given to the officers who then donated the money to the Company. Captain Walter Bates and First Lieutenant Silas Aldrich got ten dollars each and Second Lieutenant Edward Goodall got five dollars and they all in turn passed the money onto the Company.

The engine house

The original engine house was a shed at the back of the old stone Thompson Bank¹⁹ next to the Congregational Church and, as noted in the minutes of January 1st 1866, the Company had to pay an annual rent. The minutes also make reference to the need for maintenance and improvements. For example: January 3rd 1863 they voted to instruct Captain to repair the engine house. On another occasion they voted to improve security and then later to provide seats. No details are given but this accommodation cannot have been a very comfortable meeting place. An account in the minutes of October 3rd, 1891 notes that "The clerk was appointed to remove the cumbersome handles to the Horse sheds for storage and to put up seats in the engine house for the convenience of members at the meetings". In 1897 it was "Voted that the two padlock keys to the ladders be hung in the engine house."

Thompson fire marker

In 2005 the Thompson Fire Engine Company was given a cast iron metal fire marker about 11.5 inches in diameter and weighing 7.6 lb. depicting a manual fire engine of the type used about 175 years ago with the raised initials "F.I.Co" -- the insignia of the "Fire Insurance Company. This is

¹⁷ Walter Bates was Captain for a total of 27 years (1849-1850 and 1852-1873)

¹⁸ Larned, Ellen (1880) *History of Windham County*. Bicentennial edition published by The Pequot Press, Chester, CT 1976, Volume II, (p. 575)

¹⁹ *Thompson Bicentennial Memory Book*. 1985. (p. 34)

the mark²⁰ used from 1835 by the *Firemen's Insurance Company of Baltimore*, which existed, from 1815 to 1904. This Company was also associated with the *Firemen's Insurance Company of the District of Columbia*. The combined company consisted of five volunteer fire companies in Washington and Baltimore. It is believed that the marker was found in the area of the old engine house.

How did the marker come to be in Thompson? It is possible that the Company saved a building sometime between 1835 and 1837 and that marker was used to claim a reward from the Fire Insurance Company but there are no records to substantiate this. In 1852 the Company received \$25.00 as a reward for saving two barns from fire but the payment came from the local Windham Mutual Fire Insurance Company not from the Baltimore Company. Ellen Larned²¹ wrote that the Company received a \$25.00 reward from a "grateful" insurance company for saving the Scarborough property in 1880. It is most likely that the old marker was used to claim a reward on this occasion. Fire marks were in use right up to the end of the 19th. century when municipal fire departments became predominant, rendering the use of fire markers unnecessary. According to an old map the Scarborough house was located a few lots down from the site of the present post-office on what is now Thompson Hill Road. It is still there.

Social side of the Thompson Fire Engine Company in the 1800s.

As might be expected from a Company that had an Innkeeper as a founder member, there were a number of gustatorial occasions. The tradition of annual suppers began in 1841 and the early ones were held at the house of Vernon Stiles. This tradition has continued into the 21st Century and there are many accounts of mouth-watering meals. The Temperance movement became very popular in Thompson in the 1840s and Vernon Stiles converted his bar into a Temperance meeting place. This may have put a damper on things because there is gap of 27 years from 1852 to 1878 when there is no mention of suppers. In 1879 the accounts reappear but in January 6, 1890 the motion to have a supper was lost. This is the only recorded occasion when the Company declined the opportunity to celebrate.

A list of references to suppers and other celebrations follows.

- January 5th 1841. The annual meeting was held at the house of Vernon Stiles but there is no mention of the menu or the cost.
- January 4th 1842. "*Supper was had at Vernon Stiles' inn*".
- January 3rd 1843. Voted to pay for supper out of company funds
- May 4th 1844 Company voted to go fishing last Tuesday in May
- May 23rd 1844. "*Agreed to go fishing and to invite the band and others that would appear in uniform. Meeting at Vernon Stiles at 4 o'clock.*" [This must have frightened the fish because there are no records of the catch.]
- January 5th 1845. "*Supper was taken at the house of Vernon Stiles and after a short time smoking the meeting was called to order. It was voted to dispense with uniforms at the annual meeting and all other meeting when the Company is not called upon to do engine duty*" *Voted that the thanks of the company be tendered for the ample & elegant manner in which he [Vernon Stiles] has provided for us at this & our previous annual suppers.*"
- January 6th 1846. "*The Company partook of a beautiful supper prepared by their liberal host Capt. Stiles*"
- January 7th 1847. Annual meeting at the house of Vernon Stiles ... "*adjourned to the supper table*"
- January 4th 1848. The company "*partook of a supper*"

²⁰ Bulau, Alwin, *Footprints of Assurance*, New York: MacMillan, 1953.

²¹ Larned Ellen, *Thompson Fires and Fire Engine*, unpublished notes in Connecticut State archives, 1898.

Thompson Fire Engine Company History

- January 1st 1850. *“there being no other business before the meeting the members withdrew to enjoy the Society of the invited Guests and to partake of the Supper prepared for the occasion”*
- November 1850. Voted to have supper at the annual meeting and that *“each member having the privilege to invite one or more ladies”* [Ellen Larned was one of those so privileged].
- January 7th 1851. Elected officers and withdrew *“to partake of the supper prepared for the occasion and enjoy the company of the invited guests”*
- November 3 1851. Voted to have supper at the annual meeting each member inviting one or more ladies.

The January 1852 meeting at the house of Mortimer C. Cook may have been contentious since the company voted to dissolve soon afterwards. There are no accounts of suppers for the next 27 years.

- January 6th 1879. *“It was voted that the company have an oyster supper to consist of oysters cake and coffee also cigars. Voted that the lowest bidder get up the supper. Gilbert A Thompson bid fifty nine cents .59 per head and was accepted as the person to get up the supper the evening of Jan 22.”*

There is no account of this supper in the minutes or confirmation that it took place. There no entries to show whether there were suppers for the years 1880 through 1888.

- January 18th 1889. *“.voted to.....make arrangements for a turkey supper ... to the amount of \$25.00”*
- January 6th 1890. *“... a resolution to have a supper was lost”*
- January 23, 1891 in the archives there is a colored invitation to the Thompson Fire Department’s ball *“to be held Friday evening in the Town Hall. Tickets 50 cents. Good music will be furnished. Supper will be served in the hall from 11 to 1 am at 75 cents a couple 40 cents per plate. Committee G.T. Wilkes, W. Gerrish, W.M Babbitt”.*
- January 11th 1892. Voted to have a supper and to book the room a year in advance.
- January 2nd 1893. *“Voted: that we have a day to go fishing. Voted that 2 members be appointed a committee to procure bait set the day and make all necessary arrangements. The treas to pay for the bait. Voted H.J.Morse & R.H. Chandler said com. Voted that we have a bean supper in the Town Hall after the return from fishing. Voted John Ballard & Val Ballard 2nd committee to procure supper”*

There are no other records of social activities from 1892 to 1900 except for participation in parades and musters in 1895, 1899 and 1900.

Attempts to buy improved fire-fighting equipment.

In 1875 Putnam experienced three bad fires in succession and a great fire in 1877²². This may have led Thompson to recognize that it too, needed better fire fighting equipment but a meeting in 1878 failed to get the necessary support. After the Jacob’s House fire of 1889, it was again thought that a modern engine was needed, therefore a special meeting was held at the Town Hall Saturday January 22 at 7.15 PM. The minutes record unanimous approval for the motion to *“buy a Steam Fire Engine with the necessary Hose and other necessary articles with a provision of water to supply said steamer. Providing that money can be raised to pay for same.”* Once again the money was not forthcoming perhaps because it was realized that maintaining horses ready for use 24 hours a day 7 days a week was too much to ask volunteers to support and most importantly there were no hydrants available to supply water. The 1832 hand tub remained in use well into the 20th century. Equipment is discussed in detail later.

Musters and parades.

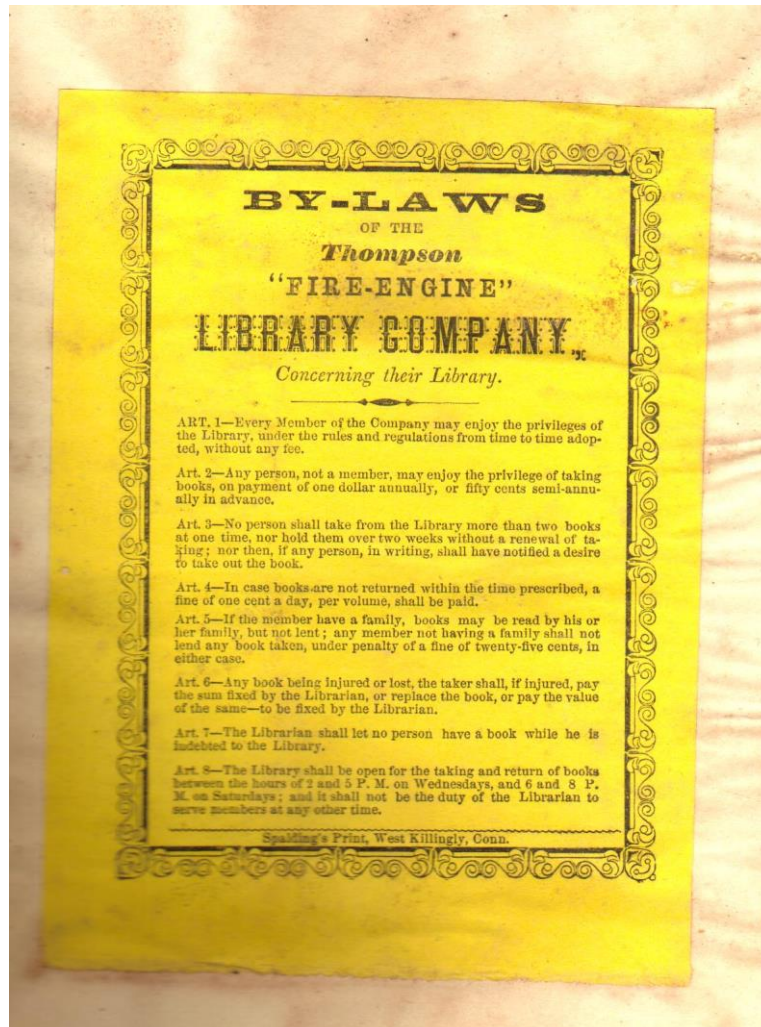
Although the Company once went fishing dressed in uniforms complete with a band they are not known to have paraded until 1892. The Captains decision not to accept the invitation from

²² History of the Putnam Fire Department from the Aspinock Historical Society collection

Putnam to parade in 1891 caused much dissension, but they went the next year. In 1900 they went again. Details of parades, musters and celebrations in the 20th. century are given later.

The first successful library in Thompson

In 1855 the Company voted use the funds derived from fines, dues and donations after services at fires to start a library. Edward Shaw, who owned a jewelry store in Thompson, was the secretary. He became the first librarian and housed the books above his store. By 1859 a catalog²³ was printed listing 277 titles. In 1898 the collection was given to the Thompson Public Library Incorporated founded by Ellen Larned and others. A later chapter gives more information on the library. Many of these books are now kept in the Ellen Larned Museum.



1859 Book plate

²³ Copy in the Thompson Public Library collection of Thompson fire company archives.

Chapter 3. THOMPSON FIRE ENGINE COMPANY IN THE 20th CENTURY

Thompson Fire Engine Company at the beginning of the new century

When the twentieth century began the Company continued to be restricted to 25 members and the Captain was sometimes called the “*foreman*”. Members of the Company were conscious of their need for “modern” fire fighting equipment but had failed to raise the funds necessary to acquire one. There was a fire department in Putnam and the ‘A’ and ‘B’ mill company fire brigades with chemical engines a steam-powered pump in Grosvenordale and a hose cart in North Grosvenordale. Thompson Hill still had the “tub” as its only fire engine, and there is a report of the Company continuing to buy water pails in 1917. The main source of revenue was still the fines for non-attendance at meetings. As a result, the secretaries kept good records of the members and their attendance. These lists are the only detailed information that was recorded from 1925 to 1935. It appears that not having modern equipment may have reduced the vitality of the Company and possibly, as a result, the minutes up to 1936 were not considered sufficiently important to be written or at least preserved in the same detail that they had been in the 19th century.

Fire fighting before 1938

In 1915 two hand-drawn chemical fire extinguishers were purchased by the Village Improvement Society and they were used to supplement the work of the original fire engine. All three devices were used to fight the Baptist Church fire in 1917. The report of the fire in 1917 stated “the 1827 hand tub did good work”. Before 1938 the Company had to fight several major fires with what was clearly inadequate equipment. Notable examples, apart from the Thompson Baptist Church fire in 1917, are the Bogardus store fire in 1936 and the Dresser mansion fire in 1938. Both buildings were lost and even today would be considered difficult fires. Churches are notoriously prone to catastrophic fires and the Dresser mansion had been empty for some time and was not near a good supply of water. It is surprising that the wealthy landowners that had built the mansions in Thompson did not see the need to support their local volunteer Fire Company with the necessary funds for modern equipment. The property at risk included the Gladding mansion (now Lord Thompson Manor) with its substantial stable block, Thornfield Hall, the Ream mansion and its outbuildings, and on County Home Road (Route 21), the Dresser mansion and “Primrose,” the big Doane house with the surrounding complex that became the Howe Marot College. Three of these mansions and the Quinatisset Hotel eventually succumbed to fire.

Changes in fire fighting began with motorized equipment

In the 1930s the minutes become more detailed again, perhaps due to a revival in spirit. The Company began to raise funds through whist drives, carnivals and other social events. In July of 1938 the first motorized equipment was acquired. At the same time a Buick touring car was procured and converted to carry forest fire fighting equipment. A good local supply of water is the essence of rural fire fighting. There are no hydrants in the Company’s territory and the new engine carried 500 gallons of water. The old Town pump almost opposite the Vernon Stiles Inn and pictured in the photo section was adequate to supply a bucket chain to the “tub” but totally insufficient for modern fire fighting equipment. The need for water holes became apparent and the minutes record that many were set up in the 1930s through to the 1950s and that some funds were available from the State of Connecticut as a subsidy. Fighting brush or grass fires became more organized and brought in payments for services rendered from the State.

Thompson land usage has changed. As was typical in New England²⁴, initially the forests were torn down and the rocky land worked without machinery. By the 19th century many farms were no longer active, as better ground in the West became available. Large sections were allowed to relapse to second growth trees and bushes in the 20th century. At the onset of the 21st century there are few farms but in spite of all the new developments, over sixty percent of Thompson is still covered with trees. Forest fires became a more significant threat as a result of reforestation without controlled burning. At times a brush fire might burn for a day or two. In the 1940s brush fires were a serious problem, and one cause was the sparks from passing coal-fired steam engines on the railroads²⁵. Occasionally lightning ignites forest and brush fires in the accumulations of dead wood and this allows fresh growth. In the pre-colonial era the Indians deliberately set fires at regular intervals²⁶ in order to improve the forest for hunting. In present day Thompson the density of habitation requires prompt efforts to extinguish all brush fires, whatever the cause. Rugged motorized forest fire trucks carrying water combined with aerial surveillance and good radio communications made brush fires much easier to control starting in the last half of the 20th century.

Further changes in membership rules

In the first five years the Company had only sixteen members. When the Charter was granted in 1837 the Company was limited to 25 members. The roll was called at the beginning and end of meetings and the minutes up to 1937 carefully record individual attendance. Men applying for membership were accepted as associates until a vacancy occurred. In 1943 the by-laws were changed and the list was expanded to 35 *active* members. Fines were dropped but members were required to pay annual dues of \$1.80 due at or before the January meeting. In 1947 the by-laws were changed so that failure to pay up after a 30-day written notice resulted in the member being “*dropped*” although, apart from 1949 when five members left, this rarely happened. Members were also “*dropped*” when they moved “*out of the district*”. The district is not defined; initially it was that within a ½ mile radius of the church at Thompson Center, as Thompson Hill was known. It is probable that this was relaxed to attract more support. Members not only needed to be able to hear the church bell when it was rung to summon them to a fire but also they had to get to the fire in good time on foot – it would have taken too long to saddle a horse. The 35-member limit was soon ignored and by 1948 there were 55 members noted. By 1961 the by-laws were changed again and the secretary was required to warn members they would be dropped if they had neglected to attend at least two events during the previous year. In 1963, the first year this rule was seriously applied, 46 members were dropped!

The new fire-house

In 1930 the Company is reported to have donated the old Fire Engine House to the Church for use as a wood shed. Originally the old manual engine was stored behind the bank next to the Congregational church. With the purchase of the first motorized engine in 1938 a real firehouse was needed. Back in the 19th. century, Randolph H. Chandler²⁷, a lawyer and sometime State Senator²⁸, had wanted to have his horses shod somewhere near his big house on Thompson Road (now the home of Donna Williams) and a blacksmith’s workshop was set up on Chase Road. In 1938 the smithy became the basis for the Company’s fire house. At a meeting in April 3rd 1939 the Company arranged for the use of trucks to haul stone to extend the new Firehouse. Over the years there have been additions starting with the installation of a toilet in 1942. An asphalt

²⁴ William Cronon, “*Changes in the land*” pub. By Hill & Wang 1983.

²⁵ Interview with Albert Bushey, 2001.

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ In 1902 he was listed as an honorary member of the Company. He attended the baptist church fire in 1917

²⁸ In 1895 and 1896 see Lincoln, Allen B. pge. 306 “*A modern history of Windham County Connecticut*” The S.J.Clarke publishing Company, Chicago 1820.

frontage was added in 1952. In 1958 the minutes record that. "Following a letter from Norman Dyke Chief Elliott was empowered to offer Mrs. Lindstrom \$100 for land adjoining the Fire House to allow an addition to be built. The estimated cost of the addition is \$4,200." The company needed to borrow money to pay for it and Charlie Spahl and Elmer White were authorized to negotiate a loan. In 1969 it was noted that Robert Hopgood was selling 7 acres behind the Fire House. Charlie Pozzi and Don Gleason were asked to investigate. In 1973 Don Johnson bid \$600 to paint the fire house and close in the unused truck door. In 1978 the building committee described plans to extend the foundation slab to 45 feet and to be of a width suitable for an extension to the fire house and to provide a permanent roof. Cost was estimated to be \$1,591 with volunteer labor. The Company voted to proceed.

As the State of Connecticut's Health requirements for facilities and the regulations for operating restaurants and other places serving food to the general public became more stringent it was necessary to face the decision of whether to abandon the Chicken Barbecues or to bring the kitchen up to code. The barbecue profits in the late 1990s were about \$2000 per event. The cost of a completely new kitchen was initially estimated to be \$30,000 to \$40,000. This compared to the first upgrade in the 1950s which was held to just over \$1,000. The Company decided to upgrade but as before to do as much of the work with voluntary effort. This held the cost down to \$15,000 and thus offered a payback period of less than 7 years. In 2007 plans were laid for yet another addition to the firehouse with head room sufficient for the latest type of fire truck.

Impact of World War II on the Company

By April 1942 the Company voted to allow the Air Raid Warden Service to have use of the Fire House. By June there was a discussion on the purchase and installation of blackout material for the Fire House. In June 1943 the minutes record that an appeal was launched to find airplane spotters for a post in North Grosvenordale. These concerns are remarkable given the fact that neither Germany nor Japan ever had aircraft capable of reaching Thompson from a land base and that Japanese aircraft carriers were all in the Pacific, but even mid-western states had airplane spotters during WW2. In April of 1943 the State Defense Council informed the company that members would be subject to call to anywhere in the State in the event of an emergency by the Connecticut War Council which was about to be formed. This council soon gave the Company A1 priority for gasoline for its fire trucks. In September 1943 the Company voted to remit dues of any member in the Armed Forces for duration of the war. There was much discussion about how to welcome home the returning veterans. Paul Auger, a member and former officer of the Company lost his life on active service in 1944.

Social activities

There are no records of social activities from 1892 to 1917 except for participation in parades and musters in 1895, 1899, 1900 and 1901. Annual suppers were mostly held sometime between January and April and continued in the 20th century. They tended to be somewhat more formal than at present. By 1913 there is reference to a Fireman's Club but this is not mentioned again. More significant is the entry of 1935 when entertainers were paid for a social occasion. Perhaps the best-recorded party was the Fireman's Ball held at the racetrack in 1947. The minutes for April 7 1947 state "*Made arrangements for the ball.*" For years a photograph (included in the illustrations) of the occasion was posted on the notice board in the Fire House. It was quite formal and some members were wearing tuxedos. Reports of subsequent Annual Balls appear in the minutes well into the 1960s

Following on the conversion of Vernon Stiles to the Temperance movement in the 19th century, the Company went back to more pleasurable ways later on in the 20th after the end of prohibition. Beer was on hand for consumption at meetings and was a very much appreciated beverage. So much so that the minutes of March 6, 1950 contain the following report:

Thompson Fire Engine Company History

“Arthur Peterson pointed out that there were several cases of beer in the attic. Arthur was unanimously appointed bar tender for the evening and braved the sub-freezing temperatures of the second floor to pass down a sufficient quantity to satisfy the thirst of the membership. In his enthusiasm, he passed down seven cases. Arthur’s excitement, combined with the freezing temperatures, resulted in a bad case of the shivers, which in turn shook up the beer so that each can functioned like the latest type of Fomite extinguishers. W.T. Cameron Secretary, pro tem.”

Note the regular Secretary was absent.

Suppers

The menus for suppers have varied over the years. Here are some examples.

- January 1st 1913. *Voted to have a bean supper*
- January 18th 1917 Voted to have an oyster supper
- March 1st 1917. “The company held an oyster supper at the hotel with eleven members present and a few visitors. After the supper we were well entertained for 2 hours by a Mr. McGee from Hartford, Mr. Charles C. Searle and R. H.Chandler. Mr. Backus introduced the speaker.”

The prospect two hours of speeches may explain why only eleven members were present. There are no records of this kind of “entertainment” being repeated. There is a gap in the minutes and it must be presumed that the bad times of the late 1920s and the early 1930s may have inhibited any frivolity. The minutes pick up again and by 1935 the Company resumed its traditional celebratory behavior and even World War II did not interfere. Once Charlie Spahl joined the company and became the supper master in 1955 things never looked back. Here are some details culled from the minutes.

- September 5th 1935. *Voted to have a bean supper –if we can hire the hall.*
- January 6th 1936. *Voted to have supper and invite the cast that took part in the show.*
- October 25th 1937. *Voted to have a bean party or carnival.*
- April 4th 1944 *Voted to have an oyster stew at the next meeting.*
- November 6th 1944. Voted to have spaghetti supper.
- A supper was planned for April 10, 1943.
- November 6 1944. *Voted to have spaghetti supper at next meeting at no cost to Firemen*
- December 5 1955. *Voted to have ham supper at annual meeting provided by Charlie Spahl at \$1.25 and to invite other Fire Chiefs and the Selectmen.*
- January 1956 “*The annual meeting was called to order at 8:30PM by Chief Elliott after a very delicious supper of baked ham, cabbage, mashed potatoes, green beans, coffee and apple pie with cheese*”.
- January 1958 *Voted to have corned beef supper at annual meeting and to invite the Selectmen and the Fire Chiefs*

Charlie Spahl’s corned beef suppers were an annual event from 1958 to 1983 with a few exceptions. Then followed steak suppers and, most recently, a return to corned beef.

Fund raising

From the 1940s onwards volunteer firemen spent more time raising money than putting out fires. The big money raiser for the Thompson Hill and West Thompson Fire Companies were joint bingo or “beano” games held at the Speedway. These generated several hundred dollars per month for the two companies. The Selectmen instituted some constraints on the presentation of cash prizes and on the number of permits issued. In 1952 the company sold such contrasting items as fireworks and fire extinguishers to raise money. Paradoxically the sale of fireworks was more profitable. The company was paid for attendance of men and fire trucks at the Speedway during race meetings. The minutes record that whist parties started in the 1930s and they endured with some interruptions right up to the end of the 1970s. More in line with the Company’s

primary purpose was attendance at forest fires. For this work the State reimbursed the Company for use of the truck and members for their labor. Pumping wells at \$5.00 a time was done several times a year. The Company was also paid to burn off grass for property owners at \$1.00 per hour per member. More details of the Company's finances are given in a separate appendix.

Women's Auxiliary later more respectfully called "the Ladies Auxiliary"

The Company felt that a change in the by-laws was necessary for a Women's Auxiliary to be formed. This was done. The minutes of September 1960 record that the Board of Trustees proposed the by-law change as quoted below.

"1. They shall use the names of Thompson Fire Dept. Aux and shall be governed by the fire dept. trustees.

2. They shall not be allowed at the regular Firemen's meetings.

3. They shall meet any night but Monday nights.

4. They shall have the use of the Fire Station and utensils and be responsible for same."

This change was accepted although the not-on-a-Monday rule was relaxed to not-on-the-first-Monday and by March 1961 the ladies were starting to meet on the third Monday of each month. Their impact was felt shortly thereafter. That year Halloween Parties and Christmas Parties for children were arranged and whist drives scheduled. By September of 1962 they were offering to give \$100 to match the Company's \$100 to pay for chairs. By September 1962 the Ladies Auxiliary were being thanked not only for their help at the clambake but also for their support at a fire. In 1964 the first of the now famous Chicken Barbecues was held jointly with the ladies. Over the years the ladies have made major donations to the Company to offset the cost of new fire trucks and improvements to the fire house

Variety shows

At one time the Company must have possessed considerable amateur acting and singing talent, or at least an uncritical set of fans. Don Gleason was a notable for his enthusiasm to produce a performance. Variety shows were used as fundraisers in the days before television reigned supreme. There is no discernable evidence of theatrical ability in the Company today and luckily it is not a condition for membership. The minutes report that: March 31 1944 the "Gros. Glee Club" was part of a Minstrel show in the Town Hall that made a profit of \$110. The last minstrel show was held in 1962.

Chicken Barbecues

At a special meeting held on August 26 1964 it was decided to join with the Women's Auxiliary to have a chicken barbecue rather than to have a Minstrel Show. There was probably more talent available for running the barbecues. Minstrel shows might have been considered inappropriate, as the civil rights legislation came into effect at this time. This first barbecue was evidently a success because by March of 1965 the Ladies Auxiliary suggested having two per year. In 2007 Chicken Barbecues have been a biannual event for forty-three years. The "all-you-can-eat" approach plus a secret sauce has ensured enduring popularity and a solid source of revenue for the Company. At one time a local character, Walter Burton known as "Pappy", used his portable barbecue pit and supervised the cooking, applying his secret, specially-seasoned sauce to the chicken halves. In 1979, when Pappy Burton became ill, the Company decided to build its own pit and devised or acquired a secret sauce of its own -- it had a coincidental similarity to that used by Pappy.

Clambakes

The first clambake recorded in the minutes took place in 1936. A series of clambakes started in 1960 at \$2.50 a person. It is recorded that in 1962 nine bushels of clams were consumed. Beer and initially whisky were offered from a booth outside the fire house. This helped the profits and

at one event the company ordered 25 cases of beer. The choice of which beer to serve caused a protracted and heated discussion at one meeting; Knickerbocker beer was cheap but unpopular.

Charlie Spahl and later John Eddy served as the last of the “*bake masters*.” At the ordained day, some time in August, a bonfire of logs and stones was assembled in the open space by the firehouse. This fire was started early in the morning so that by midday the stones had absorbed tremendous heat from the embers of the fire. The stones were raked clear with long handled forks. The wooden-handled tools used had to be doused with water to stop them from burning. The hot stones were next maneuvered into a steel wheelbarrow to be carried over to one of the three pits that then existed alongside the firehouse²⁹. Once the hot stones were in the pit bags of wet seaweed were placed over them and then bags of clams. More sea weed was applied and the clams were left to cook. Corn had been gathered locally and the ears were shucked ready for boiling. A beer concession was set up and butter was melted. The meal included cartons of steamed clams, butter dip and corn. It was hot hard work, but clambakes remain a very pleasant memory of good times passed. By 1984 the price had risen to \$7.00 but the profits were at risky due to the uncertain cost and availability of the clams. No more clambakes have been held and the pits were been filled in when a truck bay and offices were added.

Whist drives and Bingo are recorded to have started in the 1930s

Military Whist drives were started in the 1930s as a fund-raising activity. The parties served as a community social event, particularly before the days of television. As late as the 1970s there would be people waiting outside the Fire house for the doors to open at 6.30 PM. Some regular participants even came from Rhode Island. The format was always the same: a progressive whist followed by refreshments with coffee and cup cakes provided by Company wives and Auxiliary members. The evening ended with a penny social raffle with goods donated by members.

Examples of whist drive and bingo activity are:

- April 3 1939. Voted joint action with Ladies Aid with proceeds for Truck #2
- December 2nd 1940. Voted to run whist parties on 1st Thursday of every month except January
- November 3rd 1941. Voted to stop whist parties.

They were started again shortly thereafter.

- October 1941 Annual turkey bingo November 13 1941

Whist parties continued in 1944 and were more profitable than ever. For example, in March 1944 netted \$76.53 – a good month. In May 1980 the Ladies Auxiliary decided to stop having whist parties and the Company had had difficulty obtaining support from its members and had voted to discontinue unless the Ladies wished to carry on. The effort required was no longer enough to justify the returns.

Raffles

For many years each meeting ended with a twenty-five cent raffle. Members’ numbers were placed in a hat. When the number of a member present was drawn out there were always comments on the unfairness of the draw, and or the unworthiness or meanness of the winner, but it was customary to donate the proceeds to the company. Each Christmas for many years the Company raffled a basket full of liquor. At one time this was known as “*Christmas cheer*” and was highly prized for its alcoholic content. The minutes show that good profits were obtained and that there was some fall-out to quench member’s thirst.

Halloween Party and Children’s Christmas Party.

This custom started in 1961 and was probably inspired by the newly formed Women’s Auxiliary.

²⁹ This area is now covered and provides office space and extra garage room.

The costs are shared and both parties have become annual events in a tradition that has endured for forty years at the time of writing. The Halloween parade by children in costume around the common was led initially by the 1938 truck with sirens wailing with the 1955 truck in the rear. The newer vehicles are now used. After the parade there is a fancy dress competition in the fire house followed by ice cream and cookies. At the Christmas Party children of members meet Santa Claus and receive a present provided by the Company and the Auxiliary.

Connecticut State Fireman's Association

The Company is first recorded as becoming a member of the Connecticut State Fireman's Association in 1939, and representatives have attended meetings and conventions from that time onward. Chief James Elliott was one of the regular attendees as were Charlie Spahl and Alfred Broughton. The company voted to pay expenses for the delegates. The allowance rose from \$25 per attendee in the 1940s to \$50 by 1955.

Uniforms.

Evidently the Company did not bother much with uniforms. There is no record of uniforms from 1899 until 1950 when the minutes record that the Chief advised, and the Company voted, to buy additional hats and badges. The Chief said he had been in touch with several uniform manufacturers. Heavy blue serge uniforms could be purchased for \$50.00 and light weight uniforms for \$35.00. It was resolved that the Company should buy uniforms for the officers and members who wanted them and that the cost be repaid at \$5.00 /month. *"—should any officer or member die before he has fully reimbursed the company he will be buried in said uniform and all financial obligations to the company for any unpaid balance shall cease"*. There is no record of this ever happening.

The origins of the other fire companies in Thompson.

The mill company fire brigades.

Thompson in the 19th century was a thriving manufacturing town. Like many other factories, the local mills in the Grosvenordales organized their own fire companies for the protection of their property and to reduce their fire insurance premiums (for example American Optical Company in Southbridge maintained an excellent Fire Company for these purposes well into the later half of the 20th century). There is a reference by Ellen Larned to a mill company fire brigade in Masonville in 1833 – just one year after the organization of the Company on the hill 1832. In his book on New England mills David R. Godine (1978) notes that *"The combination of lint and spark producing machines made fire a constant threat in all cotton mills and to this masonry walls were a partial solution."* He also states that *"civic pride coalesced around communal needs - the village fire engine and shared challenges."* *There is a picture of the annual outing of the Grosvenor Dale Company Fire Department members, family and friends that shows that a great many men belonged and that there was a social side to volunteering.*

At one time there were two Thompson mill fire brigades known as Company "A" and Company "B" housed in identical buildings, one in Grosvenordale (formerly called Masonville) and the other North Grosvenordale³⁰. The "B" Company Fire House was located next to the Cluett Peabody mill. Carl Langer was an engineer at the Cluett Peabody mill and he recalls that the mill fire brigades also went to put out house fires in the area. Of course, many of these houses were owned by the mill and rented to their workers. Hose was carried on carts that the firemen pulled to the fire. Water was obtained from the hydrants and the range, volume and power of the jet thrown was a function of the hydrant pressure, hose size and length and the nozzle diameter.

³⁰ A photograph of the "B" hose house structure is included in the Thompson Historical Society's *"CD Project Millennium."*

When the engine room at the mill was told that there was fire, Carl sounded the steam whistle to alert the fire brigade and commenced to boost the pressure to the hydrants.

Fire house "A" was located by a bend in the French River near the old stone mill and it contained a steam driven pump on wheels. On the alarm "kennel coal" was ignited under the boiler so that by the time the pump had been dragged to the fire there was a head of steam to drive the engine and provide a pressurized stream of water presumably derived from a hydrant or possibly the river. It is presumed that the "A" company steam engine was brought up for use at a fire in the Hill Company's district in 1898. In the flood of 1955, the "A" firehouse and the brass steam engine were swept away. The "B" engine house survived the flood but was burned down some years later. The Thompson Historical Society has a photograph of the members of a mill fire brigade in front of a building with the inscription "Chemical Fire Engine Company Number 4". This building later became the Grosvenordale post office. None of the factory fire equipment was motorized.

West Thompson Fire Company.

A disastrous fire in West Thompson in February 1936 led to the formation of - an Independent Fire Company. A store and home owned by J.M Bogardus was consumed by flames which threatened to spread to other homes in the village. Shortly after the West Thompson Community Club was formed to provide fire protection. By September 1936 they had raised enough money to buy on an old Stanford truck and fit it with a chemical tank to become the first motorized fire company in Thompson. A charter was obtained and the organization was renamed the "The West Thompson Independent Fire Association #1. It was soon realized something better than a chemical pump was needed and in February 1937 they added a new Ford V8 95 horsepower chassis fitted with a modern 500 gallon per minute booster pump. " In November 1937, W.P.A. funds were used to build a fire house. After the construction of the West Thompson Dam a new fire house was constructed in 1966.

Community Fire Company Inc.

In 1938 after several public meetings the business men and residents of the Grosvenordales decided that they needed their own fire company. A report of one meeting in the *Windham County Observer* March 2, 1938 stated that the Grosvenordale Company maintained fire fighting equipment and hydrants but had no motorized equipment. *"Motorized fire apparatus in the Grosvenordales would go far towards insuring the Town of Thompson adequate fire protection with a volunteer department already formed in West Thompson and another on Thompson Hill planning to secure a truck and other equipment."* Later, the same paper reported that a clambake was attended by 600 people in July who were *"was stirred by the necessity for better fire protection"*. *At this meeting there was a demonstration of pumping water from the French River by the Thompson Hill Fire Department "with its shiny new truck and equipment delivered less than two weeks ago" and the Wauregan Fire Department.* The Community volunteer Fire Company was incorporated in March 24, 1939 with 45 members. A fire truck was purchased July 27th 1939. At this time notice of fires was received at the Putnam telephone exchange and a whistle at the power plant in North Grosvenordale sounded the alarm. The Grosvenordale Company donated land for a fire house. W.P.A. funds were sought to pay for the building.

Quinebaug Fire Company.

Quinebaug Volunteer Fire Company was formed in March 27th, 1939 and incorporated June 27th of that year. Funds were raised by subscription and from suppers and whist parties. Forest fire equipment, ladders and chemicals were bought. In the first year the Company was called to twelve chimney fires, two brush fires, one four-family dwelling fire and one automobile fire. W.P.A. funds were promised but never provided to erect a Fire House on land donated by Gertrude and Edwin Cleveland. A 500 gallon per minute pump was purchased and placed on a trailer bought from the government. The Fire House was begun in 1946 and completed in 1950 and materials were paid for in part from the profits from the sale of fireworks. In 2006 a new capacious modern fire house was opened on Route 131.

East Thompson Fire Company.

The East Thompson volunteer fire company was founded in September 1958 by Donald Hoenig, Elmer White and Clayton Lapire. Their first truck was a chain drive American LaFrance. In 1959 a second fire engine was procured and a fire house erected on land donated by Walter Eddy. Currently they provide fire protection coverage to events at the Speedway. Hitherto this had been a fund-raising activity for The Thompson Hill fire department particularly in the 1940s and 1950s. The Company celebrated their 25th anniversary with a muster in 1983.

Chapter 4: NINETEENTH CENTURY FIRES

Fire records

The Company's minutes only record dates or details of the fires attended by the Company on a few special occasions. There is more information because Ellen Larned, the well-known historian of Windham County, wrote her "remembrances" of fires from 1837 to about 1898 in unpublished notes entitled *Thompson Fires and Fire Engine*. The Thompson Library's microfilmed photocopy of the handwritten manuscript³¹ is difficult to decipher but it gives a fascinating glimpse of 19th century country fire fighting and is used here as the main source of information for fires in Thompson during those times. By the end of the century there are also newspaper reports that supply useful accounts and these too are quoted.

January 2, 1837 : Fire at Nathan Morgan's carpenter's shop

Ellen Larned's account of the first fire in Thompson that she remembered are given below,

"...it was a carpenter's shop on the rear of Mr. Babbitt's present residence and then occupied by Nathan Morgan of Canterbury, an enterprising young man, who had just started a business and where there was favorite place of resort for the village boys. It occurred [at] 9 o'clock Monday night Jan. 1837 and the flames have gotten full under way before discovery. It was a cold night with a high north west wind. It was too late to save the shop. There were no houses then on the south side but [the] proud residence then occupied by my uncle Ben Gay was in close proximity and in the greatest danger – then that strong wind came from the south – the flames must have wiped out the village street but it blew them directly back north over the field. There [were] but one or two wells available and they were badly frozen but the men managed to get water enough to cover the roof and side of my uncles home with wet bed quilts and by careful watching prevented further mischief. A large quantity of lumber stored in the cellar kept the fire alive many hours."

Circa 1849: Shop and barn fire

Ellen Larned helped at fires, as did all the citizens of Thompson in those times. Here is part of her account of a fire that occurred about 1849:

"The fire that called our engine into active service was that of a small shop or barn pertaining to the Cranska house that then occupied the meeting house site. As this was the first fire in which I assisted and [it] is very fresh in my remembrance. I was spending that afternoon with Mrs. Stiles.... – when suddenly we heard the cry of fire and almost the same instance the ringing of the bell..... Mrs. Stiles collapsed for a moment in her chair then rousing herself singled out water pails ... exclaiming, "Come on Ellen, women can do something" [and] hurried me to the scene of action. The fire had made much headway that it was soon seen that the shop could not be saved but the flames and cinders were falling fast upon the roof of the Davis house [later Mr. Ballard's] ... – the engine was on hand and played [water] briskly up on the outside wall. While the firemen were thus engaged the crowd that gathered proceeded to strip the [next house]. It was the first fire many people had seen [and it] was at a good time of the afternoonand [they] very badly wanted to do something. People are apt to do foolish things at fires but this time they broke the record. The carpets were yanked up,: furniture was banged around upstairs windows [and] thrown down onto the ground; an airtight store with all its contents pitched head long down the steep stairs and a man with ax in hand house was proceeding to amputate the legs of the piano. In an incredibly short time the house was emptied and everything flung down in a ... heap in front. My sister, Mrs. Green, hearing of the fire came across last and entering by the back door found the house desolate nothing left but a picture of a cat hanging over the fireplace."

³¹ The original manuscript is part of the Larned Collection Connecticut State Library, a photocopy is retained by the Thompson Public Library

Rushing to do her part she took down the cat and joined the eager crowd in front. It was very funny as we all sat round on the furniture watching the expiring flames.... Of course the house was saved and as Mrs. Davis said it helped with house cleaning to have the furniture moved for her."

1850: Barn fire in the summertime.

Here is another story from Ellen Larned's history.

"It was a hot Sunday afternoon when after preliminary exercises the congregations at both meeting houses were preparing to closeMr. Dunning suddenly paused and raised his head with an expressive gesture. Mr. Gay [nodded] his head snatched his hat and ran. ... William Warner, the sexton, [was] equal to the occasion seized the bell rope and began to pull with all speed. By that time we were all on our feet and hurrying to the doors but without the least idea of what was the matter. This you remember was in the old meeting house opposite the Scarboros [probably Scarborough]. As we came out upon the door step we saw smoke rolling up from below the hotel barn. [so] down street we all rushed pell-mell expecting Mr. Stones house was in flames - but no - further down the large old [?] house, as it was called, stood closest opposite Mr. Green's present residence and back in the yard the barn filled with new hay was already a mass of fire. As usual in our fires it was too late to save the barn but there washouse near.....There was no wind but it was a dry time and there was a scant supply of water. The men behaved very well got out the engine with all speed and formed lines to several wells in the neighborhood passing pails of water from hand to hand. A travelling New Yorker who chanced to be present said he had never seen a fire better managed at N.Y.City which may have been meant sarcastic. Meantime both congregations had gathered at the scene of action and were in high excitement. The lady who lived in the Seagram's house was a very nice person but easily flustered. The first thing I seen when I [got] close [to] the house was this good women rushing from Mr. Gay to Mr. Dunning and exclaiming in the most thrilling tones "Save Mr. Gracy's herbarium. Save Mr. Gracy's herbarium" Another lady, who made herself very conspicuous, was the wife of a lawyer at one time of New Jersey. She was one of those who know it all and she hurried down to the fire, not having been at church, to show country people how to manage and put out fire. And the first thing she did was to get her own clothes on fire so that she had to be rescued by these ignorant country firemen. When we saw there was no real danger the young folks had a very nice time indeed. It was such a delightful change from the hot drowsy meeting house to be walking on the green grass out in our best clothes chatting with beaux and neighbors. - Some of the young men in white pantaloons[?] and gloves walking about with their best girls were joviala young lady who first saw me at the fire told me afterwards that she supposed I was a city lady from the appearance of my attire. As I never had such a compliment before or since it is no wonder that I remember itThe fire soon burnt out without further damage - house and herbarium safe and after our good time we all repaired to the church singing a hymn and offering appropriate thanks giving. The barn was an old one and hay was cheap that year so the loss was not very heavy. The cause of the fire was generally considered to have been spontaneous combustion as the hay was stored before it was sufficiently cured and no boys had been seen upon the premises."

Summer of 1852: Fires at the barns of Rufus Coburn and also of Erastus Knight ³².

The following quotation is taken from the Company's 1852 -1878 book of minutes.

"Information having been received that the Windham County Mutual Fire Insurance Company, grateful for the services rendered by the Fire Company, and Citizens generally in this village in the Cases of fire in the barns of Rufus Coburn & also of [xx?] Erastus Knight,

³² It is not recorded whether this was one big fire or two separate fires, as is more likely.

& as by their ³³Charter they are restricted to the sum of ten dollars to be donated to any one person or Company, & they being desirous of paying for our benefit the sum of Twenty five dollars, & requesting that suitable person – those who had distinguished themselves be named to receive [?] said money, Walter Bates, Silas N Aldrich & Edward Goodell Esq. men named as such persons - & they rec[?] said sum. & have paid it over to the secretary who with due thanks to the said Insurance Company, said officers, rec[?] the same .& at now deposited the same with the Treasurer of the Company on the 21st August 1852

Attest

Tho. E Graves Secretary”

July 4 1852³⁴: Fire caused by fireworks

Ellen Larned states in her notes that matches and small boys were a notable cause of fires. The following account is the first firecracker incident.

“William Knight who assisted on the occasion had only just passed his 8th birthday. Frank Graves was still younger and John Mason, though older, was smaller. Fourth of July coming on the day the boys were celebrating on Monday night with a few fire crackers in the rear of Mr. Knight’s house now Mr. Washburn’s. After exhausting their stock they ran off to play elsewhere not noting that they had left behind a bit of lighted firework on the flat roof of a small shed attached to the barn. Behold how great a matter a little fire kindles. The firework slowly burning ignited hot shingles underneath there and the fire once started laid hold of anything within and coals dropped down onto the lumber below ... ‘till Mr. Evans chanced to see smoke and flames. Then there was instant alarm. The shed was blazing up against the barn and the fire making progress. The engine was on hand and fortunately there was a business meeting in the adjacent church in that a sufficient force of men were soon on the ground [and] with strenuous effort the flames were soon made to yield – though they had already effected entrance ... into the barn running up into the topmost load of hay. A visitor, who happened along, climbed over the roof and with a hose managed to avert that peril. It was said that but for the engine and [its] prompt use the barn certainly would have been destroyed and the [nearby] house greatly imperiled. The poor little boys were greatly shocked at the mischief they had brought [on] so ... inadvertently. But this fire, the fourth in four consecutive years, roused the people with renewed interest in the matter of the original.”

October 1857: Fire at blacksmith’s shop

Ellen Larned also tells of a fire where she helped to raise the alarm

“And the next year I again assisted in a fire. The blacksmith’s house in the front of the lot now occupied by Mr. Blackman’s establishment was burned. This shop had previously stored at the west end of the common back of the old meeting house and had recently been purchased by Mr. Henry Fountain It was a magnificent October night in 1857 with a full moon and some how I could not get to sleep and just before midnight I heard down the road a faint feminine voice whispering “Fire, fire.” In a moment I was on my feet and saw the flames and scrambling into some clothes soon joined my voice to Miss Gay’s. Between us we roused somebody who gave the alarm, called Mr. Warner to ring the bell, rushed over to the engine company but during all this time the fire was spreading..... It was too late to save the barn. Poor Mr. Fountain almost fainted when he saw the wreck of his new purchase. People gathered very fast in various stages of dress or undress. I doubt if any one had on both shoes and hose. Father had just there opened his clothing establishment and his employees, young men and girls, came down en masse. It was such a fine night that we could not help having a

³³ The restrictive charter may be that of the insurance company because there is no such clause in the Fire Company’s charter or by-laws.

³⁴ The date in the handwritten text is hard to read but the Fire Company minutes also record a July 4th 1888 fire caused by firecrackers at the same location.

good time strolling round and sitting on the walls watching the flames die away and so another Thompson fire had passed without spreading itself or very heavy damage”.

Ellen Larned details Thompson fires in 1846, 1849, 1850, 1851, 1852 and 1857 but then followed a period of 23 years without an alarm. The next fire that she chronicled occurred in 1880.

June 1880: Fire at the Scarborough house

Once again Ellen Larned pays tribute to the use of the fire engine in saving property.

“After the reorganization of 1852 we enjoyed a remarkable exemption from fires. For 28³⁵ years no cry was heard. So when the bells rang out early the June morning 1880 people hardly knew what was required. But soon it was noised about that the rear of the Scarborough’s house was in flames though our fire engine proved itself equal to service. It was just after daybreak but people were soon on hand and ready to help and the main building was rescued. This was an interesting fire and collected the usual number of eager spectators. Fortunately the Company had procured some new hose a few months previous. Mr. W. N. Bates was at this time Captain, Messrs. Chandler, G.V. Ballard were lieutenants. The grateful insurance companies presented the Fire Company with \$25 for their services in preserving the main building. Mr. Rank[?] the tenantgave the same sum.”

As noted earlier there may have been a fire mark on this building which was used to claim the reward.

July 4th 1888: Celebration that got out of hand –fireworks again

The following is also a direct quote from the minutes. “The Fire Department was called out this afternoon to a fire on the roof of J. P Knights House it was got under control after some hard work cause of fire supposed to be fire crackers.” Evidently there was not a large turnout because the minutes go on to state that 14 members were absent from the fire and were fined 50 cents each -- \$7.00 total. Remember this at a time when fines were the primary source of income for the company. The company membership was limited to 25 men thus only 11 firemen at most fought the fire that day. This was the second recorded instance of a fire started by small boys playing with firecrackers around the 4th of July.

January 9th, 1898: Fire at the house and barns of John Jacobs.

According to *The Monthly Record* of February 1898³⁶:

“Flames were seen shortly after 10 o’clock Sunday morning in the rear ell of Mapleshade formerly known as the West End Hotel. The church bells soon gave the alarm and people were hurrying to the scene. The fire made such headway before discovery that the building was doomed. Dense smoke hindered the removal of furniture and property. E.S. Backus livery horses and carriages were removed from the barn just before that too was enveloped. The houses of Mr. Backus and Mrs. Knight were saturated with water and were saved. Excitement was intense and church services were forgotten.” The report in The Windham County Observer January 14, 1898³⁷ stated “Putnam and North Grosvenor Dale were telephoned.....Firemen arrived with hose from Putnam. Grosvenordale came with a steam engine³⁸, but the fire had done its work before it arrived.The engine company was out in force” and all but four members were present– attendance at meetings was normally far less. The minutes record that a special meeting was convened at the fire scene – presumably after the fire was out. The alarm may have been deemed ineffective because the company voted in future to strike or “toll” the church bell with a hammer rather than ringing it as they normally

³⁵ Miss Larned reports a fire in 1857 and another in 1880 – span of 23 years not 28 as she thought.

³⁶ *The Monthly Record* Volume III, Number 3, published in Thompson, February 1898. Copy in the Thompson Public Library archives.

³⁷ *The Windham County Observer* January 14, 1898. Copy in the archives of the Aspinock Historical Society.

³⁸ This steam engine was probably the one maintained by the Grosvenordale “B” mill fire company and stored near the old stone mill in Grosvenordale. According to Carl Langer it was swept away in the 1955 flood.

Thompson Fire Engine Company History

did. Perhaps ringing was too slow and possibly subject to confusion with the bell being rung for a service or funeral. The cause of the fire was attributed to small boys who had lit a fire the day before and had not completely extinguished it before they left. The house, owned by a New Yorker, was uninhabited at the time.

The Windham County Observer commented that

“..Thompson experienced the one of the greatest if not the greatest conflagration in its history. It would seem that hitherto this place has been singularly fortunate and the inhabitants, as would be natural, may have grown measurably unmindful of what a tremendous power [fire has], should it once get the advantage of them.” The townsfolk were concerned and the paper announced, “A meeting of the citizens will be held in the Town Hall Saturday evening at 7 o’clock to consider the matter of a public library and also the matter of protection from fire.”

After the fire the Company received donations from several people but they also had to pay for the help received. At their next meeting it was voted to use the money received to pay off the mutual aid companies and keep their own funds intact because they wanted to buy a steamer. There are no subsequent reports of fund raising or of the purchase of fire fighting equipment until many years later. Even so, the citizens inspired by Ellen Larned, did go on to create a public library to which the Company donated its books.

Chapter 5: FIRES FROM 1901 to 2007

Recording of fires and emergencies

It is surprising that so far, there has been no attempt by the Thompson Fire Engine Company to chronicle the many fires that they have attended. In recent years it has been the custom for the Chief to make a report at the annual meeting. This includes the bare statistics of fire calls for help during the past year. He simply lists the number of structure fires, chimney fires, mutual aid calls, EMS (Emergency Medical Service) calls, car accidents and false alarms attended. There is no post mortem or description of the major fires. It was not necessary. Those who attended know what happened and those who didn't can get the information by asking those who did. Some members of the company and community have been interviewed for this history. An attempt has been made to list, in chronological order, some of the fires and other occurrences affecting the company over the years. It is far from complete; it is disconcerting to find how soon memories fade.

1910: Fire in the Quinatisset Hotel next to the original Library building

The library was built in 1902 next to the Quinatisset Hotel. Sometime later the hotel was badly damaged by a fire and was demolished in 1910³⁹. The lot is now a garden. The proximity of the two buildings is such that a fire in one would endanger the other.

March 4, 1911: Fire at G. Ballard's house

The minutes merely record that this fire occurred at 2.30 am and that those absent were:

Frank Bates	William Broughton	Henry Daibe[?]	E.E. Rhodes
John Bernklow	R. H.Chandler	Fred Herrick	
Charles Boulding	Newel Cutter	Clinton Lewis	
Fred Broughton	Percy Cutter	Eph. Smith	

Thus, there would have been 12 members present to fight the fire. Clarence Ballard in an interview for this history stated that the house of George Ballard was burnt to the ground following a lightning strike and that a new house was built on the same site. George Ballard became a member January 4th 1872.

March 14, 1911: Chimney fire at Myron Elliott's house

Myron Elliott became a member January 1st 1877. Those absent were:

Frank Bates	William Broughton	Percy Cutter	L.L. Mills
John Bernklow	R. H.Chandler	Fred Herrick	E.E. Rhodes
Charles Boulding	Newel Cutter	Clinton Lewis	

Again, this left 14 members present to fight the fire.

January 27, 1917: Baptist Church Fire

This was another major fire in the history of Thompson Hill and the Fire Company. There is merely the one sentence entry in the minutes. "The fire alarm rung about 1:30 PM calling the Company to the Baptist Church which burnt to the ground". This was such a big event that everyone on Thompson Hill would have known about it and there were as at least two newspaper accounts. Perhaps for this reason it was thought that there was no need to provide the details in the minutes. The 22 members recorded as present at this fire were

³⁹ Donald McGee, recalling conversation with Clerk of the Company James Ryan Sr.

Fred Herrick Cap	E. Backus	Charles Davis Jr.	Frank Ramsey
O. Ingriham 1 st lieutenant	F. Bates	Dexter Elliott	A. Russ
J. Mills 2 nd lieutenant	John Bernklow	George Foster	C. Ryan
J.H. Ryan Clerk	R. H.Chandler	C. C.Lewis	E. Smith
Paul Auger	Charles Davis	David Peterson	Fred Smith

If there were any absentees they were not recorded.

*The Windham County Observer*⁴⁰ and the *Putnam Patriot* both gave accounts of this fire⁴¹. The Observer's account states "Before the arrival of the Putnam truck there the Old Vernon hand engine (1827) – one of the oldest pieces of the kind in the State, had been called into service. This relic of bygone days again proved its worth for the stream that it threw through its little hose probably saved the [nearby] residences of V. Edgar Olney and George Vaughan". The *Patriot's* headline includes the statement that "*the 1827 hand tub did good work*" and adds that help came from "miles around". Note that the tub's origin is given as 1827; five years prior to the Company's organization in 1832. The *Patriot's* report goes on to relate that the sexton started a heater to warm the church for a service. An overheated stove was considered to have been the cause of the fire. The chemical fire equipment used would have included the two extinguishers provided by the Village Improvement Society in 1915 and the new Putnam chemical engine mounted on a truck. The building burned to the ground in two hours. The Baptist church was built in 1835 and had been remodeled with the help of Norman Reams' generosity. Damage was estimated to be between \$10,000 and \$12,000 and the insurance coverage was \$6,000.

1917to 1923: Brief entries are taken from the minutes.

- September 11, 1917: Chimney fire at the Pratt house. No details are given. Members of the Pratt family had been members since 1877
- August 24th.1918: Fire in a cottage at Howe Marot School.
This school was located on 175 acres bounded by Routes 21 and 193
- January 24, 1921: Reynolds barn burned
- April 20, 1921: Bates & Sons Storehouse burned 1-3PM
- October 15, 1921: F. A. Deckus garage burned 11 AM
- Mar 25, in early 1920s: Grace Noyes house burned 8 AM – year uncertain
- June 4, 1923: August Elliott's barn struck by lightning
- October 22, 1923: Howe Marot School -- fire at the Stable.

June 6, 1934: Gymnasium at the Howe-Marot School⁴²

The fire was discovered at 11:00 PM by girls in their dormitory. The Company concentrated on saving the surrounding buildings using the fire fighting equipment owned by the school drawing water from their 6,000-gallon pressure tank. Help was received from Webster, Chepachet, and North Grosvenordale. Although there was a steady stream of water supplemented by that pumped up from the lake by Webster's pumper, the building was lost. Crowds flocked to the fire and the road was jammed with automobiles. It was thought that the building had been struck by lightning.

February 5, 1936: Bogardus Store fire in West Thompson.

At 11:00 am a girl answering the phone found the kitchen was on fire. There was a strong wind blowing and for a time it appeared that several houses would be lost. The Putnam Engine No. 1

⁴⁰ Putnam Library has microfilmed copies of this paper.

⁴¹ Clarence Ballard provided a photocopy of this account and a reproduction is included in this history

⁴² Newspaper cutting on file at the Thompson Public Library.

came, as did engines from Pomfret, Woodstock and Muddy Brook Fire Departments. Water was available from the Quinebaug River several hundred feet away but the hose couplings of the different departments were not compatible. *The Windham County Observer* reported that “Thompson has an organized department which has been unable to secure funds to date for equipment. The Thompson Firemen turned out to fight the fire but they were helpless without equipment and had to be content with helping departments from other towns” As a result of this bad experience the West Thompson Independent Fire Company was formed shortly after and equipped with a chemical engine mounted on a truck. There is a picture of this fire in the illustrations.

March 14, 1936: Brandy Hill home burnt to the ground.

The home of the Withey family, situated near the Brandy Hill Church, was seen to be belching smoke at five o'clock. Fortunately, the wind carried sparks away from the Church. The Fire Company fought the blaze but the interior was an inferno. They were able to prevent the fire spreading to nearby houses.

January 13, 1937: House fire in West Thompson.

George Harper, the Putnam Fire Chief was present but he could not find enough water near the home to warrant calling out the Putnam Department. The house and all its contents were doomed. The newly formed and equipped West Thompson department, under Fire Chief Raymond Donnelly, fought this fire “with chemicals and a bucket brigade” and was able to save the barn, roadside stand and garage near the house. There is no record of the Company being present at this fire.

1938: Hurricane

There are no accounts of the Fire Company's involvement. There were no fires. In an interview in November 2000, Clarence Ballard remembered the day of the hurricane “as if it was yesterday”. Barns were blown down and trees blocked the roads. Stanley Wyan, the minister's son and a classmate of Clarence, saw the church steeple fall. He was standing on the porch of his house at the time

**May 8, 1938: Structure fire at the Dresser (Doane) mansion
County Home Road, Rte.21.**

According to an account given to the author by Allen “Sonny” Reynolds many years ago, this fire occurred in 1938. The house was built for Miss Julia Doane and changed hands several times. It was last owned by Count Vonsiatsky but had been empty for some years. It was very large (see the photograph) and according to Sonny had quarter inch thick plate glass windows. This fire occurred a few weeks before the company acquired its first motorized fire truck. The only water source nearby was an old well by the carriage house way in the back. Once a fire took hold the hand tub would not have been able to save the structure.

July 1939: Robbins' barn fire.

Henry Robbins⁴³ and his boys were out gathering hay when the fire call went out. When it was over not much remained. Alfred Chubbuck, a dairy farmer from West Thompson watched the proceedings and when it was over he started for home. Halfway back he turned around to seek out Henry Robbins. He is recorded to have said, “It might be a good thing the barn burned as Henry would build a lot better one” and so a new barn was built in the fall with two levels and a Mansard roof. Alfred Chubbuck⁴⁴ offered the use of his vacant barn for storage or for cattle at no cost. Fifty years later in 1987 the barn burnt once more⁴⁵ and was rebuilt on the same foundation.

⁴³ Henry's son, Ray Robbins became chief of the Company in 1966.

⁴⁴ The ruins of the Chubbuck farm are visible across from the Sacred Heart Church in West Thompson.

⁴⁵ See Barrette's lumber yard fire 1987

1938 to 1948: Brief extracts on fires taken from the minutes.

- 1938-1939 winter: Mrs. Wilfred Mills expressed thanks for the Company attending a chimney fire at her house.
- 1939 Klondike fire: Letter of appreciation from P. L. Duhamel.
- 1944 October: Fire at the Lucas house. The minutes record that a letter of appreciation was sent to West Thompson Fire Department for their mutual aid.
- April 1943: fire at Robert Johnson's house – afterwards he donated \$6.50 to the Company.
- August 1944: William Ballard's fire.
- April 1945: Lewis Elliott house fire –he donated \$25.00
- July 1945: Mutual aid at the Ramillard house fire on Buckley Hill. A letter of appreciation for assistance from the Company was received from Grosvenordale Fire Department.

1944: Fire in the Thompson Library

A brisk breeze fanned a brush fire in the empty lot next door where the Quinntisset Inn once stood. Burning leaves swept up against the bay window on the southwest corner of the library and up to the eaves. The roof boards caught on fire and the structure was seriously threatened. There was a quick response and the damage was limited to the charred roof timbers that remain to this day. The repairs cost just under \$1,000 but the library was insured. Although there is no mention of this fire in the Company's minutes the minutes of the Thompson Library Incorporated, Board of Trustees gives a complete account.

1948: Buck Hill forest fire

The summer of 1948 was exceedingly dry. Forest fires erupted from Maine to Connecticut. Hotels and homes around Bar Harbor were lost as they were at other coastal areas of Maine. The Buck Hill fire was part of this record brush fire season. Dave Buck recalled that residents of isolated homes in the forests on the Rhode Island and Connecticut border had to be evacuated. He stated that pick-up trucks raced along the dirt track roads in the forest to keep ahead of the fire. Clarence Ballard recalled that teenaged boys were involved in fighting this fire for several days and that he was paid 25 cents per hour by the State.

1951: Shoddy Mill Fire, Quaddick Road.

This is last and most serious of three fires at the Shoddy Mill each caused by spontaneous combustion of the rags stored for recycling.

December 2, 1954: Fire destroyed the former Howe Marot College⁴⁶

In 1903 Miss Mary Marot and Miss Malvina Howe purchased the Doane estate of 175 acres on the western corner of Route 193 and Route 21. Miss Howe died soon after but the Marot Howe Junior College for young ladies operated for many years. The college complex included a number of buildings with classrooms and a gymnasium and there was a pond, located about a mile from the main house, which was used for canoeing. The College held a concert for the benefit of the Fire Company April 19th 1942. The college ceased operation and was sold about 1947 to a company later identified in the minutes as Thompson Manor. At the February 3rd meeting 1947 the Company voted to sell a 2 ½ inch hydrant gate to the purchaser of the former Howe Marot School "*where it would be of some use in case of fire there.*" Seven years later a party was held in the magnificent main building and it is surmised that a discarded cigarette in the cocktail lounge may have been responsible for starting a fire. At 1.15 am residents nearby observed flames and summoned the Fire Company. A high wind fanned the blaze that quickly spread to the ell. There was a serious shortage of water. Mutual aid with water tankers was summoned from Woodstock, Brooklyn, Dayville, Putnam, West Thompson and North Grosvenordale, but the building was lost.

⁴⁶ Derived from *Putnam Town Crier*, September 11, 1998.

1955: Mill fire caused by the flood that followed the “hurricane of ‘55”

A well-known and much-respected volunteer firefighter, Elmer White⁴⁷ gave an account of the attempt to extinguish a fire in the mill at the junction of the French and Quinebaug rivers. Apparently a fuel tank ruptured and the escaping oil was ignited. Several photographs of this event are included in the illustrations.

Elmer White said

“I drove the first fire truck down there to the mill. We worked there quite a bit, but we couldn’t save anything but we did all we could. Course you couldn’t get near it cause there was so much water. [We] set [the truck] right there in front of the store [in Mechanicsville] They tried all kinds of ways, they sent a helicopter in and sent two or three men with a [portable] pump to the roof to go over, there was just a small fire in there at the time. They let them down on the roof to see if they could put it out but they didn’t have a chance. Then we had quite a hard time getting them out of there. We had to get them across the water and the only way we could get a line to them, we had a fella that used a casting rod and he casted his fish line with a weight on it and they got that and pulled it over [and] put a clothes line onto that then a big rope on the clothes line to get a rope over to pull them back. We had quite a time getting them back”. Asked if there was an explosion he said “Well it was like an explosion when that burst into flames. All at once, puff, she went, the mill it just went. There was nothing you could do.”

Thompson Fire Engine Company attended as can be seen from the photograph showing the 1938 truck and the new 1955 fire truck at the scene. Discussing the 1955 incident in 1972 with Dave Buck, he related that the helicopter pilot left to go lunch leaving the firemen stranded.

The Company submitted a claim for equipment lost at this fire. The State Department of Public Works agreed to pay \$964.20 for replacements.

1962: Fires noted in the minutes

- March: “Jos. Franczak donated \$10 for putting out fire at his house ”
- August: Brandy Hill fire

August 3, 1963: Fire at the “Picker Stick” factory

Owner George F. Bates ran a picker stick factory situated on the corner of Gawron Road and Route 193. The plant had been operated by three generations of the Bates family and did business as the New England Handle Co.-- a subsidiary of Francis J. Bates & Sons Co. Picker sticks had a wooden handle with a hook on one end and were used in the manufacture of textiles -- the major industry in Thompson for over a hundred years. The same building was used to make broom, hoe and axe handles. Varnish and glue were applied to some of these handles. The fire alarm sounded Saturday morning at 3:15 am. The sticks and handles constituted a perfect bonfire and the ensuing fire was spectacular, with flames rising 30 to 40 feet above the building punctuated by explosions as the Formica glue and a propane gas tank ignited. Doug Langer recalls that the propane tank was split open and thrown over into a field nearby close to a house. Machinery in one part of the building was salvageable thanks to the efforts of the Fire Company but the flames were so intense that the highway blistered in the heat. Chief Broughton obtained mutual aid from West Thompson, East Thompson and East Putnam fire departments. Dr. Meyer, a member of the Company and the local pathologist at Day Kimball Hospital, was asked to take pictures of the conflagration and one of them appeared in the local paper, *The Windham County Observer - Putnam Patriot*, and were printed later as the picture of the week by *Connecticut Life*. A copy is

⁴⁷ The North Eastern Connecticut Oral History Project Interview with Elmer White February 3, 1978. On file with the Thompson Public Library.

included in the illustrations. Damage was assessed at \$200,000 as most of the building was completely destroyed. Soon after it was replaced by a cinder block construction, which still stands.

March 5, 1964: Marianapolis School mansion fire

The Marian Fathers' order, based in Chicago, had purchased the mansion, building and some three hundred acres of fields and woods and started the Marianapolis preparatory school there in 1931. The mansion, which was built in 1895, was spacious with a ballroom that, in the days of the Reams, would accommodate a large crowd of dancers. There were many bedrooms in the upper part of the house. The Marian fathers were housed in one wing and four nuns and two female employees were sleeping in another.

Early on a Thursday morning, Rev. Casimir Kuckell was awakened by the smell of smoke. He called to Father John Petrauskas. Both men escaped - one through a window onto a flat roof and then by sliding down one of the columns. The Fire Company responded to the alarm shortly after 2:30 am. Mutual aid was proved by East Thompson, West Thompson, Quinebaug, Woodstock, Muddy Brook and Community Fire Departments. Word went round that one of the elderly brothers, Alexander Kinsgalia, was unaccounted for. David Reynolds, using an air pack, went into the burning building and found the Brother in his smoke-filled room. He evacuated him to a flat roof nearby with the help of Dick Meade. Resuscitation was attempted on the roof. The patient was lowered to the ground and further attempts at revival were made by Dr. John Meyer, - the medical member of the Fire Company. It was too late. It was determined later that the cause of death was carbon monoxide poisoning. The Company evacuated another brother priest, Father John Banys, who was sleeping in a room nearby. He was in the habit of stuffing blankets at the bottom of the door to his room. As a result, he survived.

As first it seemed that the building could be saved. But even though the community well was tapped there was a serious shortage of water. Relays of fire trucks used water from local ponds to supply the engines that fed the hoses trained on the building. Each truck could only bring in 1,000 gallons at a time and the hoses could dispense this in a matter of minutes. As a result, flames consumed the mansion. Molten lead from the gutters hissed as it dropped into the puddles of water around the building. Dr. Meyer went home to get his camera and once again secured pictures that were published in the local and Connecticut papers. He was so upset by this experience that he resolved never again to take photographs at a fire scene. In the morning the building was seen to be devastated and the loss was variously estimated to be \$2,500,000 by the Evening Gazette of Worcester and only \$1,000,000 by the Windham County Observer-Putnam Patriot⁴⁸. Later the ruins were cleared and brand-new classrooms and a chapel were constructed on the site.

Fires noted in the minutes from 1966 to 1971

- 1966: October. M[r. &] M[rs] Rothcock house fire.
- 1967: December. Thompson Machine Co. business fire
- 1968: April-May. Mike and Kathy Markowitz. house fire in East Putnam.

January 1971: Mutual aid to fire at Steve Grapnel's house in West Thompson.

Steve Grapnel was a chemist who managed the Belding mills in Thompson and Putnam. He and his wife were active in community affairs and in particular were strong supporters of the

⁴⁸ Digitally scanned copies of the newspaper reports of this fire are in the Company's archives. . The original and digitized copies are retained in the Thompson Historical Society collection.

Thompson library. They had also worked with the Village Improvement Society and had lobbied for the construction of Route 52 (now Interstate 395) to connect to the Massachusetts Turnpike.

The fire was reported at 5:30 am and West Thompson responded with mutual aid from Thompson Hill. Doug Langer remembers chopping a hole in the ice on a pond to provide access for the suction hose. Louis "Skip" Faucher who knew that the Bayers had attended a concert with the Grapnels the previous evening called John Bayer at home at 6:30 am. He said *"Please say the Grapnels stayed the night with you."* They had not. John Bayer remembers seeing the fire fighters peering into the cellar looking for any signs of the bodies. He said, "It was like looking into hell". The building collapsed about 7:30 AM. Member Dr. Meyer, who was the local pathologist, identified the few remains with help of dental records. The Grapnels had expressed a wish to be cremated but not like this. The cause of the fire and the demise of the Grapnels remain a mystery to this day. Significantly there was no evidence of the expensive camera lenses or of the gun collection known to be in the house. Afterwards the library benefited from the Grapnel's will. Steve Grapnel had been treasurer of the Thompson Library Inc. and Frank McGarry, who took over as treasurer for the library, had to reconstruct the details of the library portfolio that were lost in the fire.

1972: John Flood's furniture factory in Grosvenordale

Next to the 1826 textile mill– the oldest surviving factory in the Town of Thompson - there was a more recent structure that was being used to make furniture. Varnish and volatile solvents were stored on the property. One winter evening, the call came for mutual aid from Community. The fire could be seen on Route 12 even as the Thompson Hill trucks came down the hill on Route 200. At the scene the Company relayed water from the French River to the fire. Attempts to restore the building and the business were unsuccessful and it was left unoccupied. It was frequented by teenagers and others. Many years later, in 1995, a local boy apparently was using the building as a refuge. A fire started in an old mattress with other rubbish and the boy died. The building has now been demolished.

July 4 - 5, 1972: Mutual aid at the Webster Record Factory fire in Dudley

Charlie Spahl drove the Company's fire truck and as he approached the fire about midnight he had to contend with a road blocked by a stream of spectators heading in the same direction. The Company provided mutual aid and was held in reserve at the fire scene. The old factory building was fully involved on arrival and the strategy was to prevent collateral damage. The fire was spectacular.

December 2, 1972: Major fire at the Vernon Stiles Inn.

The fire started in one of the bedrooms above the Cracker Barrel bar room. A State Trooper passing by saw smoke from a window and sounded the alarm at about 7.45 PM. The first truck (the "55) on the scene was driven by Bill Clark. He ordered that a request for mutual aid be radioed. This was done but by an inexperienced fireman. We were short handed at the outset. Carl Langer heard the call on his scanner at home and phoned the Quinebaug Valley dispatcher to say that obviously things were not going well and help was needed urgently. The first firemen to enter the building were overcome by smoke. The fire was being fought without proper protective clothing and initially without Scott air packs. At that time the Company had only a few coats and boots and these were in a decayed state. In the midst of the confusion Bill Clark suffered a mild heart attack and had to be transported to Day Kimball hospital. By this time all the local fire companies were on the scene. Two younger members of the Company, Arthur Johnson and Doug Langer, gained access to the attic over the bedroom and knocked the fire down. Members of the Company stayed on location overnight to ensure no flare ups occurred. The reporter for the local

newspaper ⁴⁹ went home early and the next day a photograph of smoke pouring out of the building appeared with the caption “*Fire levels Vernon Stiles Inn*”. The account was somewhat exaggerated. Subsequently the Inn was restored and reopened thanks to the new owner, Paul Morgan.

August 1973: Mutual aid at the Webster Academy fire

This fire occurred in small hours of the morning and the building was beyond saving. Thompson Hill provided mutual aid and with the other fire companies played their deluge guns on the fire for several hours on end. Water came from Lake Webster nearby and the run –off gouged ravines in the area surrounding the building as it found its way back to the lake.

December 1973: The ice storm

On a Monday morning in December a drenching rain froze as it hit the ground, tree limbs and power lines. Brilliant blue flashes were seen and explosions heard as the power lines were brought down by the weight of the ice that encased them. There were sharp cracks like rifle fire as overburdened tree branches fell. The Fire Company’s auxiliary generator kicked in as the power failed. Immediately, without power and with the ground frozen, basements began to flood – sump pumps were inoperable. The Fire Company sent out teams with portable pumps to bail out the basements. Throughout the next day the temperature continued to drop, eventually going below zero. Some families used the Fire House as a refuge. Pipes began to freeze. Now the Company used its portable electric generator to get oil furnaces running long enough to boost house temperatures above the freezing point. Villa Maria, a local hostel for the members of Marianapolis, was saved from damage in this way. Dick Asal is remembered for having worked into the small hours on this duty together with Richard Meade Sr. This duty was not without its compensations. There were liberal offers of liquids providing inner warmth that were given and not refused. Incredibly Dick went to work as usual next morning at the Post Office, for which he received a citation. The mail must get through – and it did. Three or four days later power was restored. The Company answered 28 calls for heat and power and thus had served the community well.

December 26, 1976: Structure fire on Randall Road called in at 4:00 AM.

The minutes record that Deputy Chief Spahl commended the company on the manner in which they responded to a potentially serious fire. This may have been the call to a house on Randall Road in Quaddick where logs stored next to a stove had ignited. The family was alerted to the fire by their dog who probably saved their lives. The night was cold and snowy.

January 1977: Mutual Aid to Webster at Brightwood School Fire

Letters of thanks from Webster Selectmen and the Webster Fire Chief for help given

September 1978 : Search for a lost boy

Many local fire companies and other volunteers searched for a missing child believed to have wandered off into the woods on the west side of Interstate 395 at the Webster line. The members of the Company participated. The following brief extract from the minutes of October 2nd 1978 records this incident. “The Chief thanked all who helped in the search and rescue effort for the lost boy in Webster. The Company voted to offer to pay the Ladies Auxiliary for half of the expense of food [supplied] to the searchers.” The child was never found.

March 1979: Fire at the Ivanhoe Tool and Die factory on Rte. 193

An oil bath used in one of the machines at Ivanhoe Tool and Die Ignited. When the Company arrived, thick smoke was pouring out of the workshop building. The smoke formed a thick layer

⁴⁹ A photocopy of the report is included here.

down from the ceiling which, as things progressed, steadily descended towards the floor. The fire was controlled and the building was soon restored to operation.

Winter 1979: Fire in the mill agent's house on Route 12, North Grosvenordale.

Thompson Hill was summoned to provide mutual aid at a fire in a beautiful old house situated next to the Knights of Columbus building on Route 12 adjacent to the canal running into the old Cluet Peabody Mill. This stately residence was built for the manager of the mill. For a while it had been Dr. Waldron's residence and most lately it had been the home of the Lowell family. One bitterly cold clear and sunny Saturday afternoon it was ablaze. The loss was estimated at \$70,000. The Company's 1955 truck, responding to a call for mutual aid, was set up by the canal to relay water. The road, parts of the fire trucks and the clothing of fire fighters soon became encased in ice. Newspapers reported that Day Kimball Hospital treated eight area firefighters, two of them for frostbite and six for smoke inhalation.

January 1980: Search for lost boy in the Quaddick area.

The Company participated with many other volunteers in a search for a lost boy.

July 1983: structure fire in North Grosvenordale

One very warm July afternoon with the temperature in the nineties the Company responded to a call for mutual aid at a structure fire in North Grosvenordale. On arrival, the Company saw that the three-family apartment house was fully involved with flames. There was a good water supply and several fire companies at the scene played hoses on the house. At one time the Company's hose team were showered with shingles being ripped off the roof by hoses directed from the other side of the building. Eye protection was provided by the visors on our helmets. Tragically, this fire resulted in the death of a baby girl.

September 1985: Hurricane Gloria

The Company cleared fallen trees and guarded downed power lines. Later the Company received \$4,262.63 as their share of the Town's claim for storm damage compensation.

September 4, 1987: Barrette lumber yard fire on Robbins Road.

Two major fires occurred in Thompson over the Labor Day weekend of 1987. The first was reported at 2:18 pm on Friday September 4th. It was beautiful sunny day with a mild breeze. Many local firemen were at the Woodstock fair setting up booths ready for the opening on Saturday⁵⁰. Ben Barrette, the owner of the old Robbins Farm, had set up a high-quality wood supply business in a complex of barns, including the barn that Henry Robbins had built 50 years ago after an earlier fire. A kiln was used to season timber to be used in the manufacture of furniture. The whole family was employed by the business but both Ben Barrette and his wife Lucille were absent that afternoon and everyone else had left for the day or were packing up for the Labor Day weekend holiday. The electrical power supply was turned off. Ben's brother, Armand was working on a truck in the yard when he saw smoke issuing from one of the ventilators on the big barn. He ran round the building and realized that there was fire raging in the upper story and that there was a fireball inside. He had to use the phone at a nearby house to call the Fire Company because the phone line to building had been severed by the fire. Deputy Chief Doug Langer saw the plume of smoke from the fire as he left Webster, Massachusetts to get to the fire scene.

By the time Fire Chief Warren Reynolds arrived, he saw that there was nothing that could be done to save the barn. Attention was concentrated on protection of the other barns and the Barrette house across the road. The roof of the barn collapsed after 20 minutes. The fire pond

⁵⁰ Woodstock Labor Day weekend fair now starts on a Friday.

opposite the barn could not be reached and was not used. The water it contained evaporated due to the intense heat. Another pond on Route 21 some half-mile away was used, but within half an hour it was emptied by a relay of trucks taking water 1,000 gallons at a time to the vicinity of the fire. Even a big water tanker truck carrying several thousand gallons of water was emptied very quickly.

The only suitable source of water for such a large fire was a large pond created by the Barrettes in a meadow below in the valley. By now several fire companies had been summoned to provide mutual aid. The fire was so hot that a fire truck had to be sprayed with water to allow Second Assistant Chief Lou Lane to drive safely past the outer barns to gain access to the fields beyond. Once in the field two fences with barbed wire had to be removed to allow the truck to reach the water's edge. A large tame fish in the pond had to be discouraged from clogging the suction pipe – it thought the firemen had come to feed it. A 4 ½ inch hose was used to feed water to a second truck stationed half way up the hill. This in turn was used to boost the pressure to supply water to the pumper trucks stationed in the area around the barn that were trying to prevent the fire spreading to the farm house and other out buildings⁵¹. Heat from the truck engine running at full throttle pumping water for hours on end caused the grass underneath to catch fire and this had to be damped down. By the time the fire was under control the water level in the pond allegedly had dropped 4 feet

The other barns on the site had aluminum roofing making it difficult for the water jets to get at the fire that had spread to the timber stored below. Almost all of these structures were destroyed, in addition to the barn with all the wood working machinery. The house across the street was shielded from the intense radiated heat by a large tree still in full leaf, but an old Volkswagen minibus parked some fifty feet from the barn was destroyed and partly melted. So hot was the fire that water from the hoses became steam when it was directed into the heart of the conflagration.

Thompson Hill Fire Company remained on the scene overnight. The next morning the embers had to be doused when the debris was being shoveled out of the way with a backhoe. In all, nine companies were in attendance; the five Thompson companies – Thompson Hill, West Thompson, East Thompson, Community and Quinebaug with help from Dayville, Attawaugan and Woodstock Hill. Webster and Putnam were on standby.

Timber yards and kilns present a major fire risk. The Barrettes had installed fire extinguishers⁵² at 8-foot intervals in their buildings. There had been a minor fire in one barn in November 1986 but the Fire Company was able to extinguish it before it took off. Subsequently there were minor fires at the yard in 1996 and in February 1997. In both cases fire extinguishers were used to put out the blazes before the Fire Company arrived.

September 7, 1987 - Labor Day: Thompson Congregational Church fire

About 9.30 am on Labor Day a wisp of smoke was seen emanating from the Church spire. Thus began the second major fire in Thompson over one weekend. There was discussion of arson because of this coincidence but it was not found to be the cause in either case. The roofers working at the church some days previously had driven a nail through some underlying electrical cable and by Labor Day the heat had built up enough to cause a major fire. By noon there were 14 fire companies and at least six television crews on hand with the dazed inhabitants of Thompson Hill observing. Sightseeing traffic congestion had been bad during and after the Barrette lumberyard Fire – but now it became impossible.

⁵¹ Although the area of the pond was one acre it had sloping sides. Lowering the water level by four feet corresponds to about 800,000 gallons of water weighing almost 3,000 tons, or 850 truckloads of water at 1,000 gallons per load.

⁵² A sprinkler system requires a sustained water supply that would be more than a small business in a rural location could provide or afford.

The first fire truck on the scene pulled up at the front door of the Church. The key was obtained and a fireman ran up the stairs and found that the belfry door was locked. A crow bar was used to force it open. Fire Chief Warren Reynolds, knowing that the fire was in the apex of the roof near the tower over the choir loft, directed that the water should be used to force the fire back into the tower to vent. This strategy saved the body of the church from destruction. Maurie Landry, the minister, had to be ordered to stop trying to evacuate church artifacts. Webster's pump escape engine was already on call for mutual aid and was soon able to get a water stream into the building through the bell chamber opening. Muddy Brook fire company and others laid a large bore hose from the big pond on what is now the Vincent's farm about one mile distant so that there was a good supply of water. The spire and tower acted as a chimney, and flames spurting out of the apertures. Around noon the fire trucks sounded their sirens to warn every one to stand clear in case the spire should collapse. After the loss of the spire in the 1938 hurricane the new spire was erected on a steel girder frame and this held up in spite of the blaze.

Large volume structures such as churches and barns are very vulnerable to destruction by fire. It is remarkable that this church could be saved. Dr. Ronald Barks, a trustee of the Church and a Fire Company member, recalls that he and Warren Reynolds inspected the ridge beam of the church after the fire. It was evident that the wood had been charred and could have taken the body of the hall into flames had it not been squelched. The Church's venerable Tracker organ is situated behind the choir loft at the back of the Church next to the tower and yet the only damage suffered was due to water not to fire. Just prior to the fire the music committee had been able to raise funds to have the organ restored. Over a million gallons of water had been streamed through its innards. Eventually an appeal to the music and organ lovers in New England and across the country resulted in funds being raised to have the organ parts dried out. The Johnson organ was once again restored to its full voice and former glory.

The Vernon Stiles Inn across the road from the Church had to close for business. The owner, Joe Silberman thought that the spire might crash onto his building. By the end of the day when everything was under control and the building was roped off. Joe invited the Thompson Hill Fire Engine Company to an impromptu supper. Founder member Captain Vernon Stiles would have been pleased to see that once again the Company was enjoying hospitality at the Inn as they had 140 years ago.

The next day a crane was used to remove the spire. The squat tower had a temporary roof applied. The members of the Fire Company settled down to collecting video recordings of the news reports of the fire broadcast by all the local television channels. Various firemen who were interviewed made some star performances but no contracts for future TV appearances were offered. The weekend of Labor Day 1987 will not be soon forgotten. It is the best-documented⁵³ set of fires in the Company's history. Long may it be so.

June 6, 1998: Vehicle accident Quaddick Town Farm Road.

The driver of a 1986 Dodge Charger with eight passengers on board including several children lost control and slammed head on into a tree. Some victims were thrown clear and some were trapped. Captain Hogan Krohn, was the first Company responder on the scene and he called for mutual-aid rescue support from East Thompson and Community, for multiple ambulances and for life flight helicopters. He was presented with a triage scenario. When he arrived, he saw a boy in the road with shattered arms some 100 feet from the wreck of a small sedan. He did not appear to be in need of immediate help. Near the car two more semi-conscious children lay on the ground. A boy and a girl were trapped together in the back of the car. The boy was bleeding badly but was still conscious. The driver, a young woman of 25, was terribly injured and died moments later. A

⁵³ Copies of some of the many newspaper reports of the fire are attached and contain additional details.

12-year old girl in the front was dead. Incredibly one other passenger was wandering around with just a scratch on his head. A bystander, who knew the driver, became distraught and abusive. He had to be removed from the scene before Captain Hogan could get to work. Fire Chief Doug Langer had to repeat the request for multiple ambulances and three life-flight helicopters to evacuate the casualties. The dispatcher at Quinebaug Valley continued to question the judgement of the officers in charge. He cannot have realized that with so many patients involved in a single vehicle accident that they would be extracted one at a time and that each needed to be evacuated immediately in order to prevent further loss of life. Eventually two helicopters were used and one made two trips. All living victims were extricated within 38 minutes of arrival at the scene. This was the most traumatic incident in the Company's history.

1999: fires

- 1999 Fire at Nancy Ebbs house on Route 21. Quick response to this fire, which was started accidentally, saved the structure from serious damage.
- February 1999, Fire at the Ivanhoe Tool and Die Company. This was the second fire at this business – the first was about 1982
- August 25 1999, Kitchen fire at the house of Harry and Ruth Elliott. A flash fire caused damage to the kitchen and Ruth received burns.

November 26, 2000: Another minor fire at the Vernon Stiles Inn.

There have been many fire alarms at the Inn. The most recent occurred about 10:45 am one Sunday morning in November 2000 when the Inn staff were preparing food for the brunch. A small propane heater was being used to warm trays of food at the buffet table. The heater exploded and fire raced up the curtains and ignited the wooden wall post behind the serving table in the corner of the old tap room. A waiter had the presence of mind to empty two fire extinguishers onto the blaze which did dampen things down considerably but the Inn was still suffused with smoke when the fire trucks arrived -- as they did very promptly. Any smoldering remains of the fire were soon knocked down and damage was restricted to the curtains and window area in the corner of the room. A large quantity of food was spoiled and the Inn closed for a few days. Those with reservations for lunch that day were turned away – including the author! Once again Captain Vernon Stiles' original investment in a local fire company paid off. There have been many calls to the Inn. A photograph taken at another kitchen fire at the Vernon Stiles Inn September 12, 1958 is included. This shows the Company's fire trucks at the rear of the Inn with smoke issuing from the kitchen area. In the 1950's the Company's association with Inn was maintained by Otto Graf, a Company member who ran a general store called *The Cracker Barrel* as part of the inn complex. The bar immediately adjacent to the store was called *The Pit Stop*, and served the raceway crowd, which sometimes included actor Paul Newman. John Bayer, a member of the Company, supplied several anecdotes from that time. He recalled that early one evening, a fire developed in the partition between the bar and the store and an active member of the Company, Jan van der Swaagh, used an axe to expose and extinguish the fire. John also related that one night a chimney fire developed at the Inn. The alarm was sounded at two or three o'clock in the morning and some 25 to 30 firemen showed up. Unfortunately, they squirted water down the chimney and created a mess in a kitchen and lounge room on the second floor. A dozen or so firemen stayed and helped to clear up the water damage. They were rewarded with a meal of cheese and crackers and an abundant supply of alcohol from the bar. Although the firemen had a rousing good time, the incumbent Inn manager was fired following his unapproved act of largesse.

2000: Fire at the Barker house on Quaddick Road

In the early hours of the morning the fire alarm was given to the Company with the warning that there was someone trapped inside a burning building on Quaddick Road. The first on the scene was the newly appointed Fire Chief, Lou Lane. He found that dense smoke prevented entry

through the front door. It was known from prior EMT calls that an elderly lady was bedridden in a ground floor room. Chief Lane went to the window and found that it could be opened but it was too high to allow entry or evacuation of the lady. Assistant Chief Hogan Krohn tried to gain access at a rear door but was beaten back by the flames. There was snow on the ground and a berm thrown by the snow plows at the edge of the road. A four-wheel drive Ford Explorer was available but the vehicle's tail window opened the wrong way to allow close approach. By now the room was full of smoke. A 4WD Chevy Blazer was immediately put to use and its tailgate folded down to provide a platform. Rescue was possible because the victim's bed was close to the window. Hogan Krohn and another fireman, Jeff Matteau⁵⁴, with help of a State Trooper maneuvered the patient from her bed through the window onto the tailgate of the sport utility vehicle. She was placed on a stretcher and immediately transferred to the ambulance, which had arrived in the meantime. The only source of heat in the house was a stove burning wood pellets and the stovepipe connection to it had corroded. Heat and sparks had leaked from this pipe and had ignited the surrounds. It was a very stubborn fire. False ceilings and wall cavities concealed pockets of conflagration. Smoke was intense and the floors were unsafe. Firemen had to be evacuated and sometime later the roof collapsed. The house was a total loss. Later the rescuers received a commendation from the Selectmen of the Town of Thompson⁵⁵ for their effort in saving a life.

October 6, 2001: Fire in former chicken farm on Five Mile River Road, East Thompson

The Company provided mutual aid to East Putnam from 10:52 am to 5:30 pm at a stubborn fire in an extensive complex of sheds, barns and former chicken coops that were used for storage of old cars amongst other things and also as an egg packing plant. Most of the time the Company pumped water while fire police stood guard over the hose lines across one of the roads.

March 20, 2002: Tractor trailer rollover on Interstate 395

One snowy icy night an eighteen-wheeler truck heading north and rumored to be carrying a load of wine skidded on the icy snowy road and rolled over upside down pointing south at the bottom of the embankment. The driver walked away without injury but it took three large wrecking trucks to get the vehicle back on the road and required that Interstate 395 be shut down. The Company was involved from 5:23 pm to 10:43 pm as the weather changed from snow to freezing rain. In fact, there was very little wine and none of it spilled.

December 18, 2002: Tractor trailer accident on Interstate 395

At 8:15 am the Company was called to an accident northbound of Exit 99 on I 195. It was found that a tractor trailer travelling north had gone through the guard wires on the left side and had plunged down the embankment and was poised pointing north on the side of the southbound lane some 20 feet below. The southbound lane was blocked while extrication took place. A life-flight helicopter landed on the highway and transported the driver to hospital but he did not survive.

December 25, 2004: Fire at a garage in East Thompson

At 4:46 pm in the afternoon of Christmas Day the Company was called out to provide mutual aid to East Thompson at a fire in a garage used to store maintenance equipment for the golf course next to the raceway. Very shortly after the members arrived there were a series of explosions. One of these ejected a red-hot piece of metal weighing twenty-one pounds high in the air over the heads of firemen and firewomen. It missed the firefighters and landed near them on the ground. No one was hurt and no damage was done to Company's equipment. Later, this missile was retrieved as a souvenir and taken back to the firehouse. The fire was featured in an article in the

⁵⁴ Jeff Matteau was home on leave and later served with the US Navy on an aircraft carrier at an undisclosed location.

⁵⁵ A news cutting is included in the photo-section.

1st Responder Newspaper by their senior correspondent, Allan Bracket. His account of the fire is copied below.

***“Suspicious blaze guts building at Thompson (CT) golf course.
East Thompson, CT-***

A fire in a maintenance building at the Raceway Golf Course was deliberately set, according to fire investigators in East Thompson CT. The Christmas day fire was discovered at about 5 PM, and totally destroyed the maintenance building and all of its stored equipment. The Raceway Golf Course is located on rural East Thompson Road, on the grounds of The Thompson Speedway. The East Thompson VFD received the initial alarm of fire shortly after 5 PM. The station is located approximately a mile and a half from the golf course. When East Thompson firefighters arrived on scene, they were met with heavy fire and smoke conditions issuing from the 60x40 concrete block maintenance garage. Black smoke rising from the inferno could be seen some ten miles away. The incident commander, seeing he had a major emergency in progress, immediately called for mutual aid from the neighboring Thompson departments of Thompson Hill and the Community Fire Company for tankers and manpower. A call was also placed to the Webster MA Fire Department, requesting a tanker. The fire very quickly engulfed the entire structure, and severely threatened a similar garage type structure located only about three feet away from the original fire building. Due to the large volume of fire that was initially encountered, the incident commander ordered an aggressive exterior attack, concentrating large diameter handlines on the most severely threatened exposure. As Thompson firefighters started to get the large structure surrounded with handlines, explosions could be heard within the building. Stored containers of gasoline and diesel fuel burst and added volatile fuel and vapors to the already immense fire. Master stream devices were placed into operation around the fire building and poured tons of water into the sea of flames. As the fire was being contained, Webster Ladder 2 was brought in to the D-side of the exposure building to access the gable and check for fire extension. No fire was found in the ridge, and handlines were successful in keeping the fire out of the exposure. All the heavy fire was finally knocked down, and the tedious process of overhaul began. Crews cautiously entered the building to fully extinguish the fire. Firefighters remained on scene until about 11 PM. No injuries were reported.

During the fire, crews from the Quinebaug Fire Company and the Dudley MA Fire Department covered empty Thompson firehouses. The owner of the Raceway Golf Course, Donald Hoenig, stated the building and the contents were a total loss. Hoenig said that the building housed all course management and maintenance equipment such as tractors, mowing units, irrigation equipment, aerators, and other smaller equipment such as hand tools, flags, and ball washers. Mr. Hoenig was asked what his estimate of the damaged equipment might be, he replied "pretty substantial, half to three-quarters of a million dollars", and the estimate doesn't even include the building. An official estimate has not been released. The fire was investigated by Thompson Fire Marshal Rick L. Hayes along with members of the CT State Police Eastern District Major Crime Section, Troop D. Investigators determined the cause to be incendiary in nature, after eliminating all other sources of ignition. A reward has been offered through the Arson Hotline (800-84-ARSON) for any information about the fire that leads to an arrest of the person or persons responsible for the fire”.

June 20, 2005: Fire in a single-story duplex 109 Elmwood Hill Road

The call came in from a resident of a similar duplex about 200 feet across from the structure. When he came home for lunch the structure was already fully involved with fire and a column of smoke could be seen above the trees as far away as Chase Road. The building was set in the woods at the end of a long drive out of sight of the road. There was limited space for the fire trucks. East Putnam truck's deluge gun checked the fire but soon all the other trucks had

exhausted the water in their tanks. A pond on the Teft brook was then used as the water supply. Five-inch hose was laid up the hill to Community's engine tanker on the road, which relayed water to the trucks at the end of the driveway. Mutual aid was rendered by East Putnam, who were first on the scene, Community, West Thompson, East Thompson and the FAST team from Quinebaug. It took fifty feet of suction hose to reach the pond and after two hours of use the water level had dropped by four inches. A tanker shuttle to this site would not have been so effective.

July 4, 2005: Fire in an expanded trailer home on Judson Drive

There have often been fires on July 4th, but this one was noteworthy because the neighbors continued to have a spectacular fire works display while the fire was being fought.

April 18, 2006: Multi structure fire on Green Island on Quaddick Lake.

The Company was called at 2:05 am to respond to a report of a suspected car fire. When the first firefighters arrived, they were amazed to see that four cottages on the north west shore of Green Island were fully involved with flames and were doomed to destruction. An immediate call was made for mutual aid from the other four fire departments in Thompson and to East Putnam. Chief Doug Langer, Deputy Chief Ed Stevens, Lieutenant Lou Lane and Firefighter Andy Syme commandeered two rowing boats loaded one with a portable pump and the other with hose. They paddled across to the island directly to the fifth cottage now being singed as the wind blew the fire down the Island towards them. In spite of the heat and the contrary wind the fire was stopped and all nine remaining cottages on the Island were saved. Assistant Chief Hogan Krohn set up a Command post on shore and supervised setting up a ferry for firefighters and equipment to go across to the Island. West Thompson had a boat but most of those Companies who responded could do nothing to help but wait their turn to be shuttled across to the island. In time Webster, Danielson and Williamsville answered the calls for departments with boats and ultimately there were 35 firefighters on the island using water from Indian tanks and five portable pumps to soak the debris and wet down the brush.

At its height the fire was spectacular aided by the reflections from the water. Skeletal vestiges of the house frames could be seen silhouetted against a backdrop of flames rising 40 feet in the air. It was noisy with propane tanks popping their safety valves and dry timber studs cracking as they burst into flame. The heat was so intense it could be felt on the shore opposite. Although there was a light drizzle, flying embers driven by the wind posed a threat as the forest fire danger was still high after weeks without rain. An amateur video was taken as things began to die down and this was shown by one of the three television news teams that came later to cover the event. The Salvation Army from Providence provided a canteen to serve coffee, drinking water and refreshments.

April 18, 2006: Structure fire at 419 East Thompson Road

As the Company prepared to depart the scene of the fire on Green Island the call came to provide mutual aid at a structure fire. The response was rapid, as firefighters and equipment were ready to roll. It was found that the fire was confined to a mattress in a bedroom and was quickly brought under control. By 10:30 am that morning every one returned to the station after a long and exhausting duty.

October 2, 2006: Structure fire 50 Buckley Hill Road

The Company responded to a call for mutual aid in the early hours of the morning. A three-story home was seen to be completely engulfed in flames on arrival.

January 1, 2007, New Year's Day on Klondike Street

Smoke was pouring out of a two-story home in the early hours of the morning when the Company arrived to provide mutual aid to Community Fire Department. There was some freezing drizzle and the roads were icy. It was not a good start to the year.

February 6, 2007: Garage fire on Wrightson Drive

The temperature was 25 degrees Fahrenheit and there was a stiff breeze blowing off the lake to feed a substantial fire in a garage that was close to other houses. Mutual aid was given by Community, East Thompson, East Putnam and Webster's tanker. There was open water available on the causeway and the tanker truck was not needed.

Chapter 6: CALLS FOR THE SERVICES OF THE FIRE COMPANY

Mission

The original purpose of the Company was to save life and property from fire. But from the mid 1980s the scope and mission of the Company's activities were greatly enlarged to include a "First Response" to all emergencies. Records of the annual number of fire, and other calls for help, appear first in the minutes in 1954. From that date, with a few exceptions, the minutes of the annual meeting list the calls for the Company's help over the past year as read out by the Chief. Detailed call sheets were introduced about 1990 and the data contained is now entered into a computer program and the information is relayed through the Fire Marshall in Thompson to the authorities in Hartford.

First responders

The character of volunteer fire fighting changed dramatically with the introduction of the "First responder" responsibility. In the early 1980s the number of calls per year increased from an average of 25 per year to over 50 in the next few years continuing to rise to over 150 calls per year by 2000. The number of structure fires has not changed. Currently ten percent of calls are for vehicle accidents. Emergency Medical Service (EMS) calls now constitute over 50 percent of the total. The number of brush fires varies from year to year and, as would be expected, the spring in dry years is a very active time. Miscellaneous calls include pumping cellars and dealing with downed electrical wires and fallen trees. Automatic fire alarms account for about 8 percent of calls. Mutual Aid is generally concerned with structure and brush fires and account for about 30 percent of non-EMS and vehicle accident calls.

Structure fires.

In the nineteenth century when there were many active farms in Thompson, barn fires were not unusual. From Ellen Larned's notes it appears that barn fires were sometimes caused by spontaneous combustion of damp hay stored there. The other cause that she noted was small boys playing with fireworks or matches. Fire fighting equipment has become far more sophisticated with better protective clothing and thermal imaging devices that see through smoke. Serious fires involving houses or businesses are rare. The annual incidence is reasonably constant since, until recently, the population has not grown significantly and because there are fewer factories operating in the Town. There was a surge in the number of fires caused by wood burning stoves when they first became popular in the 1970s but safety regulations have helped reduce the frequency. It is not possible to trace the benefit of the introduction of smoke detectors but in recent years there have been calls to investigate carbon monoxide detector alarms. Modern fire fighting equipment and the use of pagers to alert fire fighters has improved response efficiency so that conflagrations are rare. Most structure fires are nipped in the bud and are not news.

Chimney fires

Chimney fires are most common potential cause of structure fires and yet today they constitute 3% or less of fire calls. Tar accumulated as a result of burning of wood for heat or cooking eventually catches fire if the chimney is not swept. During the winter months chimney fires are a regular occurrence so much so that no complete list of them exists. The earliest record of a chimney fire in the Company's minutes occurred in 1911 but there must have been many more before and it is certain there were and will be many since. Lewis Elliot recalled that when his father was Chief members would clean chimneys on Saturday mornings and received a donation for the Company as a reward. In a taped interview veteran local firefighter Elmer White⁵⁶ talked about fires that occurred when he was young (he was born in 1908). He said, " You didn't have

⁵⁶ Extract from "The North Eastern Connecticut Oral History Project" interview with Elmer White February 3, 1978 copy in Thompson Library archives.

house fires like you do today.” He also said “You’d get a chimney fire every once in a while, but they’d take care of it”. Elmer went on to comment “ --- look at all these old houses in town, they’ve been here for all those years and they never burnt. ”

The first fire attended by two new members on evening in early 1972 is remembered by them because as the fire truck drew up the distraught owner of the house with a blazing chimney rushed out shouting “*Don’t put water on it!*” This seemed a strange remark to these inexperienced firemen. Officers were well versed in the procedures needed. A chemical flare was inserted in the fireplace to exclude oxygen and later a chain was lowered to break loose the smoldering accumulation of tar that had caused the fire. Some 20 firemen stood on the lawn chatting while two stalwart members stood on the roof smoking cigarettes and jerking the chain up and down -- quite an introduction to a typical fire scene at that time. There was one member in the 1970’s – Jim Raftery -- a salesman, who always had a new joke to tell. Afterwards, this was referred to as “*the joke of the fire*”.

Lightning strikes

Lightning strikes and consequent damage are not infrequent. The first record in the minutes is of a fire at George Ballard’s house caused by lightning in 1911. Not long after that another fire destroyed George Ballard’s barn after a lightning strike but the precise year is not known. Recent events are better recorded. For example, August 10, 2001 a violent storm caused a lightning-strike fire at a house in Grosvenordale and within thirty minutes lightning caused a second fire in a house just north of Thompson Hill. A third strike was reported but there was no damage. The Company provided mutual aid to Community at the first fire and received help from East Thompson and Webster Fire Department when they had to return to the second fire.

In 2002 an isolated thunderstorm started two brush fires within a half-mile of each other on Azud Road in an area perfectly dry and untouched by the drenching downpour nearby. While the Company was assisting West Thompson Department a third strike occurred killing a woman in a field by West Thompson Lake.

The most spectacular lightning strike to date occurred at a house on Reardon Road at 4:00 PM April 27, 2004. The first bolt hit the back yard some fifty feet from the house, ripped up a trench two or three feet wide and a foot deep, bored a hole through the side of the house and brought wires down. As fire crews from West Thompson and Community arrived⁵⁷ a second strike occurred and heavy smoke appeared in the basement. The Company provided mutual aid to West Thompson. No one was hurt although there were people in the house at the time.

Brush fires

Brush fires occur almost every spring when the weather is dry and the new green leaves have not appeared. Some of these fires are due to carelessness in the disposal of brush piles or rubbish but some are due to wanton mischief. Spring is an anxious time for country firefighters. References in the minutes to forest fires are brief and are mainly concerned with the payments received from the State for services rendered. There was considerable attention given to the acquisition of brush fire fighting equipment in the 1940s. Albert Bushey recalled that when the railroad was still operating, sparks from the smokestacks on the coal-fired engines were responsible for starting fires. A brush fire in those days might last several days. Fires that started by the rail road tracks in East Thompson might migrate into Webster or over to Rhode Island and Buck Hill. In 2001 there was an exceptionally dry spell in the spring. In a period of two weeks there were 10 brush fires –

⁵⁷ “We had just pulled up and I was putting my air pack on when a second lightning bolt hit,” said West Thompson Fire Lt. Mike Rivers. Friday April 30, 2004 .

mostly in East Thompson. For the dry years 1998, 1999 and 2000 brush fires accounted for 8% of all calls.

Electrical fires

Broken electrical wiring can be lethal. Frayed wires can create a source of heat that if undetected slowly smolders until the critical temperature is reached and there is a fire. This is a leading cause of accidental structure fires. The Labor Day 1987 Church fire is believed to have been caused by a roofing nail that pierced a badly placed electrical cable. The roofing work was finished on Friday and the fire erupted on Monday. In a similar way the kitchen in a house occupied by the Barks family began to fill with smoke. This house on Chase Road is only two houses up from the fire house. It was determined that a broken floodlight had dropped down onto the wall of the house and the heat had slowly built up until it erupted in the cavity. Serious damage was prevented.

Kitchen fires.

Kitchen fires are common. At least two fires at the Vernon Stiles Inn started with the preparation of food. The Inn has probably been the most frequent scene of fires over the years. As the early minutes show it was also a frequent supplier of nourishment, solid and liquid, to fire company members. A fire in the kitchen at the Elliott home in 1999 caused serious damage and burned Ruth Elliott, who also suffered anguish at having unwittingly caused the fire to start.

Shoddy mill fires

In the days when the textile business was still flourishing there were a number of shoddy mills in Thompson. Cliff Greene recalls when Henry Davis ran a shoddy mill using waterpower derived from the Five Mill River as it flowed out of Quaddick Lake. Discarded wool clothing was processed to create woolen fiber that could be reused. Wool is not particularly flammable. The problems began when rayon and cotton scrap cloth was introduced. Bags of these materials can ignite spontaneously, so it was the practice of the third shift workers to feel bags to see if they were warm. Airborne cotton lint and air in the right proportions only need a spark to explode. Dave Rawson recalled three fires at the shoddy mills.

Arson

John Bayer remembers that during the 1960s it was noticed that one member of the Fire Department was always the first to arrive with the truck at a series of small brush fires. The suspected firebug was watched discreetly and carefully. In those days when the alarm sounded the first member to arrive at the firehouse went to the red telephone to find out where the fire was located and record the location on the blackboard. Finally, there was a grass fire near Bell's Barn in Quaddick. The arsonist went to the station and drove the fire truck straight to the fire without picking up the telephone. He was expelled in disgrace. In the 1970s there was a structure fire in a small house on Quaddick Town Farm Road that had been set in course of a drunken domestic altercation. It was a sad sight to see a home badly damaged with the loss of toys and other family belongings. On at least two other occasions there have been fires where insurance money may have been an issue.

Emergency Medical Service (EMS) calls and vehicle accidents

As soon as some members of the Company qualified as Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) the Company became a "first responder" at all catastrophic events. EMS calls exceeded the number of fire calls and often were more disturbing. In the three-year period 1998 to 2000 over 50% of calls were for medical service. If the requirement for medical service at vehicle accidents is included then nearly 60% of calls required EMS response. Twenty-five years ago, firefighters received rudimentary first aid training at a few drills. Currently to qualify as an EMT, it is necessary to attend school for 3 hours a night twice a week for three months and then pass a

written and a practical exam. Automobile accidents can be far more stressful than the fire calls of the past. In one accident the Company had to deal with a collision that resulted in decapitation of one of the victims. The 1998 accident with two fatalities and six injuries was the worst ever. Car fires are not unusual and are rarely serious. For example; in 2000 a call at three in the morning to the O'Leary garage on Route 193 revealed a truck with its engine running and the cab ablaze. The fire was quickly extinguished and the electrical circuit disconnected. Apparently the cause was a failed attempt to steal the truck using "*hot wiring*". The Company is responsible for provision of help at accidents that occur on Interstate 395 from Exit 99 to Exit 100 northbound and to Entrance 98 southbound.

Storms

The Company is called upon to block traffic when wires are downed by falling trees. Chain saws carried on the rescue truck are used to clear branches that have lie across the road. The ice storm of 1973 and the hurricane of 1984 exercised the Company's resources. Surprisingly, there were no serious incidents during the Blizzard of 1978 in spite of the fact that roads were closed to all but emergency vehicles during three days of high winds and 34 inches of snow. Downed electrical cables are a serious hazard, and the Company has often been forced to close roads or constrict traffic flow to one lane to protect the public until the electrical utility company and road crew arrive to take care of the problem.

Water rescues

The Company now has a team trained in water and ice rescue. Pictures of an ice rescue drill are included in the picture pages. The techniques practiced were put to good use one cold sunny afternoon in March 2005 when the Alpha pagers warned that a dog had gone through the ice into the water on Quaddick Lake. It was at a remote location. Doug Langer donned a wet suit and walked out on the ice for a hundred yards or so towards the open patch of water where the dog's head could just be seen. When the ice began to flex he crawled on his stomach and slid into the water. When the dog saw him it struggled to join his rescuer. It was possible to hoist the dog's front legs onto the ice but its flailing back legs pushed Doug back. Finally, with the help of some tension on the safety line, all four legs of the dog were placed on firm ice. They both got back to shore and the wet black Labrador shook itself and ambled off seemingly unconcerned after many minutes in very cold water. Six members were present but not one of us had a camera to record the event.

By contrast, when a deer was rescued from West Thompson Lake, there were so many spectators that the parked cars caused a traffic hold up on the road over the dam. The ice was too thin to bear the deer's weight but too thick for her to break a path back to the shore. Doug Langer and Lou Lane paddled towards her, breaking a channel through the ice in an aluminum boat. Naturally, the frightened deer tried to swim away from them and from the crowds and trucks on the shore. Finally, they got a rope around her neck and held her alongside the boat so that they could all be pulled ashore. The exhausted doe was wrapped in a blanket, placed in the back of a pick-up truck and taken to some nearby woods to be released in time for the hunting season.

Miscellaneous calls

The Company has been called upon to rescue cats from high places and twice the Company has been called to "rescue" or capture a pet monkey from a tree. Some years ago, Heidi Roosevelt, a cousin of President Roosevelt, lived on Chase Road. She had a pet monkey that she had brought back from Africa. The recapture of this monkey occasioned some ribald comments and understandably the members concerned were very reticent about the incident afterwards.

Miscellaneous service calls range from pumping flooded cellars to lifting an elderly person who has fallen. The Fire Company is the good neighbor. As noted, carbon monoxide detectors are now

Thompson Fire Engine Company History

widely available and have added to the number of emergency responses made by the Company. Automatic alarms at the school and at local factories that are falsely activated account for 8 percent of all calls.

Chapter 7. MEMBERS

The Founders

When the Company was first organized in 1832, the fire engine belonged to the proprietors who would have been assisted by those who banded together to operate it in case of fire. The proprietors consisted of local business men and men of some financial substance including Captain Vernon Stiles and Benjamin Gay. Fire fighting then was a neighborly affair and everyone pitched in to help. In 1832 there were sixteen members. When the Charter was granted in 1837 the Company was initially restricted to 25 men who had to live within the district. Not all those who volunteered were accepted. By-laws were prepared and would-be members signed a sheet to indicate their willingness to abide by these rules. .

The 19th century members

The minutes from 1837 to 1900 do not contain an annual listing. It is merely recorded when members were elected and occasionally when they were “dropped” or when they resigned. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the membership rolls for the 19th century. There are lists of member’s names and the date of their election to membership. It is recorded in the minutes that members were fined for non-attendance or late attendance at meetings and even fires. The Company might be considered to have been an elitist men’s club but members were drawn from all ranks of Society. For example; Walter Bates was a craftsman, Dr. Holbrook was a professional man, there were clergymen like Rev. Dunning, Nathan Chase was a farmer and some were businessmen like Edward Shaw.

The 20th century members.

In 1937 the bylaws were changed to allow 35 members to belong and the Company secretary listed them in the minutes. There is a gap from 1907 to 1911. From 1937 onward the list quickly grows beyond 35 members and it is presumed that another bylaw change may have occurred but the minutes do not show this. The lists were used to call the roll at meetings and to establish the fines due for non-attendance. At a meeting on May 1962 it was recognized that the papers of incorporation needed to be changed. The June 4 1962 meeting decided to formally increase the membership to one hundred.

Captains, Foremen, Chiefs and Line Officers

Table 7.1 lists the 28 recorded leaders of the Thompson Fire Engine Company over the first one hundred and seventy-five years of its operation. It can be seen that most of them served for many years - a tribute to the stability of the organization. The elections of officers are faithfully recorded from 1837 on with a few gaps. The first recorded Captain of the Company to be elected was William Jordan. He was followed the next year by Captain Vernon Stiles. Then for the next five years Silas Aldrich was Captain. The longest serving officer was Walter Bates. He held the captaincy from 1846 to 1872 -- a recorded total of at least 27 years. There was a break in 1851 and 1852 when the Company was so troubled it dissolved for a few months. Later Captains, or Foremen as they were sometimes called in the late 19th century, generally served for five or more years. In the first half of the 20th century Fred Herrick is known to have served as Captain for at least 12 years. There is a gap in the records from 1902 to 1911 but it may be because there was no change. There is also a gap from 1932 to 1935 but is more than likely that Fred Herrick continued in that capacity until James Elliot took over. He was the first leader to be titled “Chief” in 1937 and served throughout World War II. He retired in 1959.

There is a similar permanency in the men elected to hold positions as lieutenants and as clerks. For example, Edward Shaw was Secretary and Treasurer for 15 years and librarian for 9 years. James Ryan served as Clerk and Treasurer for 21 years from 1911 to 1937 and is listed as a

member up to 1940. James Ryan Junior is first listed in 1936 and served as Clerk and Treasurer from 1944 to 1948.

Table 7.1
Captains, Foremen and Chiefs

Title	First name	Last name	Began	End
Captain	William	Jordan	1837	1838
Captain	Vernon	Stiles	1838	1838
Captain	Silas	Aldrich	1838	1842
Captain	Jonathan	Clough	1843	1844
Captain	William	Scarborough	1844	1845
Captain	Jerome	Bennett	1845	1846
Captain	Walter	Bates	1846	1850
Captain	Jonathan	Clough	1851	1852
Captain	Walter	Bates	1852	1872
Captain	Cyrus	Read	1874	
Captain	Randolph	Chandler	1876	1877
Captain	Horace	Morse	1877	1879
Captain	William	Bates	1879	1880
Captain	George	Ballard	1888	1892
Captain	Worthy	Garish	1893	1894
Captain	Frank	Bates	1894	1895
Captain	George	Ballard	1895	1896
Captain	John	Ballard	1896	1902
Captain	Charles	Knight	1903	
Captain	Harry	Coman	1911	1912
Captain/Foreman	Fred	Herrick	1912	1932
Captain/Chief	James	Elliott	1937	1959
Chief	Alfred	Broughton	1960	1966
Chief	Ray	Robbins	1967	1968
Chief	Robert	Reynolds	1969	1977
Chief	Charles	Spahl	1978	1979
Chief	Warren	Reynolds	1980	1992
Chief	Douglas	Langer	1993	1999
Chief	Louis	Lane	2000	2005
Chief	Douglas	Langer	2006	2007

Notable members in the 19th century.

Ellen Larned's book *The History of Windham County* and her notes *Thompson fires and fire engine* provides some background information on these early members.

Captain William Jordan

He was the village blacksmith and "*a stalwart, sociable man ...and must have been very efficient and popular*" but he is only recorded as a member for one year. "The company was very popular and took in all the young men and some older ones."

Captain Vernon Stiles

Captain Vernon Stiles and his wife were leading members of the community. "*Captain Stiles could rule with authority,*" wrote Ellen Larned. He was a Justice of the Peace and, as the minutes show, an excellent host to the Fire Company at their suppers. The title Captain was an honorary

form of address often assumed by leaders of a community at this time. He acquired the Inn in 1831 and with fellow businessmen on the hill he was active in obtaining "a good fire engine" He was elected Captain of the newly chartered Company in 1838 and played a leading role in the Company for many years. His investment in the formation of a Fire Engine Company has paid off many times over the years. Captain Stiles claimed that "*more stage passengers dined there every day than at any other house in New England.*"⁵⁸ According to Ellen Larned he was a genial host and a graceful speaker. "His bar room was the headquarters of the Democratic Party" then powerful in the town. Later, when several former drunkards signed the pledge, Captain Stiles "closed his bar and made his popular tavern a temperance house."⁵⁹ This left only one drinking-place in the area -- known as the "ponog" (a place for firewater) this was situated on the western side of the common. It is not recorded whether any members of the Company owned, operated or used this establishment. By 1850 it had been bought out and closed down.

Secretary Edward Shaw

Edward Shaw was the first treasurer of the Company after its incorporation in 1837. When Jeremiah Olney resigned, Edward Shaw became Clerk/Secretary as well. In all he served the Company for 16 years and in 1855 became the first librarian of the Company and thus of the town. He came from Providence in 1830 to establish a jeweler's business in Center Village, as Thompson Hill was known at that time. Again, according to Ellen Larned, this was "a very great novelty and attraction" with the girls. Men came from miles around to buy timepieces or to have them regulated. Initially when the library was formed it was located above his place of work. He had distinctive copper plate handwriting and kept meticulous records in the books of minutes.

Captain William S. Scarborough

The first lawyer known to have become a member was William Scarborough from Brooklyn. From 1842 to 1846 he served as first lieutenant, then as Captain and finally as the Secretary of the Company.

Captain Walter Bates. (1817-1891)

Walter Bates was a founder member of the Company and its Captain from 1846 to 1850 and again from 1852 to 1873, a total of 27 years. Before this he served as Second Lieutenant from 1839 to 1841 and was First Lieutenant in 1845. He was a cabinetmaker specializing in coffins and chairs. He was also built two houses on the hill, one in 1839 and another in 1840. In 1852, a time of trouble for the Company, he brought it back to life and made it endure. His tenure covered the period of the Civil War. In addition to serving the community as a fireman he was a deputy sheriff and constable⁶⁰. The Bates name is first recorded in the West Thompson cemetery thus "Cap Issachar Bates who died Ag 29th 1795 in his 60th year." Several members of the Bates family belonged to the Fire Company after Walter. The name Bates also appears on the lists of 1st. Selectmen of Thompson from the 18th century through to the 20th century.

Members of the Company known to have served in the Civil War

Nathan Chase	Gilbert Eaton	Dr. John McGregor	George Server
Nelson Dagget	Dr. Lowell Holbrook	John Perrin	*William Beebe

The plaque set onto a granite slab on the common records the names of 235 men of Thompson who served in the Civil War. Not all of them were casualties and there are 28 veterans buried in

⁵⁸ Ellen Larned "*History of Windham County*" first published in 1880. Quotation taken from the Bicentennial edition published by The Pequot Press, Chester, CT 1976, Volume II, Page 535.

⁵⁹ Ibid. page 538.

⁶⁰ Lincoln, Allen B. pge. 305 "*A modern history of Windham County Connecticut*" The S.J.Clarke publishing Company, Chicago 1820.

the Wilsonville Cemetery alone. Eight Thompson Fire Engine Company members are known to have served in the Civil War. Seven went from Thompson and another veteran* joined later when he moved to the town after the war. There are twenty men on the list who came from the same family as members of the Company.

Dr. McGregor stayed behind to look after the wounded after the first battle at Bull Run (known as Mannassas to the Confederates). He was captured and returned to Thompson 14 months later a changed man. Perhaps Dr. Holbrook is the most notable. He served as a Captain Surgeon with the 18th Connecticut regiment. He enlisted in 1862 and stayed with them until the peace. He and Nathan Chase of the same regiment were taken prisoner at the battle of Winchester but were exchanged. The photograph of Dr. Holbrook taken after the war makes him seem rather dour but he would have been badly needed and must have seen horrible carnage following the many battles where he was on duty. Dr. Holbrook went on to be elected to be representative in the Connecticut General Assembly and President of the Connecticut Medical Society ⁶¹.

Nathan Chase also returned to active duty but later his left leg was shattered in the battle of Snicker's Ford while crossing of the Shenandoah River. Dr. Holbrook attended Nathan Chase so that he was able to return to his farm on Chase Road after the war. There is a picture of a cheerful Nathan with his wife and two grandchildren. One of them, Allen "Sonny" Reynolds, became a member of the Company when he grew up. Gustavus Davis Bates went to war from North Grosvenordale but he is not listed as a Company member. It is recorded⁶² that his father, possibly Walter Bates, tried to stop him. Major William Sully Beebe is recorded in the minutes as a member of the Company in 1879. He lived in the Mason house by the common and his biography⁶³ catalogues his heroism and enterprise in the Civil War. There is an old postcard in the Thompson Historical Society's collection that shows Major Beebe with his family and Ellen Larned.

Doctors who were members or supporters.

As noted above, in the 19th century Doctors Holbrook, Hosford and McGregor were members. In the 20th century Dr. Paine, the highly respected general practitioner who lived on Thompson Hill although not a member was a generous benefactor. **Dr. John Meyer**, the Head of Pathology at Day Kimball Hospital was a member and provided medical advice and free blood pressure checks to the Company. Dr. Goyette and Dr. Waldron both provided their services on occasion.

Members who paid for and designed Thompson's first public library

In 1898, thanks to Ellen Larned's efforts, there was enough support in Thompson to raise the funds to build the new library that was completed in 1902. The principal donor was the Honorable Elisha Slade Converse⁶⁴, a descendant of the first settler of Thompson. He gave \$3,000 towards the \$5,000, that was needed. Although he was born in Woodstock, he married and moved to Thompson to set up business. He is recorded as being a member of the Company prior to 1850. He prospered and moved to Malden, Massachusetts 1844. **Joseph Gay** was chosen as the architect. He is also recorded as being a member of the Company in 1852 and was probably related to Ellen Larned's uncle Benjamin J. Gay who was one of the original proprietors in 1832.

Churchmen who were members

The formidable Reverend Daniel Dow was listed as a founder of the Company. A graduate of Yale and a staunch Congregationalist, he was renowned for his outspoken views on Baptism and

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Unpublished Civil War memoirs of Amos Bartlett of Webster Massachusetts courtesy of Linda Montfort.

⁶³ *Windham County, Connecticut History* based on Bayles, Richard M., *History of Windham County, Connecticut*,; New York: W.W. Preston, 1889

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Methodism. He knew everyone in Town and did not hesitate to expiate on their past faults in funeral orations. Several members of the Company have been deacons of the Congregational church and the first of note is Moses Bixby who joined in 1846. **Elijah Crosby**⁶⁵, who was a founder member in 1837, had helped set up the first Sunday school. In 1852 the Reverend Andrew Dunning became a member and was active in directing the affairs of the Fire Engine Company library if not the direction of a hose jet. **Valentine Ballard** (1804-1898) a farmer, was deacon of the Baptist Church for fifty years. In the 20th century the Reverend **David Landry** joined in 1953, Reverend Herbert Pickett attended meetings in 1970 although he is not recorded as a member. The Reverend Randall Ferrara joined in 1972 and was appointed the Company's chaplain.

President, Vice President and Boards of Trustees and Engineers.

There was discussion in November 1959 about operating administrative tasks on a rotating shift basis. Dick Mead Sr. who made the motion evidently felt some division of labor was needed. No action was taken. But at the following Annual General Meeting of December 1960 the office of President and Vice President were added to the list of nominations together with nominees for members of a Board of Trustees and a Board of Engineers serving three years two years and one year respectively. Frank Cooney has the honor of being the first member of the Company to be elected its President. The Engineers report at every meeting and it is apparent that, once motorized equipment was acquired, keeping the fire trucks serviceable has been a major enterprise. Fortunately, the Company has always had members who are able to carry out routine maintenance thus saving the Company considerable expense. Engineers and trustees are listed in a separate appendix.

Some members of note in the 20th century

It is difficult to single out all the past active members for inclusion. The Company has attracted many good men and women. In some cases, there is nothing to report except that which is recorded in the minutes. For example, Fred Herrick was Captain or Foreman from 1912 to 1932 and possibly to 1937 but there are no details or photographs to chronicle his 21-year or more span in office as the senior line officer. Following are a few brief details of members who have contributed to the continued well being of the Company.

Secretary James Ryan and Secretary James Ryan Jr.,

James Ryan joined in 1906 and was Secretary from 1911 to 1932. His son James Ryan Junior joined in 1936 and he was Secretary from 1944 to 1948 and treasurer from 1944 to 1951. Albert Bushey recalls that he lived across the road from the Picker Stick factory and was a carpenter who also carried out repairs around town. He at one time had Alfred Broughton and others working with him. After the Hurricane of 1938 the Ryans salvaged the slates torn from the Church roof and replaced them with shingles. As a result, young Jim Ryan's small cottage had a slate roof.⁶⁶

Chief James Elliott

The first listing for James Elliot appears in 1929. He was a carpenter and lived across the road from the present firehouse. In 1930 he was elected the Second Lieutenant and from 1937 to 1959, a span of 23 years he was Fire Chief. Afterwards he served as a trustee and was elected Fire Chief Emeritus January 1960. He died in 1984 after a 55-year relationship with the Company. From the photograph included here it is evident he enjoyed a good party. Under his leadership the Company acquired its first fire truck. He was in charge during the war years and was a guiding

⁶⁵ Elijah Crosby lived in the house now occupied by Company Secretary - Frank McGarry.

⁶⁶ The North Eastern Connecticut Oral History Project Interview with Allen Reynolds March 21, 1978. On file with the Thompson Public Library.

figure in setting up social functions. Jim Elliott was very well regarded and shares with Walter Bates the honor of keeping the Company active in difficult times.

Chief Alfred Broughton

Alfred Broughton joined in 1942 and was elected First Lieutenant in 1952, Second Lieutenant in 1956 and took over from Jim Elliot as Chief in 1959. He remained as Chief until 1966. He was instrumental in seeing that the Women's Auxiliary was set up. His school days friend, Albert Bushey, recalls that "he was a real, every-day square-shooter". Alfred ran a snowplow for the Town; he was a mechanic and was a sometime catcher at baseball.

Mary Broughton President of the Ladies' Auxiliary

The redoubtable Mary Broughton, wife of the late Fire Chief Alfred Broughton, was the first President of the Auxiliary and remained so for many years even after the loss of her husband. Her unwavering support for the Company is commemorated by a plaque on the wall in the Fire House. She ran whist drives and supervised the serving of the barbecues. She was a leader in setting up the Halloween parties and the Christmas parties for the children. Under her leadership the Company received many financial donations from the Auxiliary to help purchase new trucks or to fix up the fire house. When there was a serious fire that kept members on duty for prolonged periods, Mary and other members of the Auxiliary supplied sandwiches and coffee. For example, during the Congregational Church fire in 1987 the ladies ran a supply shuttle to the men at the scene and even down to the trucks at the water holes. No one starved and her carrot cake is remembered to this day.

Chief Ray Robbins

Ray joined in 1951 and was voted Assistant Chief from 1960 to 1967. After the death of Chief Alfred Broughton, he took over and served as Chief from 1967 to 1968.

Chief Robert Reynolds

Bob joined in 1948; he was voted Second Assistant Chief in 1956 and stayed in that capacity until he became Chief in 1969 to 1977.

Chief Charles Spahl

Charlie was a fixture at the Fire House from the day he joined in August 1945. He served as Treasurer from 1952 to 1964 and President in 1972. In 1973 he was elected First Lieutenant and remained in this capacity until he became Fire Chief in 1978 and again in 1979. Starting in 1952 he provided the Company's annual suppers and was renowned for his corned beef and cabbage. Fund raising was his specialty and in conjunction with West Thompson Fire Department for many years he managed the bingo or beano games that were held at the Speedway. Many members have fond memories of Charlie. The author was pleased to learn from him that those who were not yet American citizens could become members and promptly joined at the next meeting. Charlie worked for American Optical Safety Division in Putnam and as a result they made several donations of gloves, coats and safety hats to the Company. Tragically, he died of lung cancer in 1993. His only son David Spahl, a member of the Company, had succumbed to lung cancer in 1987. Posthumously Charles Spahl was named as the first recipient of the Roger Therrien Emergency Services Award at a ceremony honoring firefighters in the Town of Thompson. The commemorative plaque is in the Fire House.

Allen "Sonny" Reynolds

Another memorable and very well-regarded member of the Company was Allen "Sonny" Reynolds. He joined in 1948 and died in 1998. He served on the Board of Engineers 1960-68 and 1971-72. Sonny had an extensive knowledge of the history of the Town and the Company and would have been invaluable in preparing this history. His memoirs, taped in 1978, have been

quoted earlier. He was very active in Town affairs and was elected to the Board of Assessors in 1959 to a four-year term and was re-elected three more times. Like his brother Robert "Bob" he was a practical engineer and ran a welding shop from premises in Chase Road. Four generations in his family have served the Community beginning with Nathan Chase, the Civil War veteran. His brother, sons and grandsons became members and have served with distinction as line officers and board members for many years. I remember peeling potatoes for a barbecue and listening to opera with Sonny

Assistant Chief William Clark

Bill is the only member to have died in the course of his duty. He suffered a fatal heart attack at the door of the fire house when responding to an alarm in 1979. Bill joined the Company in 1962. He was elected and served as Treasurer 1965-66, First Lieutenant 1965, Captain 1965-68, Assistant Chief 1969 and Deputy Chief 1970-72. He had a mild heart attack in 1972 during the fire at the Vernon Stiles. Thereafter he became the training officer. Bill was a kind and gentle man and a good mentor to new members including the author. He was a carpenter and lived in the house now occupied by Dr. Hillman next to the old parsonage.

Treasurer Albert Bushey

Albert shares the distinction with Edward Shaw of having served in a clerical office for the longest period. After a he had had a few drinks at the Thompson Firemen's ball in 1964 Alfred and Mary Broughton had no trouble persuading him to join the Company. He later consented to be treasurer as a temporary measure - a period which lasted twenty years without a break from 1967 to 1986. Albert was born in Thompson on Quaddick road and spent the last 31 years of his working life with Connecticut Light and Power. He saw more than his fair share of fires in Essex County when he was one of the linesmen called in by the utility company to shut off the power. Al retired in 1972 to go fishing but was unable to do so because of his failing eyesight. An article on his recollections of bee hunting in Thompson was reproduced by the Thompson Historical Society in "Echoes of Thompson" Volume 2 published 2007.

Chief Warren Reynolds

Warren is credited with providing firm direction that saved the Congregational Church from destruction in 1987. In 2004 when his kidney was failing his friend and brother fireman, Chief Lou Lane, donated one of his and Warren was restored to health. Members of the Reynolds family have been major supporters of the Company over many years. Since they are related to Nathan Chase it can be claimed that four generations have been members of the Company. Warren became a member in 1969 and served as Chief from 1980 to 1992. In 2002 he was honored with the Roger Therrien Emergency Services Award.

Chief Louis Lane.

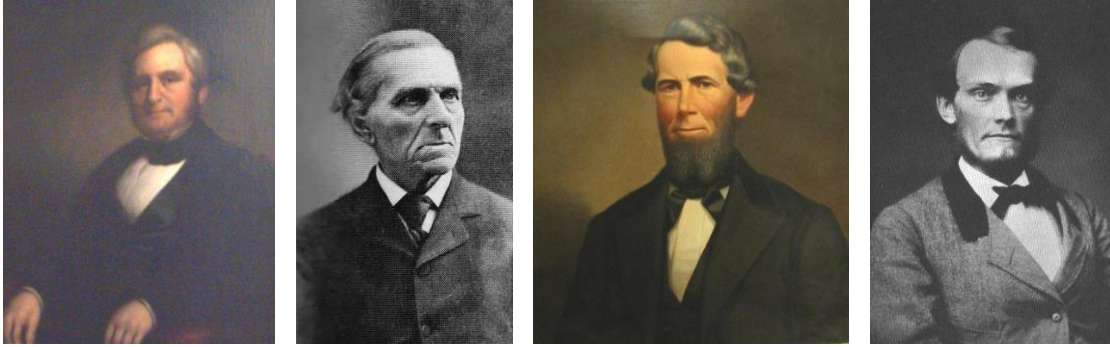
Lou joined in 1980 and served as an officer starting in 1987 prior to becoming Chief in 2000. He stepped down in 2005. He also was President of the Company from 1983 to 1986. In 2004 he was given the Roger Therrien Emergency Services Award in recognition of his services to the community and for his donation of a kidney to Warren Reynolds.

Chief Douglas Langer

Three generations of the Langer family have volunteered for service with the Company and they have a relationship to another member, Elbert Joslin (1927-1934), so that again four generations are linked to the Company. Carl Langer joined in 1947 and Doug Langer followed in his father's footsteps in 1970. Then his son Joe Langer, became a fireman in 1994 and his daughter Kelli joined in 2004. Doug became an officer in 1975 and later served as Chief from 1992 to 1999 and agreed to be elected again in 2006.

Thompson Fire Engine Company History

Members of the Company from the 19th. Century



L to R: Captain Vernon Stiles, Founder 1832, engine proprietor and second Captain, Dr. Lowell Holbrook, member 1852, library committee 1855, Surgeon Captain with 18th. Connecticut Regt. in the Civil War, Elisha Converse, member in 1850, principal benefactor for Thompson Library in 1898, Joseph Gay, member in 1852, benefactor and architect of the Thompson Library.

Recent Fire Chiefs



L to R: Jim Elliot, joined 1929, Chief 1937-1959. Alfred Broughton, joined 1942, Chief 1959 -1966. Raymond Robbins, joined 1951, Chief 1967-1968. Robert Reynolds, joined 1948, Chief 1969-1977.



L to R: Charles Spahl, joined 1945, Chief 1978-1979. Warren Reynolds, joined 1969, Chief 1980-1992. Louis Lane, joined 1980, Chief 200-2005. Douglas Langer, joined 1970, Chief 1992-1999 and 2006 to 2007.

Chapter 8: FIRE FIGHTING EQUIPMENT

1827: The original fire engine

The Thompson engine is a genuine antique and is now firmly believed⁶⁷ to have been made in Windsor, Vermont, probably on or after 1827, by the American Hydraulic Company to a rotary engine design patented by John Cooper in April of that year. Prior to this all engines were hand cranked and used pistons. In 2007 the engine is still in working condition Ellen Larned in her history called it “*that jaunty little engine.*” There were stories that at one or more musters the tub had been filled with beer and the handles rotated to distribute this welcome beverage. A restoration was carried out by a group of volunteers early in the 1960s and again in 1982 so that the tub could be exhibited and worked at musters. The original sign board proclaiming the age and identity of the truck was painted on canvas that disintegrated. A more complete provenance of the Company’s Cooper engine is given in the appendix.

Attempts to obtain “modern” fire engines

The tub was long recognized as having insufficient throwing power. In 1878 a meeting was held, possibly influenced by the 1875 and 1878 fires in Putnam, and it was “Voted to appoint a committee of five to take in consideration the purchasing of a new fire engine & report as soon as possible.” The committee reported back and at a special meeting their recommendations were adopted part of which follows--

“Where as; There is over \$100,000 invested in houses in District No. 4 as shown by the tax list of 1878. And

Where as; most of this property is situated in the thickly settled village of Thompson, & therefore liable to be destroyed by fire, and

Where as; the present fire engine belonging to the Thompson Fire Engine Company is [worthless?] the useful ness of said Company greatly impaired and

Where as; a Committee appointed by us having reported that in their opinion a good second hand engine can be bought for \$400 or less, therefore be it Resolved that we authorize said Committee to circulate a subscription paper to procure money to purchase a Fire Engine. Said engine to be property of said subscribers to said paper, but be leased to the Thompson Fire Engine Company, without rent as long as they maintain an efficient organization in accordance with the charter”

The money was not raised and nothing more about a new engine appears in the minutes for the next twenty years. The fire at Jacobs’s barn and house in 1898 brought home the need for action. The minutes record that the company had to rely on outside help and that a special meeting was called at the fire scene where it was “Voted to proceed to buy a Steam Fire Engine with the necessary Hose and other necessary articles with a provision of water to supply said steamer. Providing that money can be raised to pay for same. (A unanimous vote was carried)”

The appeal for funds again failed.

Steamers were expensive to maintain. For example, in 1917 Putnam fire department and town officials debated whether to get a horse-drawn steamer or to buy a motorized engine for \$3,500. The newspaper of the day⁶⁸ stated that a steamer would require that two horses be kept on hand at all times and that they had to be cared for, fed and stabled. The cost of this amounted to over \$700 per year. Instead, they bought a truck that carried a chemical engine. In 1917 the Thompson Fire Engine Company voted to purchase water pails and axes.

⁶⁷ The provenance of the engine and a copy of the 1928 sales circular describing the engine is incorporated a separate appendix.

⁶⁸ *The Windham County Observer* January 17, 1917.

1915 Chemical fire fighting equipment

At a meeting January 1st 1915 it was voted to assume management and maintenance of the proposed chemical fire fighting equipment to be provided by the Thompson Village Improvement Society. This Society had formed in the late nineteenth century and was composed of local residents chiefly concerned with the beautification of the common and the provision of footpaths. Use of an engine not owned by the Company was an approach harking back to the days of the “proprietors.” The equipment was to be stored at a place provided by The Village Improvement Society. At the Baptist Church fire in 1917 it is reported that the two chemical engines were present and that they were owned by The Village Improvement Society. Minutes of that year imply that use of the extinguishers was shared because the chemical engines were lodged with the fire company officers. As late as 1937 the Company was taking care of these engines and paying for the chemicals necessary to keep them charged.

Motorized fire trucks

1938 The Maxim truck

By the 1930s the need for motorized equipment was obvious. The minutes for April 15, 1938 record that the company paid \$3,452.45 to the Maxim Fire Equipment Company of Middleboro, Massachusetts for a custom-made engine tanker using a Ford chassis with an 85 HP engine and carrying a 250-gallon water tank. The truck was delivered in July⁶⁹ and was the first motorized pumper in the Town of Thompson. Like many fire trucks of that time, it had an open cab and required acrobatic dexterity to prime the pump when water was to be sucked from a pond or well. Nevertheless, this engine could deliver a powerful stream of water, and although only 8,000 miles showed on the odometer when it was retired in 1985, the engine had many hours of pumping time at fires and drills. A local collector purchased the truck and has since restored it to pristine condition.⁷⁰ complete with the Company’s original logo.

1938 Forestry truck #2

At the same April 15 1938 meeting the Company voted to purchase a truck from Auger and Reynolds for \$700. In April 3rd 1939 this truck was painted and fitted with four Indian tanks loaned by Borrodale Farm. In 1943 the Company fitted a newly purchased portable pump onto this vehicle. A photograph of this vehicle is included.

1938 Buick touring car

In November 1938 a Buick touring car was adapted for forest fire fighting purposes. The amount paid is not recorded.

1955: Robinson fire truck.

The first closed-cab fire engine was purchased in 1955 to the Company’s specifications. This truck could carry 1,000 gallons of water to the fire scene with a nominal pumping rate 600 gallons per minute. This truck was replaced in 1985.

1971 Ford Oren Roanoke engine tanker

The specifications were drawn up by a committee appointed for the purpose and were put out to bid. The winner was a Hahn truck from Worcester Fire Equipment Co. The order was placed but the Worcester Company defaulted. The order was placed with the Gowans Knight Company in Virginia for an Oren-Roanoke truck. The Company appropriated \$22,588 plus 2% for incidentals. The truck was driven to Thompson but an oil leak was discovered before it reached the station in Thompson. Consequently, the truck had to be taken to Hartford twice before a satisfactory repair

⁶⁹ *The Windham County Observer*, July 19, 1938.

⁷⁰ Stanley Ciesla has restored the truck and it was displayed first on October 5, 2008 at the Thompson Community Day. Although painted in the original color new oak floor boards were needed and the wood was donated by Barrettes Lumber

was made to the leaking seal. The length of the “cab-over” engine design allowed the 1,000-gallon engine tanker to fit in the Fire House. Nominal pumping rate is 750 gallons per minute but in practice 1,000 gallons per minute is obtained. This truck was withdrawn from service in 2002 and later sold.

1985 FMC fire truck (in service 2006)

Rather than purchasing a new fire truck with custom specifications the Chief found that a line of “cab-over” engine tankers was being manufactured by FMC at a better price. The differences from the 1971 truck are minor. For example, there is only one electric 1 inch rubber hose drum versus two such covered drums on the 1971 truck. In April the Truck Committee recommended and the Company voted to procure additional options to the basic design. These were

1. A manual pump override @\$375
2. Swap a hard suction hose for a flexible hose @\$100
3. Add a rear tank fill and an additional 250-gallon water cap @\$600.

A letter appealing for support from the community raised \$9,906. There is picture of Treasurer Albert Bushey signing the documents to acquire this truck. He said it was the biggest check he had ever signed. In 1988 Treasurer Ed Luther, signed a check for \$40,943 to pay off the loan.

1959 Dodge Forest Fire truck

This was the first vehicle to have four-wheel drive, it has a front-mounted and can pump water from its 750-gallon tank while it is on the move. This vehicle was purchased from Oxford Fire Department in 1981 and although antiquated it has proved to be a rugged and serviceable. It has proven its worth many times over and is affectionately called “Fluffy”.

1988 Rescue truck

When the local volunteer fire companies became “first responders” it was necessary to procure and equip a rescue vehicle. An old converted ambulance van was purchased and refurbished in 1988 for \$4,500 and outfitted with medical aid items such as stretchers and defibrillators in addition to the chain saw and the Lucas tool considered equivalent to or superior to the well publicized - “*Jaws of life*.” This truck responds to medical emergencies and automobile accidents in addition to attending fires. This vehicle was retired in 2006

1995 Ford 450 Four-wheel drive rescue truck (in service 2006)

The first rescue vehicle was sold and replaced by this new rescue truck. The compartments were built to the Company’s specifications at a cost of \$68,000.

2002 New Freightliner engine tanker

The 1971 Oren engine tanker served the Company well for 31 years but required an increasing amount of maintenance. While the road miles were low the engine hours were high and with the normal rust, corrosion, wear and tear of components the truck was less reliable than it should be. On its 170th year of operation the Company acquired a new engine tanker at a cost of \$130,000 with another \$10,000 for equipment. Ferrara, in Louisiana, outfitted a Freightliner truck engine and chassis with a 1,250-gpm pump, thick-walled 1,000-gallon polythene tank and rugged aluminum framework. Shipmans in Connecticut provided the final fittings. This fire truck entered service in April 2002.

Other equipment and accessories

Hats and coats (Bunker gear)

Before impact resistant plastic became available firemen had leather helmets and the Company still has an example of one that was worn by the Chief. Stout hats protected the men from flying embers and debris and streams of hot water dripping from a burning structure. Protective clothing is essential to modern fire fighting but there have been periods in the Company’s history when

members fought fires in the clothes they were wearing at the time. This was the case at the Vernon Stiles Inn fire in 1972. Some of the recorded purchases of proper clothing and safety equipment are as follows.

- 1939 the company voted to buy coats, hats and boots from the American Raincoat Company of Marengo, Illinois.
- 1939 Voted to get a good white rain coat for the Chief at low cost.
- 1946 Charles Spahl reported that new helmets would cost \$6.40 to \$7.60 and boots were \$9.75 each. Jim Elliott thought he could do better and was instructed to purchase 9 helmets, 9 pairs of boots and 3 raincoats.
- 1953 “Charles Spahl volunteered to see about getting six new rain coats that are needed.”
- 1956 Demonstration of Scott Air Packs announced.
- 1964 Voted to buy three white helmets for Chiefs.

From 1973 onwards the Company has had good protective clothing and air breathing apparatus. In 2005 a FEMA grant provide funds to equip all members with new turn out gear.

Hoses

Hose for the 1832 engine was leather and needed to be dried and oiled after use. Purchases and care of hose are recorded in the minutes. The capacity of hose varies as the square of the diameter. Thus, modern 5-inch hose can provide 2 ½ times more water than a 3-inch hose. Some of the references to hose care and purchases that are to be found in the minutes follow.

- 1851 “found the long hose very much out of repair.”
- 1948 2,000 feet of forestry fire hose ordered.
- 1949 Voted to buy 500 feet of 2 ½ inch hose @ \$1.42/ft. and 200 feet of 1 ½ inch hose @ \$1.00/ft.
- 1956 Purchased 250ft of 1 ½ inch nylon hose, two lengths of 2 ½ inch hose and “500 ft. of forestry hose costing \$125.00.”
- 1964 Hose bids \$1.35 and \$1.45 per foot.
- 1965 Voted to buy 300 feet of new 2 ½ hose.
- 1971 The Company approved the installation of 300 feet booster hose, 500 feet 1 ½ inch double jacket hose, 500 feet 2 ½ inch double booster hose, one deluge gun.
- 1983 Voted to buy 600 feet of 1 ½ in. fully jacked polyester hose.
- 1987 Voted to buy a good garden hose on the advice of Lou Lane [– not for fire fighting!]
- 1992 Voted to buy 1,500 feet of 5-inch hose @\$5.10/ft. With 3-way distribution valves and gated relief valve the total cost is \$8,900.

Currently the Company has a range of hose including durable 5-inch hose suitable for high volume though put in a long relay line from a water hole.

Alarm systems

The technology for sounding the alarm and communicating with other firemen and fire departments has improved. In 1832 ringing the church bell sounded the alarm. This meant that to be an effective member of the Company it was necessary to work and live within the sound of the bell. It is surmised that this audible range defined the “district”. Members who did not live in the district were “*voted out*” or “*dropped*”. By 1898 ringing the church bell was thought to be too slow or too confusing and it was voted to hit it with a hammer in the future. Reference to the use of a telephone does not appear until 1942 but the minutes from 1900 to 1935 are lacking in detail. The first reference to radios comes in 1952. Before that the telephone operator at the exchange in Putnam played a key role.

The progressive improvements in fire alarms, as noted in the minutes, are as follows.

- 1898 Special meeting at John Jacobs house and barn after a fire. “Voted to strike the tolling of hammer to church bell instead of ringing as before.”

Thompson Fire Engine Company History

- 1939 The audibility of the ¼ HP siren (which cost \$40) was tested prior to the meeting in order to obtain approval from the insurance underwriters.
- 1942 a telephone was installed in the firehouse.
- 1942 a telephone call system for members was introduced.
- 1952 A new alarm system was initiated. A telephone company dispatcher operated the siren systems for Thompson Hill, West Thompson and Quinebaug. The Town paid the cost of \$2,000.
- 1952 Radio communication to fire trucks was introduced from a center in Putnam. Later the North East was served by Quinebaug Valley Emergency Communications in Danielson.
- 1955 A meeting at North Grosvenordale was announced to instruct members on the use of radios. "It was suggested that headphones be put on the truck because when the pump is running it is difficult to hear the speaker."
- 1959 Received \$750 grant from Town. New two-band radios to be on fire trucks by 1960.
- 1973 Chief has two-way radio installed in his car.
- 1976 the 911 call system was introduced.
- 1978 It was reported that a new radio for the 1955 Robinson truck will cost \$1,250 installed plus about \$500 to change over to 12volt system. Six-volt systems are no longer manufactured.
- 1987 It was noted that high-band radios will be needed soon.

By the 1980s "Bearcat" and similar receiving scanners were used in firemen's homes to broadcast signals of fire alarms much to the annoyance of some wives. Later Motorola voice pagers became available that could be tuned to receive all alarms or only those for the Company. These pagers could be clipped to a belt. After 2001 a FEMA grant was used equip all firemen with clip on Alpha pagers that not only give an audible warning but display and retain all the essential information concerning an alarm. Portable two-way radios are now issued to line officers and fire police and these too have increased in sophistication.

Fireman's speaking trumpet

Among the Company's memorabilia is a silver speaking trumpet. Fire fighting was once a noisy, very labor-intensive activity with lots of people trying to help; some passing buckets of water and returning the empties, some rescuing possessions from the fire and others just getting in the way. The chief needed a speaking trumpet to tell the firemen what to do. The Connecticut Fireman's Historical Society newsletter is called "The Trumpet" and uses one as its logo.

Blue lights

In 1950 Connecticut firefighters were first authorized to use flashing blue lights on their vehicles when responding to a fire. From time to time the Chief had to remind firemen not to drive recklessly to the fire and on one occasion he also advised they should not speed when going home from a fire either. In 1956 Chief Robbins stated that the "speed limit for 1956 [1955 truck] was 35 mph."

Water supply

June 3rd 1939 it was decided to list all sources within a two-mile limit. Again in 1949 all water holes were surveyed and marked on the map hanging in the Fire House. Examples of other references to water supplies follow.

- 1947 The Chief noted that "the grounds at Thompson Hill Manor were burned over in return for permission of the Fire Company to use the water supply on the manor grounds to fill the booster tank etc."
- 1965 "the State will pay up to \$100 for a water hole if a landowner makes an application"

Water rescue equipment

The Company's district includes several lakes and ponds. In 1999 the minutes record that " Ed Stevens spoke on the creation of a team of divers for water search and rescue work". The bylaws were changed to allow the creation of a dive and water rescue team and to allow the Chief to appoint a Rescue Captain. Water proof rescue suits have been procured with the necessary ropes and other equipment. Joint training exercises have been held with other fire departments under the direction of Ed Stevens, the Company's Rescue Captain These exercises include hauling "victims" from cold water after a fall through the ice. As an extra measure of realism one such exercise took place at night under the glare of floodlights from the rescue truck while temperatures plunged into the low twenties.

Chapter 9: PARADES AND MUSTERS

Parading and mustering

Some volunteer fire companies in other parts of Connecticut make an annual practice of attending parades on special occasions including Memorial Day and Independence Day. These Companies have smart uniforms and their fire trucks are purchased with intention of using them as parade vehicles as well as for fighting fires. The Thompson Fire Engine Company is not like that. There have been times when uniforms have been worn while members marched and the Company has sent its vehicles to be driven in Putnam with the trucks from some of the other fire departments in Windham County. The Company has even crossed the border into Massachusetts for an occasional parade in Webster. On the whole these events are spasmodic and not annual. After a busy brush fire season with trucks that have regularly been up to their axles in mud – parading is not a priority. There have been times when the spirit has moved the Company to march or ride in a display of patriotism or pride in community. Those instances that are recorded in the minutes and, or in the newspaper accounts are listed here. Equally the younger Company members have been moved by a competitive urge to demonstrate their prowess at musters. These appear to have run in cycles – for example they attended and were successful in a series of musters in the 1980s. Again, attendance at musters has not been an annual affair. Rallies involving antique fire engines have also been a temptation for the Company to appear and win prizes offered for the oldest manually operated fire apparatus. The tub does well at such functions. Nowadays the tub is retired, gathering dust in a corner of the old Town Hall in custody of the Thompson Historical Society.

September 28th. 1895, Putnam's Parade

The company received an invitation and on September 21st 1895 voted not to attend. There was a change of heart and on September 24th 1895 they did decide to go

September 1st July 1899, Webster's Parade,

July 27th *"A special meeting was held to see if the co. would go to Webster. Voted to go. Committee of arrangements Foreman Mr. Ohara and Mr. Backus. Voted to levie[?] Thompson Band to go for \$20 or \$25. Voted to purchase shirts & caps adjourned for 2 weeks"*

August 11th *"Arrangements completed for going to Webster Sept 1st".* An account of this parade is given in "The Monthly Record Volume IV, Number 10, published in Thompson, September 1899⁷¹ and this states that *"It was their first appearance in red shirts and white caps. The engine, bearing the date 1837, attracted much attention. This engine is said to be the oldest in use in the United States. The Vernon Stiles Band accompanied the Company, in their new uniforms, and all presented a fine appearance."*

September 3rd 1900 Putnam's Parade,

August 14th *"The Company voted to go to the Putnam parade. September 14th "The co. attended the Putnam Fire muster and enjoyed a good time."*

1901, Danielson Muster

August 4th *"The Company voted to attend a muster in Danielson".*

September 14th 1935, Southbridge Fire Department Muster.

Evidently the Company attended this muster and a copy of the program is included

July 13th 1941, Thompson Muster

A newspaper account of this muster is included in the picture section of this chapter. What is perhaps more interesting is the page from the same paper giving news of the Nazi invasion of Russia and the German bombardment of the South Coast of England following an air raid on Bremen by the Royal Air Force. The muster, held at the Speedway, was the largest gathering in North East Connecticut for 25 years. The Governor gave an address and there was a parade. Thompson Fire Engine Company sponsored the event together with the West Thompson, North

⁷¹ Copy of this newsletter is held in the archives of the Thompson Public Library.

Thompson Fire Engine Company History

Grosvenordale and Quinebaug Fire Companies. The Thompson tub was on display. Perhaps more impressive was the demonstration of the horse-drawn General Putnam Steamer. The boiler was fired and a good stream of water was projected. A picture of this equipment is also included.

July 2, 1946, Thompson and West Thompson Firemen's Association

The program for this event is in the Company archives and the program cover is reproduced in the photo section.

1976, Thompson Fireman's Bi-Centennial Parade

As the oldest fire company in the town and in the State Thompson Fire Engine Company had the honor of leading the parade of fire fighting vehicles along Route 12 starting at the old Cluett Peabody mill. The 1938 truck in front was driven by the President of the Company for that year -- a member who had not yet acquired American citizenship.

June 27 1982, Quinebaug Volunteer Fire Department Muster and others.

The Norwich Bulletin published a picture showing the enthusiasm and energy of three members of the Company. The Company came first in the bucket race and was judged first overall. Second place awards were received for the Mystery Race, the Reverse Race and the Bed Race. The Company's attendance at celebrations and trophies won at musters from 1976 on as determined from the trophies on display in the Fire House have been inventoried. A news cutting from the Village Crier records the performance of a parade of antique fire engines in Merrimack New Hampshire in which the Company participated and came in fourth in the pumping division with a throw of 81 feet.

Chapter 10. THOMPSON LIBRARIES

The first library in Thompson 1855-1898

The following transcript is taken from the 1852-1878 Book of minutes of the Thompson Fire Engine Company. It shows that there was solid support by the Fire Company members to use the funds that the company had accrued from a \$25 reward from the local Insurance Company and from fines paid by members for absenteeism at meetings. First the company voted to establish a committee to report on the founding of a library. When the committee reported back they established the by-laws for a library association. The long-term objective was to open the library up for use by the general public. There was a membership fee of \$10 or of books and cash of equal value.⁷²

Extract from the minutes of a special meeting of the company January 4th 1855

"The Company met January 4th 1855 agreeable to adjournment and voted to expend the funds of the Company in the purchase of a Library provided such arrangements can be made for the keeping of the books and the management of the library as shall be satisfactory to the Company a committee of eight were then chosen viz Joseph B Gay T E Graves Esq. Dr. Lowell Holbrook W^m H Chandler Rev A Dunning Erastus Knight Stephen Crosby Silas N Aldrich. For the purpose of procuring a list of books to lay before the Company at a future meeting. The meeting was adjourned to meet at the office of T E Graves Esq. on Monday January 15th at 6 O'clock PM"

Two weeks later the committee returned and at a special meeting of the Fire Company made their findings known to the members. The transcript from the minutes follows.

"..The Committee appointed on the Library matter then made report of a list of books they would recommend to be purchased and also that Mr. Shaw would keep the Library over [the shop?] at his store without charge and then voted, that the funds on hand, or that may be contributed under any rules adopted for a Library shall be expended on Books"

Then voted as follows

The members of the Thompson Fire Engine Company do form themselves into a Library operation in addition to being a Fire Engine Company and do agree upon the following articles

- 1 Every member of the fire company may enjoy use of the library on complying with the rules of the same.*
- 2 Any person giving \$10 in cash or Books or both shall be a member of this Library Company & receive a certificate of such fact from the Library Committee & so shall be entitled to vote in person. or by proxy in all Library meetings & may take Books on the same terms as members of the Fire Company said right to be transferable for 6 months, or any longer term if transfer lodged with & recorded by the Librarian.*
- 3 The Books of the Library shall not be sold unless transferred to form part of some other Library to be kept in the Center village in Thompson⁷³ & open with suitable regulations to public use.-*
- 4 The officers of this association shall be a Presiding Officer who shall be President of the Fire Company, a Library Committee of 8[?] who shall ... with the present funds of the Fire Company and any received for shares or fines. & that [?] & purchase books for*

⁷² Tillen, Ron "History of the Thompson library" 2002 Unpublished pamphlet Thompson Historical Society

⁷³ This provision anticipates the formation of some other public libraries such as the Thompson Library Incorporated which was to follow in later years.

Thompson Fire Engine Company History

the Library, grant certificates of membership they accepting & appraising all books offered towards shares – They shall cover all books with good brown paper & paste printed copies of the By laws inside the covers & shall have the General control of the library & make their report of their doings to the Annual meeting – Then shall also be a librarian who shall loan the Books & keep a record at all times of taking & returns – of fines imposed & money received. & produce his record for inspection at the annual meeting –He shall record all certificates of shares & transfers of the same & pay over any funds in his hands to the Library Committee on their written order

- 5 The officers shall hereafter be chosen annually at the time and place of the meeting of the Fire Company and its Secretary shall be secretary of the Library Association and the officers shall hold till others are elected in their places*
- 6 The following are adopted as Bylaws to regulate the Library and may be altered at any annual meeting or any special meeting called by the Library Committee for the purpose”*

The minutes then go on to state the by-laws as follows

- Art “Every member of the Company may enjoy the privileges of the library under the rules*
- 1 & regulations from time to time adopted without any fees-*
 - 2 Any person not a member of the Company may enjoy the privileges of taking books on payment of one dollars annually or fifty cents semi annually⁷⁴*
 - 3 No person shall take from the library more than two books at a time, nor hold them over two weeks without a renewal of taking: nor then, if any person in writing shall have notified a desire to take out the Book*
 - 4 In case Books are not returned within the time prescribed a fine of one cent a day per volume shall be paid*
 - 5 If any member have a family books may be read by his or her family but not lent: any member not having a family shall not lend any book taken under penalty of a fine of twenty five cents in either case*
 - 6 Any Book being injured or lost the taker shall if injured pay the sum fixed by the librarian or replace the book or pay the value of the book to be fixed by the librarian*
 - 7 The Librarian shall let no person have a book while he is indebted to the library*
 - 8 The library shall be open for the taking & return of books between the hours of 2 & 5 pm on Wednesday and 6 & 8 pm on Saturday: and it shall not be this duty of the librarian⁷⁵ to serve members at any other time.*

Then[?] voted and chose Rev. A Dunning, TE Graves & L Holbrook Library Committee

Then voted & chose Edward Shaw Librarian

Then on a motion dissolved this meeting

A true record

Attest”

The by-laws were later printed by Spalding’s Print of West Killingly and appear on the inner cover or first page of every book. A copy of the 1859 catalog listing the books that the committee chose is held in the archives of the Thompson Public Library. This catalog is reproduced a separate appendix to this history. The 1859 library consisted of 277 volumes. The titles indicate that biographies were popular along with Sir Walter Scott’s novels and books on travel. Note here

⁷⁴ They seemed to have changed their minds. Initially they were looking for a \$10 membership fee although the inference was that this was a one-time payment, equivalent to a ten-year subscription as the By-laws now state.

⁷⁵ Edward Shaw evidently had a store in town and was prepared, without pay, to look after the library. It is supposed that his store would be open at the times stated and that the traffic was not too onerous.

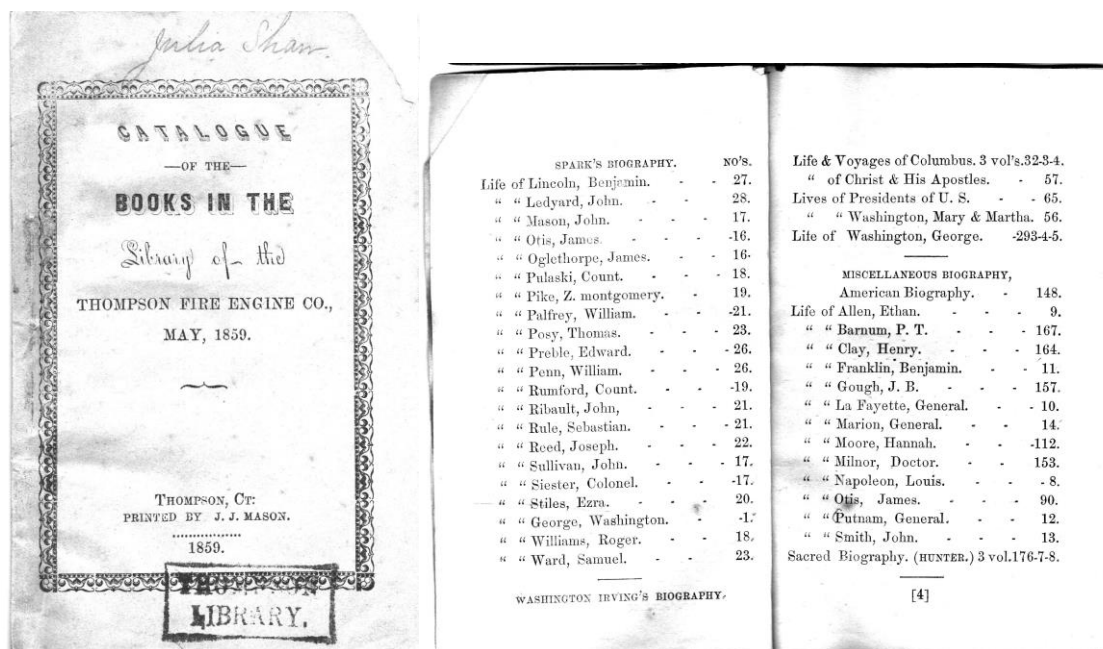
is further proof that Thompson firemen were literate and well-read at a time when many people in other parts of the country and in European countries could not read or write.

The minutes record that the books were once kept above the store of the first librarian, Edwin Shaw, the jeweler. More recently some of these books were stored in the 1842 vintage Town Hall but they were moved to the library building when it became a repository for the archives of the Thompson Historical Society in the 1990s. Among the surviving copies is a book published in 1845 by Lewis Colby 122 Nashua Street Boston entitled *Domestic slavery*. This consists of a correspondence between The Rev. Richard Fuller and The Rev. Francis Wayland in which the biblical justification for slavery is explained. This would contrast with the sentiments explicit in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which was also listed in the library catalog of 1859.

There is one account⁷⁶ that the Fire Company sold the library to the highest bidder in 1890. There is no mention of this in the minutes for that year. More significantly the secretary and treasurer were filling the post of librarian up to 1898. The Thompson Library Incorporated started that year and Ellen Larned⁷⁷ gives credit to the Company for their donation of books. She also refers to the Company's service to the community for provision of a library service from 1855 to 1898. The bulk of the money to pay for the new library came from Elisha Converse and the architect was Joseph Gay. Both were former members of the Company.

Many of the original books from the library are kept in the Ellen Larned Museum. Most retain their hand made brown paper protective covers. Some appear to have been donated one or two bear the flyleaf signature of William H. Mason the mill owner who lived in the house on the common that was built in 1845.

1855: The first library in Thompson



⁷⁶ Allen Reynold's brief history of the Fire Company.

⁷⁷ Ellen Larned's address at the opening of the new library building in 1901. An original is retained in the Thompson Historical Society collection and a digitized copy is included here.

Left: Cover of the “Catalogue of the books in the library of the Thompson Fire Engine Co., May 1859.” Note at the top there is the handwritten name “Julia Shaw” – probably the wife of the Company’s first librarian, Edward Shaw, a jeweler who ran the library from a room above his shop on Thompson Hill.

Right: Two pages from the catalog listing showing some of the 277 books in the collection.



Ellen Larned, the historian and a good friend of the Company, is on the left in this picture. In 1898, she led the move to establish Thompson Library Incorporated to which the Company’s book collection was donated. The man in the foreground is Major Beebe, a civil war hero and a member of the Company.

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Thompson Fire Engine Company History

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Chapter 11. EPILOGUE

The Company held a celebration at noon on July Fourth, 2007 in front of the Vernon Stiles Inn - exactly one hundred and seventy-five years after its original organization. Members had hauled the old fire engine, "the tub", up from the station for the occasion. The First Selectman gave a speech as his predecessor may have done all those years ago. The Secretary of the Company, like all those before him who had meticulously recorded affairs of the Company in the books of minutes, responded reminding the audience that volunteers from the Company had saved the adjacent church and inn amongst many buildings over its long history. It was a Norman Rockwell event. The hatch to the well of the tub was opened and a bottle of champagne and one of whisky were found to be concealed. A toast to the Company was given with the hope that another one hundred and seventy-five years of service lay ahead.

On September 11, 2001 people became very aware of the contribution made to society by the emergency services. Nothing can or should detract from the memory of the selfless bravery shown by the New York Fire Department and their compatriots in the Police and Emergency Medical Services on that day. Nevertheless, it should be recognized that the members of volunteer fire departments in small communities like Thompson also stand ready to serve and risk their lives. Without massive skyscrapers ranked in city blocks, the dangers from terrorism are not so great but they are proportionate. All fires are potentially life threatening and a fire in one of the schools, the mills or churches could be very dangerous for emergency service volunteers.

The men and women of the Thompson Fire Engine Company, together with members of the other fire departments in Thompson study, practice and drill to be prepared for any emergency. They have to be ready to turn out in the middle of the night in a blinding blizzard or a howling gale to fight a fire, render aid to automobile accident victims, attend the sick or injured. That is what being a "first responder" means. These members are not paid and if they were the cost would be a heavy burden for a small town to bear. The State and Federal Government mandate that the same safety procedures, training and equipment that apply to paid firemen, paramedics and Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) in large cities also apply to volunteer firefighters and EMTs in small communities. This is as it should be although the bureaucracy can sometimes be very irksome. Some regulations are not appropriate for a small group of volunteers in a small town.

Fire fighting equipment is expensive. Fund raising events, such as chicken barbecues, raise only a small part of the funds needed. If the Thompson Fire Engine Company is to continue to serve it must be supported. It is not enough that there must there be a body of good men and women prepared to spend hundreds of hours in training and ready to accept the risks. The community as a whole must do its share. To be successful a volunteer fire company must have the appreciation, encouragement and financial support of those it seeks to aid. Volunteerism is an American tradition. The willingness of neighbor to help neighbor in time of need is a core strength of this country. Thompson Fire Engine Company has provided volunteer fire protection to its district and surrounds for one hundred and seventy-five years. It is a proud and worthy tradition that deserves to be continued. It should be remembered when there is a life and property-threatening incident due to fire, storm, accident or a terrorist attack those neighbors who are volunteer firefighters and EMTs will be there to do their best to help.

Thompson Fire Engine Company History

Thompson Fire Engine Company Incorporated
*Celebration of the one hundred and seventy fifth anniversary of their organization
at the Vernon Stiles Inn, July 4, 2007.*



Back row L to R: Keith Mathon, Richard Asal Sr., Brian Walker, Chief Doug Langer, President Rhonda LaGasse, Joe Langer, Shanon Grauer, Jason Pelletier, Kelli Langer, Karl Langer, Gavin Paquette, Wayne Newcombe.

Front row L to R: Secretary Frank McGarry, Aaron McGarry, Matthew Grauer, Lou Lane, Ron Tillen, Robert Rogers.



Left: Hauling “the tub” up to the Inn for the celebration. Right: Members preparing for the anniversary toast

Chapter 12. ILLUSTRATIONS OF FIRES AND EMERGENCIES

Mill fire companies in Thompson



The photograph above was taken in 1902 and shows the old fire house next the Cluett Peabody mill in North Grosvenordale. The building is draped in mourning following the assassination of President McKinley. The news paper cutting on the right describes the destruction of this Fire House in 1982.



The picture above shows members of one of the mill companies. Chemical fire engines were popular before motorized units were introduced. There was also a steam powered fire pump that was stationed in Grosvenordale but this was swept away in the flood of 1955.

Landmark destroyed by fire

THOMPSON — A landmark is gone.

The original "Cluett Fire Department," once housed in a two story, frame building built on a spit of land between the French River and the tail race of the Cluett Mills, was destroyed by fire early last Thursday morning.

The building housed Fire Company "B" of the sister fire companies, in identical buildings. "A" was in Grosvenordale; "B" in North Grosvenordale.

Boy Scouts met in the hall above the fire equipment. The American Legion called the hall 'home' until the purchase of the Grosvenordale school house gave the legion a permanent meeting place.

The fire companies re-organized community built a new structure.

The property, built by the mill for its own protection, reverted to the company.

The Company B firehouse became a storage shed.

Different industries used the mill buildings — and the adjacent storage over the years.

Then, last week — it burned.

"Structural damage beyond repair," diagnosed the town's building officer, Fred Wojik. A very real threat existed of having the damaged building and its contents fall into the river channel.

Wojik moved quickly. The building was demolished and the remnants removed in a short 36 hours. The contractor was hired by the town, but the expense will be reimbursed by the building's owners. The lot was graded level and a chain link fence erected.

The triangle of land between the canal and the river is shady and, empty.

(Photographs and cutting reproduced from the Thompson Historical Society

Millennium CD Project 20001 Vol.. 1 and 3.)



OLD CHURCH BURNED

Central Baptist of Thompson Totally
Destroyed Saturday Afternoon

Was Built About 1835, 'Vernon Styles
Hand Tub, 1827, Did Good Work

Loss Estimated at \$10,000. Insurance
\$6,000

The Central Baptist church of Thompson, on Thompson Hill, was totally destroyed by fire, Saturday afternoon. The loss is estimated at from ten to 12 thousand and six thousand insurance was carried. The loss is divided on the building, \$8,000, the stained glass windows and furnishings \$2,000 or more. The building was built about 1835 and was of the style



of architecture common to that time and was one of the landmarks of the village which can not be replaced.

The fire is believed to have caught from the heater as the sexton started a fire Saturday morning so as to get the church warm for Sunday.

Shortly after one o'clock E. S. Backus, who has a grocery store opposite the church, and George Dexter, who was in the store, saw smoke issuing from around the window sills. Making a hurried investigation they found that the interior of the church was a mass of flame. The fire department responded quickly to the alarm and every available man for miles around was summoned. Help was also summoned from Putnam, and the chemical company made a quick run to the

slight extent from the investigation. In less than two hours after the fire was discovered the building was lying a mass of charred embers in the cellar.

About fifteen years ago the old church was thoroughly repaired and renovated, the late Norman B. Ream contributing largely to a fund to do the work. Rev. C. D. Hazelton is the present pastor.

The loss is one of the greatest that the village has ever suffered from fire.

The fire which destroyed the old church has cast a gloom on the entire community and many expressions of sorrow have been heard on all sides, even from beyond the confines of the town and the state boundary.

The loss of the building, adding as it did to the beauty of the place, as well as standing for the religious life of the community and the close association of those who sought it as a place of worship adds to this feeling of sorrow and sadness as though an old, tried and true friend had passed from the village forever.

Any attempt to replace the historic structure would be futile. The style of architecture of over eighty years ago, with its massive fluted columns standing on an elevated platform to which led a tier of steps, and supporting a heavy, deep, friezed pediment so common to public buildings of that period gave to it that look of stately grandeur which modern architecture fails to duplicate.

Among the furnishings was a beautiful pulpit elaborate in design, made of that rich old dark leather, with Domingo mahogany, very valuable and much sought after by collectors of antiques today. It is supposed to have been made by a Mr. Hutchins a furniture maker at the mill in the days when the meetinghouse was built.

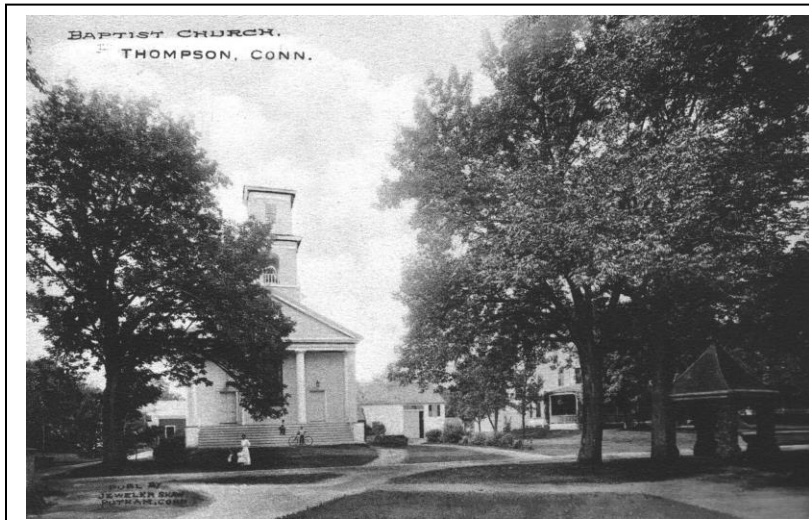
Concerning the Church

The following outline history of the church was written for the press by J. H. Converse, secretary and treasurer of the church:

The structure of the Thompson Central Baptist meeting house, which was destroyed by fire on Saturday last, Jan. 27, was built in 1835, eighty years ago last December when a society was organized and named the Thompson Central Baptist Society. The cost of the original building was \$5,050.

January 17, 1917: Fire at the Central Baptist Church on Thompson Hill

This account of the January 17th 1917 fire at the Baptist Church states that this was the "greatest loss the village ever suffered". It also notes that the "chemical company made a quick run". This may refer to the Chemical Fire Engine Company associated with the mill in Grosvenordale or to the chemical engine which came from Putnam. There were two chemical fire extinguishers donated by the Village Improvement Society that would have been used. The heading reads -- the "Vernon Styles Hand Tub, 1827, Did Good Work". Another newspaper also referred to the 1827 tub as "one of the oldest in the State a relic of bygone days." Nevertheless, collateral damage to the adjacent houses was prevented. At the time of the fire the tub had been the property of the Company for 62 years.





Thompson Common as it was sometime between 1902 and 1910.

The buildings seen left to right are the Congregational Church, the Thompson Bank, the brick building that was once the Woodstock Academy, Dr. Paine's house, the library, and the Quinntatisset Inn. The Inn was demolished in 1910 after being damaged by fire. The 1827 fire engine was once stored in a shed behind the bank. The picture post card copied below shows the library and the Quinntatisset Inn.



According to the library records, there was fire on the right side of the building in 1944 caused by burning leaves being swept up into the eaves. The roof timbers are charred as a result. The Company is credited for achieving a prompt and successful rescue. It had been surmised incorrectly that the damage might have been due to collateral damage from the Inn fire prior to 1910.



February 1936: Fire in West Thompson at the Bogardus Store

This fire threatened to engulf several houses in West Thompson. Firemen from Putnam, Woodstock and Muddy Brook saved the village. The firemen from Thompson Hill attended but had no equipment suitable for use and had to help the other companies. This event led to the formation of the West Thompson Fire Department the same year.



"THE GEO. E. DRESSER HOUSE", THOMPSON, CONN.

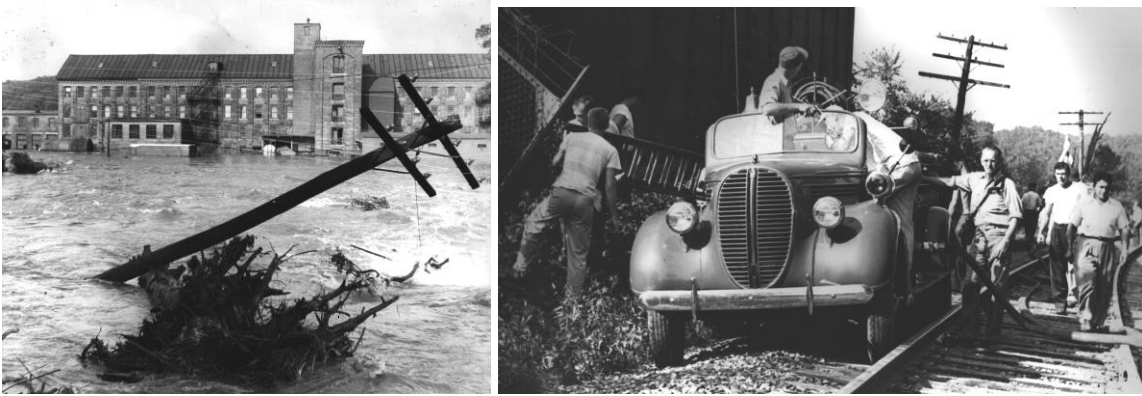


PRIMROSE FARM, THOMPSON, CONN.

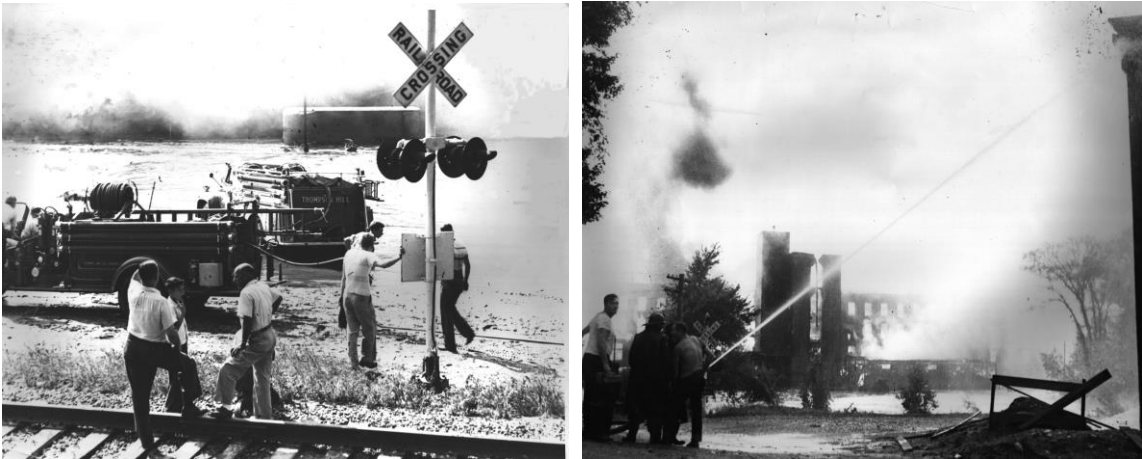
Two mansions lost to fire

On the left is the Dresser mansion that was burned May 1938 a few weeks before the Company acquired its first engine tanker. On the right is the Doane Mansion which later became part of the Howe-Marot College and then after the College closed was used for business entertainment. It caught fire, presumably as a result of discarded smoking materials, in the small hours of December 2, 1954. Due to a shortage of water, it was lost.

THE FLOOD OF 1955

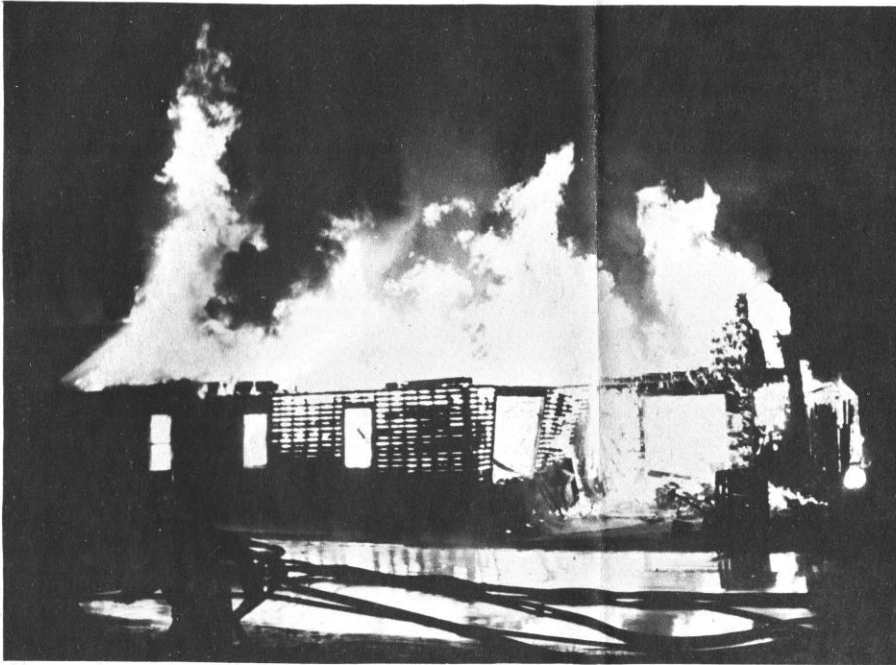


The hurricane of 1955 caused extensive flooding and damage all the way down the Quinebaug River. The mill building in Mechanicsville was surrounded by floodwater. It is presumed that fuel oil leaked as a result of the flood and was ignited by a pilot light. Two men and a portable pump were ferried across by helicopter to deal with the small fire that soon got out of hand. These scenes show the initial attempts to deal with the fire that later developed into a conflagration. The 1938 truck is shown above. Irwin Rhoades is in the forefront of those walking alongside. Elmer White drove one of the trucks. His account of the fire was captured on tape in 1978 and his reminiscences are quoted in the text. Both fire trucks are shown on the left below. The Company's brand-new Robinson truck is in the background.



The firemen at the mill were marooned and had to be rescued. Since the fire trucks were unable to approach the building from the shore the mill burned and was a complete loss. Pictures on the left show the extent of the conflagration.

\$200,000 Fire Ravages Plant In Thompson



RAGING INFERNO: All that remains of the Bates plant in Thompson is shown above during the height of a disastrous fire which early Saturday destroyed the structure on Route 193. The building housed the Francis J. Bates and Sons Company and its wholly-owned subsidiary, New England Handle Company.

(Dr. John Meyer Photo)

The loss in a raging fire that damaged the New England Handle Company plant on Route 193 in Thompson early Saturday is expected to run to \$200,000, according to unofficial estimates.

Fire officials said that the blaze started in a storage ell in the rear of the plant and swept through warehouse and office sections. The storage area was levelled.

George F. Bates, the plant owner, said that work will begin speedily on the rebuilding of the structure.

The plant is known as the Francis J. Bates and Sons Co. and its subsidiary, the New England Handle Co. The business has remained in the Bates family for three generations.

As walls fell, a series of small explosions was heard. They were thought to be caused by formica glue, and propane glass stored in the plant.

Chief Alfred Broughton of the Thompson Fire Engine Company said that the cause of the fire was not immediately known. The alarm was sounded about 3:15 a. m. and Thompson, West Thompson, East Thompson and East Putnam fire departments responded.

In the early moments of the fire some company papers and some office furnishings were saved. Heat from the flames later blistered the highway at one point. Firefighters saved a section of the plant that housed most of the firm's heavy machinery by inserting hoses through the roof. The interior of the section was damaged, however.

(Continued On Page 2)

August 3, 1963: Fire at the Picker stick factory



March 5, 1964: Fire at the Marianapolis School



Above left and right: The main house before and after the fire. The mansion was built for Norman Ream at the end of the 19th Century and became a school in 1931.

Left: The house as it appeared when the water supply ran low and the structure became fully involved.



January 1971: Fire at a house in West Thompson,

Left: Steve Grapnel and his wife. Right: The glowing remains of the Grapnel's house. The alarm was called in at 5:30 AM but the structure was already fully involved with flames. The Company rendered mutual aid to West Thompson.



1979: Fire at the Agent's House,
North Grosvenordale

Left: Before the fire.



The Company rendered mutual aid at a fire here in the winter of 1979.

Although it was a sunny Saturday afternoon, the bitterly cold weather caused treacherous ice build up and two firemen suffered from frost bite. The house was badly damaged and was eventually demolished.

December 6, 1972: Fire at the Vernon Stiles Inn



The Vernon Stiles Inn that was badly damaged by fire.

Gazette Photo

Historic Vernon Stiles Inn Is Badly Damaged by Fire

By BERNARD A. DuPONT

The Evening Gazette
Putnam Bureau

THOMPSON — Investigators probed today for the cause of the Saturday night fire that severely damaged the 158-year-old Vernon Stiles Inn, one of the most historic buildings in northeastern Connecticut.

The rambling wood and brick structure, which once offered overnight accommodations to Marquis de Lafayette and his aide-de-camp, Rochambeau, caught fire about 8 p.m. It was discovered by state policemen driving by on patrol.

Fire Chief Robert Reynolds of the Thompson Fire Company said he did not believe the fire was set in the building, which had been vacant almost two years.

William Clark, deputy chief, was overcome by smoke. He was admitted to Day Kimball Hospital, Putnam, where he was reported in satisfactory condition today in the intensive care unit.

The chief said today that he, the local and state fire marshals would inspect the structure. The chief said the lower level, which contained most of the historic items, had smoke and water damage.

The blaze struck mainly the north end and the upper level of the two-story building. He estimated the place was 25-30 per cent destroyed.

When fire fighters arrived, flames were leaping out of upstairs windows and through the roof. Fourteen pieces of equipment answered the call, including the Thompson Hill, East and West Thompson, Quinebaug and community fire departments of Thompson, along with units from the Muddy Brook department of Woodstock, Dayville and Putnam. About 100 men were at the scene, Reynolds said.

The building is on routes 193 and 200, across from the

Thompson Congregational Church and the Thompson Common. The white colonial church was not damaged by the flames or smoke, said the Rev. Randall Ferrara, pastor.

The tavern was built in 1814 and was also famous as the place where Rhode Island Gov. Thomas Dorr achieved temporary asylum from Rhode Island authorities after fomenting what became known as "Dorr's Rebellion."

The inn later contained a number of smaller shops on the ground level, including a saddler's shop, a hat manufacturer, and a jeweler's store. It was named for Capt. Vernon Stiles.



BATTLING BLAZE — Firefighters from eight area departments battled a smoky blaze that extensively damaged the 158-year-old Vernon

Stiles Inn in Thompson Saturday night. One fireman was overcome by smoke fighting the fire. (Bulletin Photo by Bond)

Fire Levels Vernon Stiles Inn

"Fire levels Vernon Stiles Inn"

The picture on the left is a copy of a faded newspaper cutting that recorded the fire of December 2nd 1972 at the Vernon Stiles Inn. The reporter evidently had little faith in volunteer fire departments and left before the fire was out. This picture was displayed on the notice board in the fire house for many years afterwards



July 1983: Fire in North Grosvenordale Mutual Aid to Community

THE WEBSTER TIMES • March 15, 2000 3



Above left to right, First Selectman Brian Lynch, firefighter Holger Krohn, Selectman Douglas William, firefighter Jeffrey Matteau, and Selectman Robert LeBeau are shown at the March 7 meeting at which the selectmen honored the firefighters.

Photo courtesy of Dottie Guillette

*February 9, 2000: Fire
at the Barker house
on Ouaddick Road*

Thompson firefighters honored

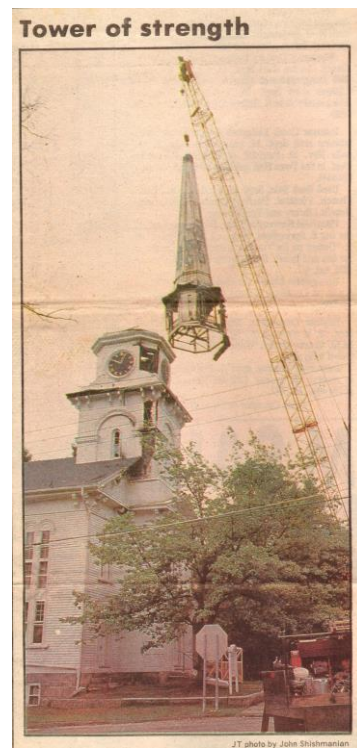
THOMPSON — Thompson Selectmen recently honored firefighters Jeffrey Matteau and Holger Krohn of the Thompson Hill Fire Department for rescuing 91-year-old Adeline Barker from her burning house Feb. 9. The victim could not move from her bed so the pair, along with State Trooper Eric Basak of Troop D, backed a truck to her window and pulled Barker out from the smoke. She was later stabilized at Day Kimball Hospital. Barker passed away from an illness 20 days later. Matteau and Krohn were presented with plaques honoring them for their bravery.

Members of the company rescued an elderly lady from a burning house. Subsequently their efforts were honored by the Town

Two major fires Labor Day weekend 1987



September 4, 1987: Lumber yard fire Robbins Road



September 7, 1987: Fire at the Congregational Church by Thompson Common

Mutual aid was received from 14 local fire companies including all of those from Thompson. Fire was forced into spire in order to save the church. The next day a crane arrived to take the spire down. As shown above on the right, the steel structure that had been used to rebuild the spire after the hurricane of 1938 survived and prevented its collapse. A few years after this fire a fiber glass replacement spire was installed

Thompson Fire Engine Company History



Left: Christmas Day 2004: Garage fire at the Speedway golf course in East Thompson.

Mutual aid provided to East Thompson Fire Department.

Right: October 2, 2006: Structure fire 50 Buckley Hill Road .

Mutual aid provided to Community Fire Department



February 6, 2007: Garage fire on Wrightson Drive. Temperatures were in the mid 20s



March 14, 2011. Mutual aid at a garage fire by Rte. 193 in Wilsonville.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The main thread of this history of the Thompson Fire Engine Company was derived from the books containing the minutes of the Company's meetings from 1837 to the present. Although there are gaps in the narrative, there is an unbroken record of the membership. In addition, there were old photographs and brittle newspaper cuttings that were dispersed around the firehouse. These have been collected, photocopied, digitized and stored. The Company had obtained pictures of the 1955 flood and mill fire. These originals and the digitally recast versions are now stored in an archive file.

Some photographs used in this history were obtained from the growing collection of memorabilia that has been established by the Thompson Historical Society. Joe Iamartino, sometime President of the Society, was extremely supportive in abstracting the computerized pictures selected in a form that could be used to make up the illustrative pages. The Thompson Historical Society Millennium CD and its follow up version were good sources of fire company related pictures of old Thompson. The late Hattie Green of the Historical Society helped by going through archival material stored in the old library on the common. Some pictures used here are derived from the calendars that the Society has published for the last twenty years or so. The Thompson Historical Society has in its possession a number of the Company's books that were donated to the Thompson Library Incorporated in 1898. Most of these were part of a collection that was cataloged in 1859 as part of the Thompson Fire Library formed in 1855.

Another good source of information on the Company and the community is *Thompson Bicentennial Memory Book 1785-1985* published by the Bicentennial Book Committee in 1985. This book includes information on the Town's fire departments, the major fires and other disasters.

The Director, Allison Boutaugh, and the staff of the Thompson Public Library, especially Kate Gorczynski, were very supportive and provided access to the archives kept there. This helped to confirm other information concerning the library established by the Company in 1855. The materials used included Ellen Larned's hand written notes on the history of fires and the fire engine and the 1859 Thompson Fire Engine Company library catalog. The library also provided tapes and transcripts of interviews and commentaries made in the 1970s by Allen Reynolds and Elmer White. Both were active in the Fire Company and their recollections provide a time warp on the events in the Company's history.

Putnam Library allowed access to the microfilmed records of the *Windham County Observer and Putnam Patriot*. The 1917 account of the financial pros and cons of the purchasing of a motorized fire engine over a horse drawn steamer make interesting reading and may reveal why money was not forthcoming to buy a steamer for Thompson in the late nineteenth century. The Aspinock Historical Society in Putnam allowed me look at their archives and provided a copy of the *History of the Putnam Fire Department* which gives details of some bad 19th century fires there.

A hint at the provenance of the original hand-operated engine came about as a result of the Company's participation in a muster for antique fire engines in 1983. Donald Mason, a historian in New Hampshire specializing in old fire engines, thought the "tub" was a Hubbard rotary engine but later investigation shows it to be a Cooper made by the American Hydraulic Company in Windsor Vermont. Its date of manufacture is uncertain but an old photograph and newspaper reports in 1917 refer to "the 1827 tub". Both Hubbard and Cooper engines were made before

Thompson Fire Engine Company History

1830 in Vermont. Similar Cooper engines have been located with the help of Peter Malloy, at the Hall of Flame fire museum in Phoenix Arizona and of Lydia Repoza at the Sprague Museum in Rhode Island

Members of the Company were interviewed and provided anecdotes, photographs and newspaper cuttings. Carl Langer, Doug Langer, Albert Bushey, Cliff Green, David Rawson and Clarence Ballard were especially helpful. Two members of the Company provided editorial assistance and feedback on the draft version. Frank McGarry, long time Secretary of the Company, provided names and geographic information. Lou Lane, a former Fire Chief of the Company, provided encouragement, details of fires and technical feedback on the content. Jim Elliott's son gave accounts of the time his father was Chief.

Members of the Thompson community provided materials, particularly Marion Howard, who has lived on the Hill for 75 years and John Bayer, a former member who has a fund of anecdotes. Linda Montfort provided Civil War information from the journal of Amos Bartlett.

In July 2007 the proprietors of Lord Thompson Manor gave permission to photograph the portrait of Vernon Stiles that was hanging on a wall of the old building once known as the Vernon Stiles Inn.

Perhaps the most corroborative link between the Company and the community in the nineteenth century are Ellen Larned's reports in her book the *History of Windham County* and her notes on *Thompson Fires and fire engine*.

Information on the local mill fire companies was provided by Carl Langer a member and former engineer at the mill in North Grosvenordale. Donald McGee, the local historian specializing in the history of the mills, was also consulted and his books were used to provide background material. In his book *The run of the mill*. David R. Godine makes observations on fire hazards and firefighting measures on cotton mills.

Information on the dates of formation of the fire companies in Connecticut comes from a book privately published by the New London County Mutual Fire Insurance Company.

The history of volunteer fire fighting comes from a variety of sources. David McCullough's biography of John Adams described how the second President of the United States joined bucket brigades at fires while in office. The Company has a copy of a book by Paul C. Ditzel entitled *Fire engines, firefighters* published by Bonanza Books. This includes details of the development of manual fire engines and of volunteer fire fighting companies.

Special thanks to Gwyneth Tillen and Vicki Yeomanson who provided editorial oversight and advice.

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APPENDIX I

Thompson Fire Engine Company's rotary engine

After the Great Fire of London in 1666, fire companies were formed in the cities of Great Britain and then in the American Colonies. Fire companies were formed in Philadelphia⁸⁰, New York and Boston and used hand-operated pumps made in England. By the end of the 18th Century there were hundreds of makers of hand-drawn manual fire engines in America. Some only build one or two engines while some of the better-known makers build many engines over decades of operation. Early fire engines were hand cranked and used pistons but at the beginning of the 19th Century rotary engines began to be available. Apparently these engines were cheaper than the piston pump variety and less prone to malfunction. It required heavy manual effort to maintain pumping at high pressure but otherwise these rotary pumps worked very well and provided a steady stream of water.

John Cooper designed and built his engines in Windsor, Vermont and he was awarded a patent July 16, 1827. The American Hydraulic Company bought his designs and sold engines from 1828 onwards. Cooper's pumps have radial vanes and use a single gear, eccentrically mounted in a round housing. The vanes of the pump are spring mounted on the pump rotor and compress and expand a volume within the housing when the pump is rotated. Internal pressure is lowered on the suction side and water is drawn into the housing then the water is pressurized and driven out of the discharge orifice on top of the pump. A considerable number of these Cooper engines were built by the American Hydraulic Company which also went on to offer a number of manually driven water pumps for industrial purposes. The Thompson Fire Engine Company engine was made to the Cooper design.

Cooper's competitor and hated nemesis was Asahel Hubbard. At one time he had a shop in Proctorsville, Vermont, a short distance from Windsor. Donald A. Mason⁸¹, in his booklet describing early American fire engines, conjectured that Hubbard and Cooper bought their chassis from the same wagon maker, because they are identical. Hubbard's pump was a true gear pump, using two meshing gears to draw and pump water from the top of the pump. His pumps were oval in shape rather than round. It is difficult to distinguish the Cooper and Hubbard pumps from their external appearance. Hubbard's patent dates from April 28, 1828 and his company the National Hydraulic Company continued in business for many years. He moved to Windsor in 1830, and his company remained there but one report from Handtub Junction USA claims only 15 Hubbard style fire engines were built.

In May 1832 the Assembly in Hartford recorded⁸² that, upon the application of the Selectmen of the town of Thompson, Connecticut, the formation of a volunteer fire company was authorized to consist of sixteen persons, twelve of whom were to be withdrawn from the militia and all had to live within one-half mile of the meeting house. The primary condition for permitting the formation was that the Company had a "*good engine*". This engine had been purchased previously by local businessmen including Captain Vernon Stiles, a local innkeeper. There is a photograph in the Thompson Library archives labeled "*the 1827 engine*". Captain Stiles did not come to Thompson until 1830 so that it is possible the engine was in the town a year or two before the Company **was** organized but there is nothing in old documents to indicate it was purchased as early as 1827. Thompson's "*good engine*", known to Company members as "*the tub*" belongs to a class of

⁸⁰ Gray, R. Jerome, "*One hundred years, a short history of fires and the methods of fighting fires..etc.*", The Franklin Fire Insurance Company, Philadelphia, 1924

⁸¹ Mason, Donald, *Sidewinders and coffee grinders*, Private publication c.1989

⁸² Ella Grasso, Secretary of State for Connecticut certified that this record was correct in a document signed and sealed April 4, 1961.

engines called “*coffee grinders*”. When the tub was refurbished in 1982 it was seen that the pump used vanes not gears to impel the water and therefore it is certain that the Thompson engine was built to the Cooper design.

There are two other rotary engines, apart from one in Thompson, that can be attributed to Cooper although there may be many more because they were sold widely in the eastern part of the United States. In Rhode Island there is a pump and carriage on show in the Carriage House of the Governor Sprague Museum administered by The Cranston Historical Society. This engine is listed as an “1830 rotary engine” but it must have been made later than that. The engine is painted white with yellow lettering on all four sides. At the front appears the legend “Built by A.H.Co. N.Y.” This would seem to be the initials of the American Hydraulic Company thus indicating that the engine is a Cooper design. It is possible that the American Hydraulic did have premises in New York as well as or, at another time than those in Vermont. Presumably the Woonsocket engine has been used as a muster and parade showpiece because on the side of the suction hose on top of engine the painted legend reads -- “1797 Woonsocket R.I.” – a date that is earlier than Cooper’s patent. The Woonsocket Fire Company was not formally organized until 1836 but may have been informally active before that. It is noteworthy that the first engine purchased by this Company in 1840 is referred to as *Hydraulion No. 1*. A circular⁸³ issued by the American Hydraulic Company dated December 8, 1828 lists a number of “hydraulion” engines including “*No. 1. Discharging one barrel⁸⁴ per minute, 50 feet high, 80 feet distant; or through the hose, each 100 revolutions, two barrels: plain, and plain mounting, 4 men, \$150--with extra finish, \$175*”. These specifications would fit both the Thompson and Woonsocket engines.

The suction hose⁸⁵ on either side of the Woonsocket carriage is cause for comment. There is a coupling on the rear of the engine that may have been used to make a direct airtight connection to the pump to allow prime to be obtained and thus suction from a pond or even from a hydrant. In normal use the tub engine would have been filled with water by a bucket chain from the nearest well or pond. The Woonsocket engine is accompanied by a silver painted leather pail of the type once used for fire fighting. Thompson Fire Engine Company was still buying leather pails as late as 1917 and some of these appear in the old photograph of the engine taken in front of the Vernon Stiles Inn.

At the muster in 1982 Thompson Fire Company used six men to crank their pump. The old records show that this manning level was normal practice in the past⁸⁶ – two more than the crew of four men cited in the American Hydraulic Company advertising leaflet. Nevertheless, even with four people the pump can give a good stream. At a muster in 1982 six members of the Company “working the engine” were able to throw a jet of water 81 feet. In 2006 and 2007 the engine was demonstrated to second grade school children in Thompson as part of their annual tour of the town’s historical sites. Once again it was shown that the pump had the ability to throw a good stream of water when fed by a bucket brigade. The Thompson children were amused to see that four of their teachers, all women, were able give a good account of themselves when they cranked the engine.

The third rotary engine that has been located is on display in The Hall of Flame Fire Museum in Phoenix, Arizona and is listed by the museum as having been made by the American Hydraulic

⁸³ American Hydraulic Company advertising circular dated 1828.

⁸⁴ A barrel was probably about 30 gallons but could have been more.

⁸⁵ August 2, 2005 Email from Peter Molloy, (Executive Director of the Hall of Flame Fire Museum in Phoenix, Arizona) he stated that suction hose of the type on the Woonsocket engine was introduced in 1840. Based on the pictures that I had sent to him he also was of the opinion that the Woonsocket engine is of the Cooper design.

⁸⁶ Lincoln, Allen B., *A modern History of Windham County*, Page 295, Published by the A. J. Clarke Publishing Company, Chicago, 1920.

Company. It is mounted on a carriage similar in appearance to the Thompson and Woonsocket engines and is also thought to be a Cooper vane type engine. This unit came from the Utica area in upstate New York. The pump has a round shape, and the crank shaft is located at an eccentric point in the circular housing, which may be another indication that it is a Cooper vane pump. As far as is known, the pump has not been taken apart to confirm the existence of spring-loaded vanes. The paintwork in the picture of the engine on the Fire Museum's web site is brown with red panels. The Thompson carriage is painted fire engine red with black and yellow linings and apparently has been colored this way for over 40 years. A long-time member of the Company⁸⁷ remembers as a young boy seeing the woodwork with a very dark weathered varnish in color. The Woonsocket carriage appears to have been thickly coated with white paint but it is not known if this was the original color.

Windsor, Vermont is proud of being the site of early industrialization in America including innovation of the use inter-changeable parts, a key advantage in the manufacture of guns especially later in the Civil War. Here are two quotations from the Town's web site.

"The town of Windsor's initial success as an industrial center was partly due to the use of prison labor. Asahel Hubbard, founder of the National Hydraulic Company, was appointed warden at Windsor Prison and used convicts to make his revolving hydraulic engine.Inmates were paid thirty-two cents a day ..."

"Some of the important nineteenth century manufactories which were responsible for the village's growth are the American Hydraulic Company (1829), manufacturers of the "Revolving Hydraulic Engine" (water pump)"

The National Hydraulic Company in Windsor, Vermont was founded in 1828 by gunmaker and inventor Asahel Hubbard, whose machines have been recognized as "real antecedents of today's line-type production. Hubbard invented the "revolving hydraulic engine." It consisted of two meshed gears revolving in a watertight casing. Water was picked up at the bottom of this device and carried around the sides of the casing but prevented from returning by the meshing of the gears and thereby thrust out the top in a steady stream. Hubbard's patent is dated a year after Cooper's. Unfortunately, the original patents were destroyed by a fire in the U.S. Patent office in the 1830s.

Evidently John Cooper's designs were considered valuable and the American Hydraulic Company purchased his designs as the company's 1828 circular shows⁸⁸ shows. Their manufacturing premises may have moved to New York State later as a result of disputes over the two competing patents and because Hubbard controlled the Vermont State Prison's machine shop in Windsor with its cheap labor.

Evidence for the wide distribution of rotary pumps made in Windsor is noted in the following extracts by Edgar Grizzard⁸⁹ from letters sent by the American Hydraulic Company's presumed agents Sellers & Pennock in 1827. *"We are building, One large Hydraulion for the City of Richmond, and two do. for Alexandria."* Later it was noted that Richmond's engine was "a Hydraulion of 16 Man Power" and cost \$450.00. The big Richmond engine was sent by ship as and when it was late to arrive he noted that he was "glad the small Hydraulion for the University

⁸⁷ Discussions with Douglas Langer, former Chief and member of a family with three generations of service in the Thompson Fire Engine Company.

⁸⁸ American Hydraulic Company advertising circular dated 1828.

⁸⁹ Grizzard, Jr, Edgar *Documentary History of the Construction of the Buildings at the University of Virginia, 1817-1828*.

Thompson Fire Engine Company History

has been Insured”. Another example of the efforts to market fire engines made in Vermont appears in a selection of biographies of notable citizens of Windsor, Vermont in the 19th century. Under that of Major William H. H. Pinney, it is noted that as an agent of the American Hydraulic Company he visited Indianapolis in order to sell its citizens a fire engine. He was unsuccessful on that occasion but he traveled throughout the northeastern States, Lower Canada and as far south as Alabama.

Thompson Fire Engine Company’s engine is a good example one of the earliest rotary fire engines manufactured in the United States. The small size of the pump and the fact that it is still able meet the manufacture’s claims for its performance over 175 years or more after its creation is remarkable. Even today, in the absence of an electric or any other motor driven pump, it would still be a useful machine with which to fight a fire. Small rotary pumps had advantages for small fire companies compared to the bulky piston-operated pumps that were more commonly used by city fire departments and cranked by large teams of firemen. The Cooper engines and presumably Hubbard engines of the same size were perfectly suited for use by rural fire companies such as that in Thompson. The Thompson engine is known to have been used at fires from the time of its arrival in Thompson in 1832 up to 1927 when a newspaper article commented on its use at the Baptist Church fire on Thompson Hill. Ellen Larned⁹⁰, author of “*The history of Wyndham County*”, wrote about fires in the nineteenth century that were fought with the engine. In the minutes of the Thompson Fire Engine Company going back to 1837 there are numerous references to the quarterly training exercises at which “the engine was worked”.

⁹⁰ Larned, Ellen “*Thompson fires and fire engine*” unpublished paper in the Connecticut State Archives. Hartford, circa 1890.

Copy of a Fire Engine Circular published December 8, 1828⁹¹

**Windsor, Vermont, Dec. 8, 1828.
AMERICAN HYDRAULIC COMPANY.**

The AMERICAN HYDRAULIC COMPANY, recently incorporated by the Legislature of the State of Vermont, with a capital of *One Hundred Thousand Dollars*, having purchased from Messrs. Cooper, Phelps & Campbell the right of manufacturing COOPER'S PATENT ROTATIVE FIRE ENGINES, FORCE-PUMPS, &c.

Will receive and execute orders with promptness and fidelity, to any amount, on reasonable notice, either for the articles aforesaid, or for the conveying and supplying of water for cities or villages.

The principle having been fully tested and approved by the literary and scientific, as well as the practical mechanic, it may be deemed superfluous to add, here, any remarks upon the subject; and the following are subjoined merely for the information of those who are yet strangers to the invention:

The simplicity of its construction, its rotary motion, its admirable compactness and unquestioned durability, are advantages of this machine, over those on the old principle, or no slight importance. Independent of these advantages, there are others of still greater magnitude. It will raise and discharge *double* the quantity of water, in a given time; or, in other words, it requires the application of *one half the power*, only, to produce the same effect. It discharges a more dense column. It is as little affected by the frosts of a northern winter as by the heat of summer: and it can be made for one half the expence.

IT WILL RAISE DOUBLE THE QUANTITY OF WATER.

The fact is self-evident, that in operating the old Engines, to discharge the chamber or cylinder *once*, the piston must pass *twice* through it; an ascending stroke to create a vacuum, and a descending one to force the water. Half the time is consequently lost. In the rotative, on the contrary, it is equally evident, that a continued vacuum is created, and a continued discharge effected, by one and the same operation. As a further illustration of the point in question, it may be observed,

IT CAN BE OPERATED WITH ONE HALF THE POWER.

The air vessel is totally dispensed with, and the power is applied *directly* upon the water. It operates on no more than it discharges. On the other hand, as a consequence of the alternating motion of the piston Engines, twice the surface is acted upon, and the *friction*, of course, is comparatively *two-fold*. This is not all. The power necessary to overcome the *inertia* of the water is both exerted and suspended at every stroke of the piston. But in the rotative the current flows instantly, continuous, and uninterrupted.

Connected with this part of the subject is a fact of the first importance. The extreme necessity of prompt and efficient action in case of fire, is beyond controversy. A sufficient number of men to operate the rotative with effect, may be readily and easily convened, either in cities or villages, while a *delay*, waiting the arrival of the number necessary to work the old engines, might result in a total destruction of property.

IT IS COMPARATIVELY PROOF AGAINST FROST.

Those acquainted with the old engines, know, by sad experience, the evils of frozen valves and obstructed pistons, and the necessity of resorting to means of *thawing out the machine*, or suffer it to remain useless, even at times of fire. But a single revolution of the rotative, discharges the ice that may have collected on the surface exposed, and an effective operation is not retarded for a moment.

IT DISCHARGES A MORE CONDENSED COLUMN.

It is apparent to the man of chemical science, if not to the common observer, that water, *in the form of spray*, thrown into an intense flame, is instantly decomposed, and, instead of diminishing, increases its fury. The advantage of the Rotative herein, as before observed, consists in dispensing with the air-vessel. In the old machine it is indispensable. Yet, notwithstanding its use and importance to them, it constantly imparts a portion of air to the water discharged, and thus far produces the evil complained of.

Hence it is evident, that the following are among the most material advantages of Cooper's Rotative Fire Engine, over all others hitherto invented, viz

They are more simple in their construction, more durable, and less liable to get out of order.

The number of hands necessary to work them does not exceed one half.

They are proof, with proper care, against the effects of frost.

⁹¹ Grizzard, Jr, Edgar *Documentary History of the Construction of the Buildings at the University of Virginia, 1817-1828*.

Thompson Fire Engine Company History

The column of water is more condensed, and consequently strikes with more effect. And last, though not least in the estimation of the wise and prudent, they can be furnished for half the expence.

PRICES.

No. 1. Discharging one barrel [about 30 gallons] per minute, 50 feet high, 80 feet distant; or through the hose, each 100 revolutions, two barrels: plain, and plain mounting, 4 men, \$150--with extra finish, \$175.

No. 2. Discharging from two to three barrels per minute, 60 feet high, 90 feet distant, or through the hose, each 100 revolutions, about 4 barrels; 8 men; plain, and plain mounting, \$225.

No. 3. Discharging about 100 gallons per minute, 60 feet high, 90 feet distant; or through the hose, each 100 revolutions, about 150 gallons--8 men, plain, and plain mounting, \$250.

No. 4. With arms of the size of No. 3, but with increased diameter, and suction throats, throwing more water; 12 men; plain, and plain mounting, \$275.

No. 7. Equal in power to the Engines used by the Corporation of the city of New York, and discharging the same quantity, \$400.

No. 11. Discharging double the quantity of the best Engines in the city of New York, \$600.

No. 20. Discharging three times the quantity of the best Engines now in use in the United States, \$1000. Intermediate numbers, not named, in the same proportion. Force-pumps, for the supply of cities, villages and manufactories, will be charged at about one half the prices named above. Suctions for Nos. 1, 2, 3 and 4, will be charged at \$100 extra--for No. 7, \$125--for No. 11, \$150--No. 20, \$200.

By order of the President and Directors,

DIRECTIONS

FOR PRESERVING THE HOSE.

After the Hose has been used, it should be well washed to remove any dirt from it. Each section should then be separately suspended by the middle, to drain it; and if the Leather requires greasing, it should be taken down when about half dry, then dubbed and again suspended, until it becomes quite dry; when it should be placed on the Reel for service.

It is important that the Hose should be kept clean, flexible by occasional dubbing, and free from dampness; and that after use it should not be dried by a hot sun, or any great heat; but a small Stove may be advantageously used to impart a moderate warmth to facilitate the drying.

FOR REPAIRING THE HOSE.

Should a Rivet fail when the Hose is in service, a string lashed tight round the place will prevent its leaking. To replace it, the repairing Anvil is attached to a wooden Rod of sufficient length to reach the place. The Rivet is then put between the prongs on the face of the Anvil, and conveyed, in this way, to the hole where it is to be inserted. When the Rivet is brought into its birth, a burr is placed upon its projecting end and partially driven by the application of the hollow end of the Compressor, so as to hold the Rivet in its place, while it is disengaged from the Spring. A fair bearing on the Anvil being now given to the Rivet, the Burr is forcibly driven down, and being there firmly held by the flat end of the Compressor, is secured by spreading, with a hammer, the projecting part of the Rivet.

Should it be necessary on any occasion to remove any of the rivets, it may be readily done, by severing the projecting ends of the rivets with a pair of strong cutting Nippers, or a Cutler's Saw.

SELLERS & PENNOCK,

Patentees and Manufacturers of Rivetted Hose, Philadelphia.

APPENDIX II. EQUIPMENT 1932 to 2007

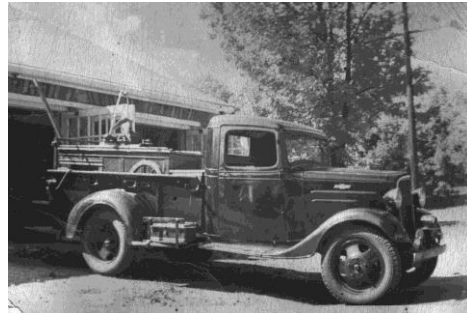
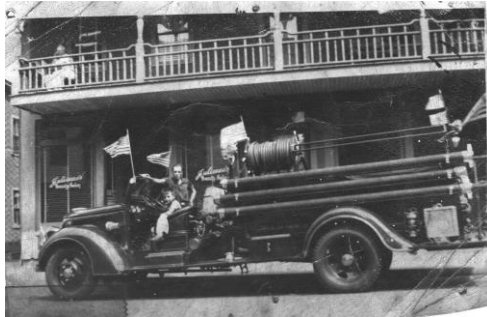
First fire engines



Thompson Hill Fire Co. Pumper



Left: The first apparatus used from 1932 to the 1930s was a Cooper rotary engine of 1827 vintage. Right: A chemical fire extinguisher of the type provided by the Village Improvement Society and used from 1915 to 1937.



Left: 1938 Maxim, the first motorized fire truck owned by the Company
Right: A pick-up adapted for use as a forestry fire truck



1955 Robinson engine tanker



1985 Ford engine tanker



1985 Ford rescue truck



2001 International engine tanker