“The Circus Tent Was a Flaming Coffin...”
Kevin Flood, editor of HartfordHistory.net

The Hartford Circus Fire

The worst disaster in Hartford history occurred on July 6, 1944, during a performance of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus in the city's north end.

With several thousand people gathered under the "big top," flames appeared on the tent and spread quickly, inadvertently aided by the mixture of gasoline and paraffin that had been used to waterproof the canvas.

The fire spread rapidly on the gasoline- and paraffin-soaked canvas.

Panic proved as deadly as the flames. The crowd stampeded to escape the tent, and many were trampled. Others were blocked by obstacles like steel railings along the front of the bleachers and an animal chute blocking a main exit. Meanwhile, hundreds were saved by spectators, circus workers, and passersby who sliced open the tent or lifted children and the injured over the barriers. In the end, however, 168 people died.

Because it was a circus performance, and because it occurred on a Thursday afternoon during World War II, when many adults worked long hours at war-production plants, children accounted for many of the casualties; only 100 of the dead were older than 15. The injured numbered 487.
Several officials of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus served prison terms for negligence in the fire. But no one was ever charged with starting it. Stewart O'Nan devotes a chapter of his book *The Circus Fire* to Robert Dale Segoe, whom Ohio authorities arrested in connection with a series of arson fires in 1950. It turned out that Segoe had been with the circus at the time of the Hartford fire, as a member of a lighting crew. He initially confessed to setting that fire as well but eventually recanted, claiming Ohio authorities had simply talked him into believing he was guilty. Ohio's refusal to let Connecticut investigators interview Segoe didn't help either. After serving four years on the Ohio charges, he was declared a paranoid schizophrenic and committed for a time to a state hospital for the insane. He died in Columbus, Ohio, in August 1997.

**The Hartford Circus Fire Memorial**

The lot where the circus performed—bounded by Barbour Street, Cleveland Avenue, Hampton Street and Kensington Street—eventually became the site of the Stowe Village housing project. On July 6, 2005, the 61st anniversary of the fire, several hundred people, including survivors of the fire and relatives of the victims, attended the dedication ceremony for a memorial created in a field behind the Fred D. Wish Elementary school. Laid out to mark the exact location of the tent that burned, the memorial features a "center ring" consisting of four granite benches and a bronze disk bearing names of the victims and their ages. Flowering dogwoods mark the location of the side and end walls of the tent.

The dedication ceremony was the culmination of four years of work by the Hartford Circus Fire Memorial Foundation. Working with city agencies, the Foundation raised about $125,000 from about 700 private donations and helped design the monument, the Hartford Courant reported.

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**From the Annual Report**


Here is an excerpt from that report:

The archives at the National Fire Heritage Center are a valuable resource for researchers. Dan Madrzykowski, of the UL Firefighter Safety Research Institute, used the archives of the NFHC in conducting research on the history of firefighter training to gain an understanding of the evolution of post-World War II firefighting tactics and equipment.

The goal was to gain insight on how these changes impact today's firefighters. He used some of the NFHC resources to develop the NFPA Fire Protection Research Foundation Report, Fire Fighter Equipment Operational Environment: Evaluation of Thermal Conditions (2017).


In another example, references like *America Burning* (1973) and the *Trade Analysis of Fire Engineering* (1932) published by the Los Angeles Fire Department, are two of several documents instrumental in describing fire service culture and occupational values of yesteryear in the completion of NFHC Vice President for Finance Rodney Slaughter’s Master’s Thesis entitled * Tradition and Progress: California Fire Technology Directors Beliefs and Values* (2017).

The value of historic documents for research can also be seen in two of the oldest artifacts in the NFHC archives.
The first, a newspaper story in a Dutch newspaper published in 1684, shows the state of building technology in contrast to the evolution of fire protection technology. The illustrated picture of a 4-story townhouse shows the upper windows broken-out and soot smudging the outside structure.

Charred contents removed from the house are piled at the foot of the stairs. The firefighting technology can be seen with a ladder, a length of rope and fire buckets in the foreground. Building technology had advanced in 1683, but it becomes obvious that firefighting technology had not kept pace at this point.

The second oldest document in the NFHC archives is a certificate of appointment to firefighter for Henry Fredricks in the town of Paterson, New Jersey. Does the practice of self-certifying for positions such as this become the harbinger of today’s drive for professional certification?

These documents provide a window to fire protection and fire engineering of the times. When the technologies evolved, can we look back and find new directions or considerations that were not considered at the time? The value of holding onto and preserving historic documents is then important to these types of questions.

**Conducting Oral History Interviews**

The American fire service is fascinating in terms of the breadth of its history, the richness of its traditions, and the deeply embedded values and beliefs of those that serve this profession. The National Fire Heritage Center (NFHC) exists precisely to document and hold in trust the history and culture of the American Fire Service for future generations to study, explore and enjoy.

Much of our historical information is carried from one generation of firefighters to the next by our oral histories. The NFHC’s Board of Directors realizes that we must not wait to begin gathering these life stories. We must begin in earnest, to collect our oral traditions, one individual firefighter and fire service leader at a time. Collectively, we will capture important features about our firefighting culture that are seldom recorded or preserved. This type of information will expand our knowledge of the profession and be of value to future generations of fire service professionals and historians.
The importance of oral histories

Every day we create history, individually and organizationally. It is the insights of our leadership, the deeds of fellow firefighters, and the people we serve which are equally valuable as the resource within our written records. Oral history interviews provide a “living history” of not only the individual but also of our fire culture, our organizations, and of each of us individually.

Your own story and the stories of the people around you are a unique resource for your family, your community, and your profession. This collective information may one day serve as a survival guide for the firefighters that come after us and for a generation of firefighters yet unborn.

What is an oral history?

An oral history is a systematic collection of living people’s testimony about their own life experiences. These histories are often compiled by professionals in history, anthropology or folklore who conduct personal interviews to capture an individual’s personal history as a tool to verify and validate the written historical record.

The concept is easily understood: to collect information about the past from people who had lived it. The effort captures data that is not always available in written records about events, people, decision-making processes, and personal belief systems. This qualitative information is often buried deep in the memory of the person being interviewed. As such, the oral interview is a very subjective methodology that captures the historical perspective from the individual being interviewed as they perceive and remember their experiences.

Often times, this memory is shaped not only by the person’s past but also by their present circumstances. An example would be interviewing a retired firefighter who can recall the days when using self-contained breathing apparatus was scorned by “real firefighters,” but recognize, after decades of experience, that this practice had exposed them to health hazards many years later. The bravado of past practices, in this case, is reinterpreted by the person being interviewed as a result of his or her knowledge of current practices and contemporary information.

The important thing for anyone who sets out to record an oral history is that the interviewer allows the person being interviewed an opportunity to tell the story from his or her perspective. The interviewer needs to respect the person, the story, and the perspective.

Oral history guidelines

Over the next several weeks, we will publish a series of articles that provide guidelines for those who share our passion for collecting American fire history before it is lost to the ages. Topics covered include ethical considerations, preplanning interviews, interview tools and questions, and publishing.

Future NFHC HQ Options

Elkton, MD Mayor Rob Alt met with officials from the National Fire Heritage Center (NFHC) on June 6, 2019 to discuss the possibility of the historic Armory being used as the NFHC headquarters. NFHC President Bill Killen and Chair of the Trustees Sam Goldwater, met with the mayor and had a productive discussion. We will pass along more information as it becomes available.
Newsletter Feedback

Seeing the front page of the newsletter brought back some quite unique memories, as I was one of the investigators that was brought in to investigate the details surrounding this fire. I am/was a fire protection system specialist and was brought in on quite a few large dollar loss fires where the built-in protection systems were alleged to have failed.

Now retired and am about to clean out my office, I am considering donating my entire file on The Meridian Plaza Fire to the NFHC, along with much of my library & possibly my over 500-piece fire sprinkler collection. I also have many pieces of “show & tell” items that I used in presenting seminars on standpipe and sprinkler systems that I am unsure of what to do with now? The items may not be very interesting without the stories that go with them.

Sincerely,
Thomas L. Herman

Elkton Inaugural Antique Fire Apparatus Muster

The Singerly Fire Company in partnership with the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation and the National Fire Heritage Center is pleased to host a Cruise-In on Friday, August 23, in downtown Elkton and a Fire Apparatus Muster, Firematic Flea Market, and Fire Apparatus Model Show on Saturday, August 24, 2019.

During both the Friday Night and Saturday events, there will be nationally recognized fire subject matter experts / authors signing their books for anyone who would be interested. These authors include Dennis Rubin, Bill Killen, and Curt Weldon, former Congressman from Pennsylvania, and Founder of the Congressional Fire Services Institute, just to name a few.

For registration and more details visit; https://www.firehero.org/event/elkton-muster-2019/

Delivering the Mail

NFHC President Bill Killen delivering copies of the Annual Report for mailing.
Contact Before Cleaning Out
americanfiresvc@juno.com

Any collection, voluntarily acquired by a fire protection professional, has already been vetted by them as having historical value and in the case of instructional materials, significance in illustrating principles of fire protection. It is most likely to be a good acquisition.

The NFHC recognizes that irreplaceable and perishable artifacts are frequently forever lost when broken up, separated, disposed of, or inappropriately donated or transferred by organizations or individuals that are not aware of their value or who do not have the facilities or program to fully utilize them.

Much of the NFHC’s expenses arise from initial acquisition and categorization of artifacts and their safe storage.

One of the functions of an archive is to identify items worthy of retention and acquisition. That is accomplished by educating and informing collectors and collection custodians of the NFHC’s interest in the acquisition and preservation of such collections upon disposition.

I am proposing for discussion an idea to create a virtual registry of archive material. Not only would NHFC catalogue its own acquisitions but it would also identify collections possessed by others. In a virtual registry, researchers could benefit from the NFHC materials, but they could also be directed to any other archives that desire to have their collections identified. Case examples of projects enhanced by NFHC assistance and resources could be highlighted in the newsletter.

Informed collectors could submit a description of their artifacts to the NFHC archivist for evaluation for a minimal fee. Items identified by NFHC as having archive value would be issued an appropriate NFHC label to be applied to the artifact. The label would state that “This document/artifact has been evaluated and registered with the National Fire Heritage Center as an item of fire protection historical significance. Please contact the NFHC if this item is to transfer ownership or if subject to disposal.”

The NFHC would gain knowledge of what historical items exist, who has them and their location, and alert those who might dispose of them, of the interest in their preservation. Collectors of common items could be redirected to more local repositories.

The fee for evaluation and for registration labels could generate a modest income stream to make the process, in the least, self-supporting.

This process would serve as an educational awareness tool for informing collectors, identify potential future donations, and support the NFHC’s mission.

“Contact NFHC Before Cleaning Out”

New Book Out in September

All of the proceeds will be donated to the National Fire Heritage Center. Email Kirkbo65@charter.net for information on ordering the book.
HLLL Nomination Instructions

BACKGROUND

The National Fire Heritage Center Board of Directors has opened nominations for the Fire and Emergency Services Hall of Legends, Legacies and Leaders (HLLL). Nominations will be accepted from July 1, 2019 through August 15, 2019. The HLLL provides individual recognition of significant contributions and distinguished service to the Fire and Emergency Services mission. Vice President Billy Shelton states that the HLLL is one of the most important initiatives of the National Fire Heritage Center (NFHC). Located in Emmitsburg, Maryland, where it is maintained along with a virtual “Hall” that is part of the National Fire Heritage Center’s website (www.fireheritageusa.org).

NOMINATING CRITERIA AND FORMAT

❖ Any person or organization may submit a single (one) nomination to the Hall of Legends, Legacies and Leaders in accordance with the following criteria:

❖ Nominees should have completed at least 25 years of service in the fire and EMS services and or fire prevention/protection disciplines and be known/recognized in the national/international fire service arena (local/regional recognition does not qualify).

❖ Nominations shall be single page printed both sides of the paper, typed, Aerial Font 10 point, or two pages printed on one side, typed, Aerial Font 10 point, a maximum of two printed pages permitted. Electronic submissions may be sent to hampvafire@yahoo.com

❖ Nomination packages shall be postmarked no later than August 15, 2019 and delivered to the National Fire Heritage Center, P. O. Drawer 76, Emmitsburg, MD. 21727

Nomination Packages Include:

❖ A Cover Page (does not count towards the nomination page maximum).

❖ Picture and complete name of nominee to include middle initial, date of birth, current address, phone number and e-mail address, if available. NOTE: If nominee is deceased, provide date of death and place of interment.

❖ Current and/or previous Fire and Emergency services affiliations with dates.

❖ Summary of fire service experience/positions held, including significant elected positions held. Professional accomplishments and distinguished service, including publications, texts, and articles published.

❖ Education, training and/or certification achievements Honors and awards received

President Bill Killen encourages your submittal of individuals who you believe have made significant contributions to this profession. The candidates for this year’s induction will be vetted by the HLLL Committee and submitted to Board of Directors for final approval and announced at the Fire Department Instructors Conference. Selections will be limited to no more than six inductees per year.

For additional information contact:

George Morgan, Chairman
Hall of Legends, Legacies and Leaders Committee
National Fire Heritage Center
P.O. Drawer 76
Emmitsburg, MD 21727
Email: hampvafire@yahoo.com
(410) 274-3031
NFHC Membership Application Form

Name: __________________________

Organization: __________________________

Address: __________________________

City: __________________________ State: _______ Zip: _______

E-mail: __________________________ Telephone: __________________________

Organizational Affiliation(s): __________________________

NFHC Membership Categories (please check one):
[ ] Individual – $50/Year
[ ] Organizational – $200/Year
[ ] Student – $10/Year

Amount enclosed: $ ____________

Please enclose your payment with this form and return to:
National Fire Heritage Center
Post Office Drawer 76
Emmitsburg MD 21727

-Or-

Join online using PayPal via the NFHC Website –
~ https://fireheritageusa.org/donate/

Comment(s) -

“PRESERVING THE PERISHABLE”

As an IRS 501c3 non-profit organization, the National Fire Heritage Center exists to preserve, protect and increase the utilization of contributors to the body of knowledge of the American Fire Protection Services and allied disciplines through identification, acquisition, preservation, conservation and restoration.
The National Fire Heritage Center (NFHC) is a nonprofit organization working to preserve the written history of “fire in America.” We support individuals, fire departments, fire libraries and museums, fire protection organizations, and others who wish to collect, catalog and preserve fire-related writings.

The NFHC is both a fire history archive and a documentation preservation project. Our collection of over 13,000 items consists of written documents and three-dimensional items donated by the public and private sectors. Materials are cataloged, preserved and made available to NFHC visitors and online researchers.

Gaining access to historical fire-related writings can be hard. Prior to the establishment of the NFHC in 2005, there was no centralized, coordinated archival activity in the United States to ensure that important fire materials were saved in an accessible way. Much of the written history of “fire in America” was challenging to locate or, unfortunately, forever lost. Historical documentation that did exist was held in private collections where access was difficult or materials were not properly preserved.

The NFHC has changed all of that. Today, our organization works to assure the collection and proper preservation of these historical materials and that access is available to all who wish to know the story of “fire in America.”

The NFHC is co-located with the Frederick County Fire-Rescue Museum in Emmitsburg, Maryland, within walking distance of the National Emergency Training Center.

Visit us on the web at fireheritageusa.org to learn more about our work and how you can donate items to our collection.

National Fire Heritage Center
P.O. Drawer 76
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

Twitter and Instagram @fireheritageusa
Facebook.com/NationalFireHeritageCenter