

History of the Lackawanna Fire Department

When the Lackawanna Iron & Steel Company first came to the area in 1899, prior to the incorporation of Lackawanna as a city, they provided their own fire protection for the plant and surrounding company-owned housing. The rapid growth in what was then District 3 of West Seneca prompted the organization of several volunteer fire companies. These volunteers were the first line of protection at a time when building was rampant and fire codes were a rarity. The first to receive town board approval were the First Volunteer Company and the Roland Hose Company in 1903. Their stalwart fire tower at Electric & Keever Avenues was long a landmark. The Stony Point Company was activated on July 15th of the same year at a location on Ridge Road approximately half a mile from the plant. Victory Hose, upon completion of their firehouse near the top of the street, was activated in 1907. George Avery provided the horse for Victory Company's wagon. When the fire bell in the tower clanged, the horse would race furiously to the firehouse, often some distance away, hitch up to the hose cart and dash to the scene of the blaze, arriving in a state of exhaustion. Stony Point and Victory volunteers later formed the nucleus of the City fire department. In 1915 the Abbott Hose Company was formed to service the Abbott Road area. At this time, Lackawanna had 300 volunteer firefighters among the various companies and continued to give valuable assistance to the City.

On March 2, 1909, Victory Hose Company had the distinction of hosting the first meeting of a group of District 3 residents who felt the time was right to propose the separation of the District from the Township and incorporate it as a city. With this incorporation, Mayor Robert H. Reed named Joseph Bouley as the Fire Chief. Chief Bouley's first task was to organize a paid fire department. Stony Point Company became House #1 and was equipped with a three-horse drawn hose and chemical wagon. Tom Dick and Bill were these first three horses. A few years later the Victory Hose Company became House #2 of the city department with a single horse drawn combination wagon running out of the imposing concrete block structure with a fire and curfew bell in the forty foot tower. At this time the Department consisted of a chief, two captains, two lieutenants, an electrician and twelve pipemen. An alarm system of 35 boxes covered the city. All a person needed to do was break the glass, turn the key and the fire department would be notified to respond to the location. One hundred and ten fire hydrants were distributed throughout the city of which ten were flush hydrants that the Department used for watering down the dirt streets. In 1914, the loss incurred through 70 fires was only \$15,000 and the Department was operated at a total cost of \$22,000. During this time Chief Bouley resigned as Fire Chief upon his election as Third Ward Councilman and was succeeded by William Morrisey.

In 1921 the Lackawanna Fire Department Benevolent Association was formed. Its purpose was to foster fellowship among the members and provide financial assistance in case of need.

With the continued growth in the city, House #3 was opened on South Park Avenue near the north branch of Smokes Creek in 1923. This firehouse is still in use today. At this time the Department became completely motorized.

In August of 1945, the three platoon system for officers and firefighters was initiated by public referendum. Firefighters went from 8 hour shifts to 24 hour shifts.

For 19 returned veterans, 1946 ended on a happy note as they were appointed to the fire department effective December 31st.

The Department was at the center of a controversy involving misdeeds in Civil Service appointments which was finally resolved in December of 1951 when the results of a new examination and subsequent appointments to permanent jobs were approved for eleven firefighters holding provisional status.

One of the costliest fires in the City's history struck the Loblaw store in the new L. B. Smith Plaza on Sunday, September 7, 1952 causing damage of \$250,000 and injuring three firefighters. This ignited demands for a firehouse in the Fourth Ward.

In June of 1954, the first civil service Chief to head the fire department retired. Chief Quinn joined the force in 1914 becoming the first Chief to work his way up through the ranks from firefighter.

On January 25, 1963 fire swept through the Hotel Lackawanna destroying the Salem Store and part of the Hotel's residence wing. A former City Assessor, Thomas Clifford, lost his life in the \$90,000 blaze.

In 1963, the Department continued to modernize with the purchase of a 65 foot snorkel truck which was stationed at House #1. One of its first tasks was to lift Santa Claus to the third floor window of Franklin Elementary School.

On April 20, 1964, William Cavanaugh resigned as Fire Chief to become the first Director of Public Safety. This position, established by the City's new charter, guided the Divisions of Fire, Police and Civil Defense. Ten days later, Edwin Kij became Chief of the Fire Department. The year 1964 also saw the opening of the long awaited firehouse in the third and fourth wards. Station #2 on Abbott Road is still in use today.

Fire, causing damage upwards of \$300,000, destroyed St. Michael's School and severely impaired use of the parish church on April 2, 1968.

The 1960's saw the Department reach its greatest complement. At one point 112 men were employed on the department.

As the year 1980 wound down, a devastating fire destroyed the Herbert Hoover Jr. High School on Ridge Road. The 74 year old structure was damaged beyond repair in a fire that broke out on December 19th, just a few days before Christmas recess was to begin. The fire was so great that Buffalo Fire and the surrounding volunteer companies had to contribute apparatus to quell the fire. The resultant insurance settlement was in excess of \$2 million, and represented the largest in the insurer's history.

With the closing of most operations at the Bethlehem Steel Plant in 1983, fire protection for the plant property became the responsibility of the City.

In 1984, a new firehouse was opened in the first ward. Replacing House #1, which had become outdated, this firehouse is still in use today. In that same year, John J. Baran, a grandson of Chief Quinn, became Fire Chief.

The year 1989 saw the arrival of a new ladder truck for the fire department. Dubbed Q4, it replaced a ladder truck from the 1960's. This state of the art truck had a 100' aerial ladder, 1500 gallon per minute pump, 750 gallons of water in its tank as well as a full complement of ground ladders and tools.

Due to severe budget cuts in 1990, the Department was forced to cut back to nine firefighters, instead of 12, on each shift. As a result, only three trucks with three men on each responded to a fire and the Rescue Squad, which handled first aid calls, was taken out of service. At this time the Department employed 55 men.

In October of 1990, fire struck the vacant Father Baker High School next to Our Lady of Victory Basilica. Causing \$10,000 worth of damage, the fire was not completely extinguished until six hours later.

In January of 1991, Chief John Baran and his brother, firefighter Michael Baran, retired from the Department. Both were grandsons of the late Chief John Quinn, thus ending a family tradition of service in the Department that began in 1914.

Also in the year 1991, Stanley Kaminski was appointed as Fire Chief. With the loss of the Rescue Squad to answer first aid calls, one of Chief Kaminski's first tasks was to upgrade the medical training on the department. Within a few years, all members of the department were certified as Emergency Medical Technicians, greatly enhancing their ability to provide first aid care.

Fire, causing over \$150,000 in damage, struck a carpentry business on Center Street in February of 1992. Contributing to the spread of the fire was the great amount of dust generated by the business that was trapped in voids in the building. The building ended up being a total loss.

In the years of 1995 and 1996, the Department purchased two new pumpers. Replacing apparatus from the late 1960's and one from the mid-1970's, these pumpers included an enclosed cab for the rear firefighters and a generator to power extrication equipment.

With the retirement of Chief Kaminski in March of 1997, Reynold Jennetti was appointed Fire Chief.

In 1998, defibrillators were placed on the fire trucks and men were trained in their use allowing the department to provide a wider range of care.

With a phone in every home and the advent of cell phones, the alarm box system installed throughout the city was dismantled in 2002. Used infrequently for emergencies, the Department shed 200 false alarms per year from its run sheet when these were taken out of service.

On August 22, 2004, the Transmission Exchange building on Ridge Road was completely destroyed by fire. A former ice house from the early century, this building had 6" of cork on the walls for insulation purposes, which contributed heavily to the conflagration. The fire, which started at 6 PM, took over four hours to bring under control and crews were still putting out hot spots through the next morning.

In 2005, the Department received a grant through the Federal Government in the amount of \$630,000 to purchase a new ladder truck, named L6. Replacing Q4, this truck has a 100' platform ladder, a 2000 gallon per minute pump, and a generator on board to power the newest extrication equipment.

On April 16, 2007, Ralph Galanti was named Fire Chief upon the retirement of Chief Jennetti who had served over 44 years on the Department starting in 1962.

In 2009, the Department received a grant allowing us to purchase state of the art Self Contained Breathing Apparatus, replacing SCBA's that were over 15 years old. Also purchased was an air compressor and fill station to fill these bottles. A year later the Department purchased an oxygen generating system and fill station allowing us to produce our own oxygen to fill bottles for emergency medical calls.

The Department received a new frequency on March 19, 2010, moving from a VHF frequency of 154.43 MHz to a UHF frequency of 425.4125 MHz. With our old VHF frequency we were unable to communicate directly with Lackawanna Police, Erie County, Buffalo Fire or any other adjoining community who were on UHF frequencies.

In 2011, the Department received a federal grant through the Assistance to Firefighters Grant program to allow for the upgrading of all department radios to utilize the new frequency and provide more safety for firefighters. Also purchased were mobile data terminals for each truck allowing us to have access to important information on the way to calls.

In 2012, much needed exterior repair work was done on all three fire stations. All three stations had new roofs installed and Station #1 & #3 had windows replaced. Brickwork was repaired at Station #2 & #3.

Through a grant, the department initiated a Residential Knox Box Program in 2012. Free loaner key boxes are made available to residents who have difficulty answering their door. In the event of an emergency, firefighters are able to open the door without having to force entry. A Medical File Program was also initiated which gives firefighters written medical information in the event a person is unable to communicate.

Also in 2012, the department received a Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Grant (SAFER) through the federal government. This grant allowed for the hiring of four new personnel to add to our complement. This provides a larger response at fires and other emergencies, increasing safety for both firefighters and the public.

In March of 2013, the department welcomed its' first female firefighter who during recruit training broke the national record for the Candidate Physical Ability Test, a standardized test that assists fire departments recruit candidates who are physically capable of performing essential job tasks. This test - the CPAT - is acknowledged as a reliable indicator of an individual's ability to function at the fire scene.

The department received an Assistance to Firefighters Grant in the amount of \$280,000 for a new pumper. This pumper replaced Engine 3, a 17 year old pumper and provides firefighters with the newest safety features and state of the art technology including a foam firefighting system. This pumper went into service in late 2013.

The department received good news in being awarded two major grants in 2015- one for the purchase of an accountability system. This system, purchased through an Assistance to Firefighters Grant, allows us to accurately keep track of firefighters which enter a burning building and to find such firefighters if they become incapacitated. The other major grant was our second Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Grant (SAFER), which allowed for the hiring of four additional personnel.

The department added the drug Nalaxone to its emergency medical care program in 2015 to treat patients who have overdosed on opioids such as heroin.

On November 9, 2016, the department successfully extinguished the biggest fire in Lackawanna's history and one of the biggest in Erie County at the former Bethlehem Steel Cold Mill Plant, a one million square foot building with several businesses inside. The fire started in a plastic recycling center and was under control within 15 hours. Over 30 agencies were involved in the extinguishment of this fire and the mitigation of public safety hazards.

Less than two weeks after the 'Bethlehem Steel fire', on November 21, 2016, the department had a large HazMat incident involving a truck containing 3500 gallons of propane involved in an auto accident on the Hamburg Turnpike. With the help of the Buffalo Fire and Erie County HazMat teams we were able to control the leaking propane and burn off enough propane to lift the truck back up for repair.

The department received another Assistance to Firefighters Grant in 2016 allowing for the purchase of a washer and dryer system for the cleaning of personal protective equipment of firefighters, such as turnout gear, gloves and hoods. The industrial washer and dryer allows the department to properly clean and dry this equipment extending its' life and providing for the safety of personnel. Also included in this grant was the purchase of a Respirator Fit Test System. OSHA requires firefighters to be fit tested every year for their SCBA masks. This was outsourced at a considerable cost to the City. This purchase allows the department to do all testing in-house at no cost and at the departments convenience.

Today the Department operates on a four platoon system with a company at each firehouse. A Captain is in charge of the platoon and an individual company. There are also two Lieutenants on each platoon, each in charge of an individual company and firehouse. The Department operates out of three firehouses. Station #1, at 55 Ridge Road, houses an engine company, E1. Station #2, at 1630 Abbott Road, houses a ladder company, L6, and Station #3 at 2990 South Park Avenue, houses an engine company, E3.

In addition to providing fire and life safety, fire department members continue to offer a tradition of community service. Through the Lackawanna Professional Firefighter's Union, Local 3166, members have held an annual Christmas Food Drive distributing food, clothing and toys to individual families and the Lackawanna Food Pantry. Members have also raised money every year for the Muscular Dystrophy Association in a 'Fill the Boot' Campaign and in September members have held the 'Lackawanna Fire 5000' run to benefit the Burn Foundation. This 5K run hosted hundreds of runners every year.

For over 100 years the Lackawanna Fire Department has seen significant advances in equipment and technology. From the horse-drawn carts of the early 1900's, to the

complete motorization of the department in 1923, to the electronic based apparatus of today, the Department continues to modernize and grow with the times.