The History of the Newtown Fire Association

Newtown Fire Association members posing in front of the 1901 Liberty Street firehouse before the 1915 Bucks County Fireman’s Parade (left), and the 2009 Bucks County Fireman’s Parade (right)
The American institution known as the “volunteer fire company” was first created in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania by Benjamin Franklin in 1736. Citizen groups were established to protect public and private property from fire damage. “Bucket Brigades” were organized to extinguish the fires, as pumpers or ladder trucks were then unknown.

Years later, in the early 1800’s (the exact date is unknown and the only preserved minutes of this company are dated 1824) the first fire company in Bucks County, Pennsylvania was established. Located in Newtown – the county seat of Bucks County – it was called the Washington Fire Company. In 1823, the active members of this company, or “engineers” as they called themselves, consisted of at least seventeen men. At a meeting held February 17, 1824, the treasurer was ordered to pay a bill of $14.63 incurred by “the committee for hooks and ladders” and a new committee of three was appointed to “draft a report to be made to the company of the state of the engine.”

This organization was fortunate enough to purchase a hand-pumper, which was later labeled “Old Washy” by its members. It is currently housed in the firehouse museum today. “Old Washy”, was built by Patrick Lyons of Philadelphia in 1812, but bears the date 1796 on its side, after the date the Washington Fire Company was organized in Philadelphia. The earliest known preserved account of the use of Old Washy was found in the Doylestown newspaper, the Bucks County Patriot, which describes, in the issue of January 24, 1825, the destruction of the big barn at the Silver Lake Farm in Newtown belonging to Messrs. Thomas and John Janney.
Probably not long after the organization of the Washington Fire Company, an engine house was constructed on the north side of Centre Avenue immediately east of the Newtown Creek (behind the present-day First National Bank). Construction is known to have been finished before 1831, but again the exact date is not on record. The firehouse was built before the Borough of Newtown was incorporated in 1838. Interestingly enough, after the Borough property lines were drawn, the firehouse was discovered to rest half in Newtown Borough, and half in Newtown Township. The site of the firehouse has been called, for over a half a century, Island No.10, and on it was later built a frame dwelling house, which was demolished in 1956. The area is currently the Newtown Borough parking lot.

For more than 40 years, the Washington Fire Company continued to furnish adequate protection to the village of Newtown and its rural environment. On June 16, 1865, the fire engine and other equipment were turned over to the Borough of Newtown by resolution of the Washington Fire Engine Company of Newtown, under the condition that the Borough keep the same in good order, and use it at fires in the Newtown area. This act officially ended the affairs of the Washington Fire Company.

Undated fire company group photo (left), undated photo of members with “Old Washy” (right)
In 1865, after the dissolution of the Washington Fire Company, the Newtown Borough Council appointed a Chief Engineer and some assistants to adopt a code of rules governing the use and care of its equipment. “We in Newtown have nothing but a heavy concern that rarely ever sees the daylight or water,” decried the Newtown Enterprise on April 28, 1870, in condemning the use and condition of the faithful Old Washy.

Public agitation ran high in favor of forming a new fire company and so, in the following year (1871), at the very time the volunteer fire companies were being disbanded in Philadelphia, a new fire company was formed, being named, as its predecessor had been, in honor of its “new” second hand engine, the Winona Fire Company. The company was formally organized on June 27, 1871. Its equipment consisted of two hand-drawn, hand-pumped engines belonging to the Borough. The new engine house, the second of its kind in Newtown, was erected on Liberty Street the same year, on approximately the site now occupied by the present building. George R. Rowland was awarded the contract for $475.00, and he built the house of red brick with a pressed brick front and a tin roof. The size of the lot was 25’ by 28’. The Winona engine was used in the Newtown area for a little over a quarter of a century, or until July 1897, when the Borough Council acquired the horse drawn Silsby steamer.

The original Liberty Street firehouse, circa 1871 (left), and the 1901 Liberty Street firehouse (right), which currently houses the present day museum and meeting room.
On October 28, 1889, following the terrible fire at the Watson and Buckman Planning Mill in Newtown, a meeting was held to form a new fire company. On the evening of November 13, 1889, a permanent organization – the **Newtown Fire Association** – was effected by the adoption of the constitution and by-laws. This organization received its equipment from the Winona Fire Company, and it included two hand-drawn pumpers, a four wheel hose carriage, four hundred feet of leather hose and fifty seven buckets – but no suitable ladders, axes, bars, or hooks. In September 1891, the Newtown Borough Council purchased a fire bell, weighing more than eight hundred pounds, in order that the “alarm of fire” could be “widely spread”. This bell is still located atop the firehouse.

The first piece of fire apparatus purchased by the Newtown Fire Association was a ladder wagon, built by Warner and McGowan, the local carriage makers. This was purchased for $400.00 on July 4, 1892. This apparatus is still in possession on the Newtown Fire Association and can be viewed in the museum. In the summer of 1897, the fire engine, Winona, was sold to Perkasie, and the Borough purchased a horse-drawn steam pumper, made by Silsby Manufacturing Company, Seneca Falls, New York. The Borough of Newtown paid $1,500.00 for the pumper. It was paid for by a $1,500.00 bond issue supplemented by contributions from individuals, insurance companies, George School and Newtown Artesian Water Company. The steam pumper had a rotary type pump that was supposed to operate at six hundred gallons per minute.

On September 16, 1901, the company was formally incorporated under the name of “Newtown Fire Association No. 1” for the purpose of “extinguishing fires and protecting life and property.” In that same year, a new firehouse was erected on Liberty Street. This was the second station on this site and the third in the Borough. A two-bay addition was added to this station in 1959. This station currently houses our museum and meeting rooms.

1897 Silsby Steamer (left), and 1917 Boyd – the fire company’s first motorized apparatus (right)
Beginning in 1914, fire calls were given to the telephone company to either A.W. Watson Company or to Mawson Brothers Mill, and a steam siren sounded the alarm. About 1925, an electric siren was placed atop the firehouse. It is interesting to note that the same siren remained in use until 1999. This siren served the people of Newtown for nearly seventy-five years without repairs. Additional sirens were added and placed at the Lavalle Aircraft Corporation on South State Street, the property of the Newtown Artesian Water Company on North Lincoln Avenue and the American Legion Post #440 on Linden Avenue. Today with the increased use on personal paging equipment and sirens have been removed from service.

Fire calls were received in the firehouse, in the office of W. Aubrey Merrick and at the home of the fire chief until 1974 when Newtown Fire Association became one of the original group of fire companies to be dispatched by the Bucks County Fire Communications Center, which continues to answer calls today. The first two-way radios were purchased by the Association in September, 1957.

The Borough Council in 1917 sold the Silsby Steamer and purchased for $4,000.00 from the James Boyd Brothers, Inc., 25th and Wharton Streets, Philadelphia, the town's first motor-driven apparatus. The fire company in Lawrenceville, N.J. purchased the steamer and motorized it. A new REO Speedwagon combination chemical and pumper truck was purchased in 1923 and retired in 1938 after “strenuous service” at Yardley, Pa. following the flood of March 19, 1936.
The Kearns Doughy pumper was purchased by the Borough in 1924 and replaced the Boyd truck of 1917. The Kearns was replaced by the 1947 Ward La France quadruple combination ladder truck. This truck was sold to the Edgely Fire Company and replaced by the 1971 American La France 80’ Aerial Platform, which served until 1988. This unit was sold to a broker and in turn sold to the fire department in Hazel Township, PA. The American La France was replaced by a 100’ Pierce Arrow rear mount aerial ladder with a 1250G.P.M. pump which was delivered in September of 1988 and was in service until 2008.

The first new Ward La France triple-combination pumper in this area replaced the REO in 1938, which was sold to the Kingwood Fire Company in New Jersey. This engine had a 750 G.P.M. pump and was later sold to a fire company in Hawley, PA. In March 1955, after the purchase of a new 1000 G.P.M. Ward La France pumper. The Ward La France pumper was sold in 1978 to a Florida dealer and later purchased by a member of the fire company and today is owned by our Chief Engineer.

To augment the availability of fire equipment an additional new Ward La France 500 G.P.M. pumper was delivered in 1942. This was sold to a North Carolina fire company for $6,000.00, and later replaced with a 1960 Ward La France 1000 G.P.M. pumper. This unit was sold in 1978 to a new fire company in Westhampton, N. J.
An emergency car, a converted seven-passenger Buick sedan, carrying emergency and first aid equipment, and a portable gasoline driven pump, was retired in 1949. It was replaced in the same year truck known to the members as the “Pie Wagon”. This truck was built by Ward La France from plans submitted by fire company member John A. Merrick, and when finished was the most modern and complete of its type. The unit was sold to Penndel Fire Company in 1965 and replaced with a 1965 Ward La France rescue unit which served the fire company until 1997 when it was retired after 32 years of active service. This apparatus is still owned by the fire company and housed in our museum.

In 1970, following a fire that destroyed a Newtown Township home, Wm. W. Fabian and Sons donated a 1200-gallon tank truck to fire company. This unit was converted by the members into a tanker with a 250 G.P.M. pump. As a result of the extension of the hydrant system and the deteriorating mechanical condition of this unit it was retired from service in 1979.

In 1963 a Willy’s Jeep was purchased for use as a field unit. This unit was sold to a member in 1978. A 1968 Chevrolet Pickup was purchased and converted into a field unit. This unit served until 1989 when it was sold to the Parkland Fire Company.

In 1976 a new Ward La France 1750 G.P.M. pumper was purchased. This engine was one of the first engines in Bucks County to be equipped with large diameter hose. The engine was sold in 1986 to the Langhorne-Middletown Fire Company and replaced with the fire company’s first new Pierce Arrow 1750 G.P.M. engine. This engine was sold in 1997 to the Kreamer Fire Company in Central Pennsylvania and replaced with a Pierce Quantum 2000 G.P.M. engine with Class A foam, which was in service as Engine 55 until 2010.
1978 brought another new Ward La France 1250 G.P.M. engine. This engine was sold in 1990 to the Knoxville Fire Company in Pennsylvania, and replaced with a 1990 Pierce Arrow 1750 G.P.M. engine. The Pierce Arrow was replaced in 2001 with a Pierce Enforcer 1500 G.P.M. engine. This was the first engine in Bucks County equipped with a Compressed Air Foam System and is currently in service as Engine 55-1.

From 1980 – 1989 Newtown Township was the fastest growing community in all of Pennsylvania - its population grew by more than 200%. Needless to say this required major changes in the operation of the fire company. No longer a rural community, changes had to be made. After many years of talking and planning a second station (Station 55) was built on Municipal Drive in Newtown Township and went into service on August 15, 1992. The first apparatus housed at this station were the 1986 Pierce Engine and the 1965 Ward La France Rescue. Station 45 housed the Ladder and the 1990 engine. To provide greater flexibility in the operation a Pierce Rescue Pumper with 1750 G.P.M. pump was purchased and housed at Station 45. This unit was replaced in 2001 with a Pierce Dash 2000 G.P.M. Rescue Pumper with CAFS and Class B foam. This unit currently is in service as Rescue 45.
In December 1983, the Borough of Newtown turned the deed for the fire station over to the Newtown Fire Association. At the same time the fire company purchased the adjacent corner property, a gas station, from the Borough of Newtown. Because of the increasing size of the apparatus and a building which was nearly 100 years old planning began for a new station at this site. The final design called for the demolition of the 1959 addition and a new 3 bay station, connected to the 1901 firehouse. In June of 1999 demolition began on the addition followed by the construction of the new station. In the spring of 2000 the new, present day Station 45 was placed in service.

The old fire station became the fire museum housing the Old Washy hand drawn pumper, the 1892 Ladder Wagon, the 1923 Kearns and the 1965 Ward La France. The 1923 Kearns was re-purchased by the fire company in the mid 1970’s and totally restored by Life Member James Miller in 1994-1995.

The fire company also owns property at 22-24 Liberty Street which was donated by Alfonso C. Sodano in 1954. It is currently being leased to the Borough of Newtown, and houses the Newtown Borough Police Department.

*Members in front of the 1988 Pierce Arrow 105’ ladder truck*
The mid 1990's brought increasing demands on the firefighters during the daytime hours leading to an ever-growing problem with manpower during normal work hours. The call volume began to tax the local businessmen who allowed their employees to respond to fire calls. In December of 1995 the Fire Chief made a proposal to the Chairman of the Board of Supervisors and the Manager of Newtown Township to begin working toward a career system to augment the volunteers of Newtown Fire Association during hours of critical shortages in manpower. The Board of Supervisors were extremely receptive to the proposal and fully understood the magnitude of the problem. Working side by side, the Township manager, the Board of Supervisors, the Fire Marshal and Newtown Fire Association created the Newtown Township Emergency Services Department, which went into operation on May 2, 1996 as an official township department.

Under agreements, the Newtown Emergency Services Department would operate the apparatus owned by Newtown Fire Association and have offices at Station 55 on Municipal Dr. The township personnel would conduct fire inspections in both Newtown Township and Newtown Borough and handle most routine fire calls during normal working hours. This allowed the volunteer member to continue working at their jobs and to only respond to the more serious calls. It has since expanded and now responds to assist the Newtown Ambulance Squad on all calls for Emergency Medical Services in Newtown Township, Newtown Borough and Northern Middletown Township during their hours of operation.
The effects of this department were quickly recognized as the quicker responses to emergencies had a dramatic impact on the outcome of situations that otherwise would have been much worse. Additionally, the number of serious fires in commercial and industrial properties has been seriously reduced since its inception. In 1997 Newtown Township, Newtown Emergency Services Department and Newtown Fire Association were recognized by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for their progressive and innovative solution to a serious problem.

In the summer of 2008, construction began on the museum and old fire house next to Station 45, which was built in 1901. The old firehouse was completely renovated to better serve as a museum, and the second floor was renovated to serve as a meeting and training room. A display case was also built at the front of Station 45 to house either Old Washy or the 1923 Kearns Doughy Pumper. Construction was completed in June 2009. The creation of the 1901 Firehouse museum restoration project, restoration of the 1923 Kern and restoration of the 1812 Patrick Lyons Hand Pumper "Old Washy" were all made possible by a bequest from former members W. Aubrey Merrick (1885-1967) and his son John Merrick (1925-1989).

In October 2008, the Newtown Fire Association received delivery of a 2008 Pierce Velocity 105’ Ladder truck, and sold the 1988 Pierce Arrow Ladder truck to the Bardstown Fire Company in Kentucky. The truck was dedicated to trustee and ladder foreman Jerry Adams for his dedicated service over the years.
In addition to Engine 55-1 and Special Service 55, in December 2008 both Rescue 45 and Utility 45 were certified as a Quick Response Service (Q.R.S.) by the Pennsylvania Department of Health, and starting in January 2009 firefighters/EMT’s began supplementing the Newtown Ambulance Squad on medical calls in the first due area on evenings and weekends.

In June 2009, the Newtown Fire Association replaced two late-model Ford Crown Victoria Chief’s cars with two 2009 Chevy Tahoes to be used by Chief 45 and Deputy Chief 45. Later in that month, renovations to Newtown’s 1796 handpumper nicknamed “Old Washy” were completed, and the fire company hosted the 89th Annual Bucks County Fireman’s Parade while celebrating the department’s 120th anniversary to Newtown and the surrounding communities. In 2010, Engine 55 was replaced with a new Pierce Velocity pumper, and the prior Pierce Quantum was sold to the Bardstown Fire Company in Kentucky.

Today the members of Newtown Fire Association and the Newtown Emergency Services Department work hand in hand to provide a professional fire, rescue, and medical response to Newtown and the surrounding communities.
Current Apparatus: Station 45

2001 Pierce Dash – Rescue 45 (top left); 2008 Pierce Velocity – Ladder 45 (top right)
2008 Ford F-350 - Utility 45 (bottom center)
Current Apparatus: Station 55

2001 Pierce Enforcer – Engine 55-1 (left), 2010 Pierce Velocity – Engine 55 (right)
Newtown Fire Association Museum

Apparatus on Display Today: 1812 Patrick Lyons Hand Pumper "Old Washy" (top left); 1892 Warner and McGowan ladder truck (top right) 1923 Kearns Doughy Pumper (bottom left), and 1965 Ward LaFrance Engine (bottom right)
### Chiefs of the Newtown Fire Association

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Terms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Edward R. Balderson</td>
<td>1889-1894</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Bothwell</td>
<td>1895-1917</td>
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<tr>
<td>George W. Ettenger</td>
<td>1918-1925</td>
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<tr>
<td>David C. Voorhees</td>
<td>1926-1934</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charles V. Urban</td>
<td>1935-1940</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daniel A. Cahill</td>
<td>1941-1943</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harrison S. Ettenger</td>
<td>1944-1954</td>
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<tr>
<td>John J. Sutton</td>
<td>1955</td>
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<td>William S. Ettenger</td>
<td>1956-1970</td>
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<tr>
<td>George A. Forsyth Sr.</td>
<td>1971-1972</td>
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<tr>
<td>Albert D. Jones</td>
<td>1973-1974</td>
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<tr>
<td>George A. Forsyth Sr.</td>
<td>1975-1985</td>
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<tr>
<td>George A. Forsyth Jr.</td>
<td>1986-1988</td>
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<td>Dennis R. Forsyth</td>
<td>1989-1998</td>
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<tr>
<td>George A. Forsyth Jr.</td>
<td>1999-2002</td>
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<td>Zach Dunkelburger</td>
<td>2003-2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>Andrew J. Errico</td>
<td>2006-2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carl Forsyth</td>
<td>2012-2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Matthew Gerhard</td>
<td>2015-</td>
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*George A. Forsyth, Sr.*
Presidents of the Newtown Fire Association

Wilmer Krusen 1889-1890
Thomas K. Gumpper 1891-1896
Ernest Sutton 1897-1903
David C. Vorhees 1904-1925
Joseph J. Mulhern Sr. 1926-1941
James D. Burns 1942-1949
Charles B. Jones 1950-1954
Preston W. Taylor 1955-1960
Elmer Pownall 1961
Joseph J. Watts Jr. 1962-1964
Preston W. Taylor 1965-1966
Frank B. Fabian Jr. 1967
John J. Sutton 1968-1970
Preston W. Taylor 1971
William B. Dunlevy 1972-1978
Harvey H. Gray 1979-1980
Glenn A. Forsyth 1981-1984
Albert D. Jones 1984-1985
Charles Keller 1985
Glenn A. Forsyth 1986
Dave Pannepacker 1987
Ronald Weaver 1988
Stanley Fesmire 1989
Dennis R. Forsyth 1999-2003
Warren Dallas 2004-2009
Michael Errico, Sr. 2010-2013
William W. Fabian II 2014-
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Complied by Brian Wozniak, with contributions from Frank B. Fabian Jr. & William W. Fabian II.

Historical information contains references from a souvenir booklet written by local historian Edward Barnsley (1906-1989), which he compiled for the Newtown Fire Association's 1939 Banquet, in celebration of their 50th anniversary.

Station 45 (Newtown Borough) | 14 Liberty Street | Newtown, PA 18940 | (215) 968-3731
Station 55 (Newtown Township) | 55 Municipal Drive | Newtown, PA 18940 | (215) 860-5503