

# EARLY BOSTON FIRES.

## March 16th, 1630, the First Recorded Fire Date.

### Ladders and a Pole with a Swab About the First Fire Weapons Used.

### Frequency of Fires Caused a Fire Board to be Formed in 1718.

The first Boston fire of which record is made occurred on March 16, 1630. Gov Wintthrop, in describing it, says: "About noon the chimney of Thomas Sharp's house took fire, the splinters being not clayed at the top; and taking the thatch burned it down. The wind being northwest, drove the fire to Mr Coulburn's house, being a — rods off, and burned that down also, which were as good and as well furnished as the most on the plantation."

Other fires causing damage in the ensuing years, the town became alarmed and orders were issued in 1653 to cause greater security to the inhabitants.

These were that each house should be provided with ladders to reach to the ridge, as well as with a pole 12 feet long with a swab at the end of it. Monthly fines were imposed on the householders who did not immediately comply with the order.

The selectmen, too, were to furnish six long ladders, to be placed outside the meeting house, and to be branded with the town mark.

At the same time the right was given William Franklin to build a cistern, 12 feet or more deep, to hold water. This stood at what is now the corner of State and Exchange sts.

For 15 years, until January, 1673, these were the only available precautions against the spread of fire. Then by a vote of the selectmen a fire engine was brought over from England. This was a rude primitive affair, and was under the management of a carpenter, named, strangely enough, Thomas Atkins. Atkins had 12 assistants under him.

Some dispute arose as to its location, but it was finally housed in a shed on the town's land on Queen st (Court st), near which was subsequently built the prison. Hence it was called "Ye engine by ye prison."

It was first used on Aug 8, 1679, at a fire which raged till the following noon, destroying 170 buildings and several vessels. Owing to its crude nature, this first engine was wholly inadequate to oppose the progress of the fire.

About this time two men, Edward Davis and Joseph Gridley, were employed as bellmen, and originated the fire patrol. From midnight until 5 o'clock in the morning they walked about the town, examining extraordinary lights, and, if necessary, giving an alarm.

Toward the close of 1679 the work of incendiaries became so conspicuous that a town watch was set to contend with them. The town was divided into four quarters, consisting each of two wards. In each quarter were placed four barrels of powder, six hand engines (not to be compared with the fire engine) and two crooks.

In September a Frenchman, Peter Lorphellin, was imprisoned on suspicion by the court of assistants, owing to rash language which he made use of while a serious fire was going on. His box and papers being searched, strange things came to light: Crucibles, smelting pan, strong shears to clip money, clippings of Massachusetts money and other instruments. On this evidence he was sentenced to stand two hours in the pillory, to have both ears cut off, to give a bond of £500 and to pay costs. Notwithstanding this, firebugs kept on at their work.

Soon, with the growth of the town, more engines became necessary. In 1707 Capt David Mason procured from England a second engine, as well as material for a third. These were constructed of wood, with iron loops. Others followed, until in 1796 there were as many as 12 engines in Boston.

Despite the new engines, a bad fire got under way on Oct 2, 1711. Starting where a woman was picking oakum on Cornhill (a part of Washington st), it rapidly spread to School st, Dock sq and Pudding lane (Devonshire st.) Had the Globe office been in existence it must surely have fallen. As it was, the postoffice, on Washington st, near State, was destroyed, and 110 families were rendered homeless.

As the old meeting house became threatened, a number of sailors climbed the roof to save the bell. They were cut off, and perished in the ruins.

Several citizens were killed and great horror added to the scene by the blowing up of several buildings for safety.

Increase Mather, seizing his opportunity, came out directly with a sermon in which he said: "But has not God's holy day been profaned in New England? Has it not been so in Boston this last summer more than ever since there was a Christian here? Have not burlesks been carried through the streets on the Sabbath day? Have not bakers, carpenters and other tradesmen been employed on servile work on the Sabbath day? When I saw this . . . my heart said, Will not the Lord for this kindle a fire in Boston?"

Although this effort, entitled "Burnings Rewayed," failed to bring much consolation to the homeless, a subscription amounting to about £700 proved more successful.

Shortly a board of fire wards was created by the general court. It was the duty of these men, assuming their badge of office, to proceed to the spot where a fire was burning, and there to take charge of affairs, to demand assistance and to blow up houses if necessary. The penalty of refusing them was 10 days imprisonment or a fine of 10 shillings, to be distributed among those who suffered from the fire.

The first board was formed of Cant John Ballentine, Cant Timothy Clark, Capt Edward Winslow, Capt Edward Martyn, Stephen Minot, Samuel Greenwood, John Greenough, J. Pollard, Thomas Lee and William Lowder.

Their badge was a red staff five feet long, tipped with a bright brass spire six inches long.

On Sept 30, 1718, the first fire association began. It was formed "for mutual aid in case it should please Almighty God to permit the breaking out of a fire in Boston, where we live." Throughout the century these associations increased greatly in popularity and in numbers and rendered great assistance by their work.

Meetings were held quarterly at the taverns, a supper usually following the transaction of business. A bill of one of these meetings, held at the "Bunch of Grapes" in 1733, reads as follows:

Supper . . . . .	£	4
Two bottles Madeira . . . . .	3	8
One bottle of port . . . . .	1	8
Six bowls punch . . . . .	6	4
Four bottles porter . . . . .	2	5
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This document was drawn upon the back of a playing card—the king of hearts.

Up to the year 1739 the only recompense that firemen had received was being excused from military duty. Then an order was passed tending to increase their activity. It read as follows:

"That for the encouragement of the respective companies belonging to the several fire engines in this town and to stimulate them to their duty in extinguishing of fires, as there may be occasion, there be and hereby is allowed out of the town treasury the sum of

five pounds, to the company of such fire engines as shall first be brought to work upon any house or building that shall be on fire."

This system of premiums was in vogue until regular compensation to firemen was inaugurated.

In addition to these premiums firemen were exempted from jury duty.

During the month of March, 1760, a memorable series of fires occurred, concluding with one on the 20th, said at that time to have been the most dreadful one ever seen in North America. The first was on St Patrick's day, and started in a joiner's shop in West Boston. Though the entire department was called out, a strong northeast wind so scattered the flames that great damage was done before the fire was under control.

The next day the performance was repeated, this time at James Griffin's (Liverpool) wharf. Here a building used by the royal artillery as a laboratory took fire. Powder blew up the building, wounding a number of men, while grenades and small arms exploded, the concussion being felt throughout the town.

Two days later occurred the great fire. It began at 2 o'clock in the morning at the house of a Mrs Jackson on Cornhill (Washington st, opposite Williams ct), from some undiscovered cause. Rapidly running from building to building, it pretty thoroughly cleaned out the neighborhood, passing over Cornhill (Washington st), Pudding lane (Devonshire st), Water st, Quaker lane (Congress st), toward the docks, Mackerel lane (Kilby st), Milk st, Battery-march st, and State st.

Various estimates of the total loss were made. The first was at £300,000. Next the general court decided upon £100,000. Hutchinson's History declares it was £50,000. A petition, however, for assistance made by the sufferers to the house of commons in Great Britain presented the most likely figure.

This set the loss at £53,321 5s 5d, stating that some relief had been obtained: From the Boston churches £3916, from New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Hampshire and Connecticut £3358, from London merchants £3000, and from other sources £793.

Although the king of England did little about the petition, for the next three years contributions came in from various parts of the country. Among these was one of £200 from Christopher Kilby, in appreciation of which the name of Mackerel lane was changed to Kilby st.

### Fire Department to Imitate Horatius.

In 1814, at the time of the war with England, the citizens became excited and alarmed at the appearance of English men-of-war on the horizon. As the water front was in a somewhat defenseless condition, measures were taken to station two fire engine companies each at the West Boston bridge, Canal bridge, Charles River bridge and South bridge, in order to cut away if necessary. The war was concluded, however, without the need of resorting to such a course.