



Major Events Timeline

The Cincinnati Fire Department

1802 - Present

02 Jan 1802— The frontier settlement of Cincinnati is incorporated as a town. The town has a population of around 1000 people with about 500 buildings. Among the first laws passed involved early fire protection laws.

1808—Cincinnati purchases its first hand fire pump and establishes the communities first fire alarm, a large drum mounted on top a carpenters shop near the present day site of fountain square. The fire drum is among the earliest relics on display at the Cincinnati Fire Museum



Several destructive fires demonstrate the need to improve the organization of Cincinnati's volunteer fire department. These included the 1st Courthouse Fire (1814), The David Embree Brewery Fire (1815), and the Lancaster Seminary Fire (1816). Large fires highlighting the need to improve fire protection would become a frequently recurring theme in the development of the fire service in the City of Cincinnati.

1819—Cincinnati is in the midst of a period of rapid population growth with a population over 10,000 and over 1900 buildings. Steamboat traffic would contribute to the growth of population, agriculture, and industry in the city. This growth would fuel the need to expand and improve fire protection as the threat of destructive conflagrations increased with the cities growing size and business interests.

1819-1820—Cincinnati's Volunteer Fire Department undergoes a reorganization in which the volunteer firefighters themselves begin to stand out in society as a more clearly defined and exclusive group. Many of the cities most prominent businessmen and leading citizens are also members of the early volunteer fire department.

1823—The massive 9 story stone steam mill situated on the waterfront is destroyed by fire. This mill was among the cities most recognizable buildings and its loss, coupled with several other earlier fires, demonstrated the need for greater organization of the cities fire protection systems

1824 – The city begins using the bells of the Presbyterian Church to replace the drum as its fire alarm

1826 – Wooden water mains are replaced with iron pipes and cisterns are constructed at major intersections to facilitate fire suppression operations in the city center.

1829 – A major fire in the business district of the city destroys 33 buildings and demonstrates the inadequacy of the current volunteer system despite significant pride and concern among the volunteers themselves and recent reorganization.

1830 – By this time, Cincinnati has become the Queen City of the West with a population of nearly 25,000 people all stuck in a relatively small 1.5 square mile basin along the Ohio River. Leading industries include corn, hogs, and whisky and the community benefits from steamboat and canal traffic. To help meet the growing fire threat, the Cincinnati Fire Association is formed to regulate the volunteer fire companies. Volunteer firefighters were celebrated in the community and could often be seen in community parades, public company competitions, and social events. Volunteers were celebrated for their heroism but many in the community still worried they were not capable of dealing with the ever growing threat of fire in the congested city.

1840-1853 – The later period of the history of the volunteer fire department transpired during a rough and contentious period in the overall history of the City of Cincinnati. Racial strife, abolitionism, and economic concerns were among the primary worries for citizens. The 1840s saw what would become the first major wave of German immigration to Cincinnati. By 1850 the city had become the 6th largest in the country with a population of over 115,000 and over 16,000 buildings, all still packed into the relatively small flat area surrounded by hills along the banks of the Ohio River. Tenements sprang up in areas overrun with newcomers and there were few open public spaces to escape the crowds, smoke, and refuse generated by so many people and businesses.



Feb 1845 – The first serious fight breaks out between volunteer fire companies with bricks being thrown. Older and more prominent members of the volunteer department had been leaving the volunteer companies as their business interests grew larger and took more of their time. Emigrants joined the ranks and companies took on more unique identities separate from the larger volunteer department. These changes highlighted the differences between companies and the social tensions of the period further contributed to a breakdown in discipline. The Chief Engineer of the department was largely responsible for maintaining equipment and water supply and generally lacked the authority to maintain order among the companies.

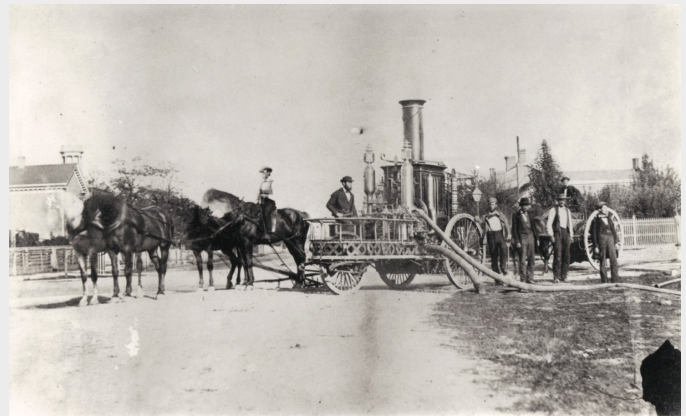
09 Jul 1849 – The 2nd Courthouse Fire causes significant destruction and reemphasizes the shortcomings of the volunteer fire protection system.

1850—Cincinnati is the 6th largest city by population in the United States. This is the peak of violence among fire companies in Cincinnati during the period of “fire riots” that impacted many major American cities at this time. During this year, a single prominent Cincinnati newspaper recorded 6 major instances of companies rioting, 2 companies were disbanded or expelled from The Fire Association for discipline and fighting, 6 people were shot during fighting, significant damage was done to fire equipment and there were 2 instances of arson including the burning down of the quarters of Volunteer Fire Company 2’s quarters. Something had to change!

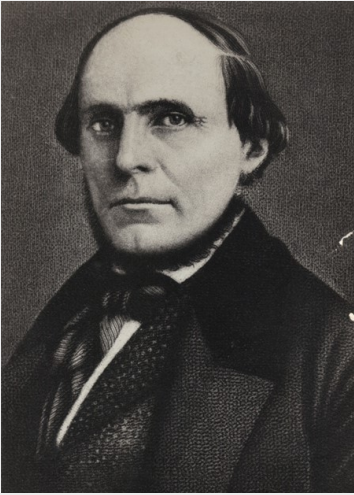
It was clear to many in Cincinnati that the large and congested urban environment filled with people and hazardous industrial factories would require a more specialized fire protection service. Media outlets reporting on the “fire riots” began to call for major changes and better protection for the city.

Some politicians and leading citizens began searching for ways to improve fire protection and discipline. Miles Greenwood, a prominent Cincinnati businessman and life member of a volunteer fire company, led a group that published a report calling for the complete reorganization of the fire department. They studied the problems facing the city and looked to other parts of the country for ideas that might work. Boston, was already using system of payment among firemen. Some departments were using trained horses to pull fire engines. These were great ideas but they needed to find a way to reduce the number of firemen required to operate an engine to make these changes practical and affordable. Some volunteer companies had over 200 members with many men required to hand-pull apparatus to scenes and hand-pump equipment at fires.

The solution was found in a new invention started in the early 1850s by Alexander Latta, who had previously directed construction of the first locomotive built west of the Allegheny’s. Latta applied his experience with the railroads and partnered with Abel Shawk and Robert Bray to invent a unique new steam fire engine.



01 Jan 1853—The new steam fire engine, called the Uncle Joe Ross, was set against Cincinnati Engine Company 09’s hand pumped and hand drawn apparatus known as “The Ocean” The two fire apparatus were tested in a run from quarters to the Ohio River where a crowd of onlookers watched as the two challenged for dominance in their ability to throw water drafted from the river. After 30 minutes the men of The Ocean were exhausted from pumping their engine. Seeing the opportunity to demonstrate its full capacity, Miles Greenwood called for all 6 remaining discharges of the steam fire engine to be opened. The critics were silenced. The new steam fire engine had clearly demonstrated it could outperform the volunteers and it had done so with a crew of fewer than 10 people!



01 April 1853 – The Cincinnati Fire Department is reorganized into a paid professional fire department using horse to pull apparatus and employing the first successful steam fire engine in the country. The new professional department consisted of 444 firefighters, most still hand companies. As more steam engines could be added to service the departments manpower would shrink dramatically. Miles Greenwood was selected to be the first chief of the new professional fire department.

30 Oct 1858 – By this date “The Cincinnati System” is the talk of the fire service around the globe. Harpers Weekly of New York published a fully illustrated article describing what fire departments needed to do to look more like the Cincinnati Fire Department. Elected leaders and prominent citizens from around the country visited Cincinnati to see the firsthand the use of paid firefighters using horse drawn steam fire engines at work. The Cincinnati Fire Department served as the model steam fire department for the rest of the nation.



1866 – Cincinnati continued to build on its push to professionalize the fire department, installing a Fire Alarm Telegraph System to improve alarm, dispatch, and response times. Speed and professionalism were the focus of the department.

1863 – Cincinnati retires its last remaining hand pumped fire apparatus from service

1873 – The Cincinnati Fire Department goes through a major reorganization. The professional department now consists of 149 fully paid professional firefighters operating 18 steam fire companies and 4 hook and ladder companies. Outside employment is forbidden. Each rank has specifically defined jobs and expectations, Companies are required to maintain diaries and record run histories and activities. Firemen are now expected to spend the vast majority of their day at the firehouse, generally only taking a few hours off each week.

1879 – Building on the push for faster responses, drop systems and fire poles are installed in fire stations. Drop systems allowed a watchman to push a button in response to an alarm of fire. The button would set in motion a system of pulleys that opened stall doors for horses that were trained to walk under the harness that automatically dropped from the ceiling onto their backs. Firehouse lights automatically turned on and fire pole trap door swung open. A fast company could be out of quarters and responding in around 10 seconds!



Early 1880s – Cincinnati's population had exploded to over 250,000 people, most still packed into 1.5 square miles on the banks of the Ohio River. Cultural diversity, economic uncertainty, labor disputes, and political factionalism ruled the day. A disparity of wealth was become apparent as well to do citizens began to escape the congested city, building homes in neighboring hilltop communities that would eventually be absorbed into the City. A series of major catastrophes grabbed the headlines. A major flood inundated the city in 1883. A second major flood struck again in 1884 and then in March 1884 the city experienced a deadly civil insurrection. The Courthouse Riot lasted for 3 days, claimed at least 56 lives and left hundred injured. The courthouse and the jail were again burned to the ground. Most citizens were left feeling that the city government and its services were ineffective. People were calling for change once again!

26-30 March 1884 – Courthouse Riots – 56 people are killed and over 300 injured in one of the deadliest recorded instances of riot in US history. The courthouse and jail were both burned to the ground during the event.





21 May 1885 – Cincinnati's deadliest fire, the Sullivan Printing Company Fire, results in 15 people killed. The loss was the result of unsafe building conditions and a lack of fire prevention and building codes.

Political change came in the form of graft and corruption with the era of boss politics and the leadership of Cincinnati Mayor George Cox. Despite the political dynamic, the Republican machine demonstrated their ability to introduce order and stability. During this period the Cincinnati Fire Department took on a more militaristic approach to discipline incorporating drills and inspections as a part of regular daily duties. The rank of lieutenant was added to help captains maintain company level discipline. A standardized fire department uniform was also introduced to replace civilian clothing. The city itself also grew substantially over this period with many new neighborhoods being annexed into the City of Cincinnati.

29 July 1887 – A large conflagration spreads through a portion of Lower Price Hill destroying at least 28 homes and a large number of animal pens.



17 July 1895—Two firefighters are killed and at least 15 more are injured in a building collapse during a fire at the J.H.Hermesch Feed Store at the foot of the Suspension Bridge. Members were operating inside the structure when the floor collapsed tossing them into the cellar. One city block was left in ruins. This was the first of two fires reported from Box 13 that proved deadly for members of the fire department.

1900—By this time the steam fire department was at its height. The city was protected by over 50 reliable steam engine companies and an improved fire alarm system provided rapid notification of emergencies. Despite these advances in capacity and professionalism, the problem of fire loss continued to grow. Firefighters were now contending with a central business district filled with bigger and tall buildings, increasingly more dangerous industrial processes, and very little in the way of fire prevention. Massive conflagrations in Cincinnati and around the country would demonstrate once again the need for a new approach to fire protection.



21 Dec 1910—The Cincinnati Shoe District Fire burns for 222hrs killing 1 civilian and 3 firefighters in separate incidents during the fire. Suppression efforts were complicated by freezing temperatures and collapsing walls. A large section of the business district was destroyed. That same weekend major conflagrations in Philadelphia and Chicago took a major toll. All said the national news made report of 37 firefighters killed in the line of duty and one police officer. This included the Chief of the Chicago Fire Department.



1912 – Conflagrations claiming numerous lives and thousands of buildings in major American cities convinced many of the need to modernize fire departments nationwide. It would again be new technology employed to solve the problem with the fire department becoming fully motorized using gasoline powered apparatus by 1922.

1914 – Cincinnati Fire Prevention Bureau established

1917 – The United States enters WW1 creating a manpower crisis in the Cincinnati Fire Department. Soon half the department was composed of men with little or no experience in the fire service. 3 members of the Cincinnati Fire Department would be killed in action military service (George Junker, Jerry Willis, Joseph Bruns).

1918 – The Spanish Flu killed millions of people worldwide and resulted in the death of at least 17 firefighters. Men living in firehouses were in close contact with their coworkers and the flu spread easily among those on duty. The losses and suffering of the flu combined with the experiences of World War 1 would lead to a push for improved working conditions across many fields including the fire service.

12 April 1919 – The majority of Cincinnati Firefighters go on strike after organizing as Local 48 under the International Association of Firefighters. The men were pushing for fair wages, better working conditions, and an improved schedule to allow for time with their families. This period was marked by a fear of Socialism and many cities including Cincinnati worked against efforts at unionization. The striking firemen held out for nearly a week before the city successfully broke the strike. Some of the members that walked off the job were never permitted to return. Among them were the 4 members that had helped to organized the union.



17 Jan 1920 – The Newton Tea & Spice Company fire kills 4 firefighters in a collapse at the foot of the Suspension Bridge. This is the second fire fatal to CFD members reported from Box 13 which would be known going forward as the HooDoo Box.

May 1920 – CFD begins operations on the 2 Platoon System

05 Aug 1920 – 4 firefighters are killed in an explosion at the Refiners Oil Company Fire in Lower Price Hill.

1920 – This year would become the single deadliest for members of the Cincinnati Fire Department, with 10 firefighters killed in the line of duty in 4 separate incidents.

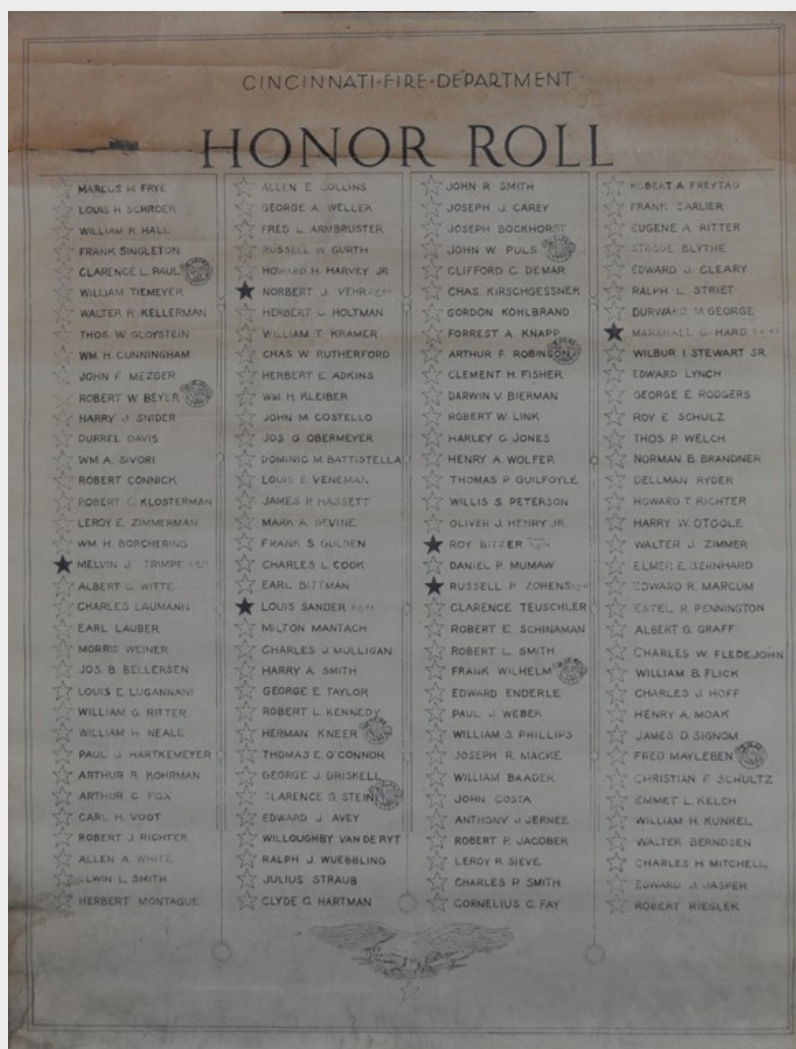
1924 – Cincinnati experiences significant political reform with the bi-partisan Charterite Committee. A new city charter is passed and a city manager and civil service are added to the cities governing structure. By the late 1920s the cities government looks similar to todays system.

Fall 1929 – Following the Stock Market Crash the nation entered the Great Depression. The cities finances were relatively strong through this period and little changes in the fire department. These years marked the beginning of the Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Administration and a host of public housing efforts.

Jan 1937 – The Greatest Flood in Cincinnati's recorded history inundates large sections of Cincinnati and numerous fires are touched off including the Standard Oil Fire on Sunday 24 January 1937. The date would come to be known as Black Sunday. Floating fuel from overturned tanks ignited on the surface of flood waters on the Mill Creek. Numerous buildings were destroyed and it was feared Union Terminal could be threatened. The Great Flood and its associated fire events were among the largest responses in CFD history with firemen working 10 straight days without leave. Following this continuous service one firefighter, Robert Hehemann, collapsed and died upon returning to Engine 45s quarters.



1942 – National defense again depleted the manpower of the fire department as many members volunteered for service in World War 2. Six members of the fire department would be killed in military service (Louis Sander, Melvin Trimpe, Roy Bitzer, Norbert Vehr, Russell Zorens, and Marshall Hard)



1952 – A successful city referendum allows for creation of the 3 platoon system with firefighters now working every third day.

1955 – Herbert Bane Jr. becomes the first African American Firefighter in the Cincinnati Fire Department. He served at Engine 34 and the Heavy Rescue for about 10 years before leaving City Service for the Federal Fire Service. He would go on to be awarded the Benjamin Franklin Award for Valor in the fire service after his actions at a fire in an ammunition dump at Camp Eagle in South Vietnam on 22 June 1970





1957 – Chief Barney Houston, once the youngest chief in the history of the CFD, retires with 54 years of service. He had served in the role of chief of the department since 1916.



11 Oct 1957 – Cincinnati Firefighters save City Hall after the outbreak of fire that goes for 5 alarms

Late 1960s – The period was marked by significant social upheaval as citizens pushed for equal rights across the nation. Cincinnati witnessed civil unrest in 1967 and 1968. The unrest of the late 1960s led to a push for diversification in the public workforce in the 1970s.

Mar 1974 – A federal consent decree established timelines and benchmarks for diversification of the Cincinnati Fire Department with the goal of the department employing at least 18% of its members from minority groups by 1980.

28 May 1977 – The Beverly Hills Supper Club in Northern Kentucky catches fire during a packed evening performance. Off duty CFD Captain Pete Sabino is among those in attendance. Fire spreads rapidly burning combustible interior surfaces unregulated by existing codes. Despite the massive response from area fire departments and the efforts of Captain Sabino and others in attendance, 165 people are killed in the fire which stands as the nation's 3rd deadliest night club fire.

03 Dec 1979 – 11 people are killed trying to force their way into the Coliseum to see The Who in concert. Festival seating and a delay in getting people into the facility played a role in the rush of the crowd. This was the first mass casualty response for the Cincinnati Fire Department since it began providing paramedic services to the community.

1980 – Formation of the Cincinnati African American Firefighters Association

1982 – By this date all members of the CFD are required to be certified as Basic Emergency Medical Technicians

1984 – First female fire recruits are hired by the Cincinnati Fire Department (Pateeser Jackson, Vickie Goodson, and Paula Duncan Anderson)

1986 – The Cincinnati Fire Department assumes responsibility for transport of all patients requiring an emergency medical response. Police scout cars were formerly used for this purpose.



1997 – Robert Wright becomes the first African American fire chief of the Cincinnati Fire Department. Had been the first African American to achieve the earlier ranks of lieutenant, captain, district chief, and assistant chief.

2005 – Local news reports indicate the Cincinnati Fire Department is among the most diverse in the State of Ohio.

2008 – The Cincinnati Fire Department graduates its first in-house paramedic class