



City of Boston Archives and Records Management Division

Guide to the City Council Committee on the Fire Department records

Finding aid prepared by Joyce Clifford
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| Repository: | City of Boston Archives and Records Management Division |
| Title: | City Council Committee on the Fire Department |
| Collection No.: | 0140.014 |
| Dates: | 1816-1844 with gaps (Bulk, 1831-1841) |
| Quantity: | 8.75 Cubic feet |

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Historical note

The origins of the Boston Fire Department date back to 1678 with the establishment of the first engine company and the receipt of the first hand fire engine in North America. The Board of Fire Wards was established on February 1, 1711. Prominent men were chosen as Fire Wards and were responsible for the operation and maintenance of the equipment assigned to their ward. Chapter 52 of the Acts of 1825, "An Act Establishing a Fire Department in the City of Boston and an Ordinance for the preventing and extinguishing of fires and establishing a fire department" went into full operation in April of 1826. With this legislation, the Board of Fire Wards was dissolved. All records and property belonging to the city were transferred to the Chief Engineer in May of 1826.

With the further reorganization of 1837, the Fire Department changed from a partially volunteer to a paid fire department. On June 16, 1851, the City Council passed an order to erect a system of telegraphic fire alarms and the first regular alarm on the new system was received on April 29, 1852. On January 1, 1859, two new steam engines were put in service replacing two hand engines. On October 24, 1873, the City Council passed an ordinance creating a Board of Fire Commissioners to oversee the department. Section 9 of Chapter 449 of the

Acts of 1895, an act to amend the City Charter, abolished the Board of Fire Commissioners and placed the Department under the charge of one Fire Commissioner. The Chief Engineer serves as the Executive Officer of the Commissioner and directs the work of the members of the Department.

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Scope and Contents note

The City Council Committee on the Fire Department records date from 1816-1844, bulk dates from 1831-1841. The collection contains fire department records and correspondence which document the transactions, personnel, activities and growth of the department from a subscription organization to a professional fire department. The original organization has been retained as much as possible, including the title Sundry Papers & Returns, which reflect the variety of the contents. The collection is organized in two series: Weekly Returns of the Magazine at Fort Strong and Sundry Papers and Returns.

Series I, Weekly Returns of the Magazine at Fort Strong Magazine, consists of weekly inventory distribution lists of the companies and individuals who purchased gunpowder. The returns (records) also list the date purchased, whether the purchase was for domestic or foreign use, the number of casks purchased and the aggregate number of casks remaining at the end of the report time. Sundry Papers in Series I include petitions (applications) to sell and store gunpowder, petitions to build forges and petitions of complaint with responses to the complaints.

Series II records, Sundry Papers and Returns, contain official returns, correspondence, inquiries, requests, resolutions, prints and drawings. Returns list the names of men who worked for the engine company that week, men added to the engine company membership (and their ages and addresses) and those who were discharged. Some of the returns include the ages of all members of the company, the majority of whom were between 25 and 35 years old. Originally, returns were signed weekly by the men in each company but that practice soon ended and the clerk/secretaries of the engine companies completed and submitted the returns to Chief Engineer William Barnicoat.

Returns may also include the men who were elected engine company officers and the number of fires or other events that a member attended. The returns are organized by month and each month was individually wrapped and sealed. The records were later expanded to include quarterly and annual returns, that is, lists of the men who committed to the engine company for a period of three consecutive months or an entire year.

The earliest papers in the collection were created in 1816 but there are significant gaps in the records for the years leading up to 1831. Some years contain only partial collections of department records. However, the boxes for 1841 consist of weekly, quarterly and annual returns, including names of vacation substitutes. These also contain correspondence, payrolls and insurance questionnaires thus making it the most comprehensive set of annual papers in the collection.

Of special interest in the collection is the earliest fire department inspection report, written in 1816. Also of interest is a complete list of the contents of a home, valued at 200 pounds, lost in a fire. More unusual are threatening anonymous letters sent in 1837, a watershed year for the department. The actions and attitudes of firemen that year initiated significant changes within the department and more professional practices and procedures were adopted. Samuel Atkins Eliot (1798-1862), a reformist mayor of Boston, expressed his, and the Committee's concerns and opinions in contemporary letters to the Chief Engineer and the Board of Engineers.

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Series I: Weekly returns of magazines at Fort Strong

Box Folder

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|---|----|-------------------------|--|
| 1 | 1 | 1821 January-December | Town of Boston records, the Fort Strong magazine papers consist of gunpowder returns (inventories) and the papers of the Fire-Ward Committee who responded to Petitions of Complaint such as one about converting a store into a forge and smithy. Fire-Ward committeemen were assigned to investigate petitions and report back to the committee head, Mr. Codman. |
| 1 | 2 | 1822 January 7-June 24 | Now the City of Boston, the records for 1822 include petitions to store and sell gunpowder, responses permitting or denying the petitions, reports, assignments and premiums. |
| 1 | 3 | 1822 July 1-December 30 | |
| 1 | 4 | 1823 January 4-June 30 | Petitions to store and sell gunpowder and to construct forges, responses to same, and proceedings of a special meeting are among these papers. |
| 1 | 5 | 1823 July 7-December 29 | |
| 1 | 6 | 1824 January 5-June 28 | An itemized list of household objects, valued at 200 pounds, that were lost in a fire, provides insight to objects values and home furnishings. |
| 1 | 7 | 1824 July 5-December 27 | |
| 1 | 8 | 1825 January 3-June 27 | |
| 1 | 9 | 1825 July 4-December 26 | |
| 1 | 10 | 1826 January 2-May 22 | Included in Sundry papers for 1826 is a list of the members of the Independent Friendly Fire Society accepted by the Mayor and the Board of Aldermen. The list was certified as a "true copy," signed by the City Clerk and Mayor Josiah Quincy (1772-1864) then submitted to Chief Engineer Samuel Devens Harris. Also included is the resignation letter from an entire engine company as unanimously voted upon by the members, a sign of the tension caused by the transition to an organized city-wide fire department with one chief engineer. |

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Series II: Sundry papers and returns

| Box | Folder | | |
|-----|--------|---------------------------------|--|
| 1 | 11 | Sundry papers, 1816 | Two applications for licenses to store and sell gunpowder illuminate the licensing process of 1816. Additional papers are a Board of Fire-Wards report of inspection of a dwelling for conformity with existing law as requested in a note, also included, and signed by Mr. Codman, Secretary (pro tem) of the Board of Fire-Wards. |
| 1 | 12-16 | Sundry papers, 1821 | |
| 1 | 17 | Sundry papers and returns, 1821 | |
| 1 | 18-19 | Sundry papers, 1822 | |
| 1 | 20 | Premiums, 1821-1822 | |
| 1 | 21-22 | Sundry papers, 1823 | |
| 1 | 23 | Sundry papers and returns, 1823 | |
| 1 | 24-25 | Sundry papers, 1824 | |

- 2 1 Sundry papers, 1825
- 2 2 Returns, 1825 May
- 2 3 Returns and sundry papers, 1825 May
- 2 4 Sundry papers, 1826
- 2 5 Returns, 1826
- 2 6-7 Sundry papers, 1827
 - A letter from Josiah Quincy (1772-1864), Mayor to Chief Engineer Samuel Devens Harris informing him that appropriations for the Fire Department are "considered to all effective purposes exhausted-" included in the letter are amounts appropriated, donated and other income.
- 2 8 Returns, 1827
- 2 9-10 Returns, 1828
- 2 11-12 Sundry papers, 1828
- 2 13 Plan for engine house, 1829
- 2 14-17 Returns, 1829
- 2 18-19 Sundry papers, 1829
- 3 1 Sundry papers, 1830
 - Sundry papers from this year include a new idea for conveying water to fire sites. Also included are addresses of fires, loss inquiries and requests for advice and fire fighting equipment from other municipalities. Additionally, there are returns, resignations, nominations and appointments. One surprising note involved competition among the engine companies disputing who arrived first at a fire; the first company to arrive received acknowledgement, possibly in the form of additional compensation. This method caused considerable animosity between the engine companies.
- 3 2-8 Returns and sundry papers, 1830
- 4 1 Sundry papers, 1831
- 4 2 Returns, 1831 January
- 4 3 Returns and sundry papers, 1831 February
- 4 4 Returns, 1831 March
- 4 5 Returns, 1831 April
- 4 6 Returns, 1831 May
- 4 7 Returns, 1831 June
- 4 8 Returns, 1831 July
- 4 9 Returns, 1831 August
- 4 10 Returns, 1831 September
- 4 11 Returns, 1831 October
- 4 12 Returns, 1831 November
- 4 13-14 Returns, 1831 December
- 4a 1 Rules and regulations on Gunpowder, 1832
 - A handwritten draft of the Rules and Regulations on Gunpowder.
- 4a 2 Sundry papers, 1832
- 4a 3 Returns, 1832 February
- 4a 4 Returns, 1832 March
- 4a 5-8 Returns, 1832 April
- 4a 9 Returns, 1832 May

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| 4a | 10 | Returns, 1832 June |
| 4a | 11 | Returns, 1832 July |
| 4a | 12 | Returns, 1832 August |
| 4a | 13 | Returns, 1832 September |
| 4a | 14-16 | Returns, 1832 October |
| 4a | 17-18 | Returns, 1832 November |
| 4a | 19-20 | Returns, 1832 December |
| 5 | 1 | Sundry papers, 1833 At a Meeting of Engineers and Foremen, a resolution to celebrate George Washington's birthday on February 22 was presented to the membership who voted to support the commemoration. |
| 5 | 2-3 | Returns, 1833 January |
| 5 | 4 | Returns, 1833 February |
| 5 | 5 | Returns, 1833 March |
| 5 | 6-9 | Returns, 1833 April |
| 5 | 10-11 | Returns, 1833 May |
| 5 | 12 | Returns, 1833 June |
| 5 | 13 | Returns, 1833 July |
| 5 | 14 | Returns, 1833 August |
| 5 | 15 | Returns, 1833 September |
| 5 | 16 | Returns, 1833 October |
| 5 | 17 | Returns, 1833 November |
| 5 | 18 | Returns, 1833 December |
| 6 | 1 | Sundry papers, 1834 Letters regarding the conduct of firemen and violations of the rules and regulations, a Notice to Disband Engine No.11 signed by clerk Edward Wigglesworth, various petitions and reports of the Mayor and Aldermen. |
| 6 | 2-3 | Returns, 1834 January |
| 6 | 4 | Returns, 1834 February |
| 6 | 5 | Returns, 1834 March |
| 6 | 6-7 | Returns, 1834 April |
| 6 | 8 | Returns, 1834 May |
| 6 | 9 | Returns, 1834 June |
| 6 | 10 | Returns, 1834 July |
| 6 | 11 | Returns, 1834 August |
| 6 | 12 | Returns, 1834 September |
| 6 | 13 | Returns, 1834 October |
| 6 | 14 | Returns, 1834 November |
| 6 | 15 | Returns, 1834 December |
| 7 | 1 | Sundry papers, 1835 An item of note is a letter regarding a contract for coats and whether India rubber or Pilot cloth would be better. |
| 7 | 2-3 | Returns, 1835 January |
| 7 | 4 | Returns, 1835 February |
| 7 | 5 | Returns, 1835 March |

- 7 6 Returns, 1835 April
- 7 7-8a Returns, 1835 May
- 7 9 Returns, 1835 June
- 7 10 Returns, 1835 July
- 7 11 Returns, 1835 August
- 7 12 Returns, 1835 September
- 7 13 Returns, 1835 October
- 7 14 Returns, 1835 November
- 7 15 Returns, 1835 December
- 8 1-4 Sundry papers, 1836
 Four folders of Sundry papers include appointments, correspondence, petitions, articles of incorporation for a volunteer fire department in South Boston, and reports to the Mayor and Aldermen.
- 8 5 Return of furniture, 1836
 The Returns of furniture consist of inventories of furniture "entrusted to the care" of individual fire engine companies.
- 8 6 Annual return, 1836
- 8 7 Returns, 1836 January
- 8 8 Returns, 1836 March
- 8 9-10 Returns, 1836 May
- 8 11 Returns, 1836 June
- 8 12 Returns, 1836 August
- 8 13 Returns, 1836 September
- 8 14 Returns, 1836 October
- 9 1-2 Sundry papers, 1837
 The Sundry papers for this year are a treasure trove of miscellaneous documents because of the changes that occurred within the fire department. Included are petitions to change the status of firemen from 'subscribed members' to 'Permanent Company.' Other petitions state that the men will now "comply with alacrity to orders Given by the Officers of the Company" and "comply with requisitions of the Ordinance and Officers." A letter from Mayor Samuel Eliot to the Board of Engineers asked the Board to commit to the new rules, regulations and ordinances and assured them of the importance of this action which the roll of engine company officers' votes, also included, indicates they did. Mayor Eliot also wrote regarding delays in crossing the bridge to South Boston and in a letter dated May 3, forbade engine companies to draw water from any reservoirs, the result of a vote taken by the Board of Aldermen the previous week.
 Additional correspondence includes a letter from the Water Commissioner to Chief Engineer William Barnicoat about fire department water use, an ongoing issue for the fire department not resolved until after the fire of 1872; letters about vandalism of an engine; and a recommendation for the new steward, Charles Easte, of the South Boston Fire Association.
 Most surprising are anonymous letters, one of which accused Chief Barnicoat of treating "Irish here worse than the Mexicans do the Yankies [sic] at Tampico." The writer adds "O for shame - where is your shame?" The second letter has a casket drawn on the front. The writer begins the letter with "Sirs or devils, You are a set of miserable dirty scamps and blackguards." Another

letter, dropped off at the post office states "there will be a fire in Boston tonight."

Reflecting a more practical aspect of departmental business are 2 copies of a contract awarded to Stephen Thayer to build a new engine.

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| 9 | 3-4 | Returns, 1837 January |
| 9 | 5 | Returns, 1837 February |
| 9 | 6-7 | Returns, 1837 March |
| 9 | 8-10 | Returns, 1837 April |
| 9 | 11-13 | Returns, 1837 May |
| 9 | 14 | Returns, 1837 June |
| 9 | 15 | Returns, 1837 July |
| 9 | 16 | Returns, 1837 August |
| 9 | 17-18 | Returns, 1837 September |
| 9 | 19 | Returns, 1837 October |
| 9 | 20-21 | Returns, 1837 November |
| 9 | 22 | Returns, 1837 December |
| 10 | 1-3 | Returns, 1838 January |
| 10 | 4 | Payrolls, 1838 January |
| 10 | 5-6 | Returns, 1838 February |
| 10 | 7-8 | Returns, 1838 March |
| 10 | 9 | Returns, 1838 April |
| 10 | 10-11 | Returns, 1838 May |
| 10 | 12 | Returns, 1838 June |
| 10 | 13-14 | Returns, 1838 |
| 11 | 1-3 | Returns, 1838 September |
| 11 | 4 | Returns, 1838 October |
| 11 | 5-7 | Returns, 1838 November |
| 11 | 8 | Returns, 1838 December |
| 11 | 9 | Correspondence from citizens and sundry papers, 1839 January |
| 11 | 10-11 | Returns, 1839 February |
| 11 | 12 | Sundry papers, 1839 March |
| 11 | 12 | Sundry papers, 1839 March |
| 11 | 13 | Returns, 1839 March |
| 11 | 14 | Sundry papers, 1839 April |
| 11 | 15 | Sundry papers, 1839 May |
| 11 | 16-17 | Returns, 1839 May |
| 12 | 1 | Sundry papers, 1839 June and July |
| 12 | 2-3 | Returns, 1839 August |
| 12 | 4 | Sundry papers, 1839 September |
| 12 | 5-6 | Returns, 1839 September |
| 12 | 7 | Returns for September payment, 1839 September |
| 12 | 8 | Sundry papers, 1839 October and November |
| 12 | 9-10 | Returns, 1839 November |
| 12 | 11 | Sundry papers, 1839 December |

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| 13 | 1-5 | Sundry papers, 1840 Letters from the Office of the Mayor, signed by Jon. Chapin, shed light on departmental disciplinary matters. The number of absences from duty by firemen had become so widely commented upon that the issue could no longer be ignored. Also included are discharge papers for individuals found guilty of neglecting their duty. |
| 13 | 6 | Returns - weekly, 1840 January |
| 13 | 7 | Sundry papers, 1840 February - May |
| 13 | 8-10 | Returns - quarterly, 1840 February |
| 13 | 11-12 | Returns, 1840 March |
| 13 | 13 | Returns - payroll, 1840 March |
| 13 | 14 | Returns, 1840 April |
| 13 | 15 | Returns, 1840 May |
| 13 | 16 | Sundry papers, 1840 June |
| 14 | 1-2 | Returns - quarterly, 1840 May |
| 14 | 3 | Returns - weekly, 1840 June |
| 14 | 4 | Returns - weekly, 1840 July |
| 14 | 5-7 | Returns - quarterly, 1840 August |
| 14 | 8-9 | Returns - weekly, 1840 September |
| 14 | 10 | Returns - payroll, 1840 September |
| 15 | 1 | Returns - weekly, 1840 October |
| 15 | 2-9 | Returns - weekly, quarterly, 1840 November |
| 15 | 10 | Returns - weekly, 1840 December |
| 16 | 1 | Manufacturers' prints of belt pulley machines and hydraulic elevators, undated |
| 16 | 2-3 | Sundry papers - loss forms, 1841 |
| 16 | 4-5 | Sundry papers, 1841 |
| 16 | 6 | Returns - weekly, 1841 January |
| 16 | 7 | Returns - weekly, 1841 February |
| 16 | 8-9 | Returns - quarterly, 1841 February |
| 17 | 1 | Returns, 1841 March |
| 17 | 2 | Returns of members admitted for 6 months, 1841 March |
| 17 | 3 | Returns - weekly, 1841 April |
| 17 | 4 | Returns - weekly, 1841 May |
| 17 | 5-6 | Returns - quarterly, 1841 May |
| 17 | 7 | Returns - weekly, 1841 June |
| 17 | 8 | Returns - weekly, 1841 July |
| 17 | 9-10 | Returns including substitutes, 1841 August |
| 17 | 11 | Returns - quarterly (1 of 2), 1841 August |
| 18 | 1 | Returns - quarterly (2 of 2), 1841 August |
| 18 | 2 | Returns - weekly, 1841 September |
| 18 | 3 | Returns - weekly, 1841 October |
| 18 | 4-5 | Returns - quarterly, 1841 November |
| 18 | 6 | Returns - weekly, 1841 November |
| 18 | 7 | Returns - weekly, 1841 December |
| 18 | 8-9 | Returns - quarterly, 1844 September |

18 10 Board of Selectmen correspondence, 1843

Included with the City Council Committee on the Fire Department collection are 2 handwritten items, one undated and the other dated 1813. The first letter is in regard to a petition, not included, that requests an execution be moved from the Boston Common to another location. The second is a request by 'subscribers' to have George Reed appointed constable.

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