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# 19 The West Chester Fire Department and the Great Depression

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## **The West Chester Fire Department and the Great Depression**

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America was at an economic high following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, which had brought a close to "the war to end all wars". America's boys were coming home, the Kaiser had been beaten back, and the United States had become the supplier for many of the war torn European countries, as its land, nor had its work force, been physically touched by the war as drastically as its European allies. It was in post-World War I that America attained a secure foothold among the ranks of elite countries.

That high came crashing down in 1929 when the stock market failed, sending the country, and the world, into an economic free fall. Many towns, cities, families, businesses, and civic programs were affected, some more than others, but how hard they were hit varied from region to region, town to town, job to job. Cutbacks and sacrifices had to be made across the board for society to continue to survive, and they were. Among other civic programs cut down, fire departments and police departments in cities across the country were forced to adapt. Many were asked to take pay cuts or, if they refused to do so, their ranks would be slimmed or equipment might become less available and of a poor quality. West Chester, Pennsylvania was not spared from having to adapt itself to the times, though its adjustments were minimal compared to those made in other regions.

West Chester was home to many businesses and markets, as it was a hub for trade from Philadelphia and the surrounding countryside, and attracted many buyers to its markets. Such an attraction lessened the impact on the town itself, but what about the civic programs? Because the West Chester Fire Department (WCFD) was made up of 3 all-volunteer companies, its needs would be met by the West Chester Borough Council and being all volunteer, its rolls would not shrink because of the scarcity of funds with which to pay

salaries. The West Chester Fire Department would make it through the Great Depression suffering no real equipment shortages, damaging membership depletion, building disrepair, or funding problems, rather it would make some important steps in its operation and organization.

The biggest thing to note when looking at the WCFD is that it is made up of 3 all-volunteer fire companies: First West Chester Fire Co. 1, Goodwill Fire Co. 2, and Fame Fire Co. 3. Being an all-volunteer department eliminated the problems faced by many governments in other cities utilizing paid fire service, the salaries. In Philadelphia, funds were in such a state that the fire and police departments had to either accept pay cuts, or a quarter, around 9,000 men, would be laid off.<sup>(1)</sup> And with the Great Depression having a stranglehold on America's economy, the fact that there was a "free" fire department operating in your town made things a little easier. Because the fire department was all volunteer and needed no salary did not mean that they were self-sufficient, no, they required the support and cooperation of the Borough Council. Each year the WCFD was sufficiently funded, getting more or less than the previous year relating directly to their needs for that budget year. The Borough Council was not the only source of funding for the WCFD, contributions would come in from businesses and people alike. From 1928 to 1937, contributions coming in for the WCFD would amount to over \$1,000 each year (See Table 1).

**Table 1. Government and Private Support for Local Fire Companies, 1928-1937**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Government Support <u>(2)</u></b>	<b>Private Donations <u>(3)</u></b>
1928	\$18,080.18	\$2,471.46
1929	\$7,768.22	\$2,603.05
1930	\$7,577.70	\$3,352.70
1931	\$16,378.20	\$1,200.00
1932	\$15,401.20	\$3,100.73
1933	\$13,719.55	\$2,450.09
1934	\$15,119.70	\$1,200.00
1935	\$5,890.00	\$2,380.00
1936	\$6,395.17	\$1,200.00
1937	\$7,130.03	\$1,200.00

Though contributions would come in steadily throughout the Depression years, the main source of money for the WCFD was still the Borough Council. Apparatus matters (purchase, repair, and parts for), equipment, chemicals, fire hose, light, telephone, insurance, compensation, gas and oil were all paid for by the Borough Council. The Council also paid the Fire Chief a steady salary of \$100.00 throughout the years prior to the years of the Great Depression, during, and after them.(4)

Other indications as to how the WCFD faired through the Great Depression can be found in that the Borough had six fire trucks in operation, though all but one belonged to Fame Fire Co.(5) The apparatus used by the WCFD would eventually outlive their use and would need to be replaced, and again Borough Council would readily supply the new equipment. The need for a new piece would be presented to the Fire Committee, who would relay the idea to Borough Council for approval. Borough Council would start accepting bids, and would usually pick the lowest price that was presented. Though the price was not always the deciding factor in selection of apparatus. Fame Fire Co. had requested a Seagrave's 600 gallon pumper in 1933 to meet their specific needs , and though the Seagraves was not the lowest price at \$9,031.65, it fact it was the highest.(6) Six days later the Borough Council would meet again and vote to purchase the Seagraves 600 gallon pumper for Fame.(7) In 1931 it was decided by Borough Council to purchase a Foamite Generator at a cost of \$350, the Foamite powder that the generator would be using cost \$.15 per pound.(8) In 1939, Goodwill Fire Co decided to replace their older American LaFrance engine and a new contract from American LaFrance for a triple combination engine (cost: \$8,495.37) would be accepted.

A sign of the importance in having a fully operational and capable fire service was illustrated by the fact that other counties paid for the service of the WCFD to come to their areas when needed. Birmingham Township would pay \$35 (half of what they had paid the year prior) for the services of the WCFD.(9) West Goshen Township requested, in the same year, that the Borough provide a larger degree of fire protection, and more apparatus if needed, up to a distance of one mile outside the Borough itself. The Borough Council agreed to do so, so long as West Goshen had the funds to pay for it, they did.(10)

The members of the WCFD were all volunteers, besides the Fire Chief and his staff, and being volunteers they were not paid to serve. Rather instead of receiving pay, the members were required to pay an annual fee to be members of the fire companies. In 1927, Fame's constitutional bylaws were revised, raising its annual dues from \$1 to \$2, and new members would be

expected to pay a \$1 initiation charge.<sup>(11)</sup> Membership rolls would, from then on, only record those who were able to pay, and those who could not would be dropped.<sup>(12)</sup> This was the only example of money depleting the member rolls, only those who could pay their dues were listed as "members". This could help to explain the sudden drops in membership for First West Chester evident in the 1930/31 and 1931/32 rosters, and Fame's decrease between 1936/37 and 1938/39 (Table 2), as personal funds that volunteers may have saved would have been depleted by then.

**Table 2. Equipment and Membership, 1928-1939 (13)**

Date	First West Chester Fire Co. No. 1	Goodwill Fire Co. No. 2	Fame Fire Co. No. 3
1928-1929 Chief: William F. Huber	625 members 750 gal. American LaFrance pump 160 gal. chemical pump	350 members 750 gal. American LaFrance pump Martin Chemical Combination truck	726 members American LaFrance Hook and Ladder truck 450 gal. pump
1930-1931 Chief: William F. Huber	625 members 750 gal. American LaFrance pump 160 gal. chemical pump	350 members 750 gal. American LaFrance pump Martin Chemical Combination truck	726 members American LaFrance Hook and Ladder truck 450 gal. pump
1931-1932 Chief: Geo J. Moses	400 members 750 gal. American LaFrance pump 160 gal. chemical pump	350 members 750 gal. American LaFrance pump 600 gal. pump	726 members American LaFrance Hook and Ladder truck 450 gal. pump
1936-1937 Chief: William Ingram	400 members 750 gal. American LaFrance pump 160 gal. chemical pump	350 members 750 gal. American LaFrance pump 600 gal. pump	750 members American LaFrance Hook and Ladder truck 600 gal. Seagrave's Special Pump
1938-1939 Chief: William T.	400 members 750 gal. American LaFrance pump	350 members 750 gal. American LaFrance pump 600 gal. pump	300 members American LaFrance Hook and Ladder truck

Finegan	160 gal. chemical pump		600 gal. Seagrave's Special Pump
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The West Chester Fire Department's three fire stations would also be improved during the Great Depression. In 1939 a decision would be made to replace Goodwill Fire Company's manually operated double doors with an electric door that would span the entire face of the building at a cost of \$1,525. This decision was made in order to better accommodate the coming and going of the new apparatus, which were larger than ones previously stationed there. In November of 1931, First West Chester received a new Seagrave pumper from the Borough Council, and subsequently a concrete floor was added and their basement remodeled so that it could be used by members. Then in June of 1938, the station was fit with new chrome and vinyl furnishings.(14) Improvements were made not only in equipment and housing, but in preparedness as well. Fame and First West Chester would seek funding from Borough Council to either pay for or split the costs to hire a fire captain from Philadelphia to give ten lessons on firefighting, the lessons would cost \$5 a piece(15). In the year 1935, Fame and First West Chester shared

The WCFD story is just one of the many stories telling how fire companies (both volunteer and paid) fared across in the nation through the Great Depression, though not all companies would receive as much support as did the WCFD in such trying years. The Royal Oak Fire Department in Royal Oak, Michigan would not be spared the effects of the Depression. As the Depression settled in, taxes could not be collected, and departments had to cut all budgets, equipment would start to regularly fail, and retiring members could not be replaced(16). In Staten Island, New York, the volunteer fire companies that had long been in service, a term of 40 years, were replaced by regular units from the City Fire Department (17). In Westchester, NY it was found that no scarcity of equipment or apparatus was present, the problem was discovered within the poor distribution of men and material (18).

In Claxton, Georgia, there was talk of a strike by the volunteer fire department. This strike was in response to a decision made by the recently elected reform administration's notification that the volunteer fire fighters would be required to pay the street tax from which they had previously been exempt. The volunteer firemen were upset by the ruling, claiming that their exemption from said tax was a small payment for the services which they provide, and decided not to respond to any calls until the matter was resolved (19). In the town of Haworth, New Jersey there was a desperate need for more volunteer fire

fighters as many of the "young Jerseyites" refused to sign up. The youth of the town no longer felt the urge to volunteer for service and had become distracted by the car, movies, and other forms of entertainment. These past times were all deemed responsible for "luring the young men from town", and leaving older men on watch,(20)

In Tempe, Arizona, the City Council would vote to reduce the pay to the volunteer fire fighter for each call he answered to \$3 per call (in 2006 they are paid \$39.47/call). Though in 1933, the Tempe Borough Council would decide to build a new, up-to-date firehouse right next to City Hall (council would take advantage of New Deal money to accomplish this construction)(21) In New Jersey, a decision had been made by the state to establish fire schools across the state, for both paid and volunteer firemen, at no cost to the communities. This was a necessary move, said Chief C.W. Greenfield, Arlington, NJ Fire Department, because the paid fireman had become too "academic" and the volunteer companies, whose main concern was water regulation, often consisted of more officers than men.(22)

The status of the West Chester Fire Department throughout the Great Depression is an ambiguous, yet good gauge of how the town itself did. The town would not have let something as essential as their fire department fall into disrepair , as it would be responsible for preventing or at least minimizing losses (both monetary and human) due to uncontrollable happening. That responsibility may have made it more of a priority when it came to funding, but it did not meant it became the number one budget with which the town was concerned.

But the real indication of how West Chester did during the Depression garnered from the WCFD's situation is how West Chester Borough Council was able to keep the WCFD adequately funded through out the economic trials.. Not many other towns/cities were able to keep their departments in such a good working order. The West Chester Fire Department would not suffer any equipment shortages, nor would it have to go to great lengths to acquire and keep in service apparatus used in the fighting of fires, and its fire stations would be kept in a working order. West Chester's ability to provide such supplies and equipment readily and aptly reveals the degree of the hardship that it was faced with during the Great Depression. Membership would not be a great problem either, as it was an all-volunteer department, and if anything, the Depression would have created more of those with time to volunteer. Funding, a problem in other cities, did not seem to be as great a difficulty in West Chester, as its budget for the WCFD stays consistent

throughout the years, with the only variations being a result of what items the WCFD required that year.

The Great Depression definitely did create a strain on society, though it was felt in different degrees in different aspects of society in different areas. West Chester was not seriously affected afflicted by the Great Depression and this observation is supported by the manner in which the West Chester Fire Department operated and continued to operate throughout those years.

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