Alexandria, Historical Engine Houses, Bedrooms and Televisions

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Where was Legeros this weekend, while the North Carolina fallen firefighters events were underway in downtown Raleigh? (And which were ably photographed by Lee Wilson, see his pictures of the [parade](#) and [ceremony](#).) He was in Virginia for the occasion of his May 1 wedding anniversary. First in Winchester (more on that later), and then in Alexandria.

The latter is an *old* town, beginning in 1695 with its first European settlement. Much of the town was incorporated into the new District of Columbia in 1801. It was returned to Virginia in 1846. Today, the historic downtown is called Old Town.

Not surprisingly, there are a handful of former and historic fire stations to be found in Alexandria. The oldest is the former quarters of the Friendship Fire Company. They were organized in 1755 and their engine house at 107 S. Alfred Street was erected in 1855. The building was substantially renovated in 1871, and restored by the city in 1992. It presently houses the Friendship Firehouse Museum. [Read more](#), and [see my pictures](#) from a 2009 visit.
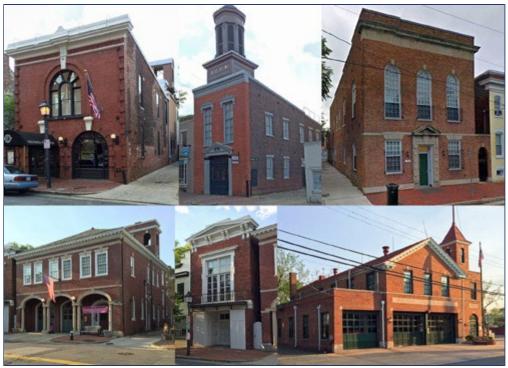

Numerous other fire companies protected Alexandria over the decades and centuries, including the Columbia, Crescent, Hydraulion, Reliance, Relief, Star, Sun, and U.S. Steam fire companies. Plus the town of Potomac fire department, which was annexed by Alexandria in 1930. [This history page](#) on the AFD site provides more information.

Yours Truly found a total of six former and historic engine houses that are still standing:

Columbia	109 S. Saint Asaph	Built 1883	Moved 1960	Currently [Columbia Firehouse restaurant](#)
Friendship	107 S. Alfred	Built 1855	Closed ?	Currently Friendship Firehouse Museum
Reliance	115 N. Patrick	Built 1900[tr]	Moved ?	Currently private residence
Relief	317 Prince	Built 1935[tr]	Active	Currently Engine 301
Relief	319 Prince	Built 1880[tr]	Moved 1935	Currently private residence

| Potomac | 213 E. Windsor | Built 1926 | Active | Currently Engine 202 |

Tax records as source as noted "tr", by the way. Click to enlarge:

Mike Legeros / Google Street View (top right) photos

Alexandria was also home to Potomac Yard, which this Wikipedia article calls one of the busiest rail yards on the east coast. Railroad development in the area started in the 1850s. The switching yard named Potomac Yard opened in 1906. The site reached capacity in 1937. During subsequent years and decades, use of the facility greatly diminished. It was decommissioned in 1989, and has been redeveloped as a site for commercial and residential use.

One of the most interesting buildings is named The Station at Potomac Yard, and is a combined high-rise mixed-use building and municipal fire station. The later is located on the ground floor along with retail space. The upper four floors house sixty-four apartments. There are also two levels of underground parking, for the firefighters, residents, and retail customers. Here's one of numerous articles about the project you'll find via Google.

The fire station opened in 2009, and included individual bedrooms for the firefighters. But without televisions, as this [city press release](#) noted:

> The bedrooms are small, and contain a bed and a desk. "Studies have shown that, around the country, firefighters are spending more and more time in their bedrooms watching television or working on their computers. This does not encourage team building. We are not allowing TVs or phones in bedrooms. We want the firefighters to use them for sleeping and spend time in the common areas with other members of the company when they are awake," North said.

There's an interesting twist, and one that's probably been discussed and/or debated by firefighters since the introduction of individual rooms. (Wonder what the history is there? Presuming it's a function of gender separation, as female firefighters joined career departments. Though separate rooms for officers have been a staple for decades.)

What's the norm locally, regionally, or nationally? How common or rare are single-room bunk rooms? Need readers to advise. Presuming that "no walls" are rare, with space dividers as the norm. Be they sleeping areas segmented by actual walls, partitions, or lockers or furniture.

Benefits and/or demerits to individual dorm rooms or sleeping areas? Now there's a topic for discussion, and notably when technology is added.

How do such things affect team dynamics, as expressed in the above quote? Person-to-person communication comes to my mind. Remember Nextel phones? They exploded the firehouse environment like nothing before.

Think back a few years and before the first cell phones. "Back in the day," we might say, "we didn't have fully enclosed cabs, nor rip 'n' run printers, nor computers with internet connections. Just two land lines. You spent most of your day talking to the people working at the station."

Today it's a whole 'nother world. When each member of the "firehouse team" has/can have a personal phone, e-mail device, instant message device, and Facebook device, what happens to that "traditionally encapsulated" team dynamic.

Discuss as desired.

"Discuss as desired." Okay, will do. In my opinion the change I have noticed over the past 10 years which has progressed rapidly within the past 5 years is the separation of the "brotherhood". I do not think televisions in the cube, phones in the pocket, or easy access to the internet is the cause. I believe the push to regrow the brotherhood will only cause those not in it to be pushed further away. Obviously they don't want to be a part of it in the first place.

The ones I am referring to who are not in the brotherhood are those who are merely here for a job. City Council leaders can call it what they

want but there is an obvious push to hire more females and more minorities so the numbers game looks good on paper. (FDNY just hired a female who DID NOT pass the fitness test but the female numbers needed to be increased so they hired her anyway.) We all know what you end up with. And again this is my opinion and just my observation but those hired to increase the quota do not want to be a part of the team. The crew can't shame them into doing right, either. If someone is "offended" they simply go straight to personnel (Rank structure? What is that? Does that even exist anymore?) and the problem goes away.

I have heard some say an advantage to pushing the crews together is the mercenaries will be pushed out. In theory, yes, because it's a LONG day at a firehouse where one in the crew is shunned and nobody talks to you. Problem is with today's helicopter society the mercenaries can simply go to personnel and usually get their way.

So, until the problem (and yes, I consider it a problem) of hiring those who don't have a love for the fire service eliminating televisions will only make matters worse as the problem child won't have anywhere to go.
Rescue Ranger - 05/07/15 - 11:45

Nice set of layers in that response! Question, are there some tiers to the above observations, about incoming career firefighters? Obviously on one end are those deeply motivated (and with requisite abilities) to make the job into their career. On the other side are those with more narrow (right now?) job aspirations and maybe minimal (?) abilities for performance for growth? But isn't there some in-between? Can you have deeply dedicated (and able) members with ten- or fifteen-year goals? Or are one step or layer below "brotherhood-ness," but are entirely able and performing members?

Side question, maybe historical. Wonder what crews observed 10, 25, 50, or 75 years ago? Is this is a perpetual struggle, between building tight and cohesive teams and those more individually-oriented (right word?) individuals?
Legeros - 05/07/15 - 18:27

I know why you were in Winchester! Wonderful event. I look forward to "more on that later."

I've been the volunteer PIO for Shenandoah County Department of Fire and Rescue, but I'm in the midst of a cross-country move for my paid job so I wasn't around. Would've loved to meet you and/or show you around a bit. Alas …

You probably saw some rigs from the Shenandoah County volunteer agencies.
John Collins - 05/08/15 - 00:37

Thanks John. Was our first-time visit. We attended the fire rodeo and parade, and wandered the downtown. Will have a mess of pictures and a blog report later.
Legeros - 05/08/15 - 08:13

Few more thoughts about Rescue Ranger's comments. Hiring/recruiting for diversity. In my opinion, everybody wins when members of a department "look like" the people in the communities they serve. Diversity in race and gender is an absolute value-add, when skills and abilities are equal/comparable. How do you get there? What are best/worst practices for recruitment, hiring, retention, etc.? That takes us into a conversational danger zone. Based on my experience, that's a short road to fast emotions. Cool heads and logical arguments don't readily prevail. Plain darn hard.

And a fool for analysis and logical thinking, even the language of your original comments are a bit prickly. "Problem child" isn't the most helpful label, perhaps. But you're being conversational and using a more direct language. Entirely understand.

The fire service (or career fire service) isn't for everyone. Some enter the profession and excel in the tasks, but don't thrive at the fire stations. Others love the people, but can't sustain or grow in job performance. Etcetera. Like all jobs, there are managers and subordinates. There are performance reviews and needs for performance improvement, or outright discipline. Comes with the territory. Unsure how well those things can be discussed as blog comments.

The world is reading, and that includes past, present, and future firefighters. For someone, say, looking for a career in the fire service, what are the best ways to be conversationally inviting? But also speaking to current line members and who are the future leaders? Something to think about. (Okay, something that **I** think about.)
Legeros - 05/08/15 - 08:37

The hiring/recruiting for diversity is a straw man argument. It's very easy to analyze current conditions and trends based on PERCEIVED past standards. This is not to say that the ways in which diversity "quotas" are met are not devoid of problems. I've been in discussions about the pro's and con's of having FD recruitment at all. The idea that you should only hire those "that want to be here" is a pitiful excuse for reasoning. There are any number promising potential members all over the place. Just hiring the "vollies" from around the area has its own pitfalls and there is no guarantee that any of them will be worth a hill of beans on line. The tacit rationale with the anti-recruitment conversations I've had boils down to this: If they aren't banging down the door to get in then they aren't worth a flip to start with. My answer to that is: BS. On it's face, that logic is flawed and prejudiced (and I don't simply mean racially prejudiced). The problem isn't recruiting, the problem is admin's hiring.

The other side of the coin is the efficacy of demographic quotas. I'd say for the fire service (as well as EMS, police, etc.), that is an unrealistic and flawed strategy. The results of poor implementation are easily seen, I think. Yea, having the FD "look like" their community is easy to espouse, but how many people, if asked while walking down the street, will say they would run into a burning house to try and help someone?? Not many is the answer. The nature of the job requires a certain personality type and attitude and those are not easily found. The kinds of demographic goals the personnel dept. is after is achievable, but only over time. This is something the talking heads in council chambers, city administrations, and leaders in other civic organizations don't understand or choose not to.

If there really is a problem in the types of people being hired the way to fix it is simple. Eliminate demographic data in the hiring and assessing process. Give everyone a number. Pick the top however many people pass the process for the number of positions needed. Done. If any of these recruits can't get with the program during the academy then cut them loose based on the recommendations of the training cadre. Done. One caveat, there should be a review/appeals board as oversight because in an organization as small as most all municipal departments across the country, cronyism can definitely infect the fair and proper execution of even the most well thought out policy. There needs to be a way to address incidents of alleged "railroading."

I sometimes use the military as a comparison, but also as a contrast. The military has the UCMJ as a vehicle to keep "problem children" in line, and deal with the hard-headed ones that can't assimilate. They also have the organizational infrastructure in place to properly mold a very diverse (personality, social background, life experience, maturity, etc.) recruit base to a relatively uniform ideal. The various fire departments don't have the same luxury of a military sized budget, time, or UCMJ action to achieve their missions. The other challenge is a paramilitary style agency is immediately accountable to a civilian style administration. This is contrasted to the military where it is military through and through and the civilian government has an oversight role vs. direct control.

Oh, and the eliminations of TV's isn't really a solution to anything. That's another example of poor decision making and weak leadership. LATER.
Bob - 05/10/15 - 14:19

Great comments and commentary, Bob. Thanks for adding your perspective.
Legeros - 05/10/15 - 17:08

There is a major disconnect in some stations. It very much could be the hiring process. Everybody wants a job working 10 days a month. However even many of the people that truly love the fire service spend more than half their day glued to what is happening on their phones. I try to spend as little time as possible on the couch or staring at my phone. I have witnessed 2 firefighters sitting 8 feet from each other texting each other, WHY. USE YOUR WORDS and SPEAK to each other. I tell my guys all the time, You're here…BE HERE. I have heard of many officers that have gone to no phones or TV's during meal times, be with your crew. I knew of a department in the Northeast that did not allow cell phone usage during your shift unless it was an emergency. Is that unrealistic in this day and age, maybe. There need to be a line drawn somewhere. However if the crew doesn't want to bond how can you force them.

One of my younger firefighters told me he didn't have TV at the house right now, He had no clue what to do with himself. We have come to be in a world where we can't entertain ourselves. I have always been a fan of buying sports equipment to leave at the station. Anything that gets the crew active and brings everybody together is a good thing. Brotherhood and leadership doesn't always need to come from the top, from the bottom up works too.

Brotherhood has seen a dip. Is it a problem with hiring & recruitment? Is it a generational problem? Is it a problem with leadership? I don't know the answer. I can say what I've seen in 20 years. Some of the youth in the fire service don't seem to have the drive and commitment of generations past. Is it because community in a lot of ways is dead?. How many of your neighbors do you know these days? Think back to when you were a kid how many of your neighbors did you know? I don't have the answers, I wish I did.

I don't think separate bunks is a problem, especially in the world of snoring people. I have shared stations with people you could here snoring down the hall. Some might say I am one of those loud snorers. Rest if it is in the card for that shift is an important thing. But I do agree that your bunk should be for sleeping. You want to read feel free, but TV's in the bunks are not a good thing.

Doppler - 05/18/15 - 00:16

Name: (real name preferred)

E-mail: (optional)

Web Site: (optional)

Remember personal info?

Yes

No

Comment: / Textile

Comment moderation is enabled on this site. This means that your comment will not be visible on this site until it has been approved by an editor.

To prevent spam we require you to answer this silly question

What are the FIRST TWO LETTERS of the word 'fire'?

(Register your username / Log in)

Notify: Yes, send me email when someone replies.

Hide email: Yes, hide my email address.

Small print: All html tags except <b> and <i> will be removed from your comment. You can make links by just typing the url or mail-address.