



Oakland County Pioneer & Historical Society



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Pontiac Fire Department Records

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Title: Pontiac Fire Department Records, ca 1921-1982

Provenance: The Pontiac Fire Department Records were donated in January 1998 by Melvin Wright, a Pontiac firefighter for 25 years. A second group of daybooks was brought in by Mr. Wright in June 2001.

Description: Ledger books, various loose papers, and two photographs.

Access: Several volumes are inaccessible due to their deteriorating condition, and are to be rebound in the future. The ledgers from 1950-1982 have been restricted to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. In the year 2010, the records from 1950-1960 will be made available, and this will continue in successive ten year increments until the entire collection has been made available by the year 2030.

Finding Aid: Compiled by Mark Gnaster and Leslie Edwards, 2000.

Administrative History: The Pontiac Fire Department began on April 23, 1833, four years before the city of Pontiac was incorporated, as a "bucket brigade" of thirty volunteers organized to carry water from the Clinton River in the event of a fire. In 1839, a small hand-operated fire engine was purchased for \$300 by the volunteers. However, the engine did not operate well, and in April 1840 when a fire broke out in the city, the bucket brigade was unable to stop the fire from destroying most of the business section. This fire led to the organization of the first real Fire Department, and in 1848, a station house built of brick was constructed at the corner of Perry and East Pike. The first volunteer fire chief was William Henderson, who was in charge of seventy volunteer firemen. The department had a water pumper, a hand engine, a hose cart and 1,700 feet of hose.

In 1857, the department was divided into two teams and a hose brigade. The first salaries were paid to the chief and two stewards, each making \$25 a year. In 1867, a new brick central station was built at the northeast corner of Perry and East Pike for \$12,000. This remained the city of Pontiac's central Fire Station for over 100 years.

In the early 1900s, horse-drawn vehicles with hand-operated fire pumps were still being used. Steam engines, fired with wood or coal, soon replaced the horse-drawn engines. With the birth of the automobile, motorized fire engines were developed as a quicker means of fighting fires, and modernized alarm systems were also set in place. By 1917, the Pontiac Fire Department had grown, but still only had 13 full-time employees: a fire chief (who was also the chief engineer), a lieutenant and eleven firemen. Additional men were "on-call" to assist in the case of any fire within the city.

By 1961, the Fire Department had grown to five fire stations employing 129 firemen. In June 1961, a new Civic Center firehall was built, and in the 1980s, the Central Fire Station at Pike and Perry was torn down to make way for the Pontiac Osteopathic Hospital buildings.

Fire Chiefs have included William Henderson, John Austin, Frank Kuhn, John Schroeder, James White, Charles Marion, and Jeffrey Hawkins among others.

Scope and Content Note: The collection consists of forty-four volumes of Pontiac Fire Department Records, one volume of Pontiac's Water Distribution System (1937), and two unidentified group photographs of Pontiac firemen. The records are logged in bound ledgers and document personnel on duty, fire alarm responses and alarm tests, phone logs, medical emergencies and deaths, and police department interaction. The collection also details fire engine vehicles, pumps, aerial trucks, rescue apparatus activities and status, all carefully documented. Much attention is paid to emergency runs and approximate dollar estimates of damage incurred, including insurance estimates on the contents of buildings.

Of interest to genealogical researchers are the numerous names and addresses of fire victims, as well as detailed descriptions of the tragedies which befell them. A variety of loose documents and various ephemera were removed from the volumes in original order and carefully documented, and have been arranged chronologically in acid-free folders and boxes. The record books are arranged in chronological order.

Related Materials: The pamphlet "Pictorial Souvenir of the P.F.D. (1914)", a collection of photographs of the Pontiac Fire Department are located in the Society's photographic collection under the subject heading: Pontiac - Fire Department. In addition, donor Robert Norberg wrote an article about fire hose wagons in the 1990 Winter/Spring issue of the Society's *The Oakland Gazette*.