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**Canada**

**THE MONTREAL FIRE DEPARTMENT IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

**Its Transformation from a Volunteer  
to a Professional Organization**

Bruce D. Redfern

A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

August 1993

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## Abstract

### THE MONTREAL FIRE DEPARTMENT IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

#### Its Transformation from a Volunteer to a Professional Organization

Bruce D. Redfern

For many centuries, urban populations lived in fear of large areas of their cities being destroyed by fire. It is only within the last two hundred and fifty years or so that local authorities and concerned citizens have organized increasingly effective forces to actively combat fires. The development of volunteer and, later, professional fire departments is a field that has largely been ignored by historians. In an attempt to partially fill this void, this thesis is an examination of the evolution of Montreal's firefighting services and of the efforts put forth by the city government and others to combat this scourge during the nineteenth century. It stresses the crucial roles of new technology, major mid-century conflagrations, and of professionalization in making the Montreal Fire Department a highly effective and efficient force by century's end.

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## Introduction

Fire has always posed a grave threat to cities and their citizens. There have been many cases, throughout history, where it has caused considerable damage and suffering such as the burning of Rome during Nero's reign or the Great Fire of London in 1666. For many centuries, urban populations lived in fear of large areas of their towns being destroyed by fire. Those living in Canadian cities have not been immune from this threat. Statistics for the years 1815-1915, for example, state that there were over forty major fires in Canada during that period. Twenty-eight of these occurred in only four different cities (Quebec had thirteen, Saint John [N.B.] had seven, Montreal had five, and St. John's [Nfld.] had three).<sup>1</sup> The destruction caused by these blazes was a powerful impetus for improved fire prevention and often allowed the reconstruction of whole neighbourhoods with more fire resistant designs and materials.

It is only within the last two hundred and fifty years or so that local authorities and concerned citizens have organized increasingly effective forces to actively combat fires. The growth of professional fire departments during the

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<sup>1</sup> John C. Weaver and Peter de Lottinville, "The Conflagration and the City: Disaster and Progress in British North America during the Nineteenth Century," Histoire Sociale - Social History Vol. XIII, No. 26 (November 1980): p. 417.

1800s was not only an improvement in fire protection, but it was also part of a larger trend - the increasing number of public services provided by municipal governments during the nineteenth century such as police departments, water supply systems, and road maintenance. Many of these services were instituted to help maintain order and stability and thereby encourage growth and investment in their municipality. This process was a major factor in the evolution of the modern city.

Technology played a large part in the increasing effectiveness of fire departments as well. At the beginning of this period, the only equipment largely available was buckets to throw water on the flames and hooks which were used to pull down houses in order to create a firebreak. Modern equipment and well-trained firefighters, combined with an easily accessible supply of water and modern building codes, have largely removed the threat of an accidental fire burning down large areas of a city.

Montreal's experiences in this area, while not reaching as far back as cities in other parts of the world, are typical of many North American cities. Throughout its centuries of existence, the city has been ravaged by many major fires and numerous smaller ones. By the 1800s, Montreal was the main commercial centre and the largest city in Canada,



so it is not surprising that it led the way in terms of instituting public services and other reforms. It had, among other things, the first municipally owned water works and the first professional fire department in the country. This thesis will be an examination of the development of Montreal's firefighting services and of the efforts put forth by the city government and others to combat this scourge during the nineteenth century.

## CHAPTER I

### The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

During the early years, when Montreal was under French rule (1642-1760), there was little in the way of organized resistance even though fire remained a grave danger due to wood being the primary building material used in the town. Any firefighting was done on an ad hoc basis by the citizens. The alarm would be raised through the ringing of church bells and the citizens would hurry to fight the blaze with buckets and assorted tools (such as axes and shovels). Water would be obtained from the St. Lawrence River, from wells, or from creeks. With these primitive methods, it is not surprising that once a building caught fire it usually burned to the ground.

In 1695, it seems Montreal was saved through a timely shift in the wind (always a major influence on the behaviour of large fires). On February 24th of that year, a fire had broken out in the Hôtel Dieu church. One of the members of the congregation describes what happened:

Fiercely it blazed, until the pealing of alarm bells roused the townspeople and brought them, half dressed, into the ruddily illuminated streets. As the tumult of a terrified crowd filled the air, and the red signal of destruction spread over the sky, a panic seized on many hearts. Each man looked on the white face of his neighbour . . . and there read the same question "Will the town be saved?". . . . the priests from the Seminary, came to the place of

danger, bearing the Blessed Sacrament. A passionate prayer went up, "Lord save us, have mercy on us." The wind veered suddenly and carried the roaring flames away from the town.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of this shift, the fire destroyed the Hôtel Dieu hospital instead and the nuns were forced to live elsewhere.

This is not to say, however, that the government of the time did nothing to prevent fires. In the town of Quebec measures for the prevention of fire were taken as early as the 17th century. For example, in a collection of regulations passed by the governor on March 23, 1673 there are seven that deal with this subject. One states that "toutes personnes seront obligées de tenir leurs cheminées nettes de suie et pour ce, ils les feront balayer de deux mois en deux mois, en tirant pour témoignage de leurs diligences un certificat de leurs voisins qu'ils remettront entre les mains du juge de la police . . .".<sup>2</sup> Another required that all citizens help in extinguishing any fires that did occur. " . . . Au premier coup de cloche chaque habitant sortira de sa maison pour se rendre au lieu ou le feu sera indiqué, chargé d'un seau où

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Atherton, Montreal 1535-1914, vol. 1: Under the French Regime 1535-1760 (Montreal: S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1914), pp. 307-308.

<sup>2</sup> "La Protection Contre le Feu a Québec Sous le Régime Français," Le Bulletin des Recherches Historiques XXX (May 1924): p. 130.

d'une chaudière pleine d'eau."<sup>3</sup> These examples given are just some of the first fire prevention laws passed in Quebec during French rule.

Similar regulations were implemented in Montreal during this period. Nevertheless, the city experienced two major fires in the early 1700s. On June 19, 1721, the roof of the Hôtel Dieu was set aflame when a soldier fired his musket at it during a religious procession. The flames spread from the hospital and ended up destroying 138 houses within the walled town. A few weeks later on July 8th, Michel Bégon de La Picardière, the Intendant, issued an ordinance which outlined new building regulations for the city. Firstly, buildings were to be constructed from stone. The use of wood and half-timbering was prohibited, as were heavy timber framing and mansard roofs. As well, roofs were to be made of lighter materials in order to facilitate their removal in case of fire.<sup>4</sup> Wooden buildings would continue to remain a problem well into the nineteenth century, however.

The second of these fires, which occurred on April 10, 1734, was a case of arson committed by a disgruntled slave as an act of revenge. Forty-six homes were burned, along with

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Intendant of New France, Ordonnance régissant la reconstruction avec des matériaux incombustibles des maisons détruites lors de l'incendie du 19 Juin 1721 (July 8, 1721).

the Hôtel Dieu (again) which had been rebuilt for the second time.<sup>5</sup> This fire stirred the local government, including the intendant and civic governor, to further action.

In July of 1734, they obtained firefighting equipment consisting of 200 wooden buckets, 80 leather buckets, 100 axes, 24 hooks, 100 shovels, 12 demolition tools, and 12 ladders. These tools were marked with the fleur de lis and stored at five locations - the Jesuits' Church, the market, the seminary, the Guard House, and the Recollets' Church.<sup>6</sup>

The intendant, Gilles Hocquart, also arranged for the formation of two firefighting squads composed of the towns's carpenters, roofers, masons, and other such workers. Any workers who failed to comply would be fined six livres. These men must have been somewhat effective as one of the unit commanders, a carpenter by the name of Louis Truteau, was awarded an annual pension of thirty livres in 1738 for the zeal and attention he showed at the various fires that occurred.<sup>7</sup> These squads were similar to early firefighting brigades in England where the men had to belong to certain professions such as plumbers (for their skill with pipes and

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<sup>5</sup> Donal M. Baird, The Story of Firefighting in Canada (Erin, Ontario: The Boston Mills Press, 1986), p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

water), seamen (for their climbing ability and familiarity with heights), and the building trades (for their knowledge of building construction).

A different type of group was formed in 1763 after the Conquest of Quebec. The Montreal Fire Club, as it was known, was a group of fourteen merchants and other prominent citizens. Its primary purpose was to salvage goods from burning buildings (particularly those owned by the members). Some records of this organization still exist. They consist mainly of membership lists, notes of who was and was not present at meetings, and records of fines assessed and paid. There is no discussion of the group's effectiveness or of the value of goods rescued from fires. However, the information that is provided does give us a glimpse of how the club operated.

The Club began meeting in April of 1763 and was to consist of no more than fourteen men. The first list of members given in these records includes such prominent figures as John McGill, James McGill, Thomas McCord, Joseph Frobisher, and Benjamin Frobisher. Each member was to be provided with "four good Leather buckets and four Bags of a yard wide and a yard and half long mark'd Fire Club No. 1 with his name at length to be kept at their dwelling houses."<sup>8</sup> Fines of five

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<sup>8</sup> Montreal Fire Club No. 1, Records - April 1786 to November 1814.

shillings were assessed for the use of these objects other than at a fire or for allowing them to lapse into a state of disrepair. Those who were absent from meetings without a proper excuse received the same fine. Annual meetings were held to elect a steward and deputy steward for the year. Their duties were to oversee the operation of the club, hold quarterly meetings, give out fines and payments, and inspect the bags and buckets of the members on a regular basis.

Each member was instructed to familiarize himself with the houses and stores of the other members and the various ways of access to them. In the event of fire, the members were to repair with all speed "to the place most in danger with their Bags and Buckets, and shall there distribute themselves in different parts of the Buildings so as to prevent Strangers from doing injury and shall, if it be thought necessary, by themselves and assistants pack up the Goods and remove them to a place of security, and afford any other assistance in their power."<sup>9</sup> In order to provide a means of identifying those working for the Club at fires, a watch-word, chosen at the annual meetings, was used. The first of these listed in the records is "La Chine" with the reply of "Quebec".

Shortly after the formation of this club, Montreal

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

suffered one of the worst fires in its history which caused over eighty-seven thousand pounds in damage (approximately one-third of the city's total value). On May 18, 1765, a fire broke out in a house on St. François Street. The owner, a Mr. Levingston, had carried some hot ashes to his attic in preparation for making soap. These ashes caused the roof to ignite and soon the whole house was ablaze. The flames rapidly spread to the neighbouring houses on both sides of the street and continued to other streets.<sup>10</sup> In all, over two hundred and fifteen families were burned out. The areas that were hardest hit were St. François Street (54 families), St. Paul's Street (87 families), and the market-place (26 families):<sup>11</sup> Many homeowners were away in the country at the time and so lost everything. Even those who managed to retrieve some possessions from their homes were not safe from further losses. Thefts were common and the river was no sanctuary. ". . . The flames and flakes of fire were blown with such impetuous violence, that many of the goods which were carried to rafts or floats upon the river . . . were notwithstanding destroyed by the fire."<sup>12</sup> The blaze was finally contained by tearing down several homes. This

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<sup>10</sup> "Motives for a subscription towards the relief of the sufferers at Montreal in Canada: by a dreadful fire on the 18th of May 1765 . . ." p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 22.



action, combined with the efforts of the citizens and the British garrison and with a shift in the wind, saved the rest of the town.

In all, nearly one-quarter of Montreal had been destroyed. This was largely due to the high winds and the lack of fire engines. A relief fund was soon started in England to help the victims of this disaster and it ended up raising over eighteen hundred pounds (including five hundred pounds from King George III).<sup>13</sup> The municipal authorities realized that it would be wise to obtain some fire engines for the city in order to prevent another such conflagration. They ordered two such engines from England and organized weekly practices each Monday. Soon afterwards, two more engines were ordered so that there would be one engine based in each quarter of the city.<sup>14</sup> Each of these engines consisted of a manual pump set within a wooden tub. The tub would be filled with buckets while other men worked the pump handles. Water would be directed either through a nozzle mounted on the engine itself (which made it difficult to get close to the flames) or through a leather hose. Not only did a hose provide the ability to approach the fire more closely, but it also allowed

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<sup>13</sup> William H. Atherton, Montreal 1535-1914, Vol. II: Under British Rule 1760-1914 (Montreal: S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1914), p. 399.

<sup>14</sup> Baird, p. 16.

greater accuracy and freedom of movement. While the stream of water put out by these engines was not very powerful, it was a much more efficient method than attacking a fire with buckets.

In 1777, the English governor, Guy Carleton, passed an act which called for the appointment of fire inspectors in Montreal, Quebec, and Trois Rivières. Their duties were to ensure that chimneys were swept at least once a month and that the citizens obeyed the fire protection regulations. Those who did not received a fine.<sup>15</sup> By the end of the 1700s, Montreal's fire protection services had improved considerably, though there was still much to be done. Greater changes and efficiency would come in the following century.

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<sup>15</sup> Atherton, Vol. II, pp. 400-401.

## CHAPTER II

### The Volunteer Era

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, municipal authorities in Montreal began moving to improve the city's water supply system. The only sources of water prior to this were public pumps at various locations around the city, private wells and cisterns, and local rivers and creeks. As you can imagine, access to these sources was considerably more difficult during the winter months because of the cold.

The water carters provided another source. These individuals travelled from house to house with a large barrel mounted on a cart (or on a sled in the winter) and sold water by the bucketful to the citizens. They also had a role to play in the event of fire as they were required to hurry to the scene to supply the pumps. To encourage speed, a reward of \$3 was given to the first carter to arrive. This also encouraged spillage, however, as it did not matter how much water the carter had in his barrel when he arrived at the fire. Sometimes, if there was no other supply of water, the pumps would run dry and the firemen would have to wait for the carters to bring more. In the meantime, the flames would regain strength.

Owing to these problems with the water supply for

the city, an act was passed in 1800 to create the Company of Proprietors of the Montreal Waterworks. This group, headed by Joseph Frobisher, invested six thousand pounds in a new water works. In return, the Company was given a fifty-year monopoly. Wooden pipes were laid from a pond behind Côte des Neiges village. The pipes ran around the southern slope of Mount Royal to two cisterns (one was on the corner of Guy and Dorchester Streets while the other was on Notre Dame Street near Dalhousie square).<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, this system was highly unreliable. The wooden pipes were prone to bursting and the water supply was uncertain.<sup>2</sup> This led to the eventual abandonment of the system.

The water works and, more importantly, the unexpired monopoly rights were purchased in 1819 by another company for five thousand pounds. This company, headed by a Thomas Porteous, scrapped the old water works and designed a completely new system. Their water supply came from the St. Lawrence River near the city. A steam pumping plant was constructed at the corner of Water and Friponne Streets and four-inch iron pipes were laid from the plant to wooden cisterns (later lined

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<sup>1</sup> F. Clifford Smith, The Montreal Water Works: its history compiled from the year 1800 to 1912 (Montreal, 1913), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> William H. Atherton, Montreal 1535-1914, Vol. II: Under British Rule 1760-1914 (Montreal: S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1914), p. 408.

with lead) located on Notre Dame Street. The cisterns had a total capacity of 240,000 gallons. This new system cost the company about forty thousand pounds.<sup>3</sup>

By this time, there were five volunteer fire engine companies in Montreal, one based in each ward of the city. Each of these companies had their own station (there was one at Place D'Armes, at the corner of Notre Dame and St. Jean Baptiste Streets, at the fish market on St. Paul Street, by the Nunnery Gate on St. Joseph Street, and at the Recollet Church on Notre Dame Street).<sup>4</sup> These were not stations in the modern sense of the word, however. They were simply unheated sheds used to house the pumps and other equipment. This was a problem in the winter as the pump valves would freeze after each fire. It would be necessary to obtain hot water from a nearby house to thaw the pump before it could be used, a process could take as long as half an hour.<sup>5</sup> This does not include the time it took to raise the alarm.

During the day, the alarm was raised by whoever first noticed the fire. At night, the city was patrolled by several public watchmen (usually quite elderly) who were

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<sup>3</sup> Smith, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Donal M. Baird, The Story of Firefighting in Canada (Erin, Ontario: Boston Mills Press, 1986), p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

equipped with large wooden rattles. Upon discovering a fire, the watchman was required to sound his rattle and notify the nearest fire company captain. After dressing, the fire captain would accompany him to the engine station. The watchman would then hurry to Notre Dame church on Place d'Armes, where he would rouse the caretaker to place a lantern in the belfry window and sound the alarm on the church bell.<sup>6</sup> This would awaken the firemen and bring them rushing to their stations where they would try and obtain a horse to pull their pump. They were allowed to commandeer any passing horse (except a doctor's) for this duty.

The typical volunteer engine company of this period had roughly forty members. The large number was necessary due to the use of man-powered manual pumps. After pulling the engine to the blaze (if no horse was available), the members would take turns working the pump handles. Those not pumping would take the opportunity to rest as this was very tiring work (running to the fire could leave them somewhat out of breath to begin with). In return for their labour, the volunteer firemen received a certain amount of social prestige, as well as more tangible benefits. Those who served for seven or eight years had their names placed on the "Exempt Firemens'

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<sup>6</sup> "All Our Yesterdays", Montreal Gazette, 15 February 1992, p. B2.

Roll".<sup>7</sup> This released them from having to pay the "capitation" tax and exempted them from jury and special constable duty.<sup>8</sup> This was a common practice in volunteer fire companies during the nineteenth century. In New York, there was a similar arrangement, established in 1819, whereby firemen with ten years service were permanently exempted from jury duty and from having to serve in the militia.<sup>9</sup>

These engine companies tended to foster a certain amount of pride and camaraderie in their members, particularly since they often drew their membership from one ethnic or linguistic group. By the 1840s, there were English and French companies in Montreal, as well as Catholic and Protestant Irish units (the real conflict was between the Irish companies). As a result, there was considerable rivalry among the different squads, each of which had a distinctive name such as Queen, Neptune, Voltigeur, Union, or Protector. This rivalry was increased by the custom of presenting the company which got "first water" on a fire with a \$5 reward. Much honour was gained by the first company as well. Inspections

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<sup>7</sup> William O. McRobie, Fighting the Flames or 27 years in the Montreal Fire Brigade (Montreal: Witness Printing House, 1881), p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Fire Department for 1863 (Montreal, 1864), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Donald J. Cannon, "The Fire Department of the City of New York, 1835-1898: A Study in Institutional Adaptability." (Ph.D. Dissertation, Fordham University, 1976), p. 16.

by the Fire Committee (of the municipal government) were held semi-annually. The fire companies would assemble at Place d'Armes where the chairman of the committee would inspect the men and then address them. This was followed by a parade consisting of the fire companies and several bands with the colourful uniforms and flags of the different squads adding to the spectacle. Sometimes, competitions would be held between companies. These were usually tests of pumping power such as seeing who could make their hose stream go highest or who could "wash" the opposing team's engine. This involved placing the hose from each squad's pump into the other squad's tub. The object was to pump faster than your opponent thus making his tub overflow and "washing" his engine. One such closely fought contest between the Union and Montreal companies ended in confusion with the Union squad being accused of removing their rival's hose from their tub in order to prevent it from overflowing.<sup>10</sup> The firemen also occasionally ran into trouble with the public. There are stories of a mob throwing stones to drive off the Orange-dominated companies during a serious fire in Griffintown (a largely Irish Catholic neighbourhood).<sup>11</sup>

The inter-squad competition in Montreal did cause

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<sup>10</sup> Baird, p. 77.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 83.



episodes of violence between the firemen which prompted the Montreal Pilot to state that it was unfortunate that the volunteer companies were not operated by the fire insurance companies as they were in England. "With money as a focus rather than sectarian bravado, fights and hose slashing incidents . . . might have been eliminated and the quality of fire protection improved."<sup>12</sup> It seems that such behaviour never reached the extremes that it did in the United States, however. There are many stories of brawls among American fire companies and of large-scale involvement in municipal politics. Several such incidents occurred between units of volunteer firemen in New York City during the summer of 1865:

Volunteer Engines No. 18 and No. 25 fought it out on July 4. A classic donnybrook between the traditional rivals, firemen from Big Six Engine on Henry Street and Engine No. 41 battled . . . after Foreman Hennessey of Engine No. 41 led the charge allegedly crying out "Give it to the Irish sons of b-----s." Metropolitan Police from the seventh, tenth, eleventh, thirteenth, and eighteenth precincts were called out to quell the rioters, who left one dead on the field. On August 26, Engine No. 4 and Hook and Ladder No. 5 fought . . . instead of devoting their energies to a fire at 101 Walker Street.<sup>13</sup>

The elimination of this type of behaviour was a major motivation behind the formation of professional fire departments in

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<sup>12</sup> John C. Weaver and Peter de Lottinville, "The Conflagration and the City: Disaster and Progress in British North America during the Nineteenth Century," Histoire Sociale - Social History Vol. XIII, No. 26 (November 1980): p. 431.

<sup>13</sup> Cannon, p. 131.

American cities.

The Union company usually managed to be first at night fires in Montreal. As William Perry explains it: "Many's the run I had from Victoria Square to Dalhousie to put in the alarm there, for I slept in the old shop in Fortification Lane and had an arrangement with the police to rap on my shutters first when fire broke out."<sup>14</sup> This lasted until firemen began taking turns standing night watch at their stations.

William was a member of the Perry family which played a large part in the history of Montreal and the fire department. Both William Perry and Alfred Perry, his uncle, served in the Union engine company. William was a hydraulic engineer who worked in his father's company which manufactured pumps and fire engines. The Perry's engines won gold medals at exhibitions in Paris and London during the 1850s. Alfred, in addition to being a volunteer fireman, later worked for a fire insurance company and ended his career as fire commissioner of Montreal.

The 1840s were a time of change for Montreal and the fire department. In 1839, the Special Council for Lower Canada had passed an act which abolished the position of fire inspector in Montreal and, instead, called for the formation

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<sup>14</sup> Montreal Municipal Archives, Biographical Dossier on William Perry (B3207).

of a thirteen-member "Society for the Prevention of Accidents by Fire" (also known as the Fire Society). One of the thirteen was to be appointed president of the society by the government and another person was to be chosen, from outside the society, to perform the duties of secretary and treasurer. This committee was charged with the development and enforcement of any fire prevention regulations it deemed necessary and had the power to levy fines of up to five pounds for each offence. Such regulations could not be contrary to existing laws, however, and they were not ". . . in force until they shall have been passed, examined, and published, as already directed by this ordinance".<sup>15</sup>

The Fire Society was also required to divide the city into wards and assign not more than fifty volunteers to form a fire company (commanded by a captain) in each of those wards which had an engine. These engine-men were exempt from ". . . serving as Jurors, Constables, or Peace Officers, and in the Militia, except in case of invasion, and from performing or paying for statute labour . . .".<sup>16</sup> In addition, the Society was to form a squad of sixty volunteers, led by a

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<sup>15</sup> Governor of Lower Canada, An Ordinance to suspend for a limited time certain parts of two Ordinances therein mentioned, as far as the same relate to the City of Montreal, and to establish a Society therein, for preventing accidents by Fire., 2 Victoria, Cap. VIII, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

captain and two lieutenants, who were to assist at all fires. These men received similar benefits to the engine-men. During the required one year of service, these volunteers would be fined from five to ten shillings if they neglected their duties.

The Fire Society lasted until 1841, when the city regained its charter and began to take responsibility for its own affairs.<sup>17</sup> The municipal government prepared to take control of the volunteer fire squads (there were now nine engine companies and one ladder company). On June 5, 1841, the city passed into law a bill entitled "Establishing and Regulating the Fire Department". This by-law created the position of "Inspector, Superintendant, and Chief Engineer" (who was appointed by the city council) to oversee the operation of the fire companies and take command at major fires. The first to hold this position was Joseph Bronsdon. The chief engineer's duties included inspecting the men and equipment of the various fire companies at least once a month and submitting reports on these visits and any fire department operations to the city council on a regular basis. He also had the power to enter any building (between ten a.m. and six p.m.) to ensure it complied with fire prevention by-laws.

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<sup>17</sup> Montreal was first incorporated in 1833 under a three-year charter. When that charter expired on May 1, 1836, it was not renewed by the provincial authorities due to fears of civil unrest and the subsequent 1837 Rebellion.

Offenders could be fined up to five pounds per offence. There were one or more Overseers of Sweeping of Chimneys appointed to help the chief engineer in this work.<sup>18</sup>

The Fire Companies were placed under the command of captains and lieutenants chosen by the city council. Each captain was responsible for keeping the engines and other equipment of his company in working order and for drilling the men at least once a month. Captains received ten shillings and lieutenants received seven shillings for each fire they worked at. If the chief engineer was not present, the captain with the most seniority was in command. The fire companies were to be composed of twenty to twenty-five men, each of whom were paid five shillings per fire.<sup>19</sup> Training of the men was largely done "on the job".

This by-law also included twenty-five regulations for the prevention of fires. These ranged from the requirement that row buildings have stone or brick common walls between them extending at least two feet above the roof, to a prohibition against cigar and pipe smoking in establishments such as carpenter's workshops, stables, barns, or rope walks. The fire insurance companies seemed to be reassured by this action on the part of the municipal government. Announcements

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<sup>18</sup> Montreal Gazette, 19 June 1841.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

in the Montreal Gazette of June 2, 1841 state that the twenty to twenty-five percent advances required as of February 1837 would be returned upon renewal of policies in the city.

Fire insurance had first arrived in 1804 when the Phoenix Fire Office of London appointed Alexander Auldjo as its representative for both Upper and Lower Canada.<sup>20</sup> American companies, however, did not enter the Canadian market until 1821 when the Aetna of Hartford company named Abijah Bigelow its agent in Montreal.<sup>21</sup> By this time, several local firms had been founded such as the Quebec Fire Insurance Company, the Fire Insurance Association of Halifax, and the Montreal Mutual Fire Insurance Company. These groups, both foreign and domestic, had a great influence over the development of fire prevention and fire-fighting services during the nineteenth century. In the early years, they took a direct role through the presentation of fire-fighting apparatus and other equipment to various municipalities. Montreal, for example, received a manual engine from the Phoenix company in 1805.<sup>22</sup> The fire insurance companies also helped through more indirect methods. Firstly, the fire insurance companies would examine the various neighbourhoods in each city and

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<sup>20</sup> Baird, p. 31.

<sup>21</sup> Weaver and de Lottinville, p. 442.

<sup>22</sup> Baird, p. 33.

assess different rates depending on their layout and the building materials used. Secondly, they put pressure on municipal governments to improve local fire prevention regulations and fire departments. Both of these strategies were designed to allow the companies to reduce their losses from insurance claims and thus to lower the overall rates charged to their policy-holders. As a result, businessmen, in turn, would put further pressure on their cities to enact additional reforms in hopes of gaining even lower rates. By the 1840s, the insurance companies were also beginning to add more and more conditions to their policies to reduce their losses even further. Shortly after the Aetna insurance company opened its office in Montreal, for example, it had to pay its first claim for a building destroyed in a fire (it had been used to store gunpowder). The company paid the claim, but all future policies prohibited the storage of gunpowder in insured premises. The number of banned materials would grow over the following years.<sup>23</sup>

The 1840s also saw increasing public pressure for the municipal government to take control of the city's water works. The four-inch pipes installed in 1819 had proven to be insufficient for the task and this, combined with other problems, had led to the system being put up for sale again.

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<sup>23</sup> Weaver and de Lottinville, p. 442.

It was soon purchased for sixty thousand dollars by a local businessman named J. Haynes. He then formed a new company which replaced the old pipes with ten-inch diameter pipe and installed a more powerful pump.<sup>24</sup> In 1845, the city finally purchased the water works from this company for fifty thousand pounds. By that time, there were two steam pumps with a capacity of ninety-three thousand gallons per day serving fourteen miles of pipe.

The municipal government's control over public services (such as water and fire protection) had increased during this decade. The fire companies themselves, however, were still run on a volunteer basis which meant that they could be unreliable. The linguistic and cultural uniformity of the different squads was another problem which added to this unreliability and caused conflict, both politically and otherwise, between these groups. Political interference by the volunteer fire companies would come to a head in the spring of 1849.

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<sup>24</sup> Smith, p. 14.



## CHAPTER III

### The Burning of Parliament

On April 25, 1849, the Governor-General, Lord Elgin, signed the Rebellion Losses Bill into law. This bill was designed to compensate Lower Canadians whose property had been damaged during the 1837 rebellion. It was seen by the Reform government as a way to provide social justice for French-Canadians and to show that responsible government also worked for them. The Tories, however, viewed the bill as the rewarding of rebels and provided stiff resistance to it in Parliament. After the Reformers managed to get the bill passed, the Tories hoped the Governor-General would withhold his support. When the news of Elgin signing the bill came out, Montreal Tories decided to take matters into their own hands. Lord Elgin's carriage was pelted with assorted refuse as he left the Parliament building.

A rally was quickly scheduled for that evening at the Champ de Mars. One of the organizers was Alfred Perry, captain of the Ladder company. By eight p.m., a large crowd had gathered and the English and Irish fire companies were well represented. The rest of the men in these companies were called out, with their engines, through the simple expedient



**ALFRED PERRY**

of ringing the alarm bells.<sup>1</sup> Some of the crowd were proposing to draft a petition to the Queen calling for the replacement of the Governor-General. Others were in favour of more immediate action and the cry "To the Parliament House!" was soon heard from more and more of the mob. Parliament was still holding an evening session when the crowd arrived at the Place d'Youville (about nine p.m.) and began hurling rocks through the windows. Inside, the members quickly abandoned their seats under the hail of stones. Some attempted to hide behind the Speaker's chair while many fled to the libraries. The mob then broke open the locked main doors with a ladder from the hook and ladder cart, rushed up the main staircase, and entered the Chamber where some members still remained. One of the rioters, a man named Courtney, informed the Speaker that the Parliament was hereby dissolved in the name of the Queen. Courtney then picked up the ceremonial mace and proceeded to exit the Chamber.<sup>2</sup> The sergeant-at-arms attempted to rescue the mace, but was beaten off by others in the crowd. The remaining members soon fled the Chamber as the rioters commenced throwing inkwells and papers around and demolishing everything in sight.

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<sup>1</sup> Donal M. Baird, The Story of Firefighting in Canada (Erin, Ontario: The Boston Mills Press, 1986), p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Montreal Municipal Archives, Biographical Dossier on Alfred Perry (B3112).

There is some dispute as to the origins of the fire that destroyed the Parliament Buildings. Many blamed Alfred Perry, and he and several others were arrested after the riots (they were all released a few days later). Perry conceded that he may have started the fire unintentionally through his actions during the riot. In his memoirs, he describes what happened that night:

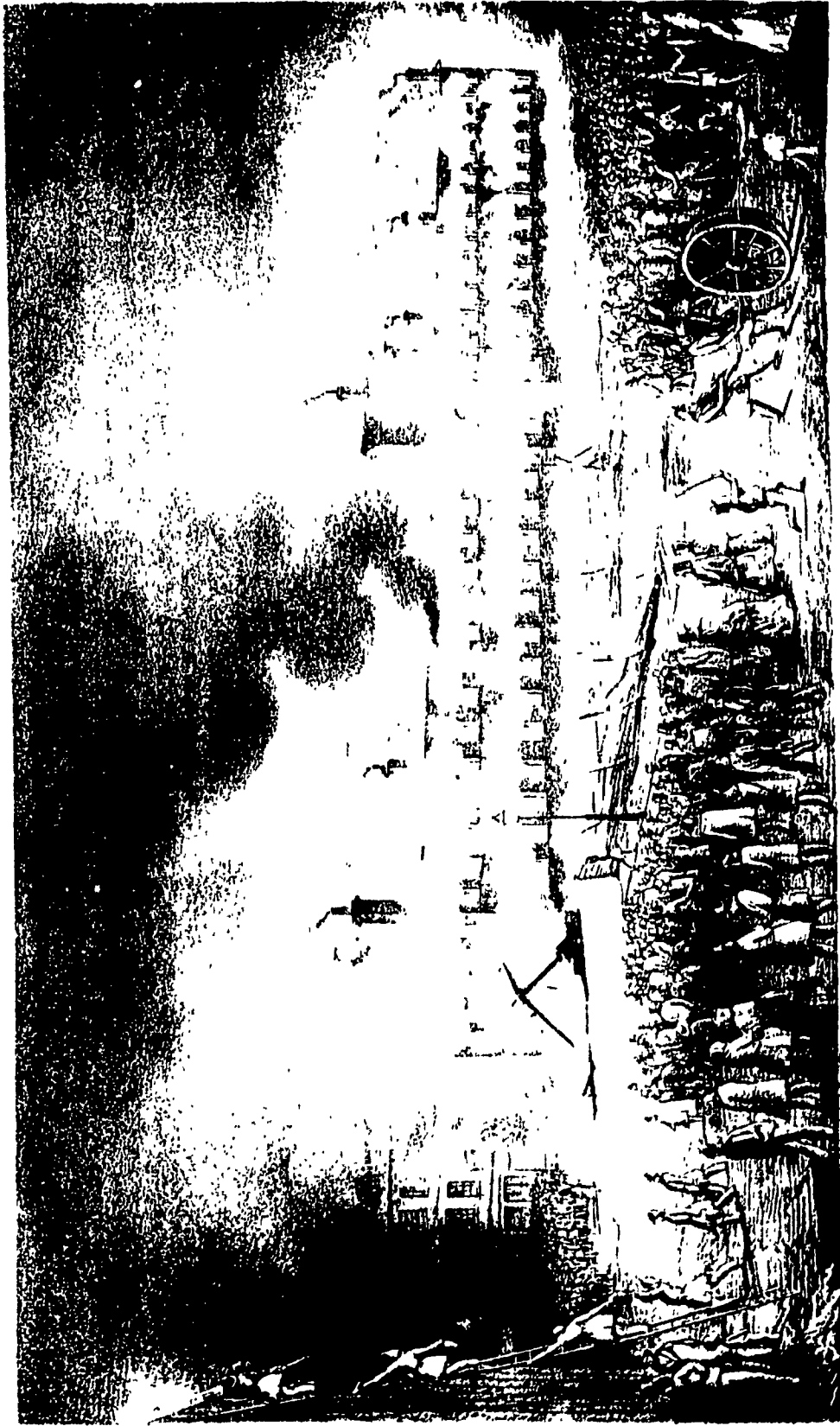
Just above the [Speaker's] chair . . . I saw a large circular clock. . . . Like a flash I determined to smash that clock. Its "tick, tick, tick" was out of harmony with the wild events that were happening around. . . . I picked up a brickbat from the floor and let fly at the clock. It missed its mark, and I tried again with no better success. But in my third shot I struck the gaselier. Several jets were knocked out.<sup>3</sup>

The pipes for the gas lighting were made of soft metal. Once the burners were knocked askew, they began melting the pipes and the flames soon spread to the ceiling and then to the loft. There is also evidence that a fire was set at the McGill Street end which caused those still inside to evacuate the building. A reporter for the Montreal Courier wrote that ". . . the canvass [sic] awning shed forth such a blaze that the whole end of the building seemed to be in flames".<sup>4</sup> Wherever the fire originally started, it soon had the entire Parliament building ablaze.

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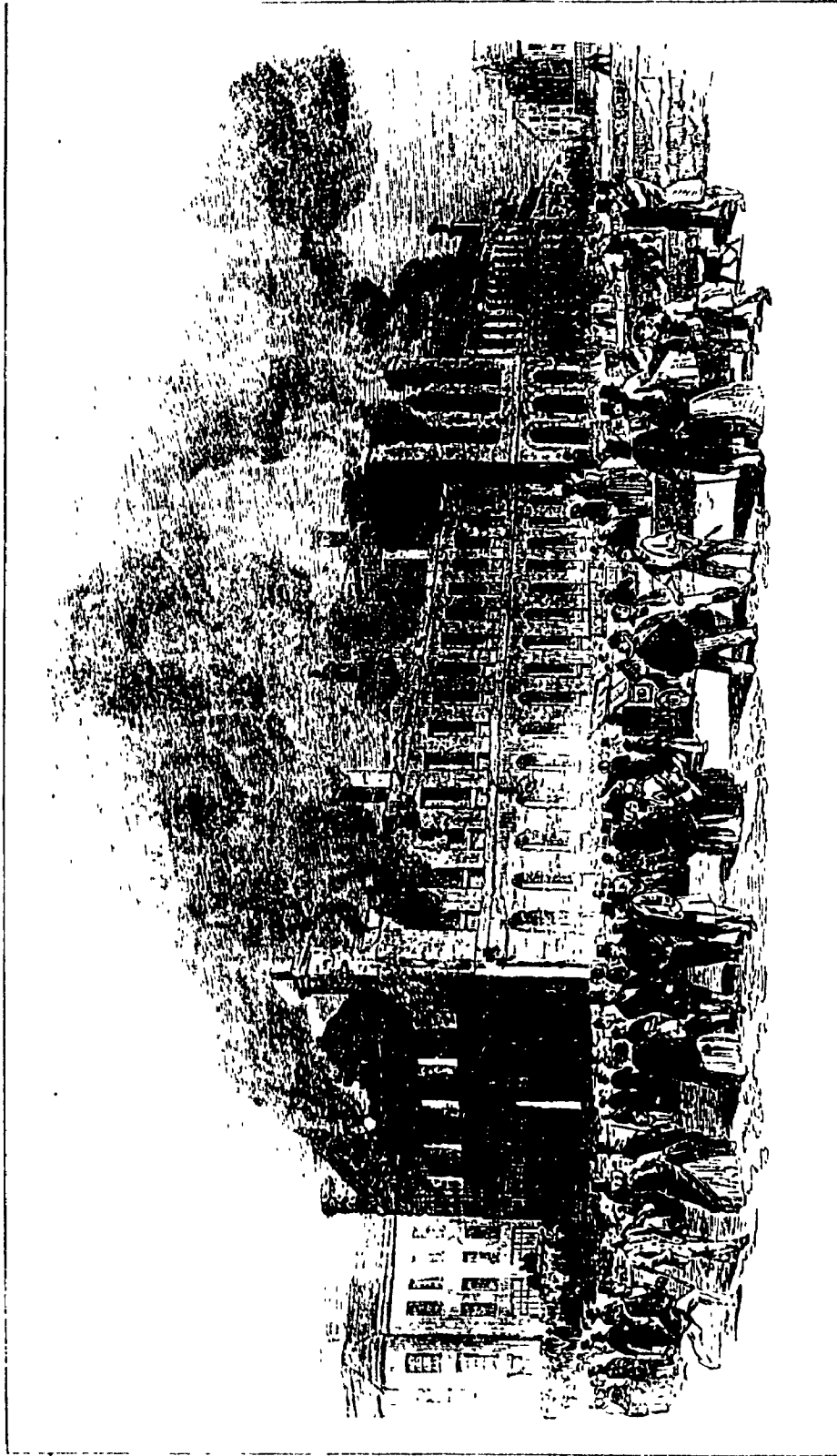
<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Montreal Gazette, 27 April 1849.



THE BURNING OF THE PARLIAMENT BUILDING

The three firemen on the right are moving a hose-reel (with a torch-boy standing by) while those at the far left are wetting down the roof of a neighbouring building with buckets.



**THE RUINS OF PARLIAMENT AFTER THE FIRE**

This is the empty shell of the parliament building that remained after the riot. Two manual fire engines can be seen among the crowd in the centre of the picture.

The fire companies present in the crowd did nothing to save the burning building. They did, however, work to keep the fire from spreading. Alarm bells were rung to summon the rest of the city's fire companies to the scene. The two francophone squads, the Héros and the Voltigeur, refused to turn out without a promise of safe conduct through the mob.<sup>5</sup> They eventually arrived and, reassured by the crowd, set to work at containing the blaze.<sup>6</sup> By two a.m., the Parliament building consisted of stone walls surrounding a mass of glowing embers.

This outburst had serious repercussions as the provincial government decided to remove the capital from Montreal because of political unrest. The riot showed that the municipal authorities had little power over the conduct of these independent fire companies. Nothing was done, however, to bring the volunteers under the tighter control of the city. The inadequacies of Montreal's fire protection services would be clearly demonstrated three years later.

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<sup>5</sup> Baird, p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Prevost, Montreal - A History, trans. Robert Chodos & Elizabeth Mueller (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993), p. 252.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Great Fires of 1852

1852 was a particularly bad year for the city of Montreal. Fires destroyed over twelve hundred buildings and left over ten thousand citizens homeless. The volunteer fire companies, now numbering one hook and ladder, one hose, and six engine companies, were finding it increasingly difficult to protect the growing city with their manual pumps<sup>1</sup> (In the decade 1850 to 1860, Montreal's population rose from 57,000 to over 95,000).<sup>2</sup>

The first of these fires occurred on June 7th. It started in a carpenter's shop on St. Peter Street behind the St. Andrew's church. The church was soon aflame and the fire crossed over the street to consume several blocks between St. Peter and St. François Xavier Streets. It then traveled along St. Paul Street to threaten Notre Dame Cathedral, the Hôtel Dieu nunnery, and several ships in the port. An eyewitness described the scene:

The sight at this time was terrible, yet magnificent; some thirty large buildings standing in three parallel lines were in flames together, and

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<sup>1</sup> Donal M. Baird, The Story of Firefighting in Canada (Erin, Ontario: The Boston Mills Press, 1986), p. 81

<sup>2</sup> Charles P. DeVolpi, Montreal - Recueil Iconographique/ A Pictorial Record, 2 vols. (Montreal: DEV-SCO Publications Ltd., 1963), p. 8 (vol. 1).



amidst the roaring of the fire, the crackling of the burning timbers, and the falling of walls, might be heard the shouts of the firemen and the ringing of the alarm bells. Here and there might be seen the military and citizens, engaged in removing the sick from the hospital<sup>3</sup> of the Hôtel Dieu, to a place of safety, . . . .<sup>3</sup>

The fire department managed to contain the blaze to a relatively small area of the city. (The damage totalled about two hundred thousand pounds.) The Montreal Gazette of June 9th blamed much of the devastation on the widespread use of wooden rain gutters (particularly when combined with tin roofing). Cinders and sparks falling on a tin roof tend to slide down to the gutter, where they accumulate and eventually set the gutter on fire. The flames then spread to the attic, via the rafters connected to the gutter, where the fire quickly grows and "before the fire is fairly seen from without, the garret is in flames".<sup>4</sup> In addition, tin roofs, when compared to wooden ones, are considerably more difficult for firemen to break through in order to attack the flames. The Gazette also criticized the city government for its management of the fire companies. In particular, the newspaper decried the lack of reserve engines. (At the time, two of the city's seven pumps were out of service, thus greatly reducing the effectiveness of the department.) One or two efficient reserve fire engines

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<sup>3</sup> Alfred Sandham, Ville Marie or Sketches of Montreal Past & Present (Montreal: George Bishop & Co., 1870), p. 181.

<sup>4</sup> Montreal Gazette, 9 June 1852.

are required, it continued, for use at major fires or to replace those undergoing repairs. As fate would have it, the city would get little time to act on these complaints.

One month later, on July 9th, another fire broke out in a house on the east side of St. Lawrence Street. Unfortunately, the water works were not in full operation due to repairs being undertaken, and there was a strong westerly wind blowing that day. The flames quickly enveloped the whole side of the street and spread northwards to Mignonne Street. There were many wooden working class homes in the St. Lawrence suburbs and the fire ". . . rushed from street to street and from house to house like water pouring down a rapid."<sup>5</sup> The fire companies could do little against such a blaze. Around noon, it crossed St. Constant Street in one sheet many yards wide and its movement to the north-east eventually came to a stop at St. Denis Street where it destroyed numerous stone houses. Everything between St Catherine and Dorchester Streets had been burned. The fire was brought under control by five p.m. and the firemen were wearily finishing it off when the alarm bells were sounded again.

Some wooden buildings behind the Hay's House had caught fire from sparks blown on the wind from the earlier blaze. The Hay's House, a four-story block of stone buildings

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<sup>5</sup> Sandham, p. 182.



**THE GREAT FIRES OF 1852**

This is the scene in Dalhousie Square on July 9th. The Hay's House is the large structure in the centre of the picture. People can be seen in the windows of the building on the left throwing their belongings into the street.



GREAT FIRE AT MONTREAL.—RETIKLED FROM THE NORTH CORNER OF THE CHAMP DE MARS

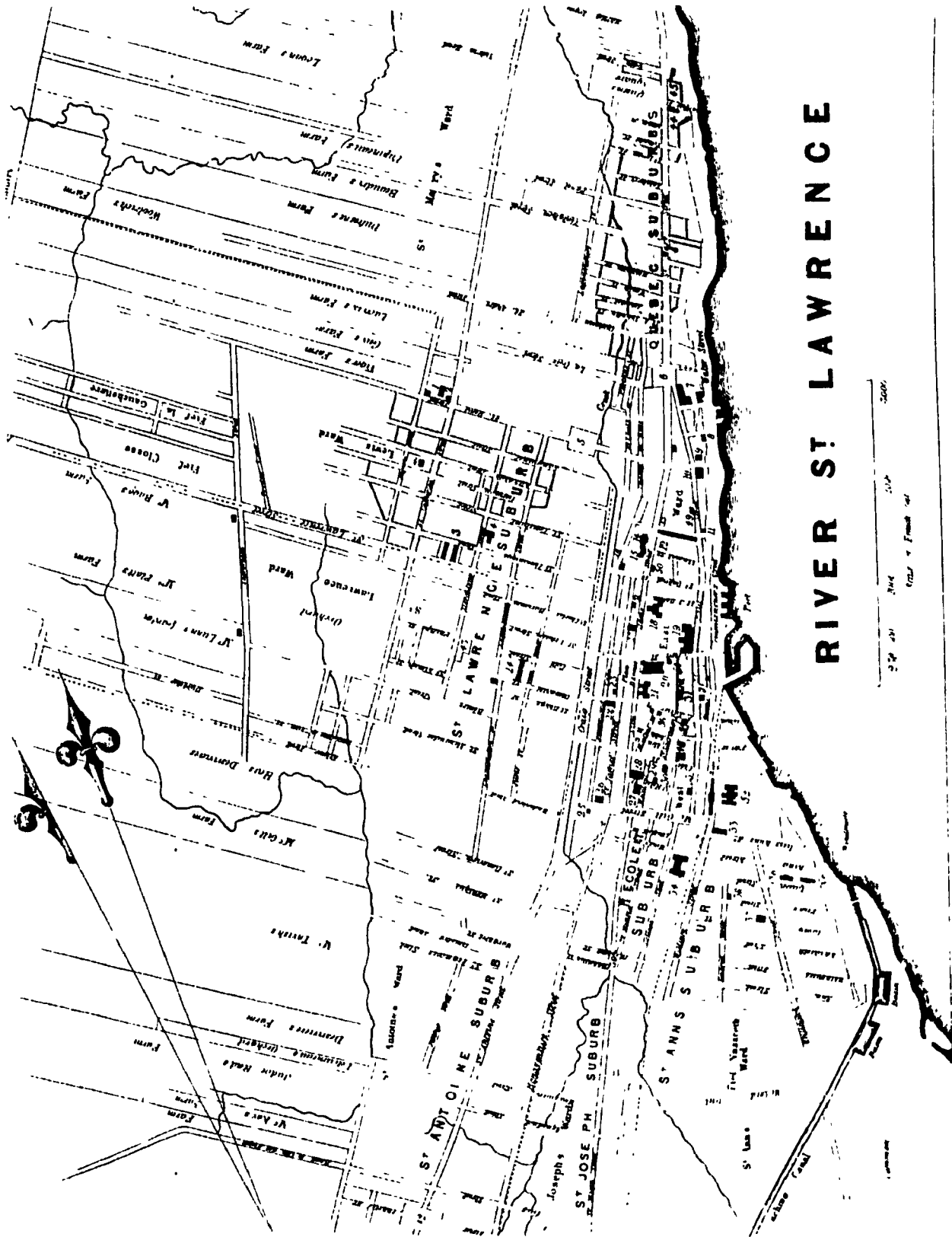


RUINS OF THE GREAT FIRE AT MONTREAL.—ST DENIS STREET, NEAR THE BISHOP'S CHURCH.



ENCAMPMENT OF SUFFERERS BY THE GREAT FIRE AT MONTREAL.

SCENES FROM THE 1852 FIRES



MAP OF THE CITY OF MONTREAL (1839)  
 Shaded areas show the destruction caused by the fires of 1852. The area on the lower left is the result of the June 7th fire, while the two larger ones are from the July blazes.

on Champ de Mars Street, was soon burning as well. The flames then crossed over the street to the houses opposite. By ten p.m., the fire was moving freely along what would become Notre Dame Street East and the cross streets between it and the harbour. In addition to consuming much of the Quebec suburbs, the blaze destroyed several churches, the Molson brewery, various industrial establishments, and many stone houses of the upper class.<sup>6</sup> The fire was brought under control partly through the blowing up of buildings to deprive the flames of fuel, and the volunteer companies, with the help of numerous citizens, finally stopped it at the St. Mary's foundry by ten the following morning. The total damage caused by these fires was estimated at three hundred thousand pounds. Many of the firemen, including Alfred Perry (who received much praise for his efforts), had been fighting the flames for twenty-four hours.

Chief Engineer John Perrigo, however, was widely criticized for his handling of the crisis. The Gazette, for example, reported that he repeatedly refused to take responsibility for the blowing up of houses to stop the fire. A public meeting at city hall was scheduled for two p.m. on July tenth "to adopt such measures as are required by the relief of the sufferers by the fire, and to prevent a recurrence of

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<sup>6</sup> Baird, p. 82.

similar calamities".<sup>7</sup> The meeting was headed by the mayor, Charles Wilson<sup>8</sup>, and many important figures such as members of the provincial parliament, military officers, city councilmen, judges, and numerous clergymen were in attendance. Several resolutions were formulated by those present. The first of these was ". . .to relieve the immediate wants of the sufferers, and . . . to aid them i the re-erection of their dwellings . . .".<sup>9</sup> To organize this effort the "Montreal Relief Committee" was formed. Its membership included such notable citizens as John and William Molson.

Many at the meeting wanted Perrigo removed from the post of chief engineer because of incompetence. After several speakers brought up this demand, the mayor promised that a meeting of the city council would be held to investigate Perrigo's conduct. Soon afterwards, the chief engineer resigned and he was succeeded by Alexander Bertram who took over the post on September 13, 1852. Bertram would remain in office to oversee the transformation from a volunteer to a professional department.

The widespread use of wood in construction and the

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<sup>7</sup> Montreal Gazette, 12 July 1852.

<sup>8</sup> Wilson was the first to be elected to the post by the citizens of Montreal. The mayor had formerly been chosen by the city council.

<sup>9</sup> Montreal Gazette, 12 July 1852.

narrowness of Montreal's streets and alleys were seen as a major cause for the rapid spread of the flames during the disaster. There had long been by-laws prohibiting the construction of wooden buildings within the city, but the municipal authorities (in particular the chief engineer) had been rather lax in enforcing them. A resolution was therefore passed at the meeting that demanded the city government immediately take steps to remedy this situation ". . . by the most stringent enforcement of the existing laws upon the subject, and the application, if necessary, to the Legislature of the Province for additional powers, by which they may be enabled to secure the widening of the streets of the city, and the absolute prohibition of the erection of wooden buildings of any description within the city limits".<sup>10</sup> Despite these efforts, wooden buildings would continue to remain a problem for many years to come.

Lastly, those present at the city hall realized that Montreal needed a vastly improved water works system to prevent such disasters in the future. It was resolved that the city make full use of the act authorizing the imposition of a tax on all houses (within Montreal and its suburbs) to which water pipes could be connected for the financing of a new water works. The resolution also called for the construction

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



of water reservoirs and the installation of hydrants throughout the city. The crowd was informed that the city council had already secured the services of an engineer to conduct a survey of the ground between the city and the Lachine Rapids to determine the feasibility of an aqueduct between these two locations.<sup>11</sup> Construction on the Lachine Aqueduct project, as it was called, began later that year.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER V

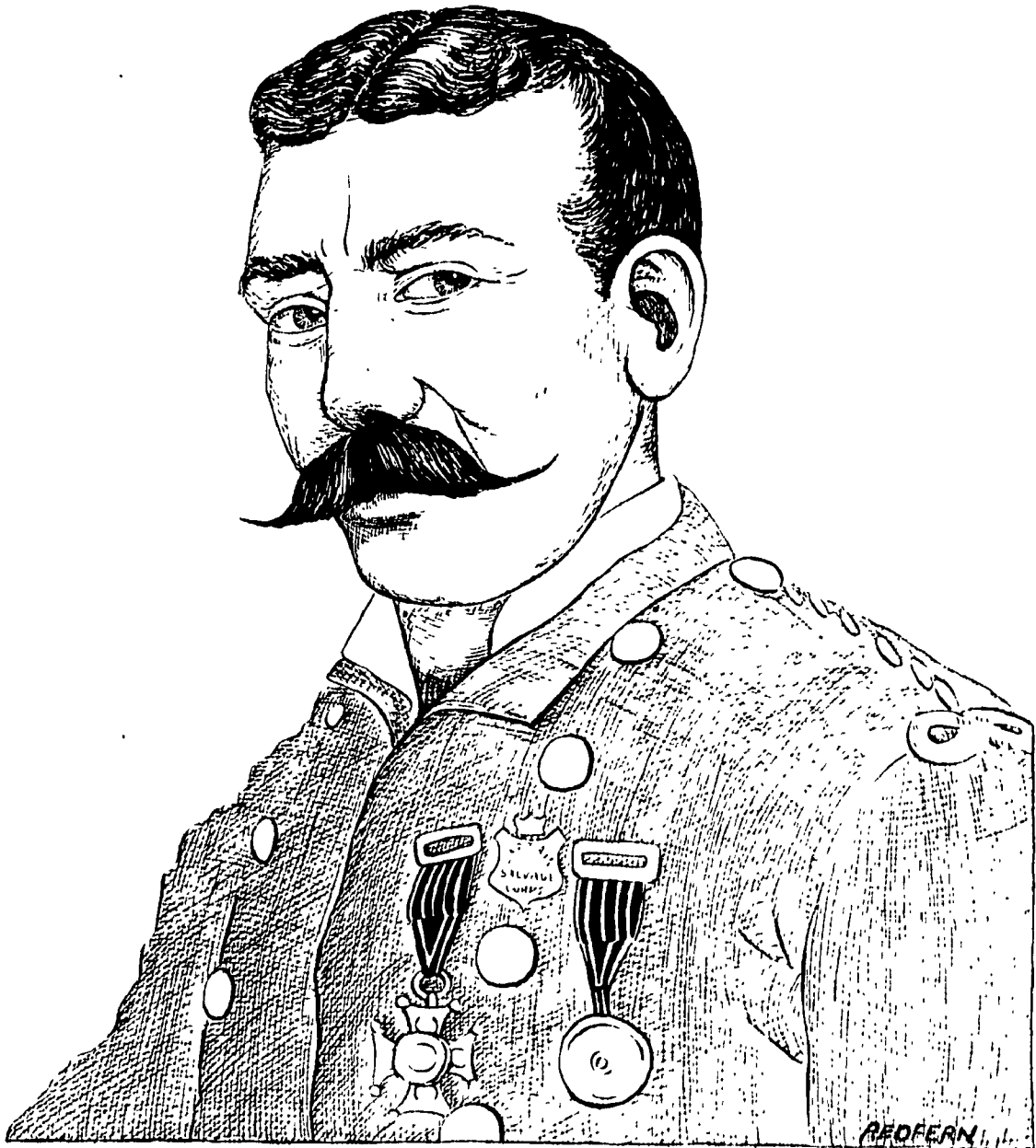
### The 1850s

It was during the early 1850s that William Orme McRobie, another notable nineteenth-century Montreal fireman, first made an appearance. His memoirs, Fighting the Flames or 27 years in the Montreal Fire Brigade, provide much information on life in the volunteer fire companies during the mid-1800s and on the early years of the professional department. McRobie first joined the fire department in 1853 at the age of fifteen when he became a "engine torch-boy" for the Queen Engine Company No. 5 (located on Wellington Street in Griffintown). He described his uniform as a red Garibaldi coat, a leather helmet, a broad leather belt with "Queen" painted on it, and a regulation hose key (hanging from his belt).<sup>1</sup> The following summer, McRobie received a promotion to "branch torch-boy" which meant that he now held a torch for the men with the hose or "branch" and followed them while they attacked the fire (instead of just standing beside the engine with a torch).

These torch-boys served two important functions. Firstly, in the days before street-lighting became common,

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<sup>1</sup> William O. McRobie, Fighting the Flames or 27 years in the Montreal Fire Brigade (Montreal: Witness Printing House, 1881), p. 14.



**WILLIAM ORME MCROBIE**

they ensured that the firemen would have sufficient light to work by (although the larger fires undoubtedly provided enough light by themselves). Secondly, these positions served as apprenticeships in which teenage boys could learn the rudiments of the fire-fighting profession before becoming full-fledged members of the company.

Despite his standing only a little over four and a half feet tall, McRobie was made a full member of the company later that year (1854) at the age of sixteen (the legal age for becoming a fireman at this time was eighteen).<sup>2</sup> His career came to a temporary end in 1856 when his father obtained an apprenticeship for him. As a result, McRobie could no longer be an official member of the fire company. This did not stop him, however, from continually abandoning his work during the day to help out at fires. Eventually, McRobie was arrested in January 1857 for deserting his employment. His father, his employers, and the high magistrate realized that he would not change his ways and so, McRobie was released from his apprenticeship. After spending several months in Ottawa (during which time he helped the local firemen at a hotel fire on Sparks Street, despite having no connection with the Ottawa Fire Department), McRobie returned to Montreal in April. He then joined the Protector Engine Company No. 3 located on

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

Court House Square and was made a full member the following month.

William McRobie writes, after describing a particularly harrowing escape he experienced at a fire: "I was very much attached to my family, and the thought of leaving them unprovided for had more than once given me a good deal of anxious thought . . .".<sup>3</sup> This was a real danger as firefighting has always been a hazardous occupation. For much of the nineteenth century, however, there was no organized system to provide for those injured fighting fires or for widows and orphans of firemen. They were largely dependent on voluntary contributions from their comrades or other concerned individuals which could not always be relied upon. To correct this problem, the "Association Bienveillante des Pompiers de Montréal" was formed in the early 1850s. Its purpose, as stated in article I of the association's by-laws, was to " . . . porter soulagement aux membre qui pourrait souffrir des injures en remplissant leurs devoirs comme Pompiers, et aussi pour fournir de l'aide aux veuves et orphelins des Pompiers dont été causée par des injures reçues dans l'exécution de leurs devoirs."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>4</sup> Association Bienveillante des Pompiers de Montreal, Constitution et Règlements de l'Association Bienveillante des Pompiers de Montreal (Montreal: Owler & Stevenson, 1854), p. 9.

The firemen's benevolent association was managed by a board of governors composed of the chief engineer of the department, his assistants, and three representatives from each fire company. These representatives were elected by their companies and held their posts for one year. (The elections took place at the annual meeting of the association.) The board of governors, however, held monthly meetings. At the first of these each year, a president, two vice-presidents, a secretary, an assistant secretary, and a treasurer were chosen by the members of the board.

Financing for the association came through the payment of annual fees by the various fire companies (they had to pay a set amount per member of the company). This income was placed into three different funds. The permanent fund was the bank deposits held by the association. The casual fund consisted of three-quarters of the annual fees paid to the association. This fund was used to make payments to those injured while on duty. As well, a percentage of this fund, decided upon at the annual meeting, was paid into the permanent fund each year. Finally, the widows and orphans' fund was composed of the remaining one-quarter of the annual fees, as well as any fines assessed on firemen during the year for negligence or other offences.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 12-13.

While injured, the firemen were given a small weekly wage and had their medical bills paid by the association. Widows and orphans, on the other hand, received a payment to cover funeral expenses and an annual pension of ten pounds. Payments to widows ended if the woman remarried, while orphans received their pension only until the age of fourteen when they would be expected to support themselves. The formation of this association marked an increasing sense of professionalism among the volunteers as they banded together to provide for injured comrades and their families.

## CHAPTER VI

### The Lachine Aqueduct

When the Lachine Aqueduct project was completed in 1856 it consisted of an open canal running from the St. Lawrence River (about a mile above the Lachine Rapids) to a pumping station, called the Wheel House, near Atwater Street. This station contained two vertical hydraulic wheels which powered six pumps giving a total capacity of four million gallons per day. The excess water was pumped through a two foot diameter main to a reservoir built on Mount Royal (where the McTavish reservoir would later be located). This project, which took over three years to finish, cost a total of \$280,236.53.<sup>1</sup> The new water works system provided unheard of pressures. It was now possible for the firemen to connect their hoses directly to the newly installed hydrants and obtain streams that were more powerful than those available with the manual pumps.<sup>2</sup> These hydrants, largely similar to those in use today, were a great improvement over the old "fire plugs" which were nothing more than a hole in the pipe with a wooden plug stopping the water.

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<sup>1</sup> F. Clifford Smith, The Montreal Water Works: its history compiled from the year 1800 to 1912 (Montreal, 1913), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Donal M. Baird, The Story of Firefighting in Canada (Erin, Ontario: The Boston Mills Press, 1986), p. 85.



Montreal's winters, however, often caused the hydrants to freeze up. Tables found in the annual reports for the water works show statistics for this problem. In the winter of 1863-1864, for example, 85 different hydrants were found frozen a total of 182 times. One of the main causes was listed as "By the Rise of Water" (into the hydrant). This accounts for roughly one-quarter of the incidents.<sup>3</sup> Winter caused other difficulties, as well. The snowy streets made pulling the fire apparatus more difficult, even with the conversion from wheels to runners. The cold weather was very hard on the firemen, themselves. William McRobie states that winter fires were ". . . very trying to the firemen's constitution - that is, half roasted and whole smoked while the fire is in progress, and chilled through and through and half frozen after it is over."<sup>4</sup> The firemen did not have warm, water-proof clothing, as they do now and they would often be quite soaked with water by the time the fire was out. Finally, after a blaze everything nearby would be covered in thick sheets of ice.

In 1858, the city took advantage of the improved water works and ordered a reduction in the size of the

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<sup>3</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Water Works for 1864 (Montreal, 1865), p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> William O. McRobie, Fighting the Flames or 27 Years in the Montreal Fire Brigade (Montreal: Witness Printing House, 1881), p. 102.



AFTERMATH OF A WINTER FIRE (1888)

volunteer companies to twelve men each as there was no longer the need to operate the pumps at most fires. The fire captains were given three months to inform the chief engineer of their selections. This was a difficult choice for some of these men. McRobie states that his captain waited until time was almost up before choosing which men to keep in his company. At first, McRobie felt he was out of luck as the captain listed him as one of the three supernumeraries allowed to each company. But fate intervened and the twelfth man on the company list lost his place due to, as McRobie puts it, the lack of dash and spirit required to make a good fireman.<sup>5</sup> These new "hose companies" only had to bring their hoses and the ladder truck with them when responding to the alarm. Several manual pumps were maintained, however, for fires high on the mountain where the water pressure was much reduced or for where the water-pipes did not yet reach.

The following year, the municipal government took the first step towards a professional fire department. In the fall of 1859, the city council arranged for the appointment of one paid "guardian" in each fire company. These guardians (chosen by their comrades) would live in their company's station, with their families, on a full-time basis. This move led to improvements in these structures. Living quarters, for

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-25.

the guardians, would be fashioned from whatever space was available. Stalls were built for the horses that could now be kept at each station. The guardian's duties consisted of maintaining the hoses and other equipment in a state of readiness, caring for the horse, and sounding the alarm when a fire was reported.<sup>6</sup> By this time, each station had been equipped with its own bell. William McRobie, who was given the post at No. 2 Fire Station, writes that he ". . . kept a book in which was recorded who gave the alarms, and out of every ten alarms, "Dog" [referring to the company dog Carlo] is recorded seven times until the electric alarm was introduced."<sup>7</sup> It seems that Carlo had the habit of barking whenever he heard someone running up to the station. Once the alarm was sounded the guardian could start for the fire with his horse-drawn hose-reel. The other units would have to report to the station sounding the alarm first, to find out where the fire was (unless they happened to pass by it on their way). Three or four guardians, with hose-reels and a ladder cart, provided a skeleton crew that could attack a fire even if no volunteers showed up.<sup>8</sup>

There had been increasing pressure during the 1850s,

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<sup>6</sup> Baird, pp. 101-102.

<sup>7</sup> McRobie, p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> Baird, p. 102.

from the public and members of the municipal government, for the city to form a professional department. Local business interests, as well, were interested in this change. The move towards modern building codes, waterworks, and professional fire departments was widely supported by businessmen and the fire insurance companies. They helped municipal governments bring about these changes when such innovations would benefit them economically.<sup>9</sup> The city council felt, however, that the time was not yet right for such a force and created the post of guardian as an intermediate step to this end. The main problem was that there were numerous volunteers who only needed a few more years to be eligible for a place on the "Exempt Firemens' Roll".<sup>10</sup> The volunteer system would be phased out as these men reached their required years of service. This process would not be completed until 1863.

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<sup>9</sup> John C. Weaver and Peter de Lottinville, "The Conflagration and the City: Disaster and Progress in British North America during the Nineteenth Century," Histoire Sociale - Social History Vol. XIII, No. 26 (November 1980): p. 420.

<sup>10</sup> See pages 16-17.

## CHAPTER VII

### The Formation of the Professional Department

Prior to the development of new technologies in the 19th century, the large numbers of men required to operate manual fire pumps made the conversion to a paid department an exceedingly expensive proposition. It was much easier for a municipal government to simply allow the volunteer companies to continue to protect their city. New equipment that would greatly reduce the amount of manpower necessary to combat fires was required before it would be economically feasible for city governments to form paid departments. At the same time, these new technologies were dependent on the support of municipal governments since the volunteer squads were not interested in anything that would decrease the size of their membership. Volunteers would explain that they were opposed to steam pumps, for example, because the heavy streams they put out caused unnecessary water damage.<sup>1</sup>

After the Lachine Aqueduct was first completed, the volunteer companies in Montreal continued to use their manual pumps. They would run a hose from the hydrant to the tub of

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<sup>1</sup> Donald J. Cannon, "The Fire Department of the City of New York, 1835-1898: A Study in Institutional Adaptability." (Ph.D. Dissertation, Fordham University, 1976), pp. 74-75.

their engine and then pump it on to the flames.<sup>2</sup> This ended when the city council forced the companies to reduce their numbers to twelve men each.

In many cities, it was the steam fire engine that allowed the change to a professional department. Not only did it reduce greatly the manpower needed to fight fires, but it also required much technical expertise to operate (something the volunteers did not have). The first steam fire engines were built in the 1830's. These steam pumps did not become truly effective and reliable until the late 1850s, however. By that time, the typical steam fire engine with a vertically-mounted boiler had been developed.

Some of the first engine designs were actually self-propelled. These early self-propelled engines never became popular due to two major problems. Firstly, these engines took a long time to get warmed up, so it would be necessary to keep the boiler going on a continual basis if you wanted the engine ready to go at a moment's notice. Secondly, once they did get moving, they had difficulties with steering and braking.<sup>3</sup> It was far easier to have a steam pump pulled by horses, as the fire under the boiler could be lit as the

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<sup>2</sup> Donal M. Baird, The Story of Firefighting in Canada (Erin, Ontario: Boston Mills Press, 1986), p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Ingram, A History of Firefighting and Equipment (London: New English Library, 1978), p. 22.

engine left the station and a good engineer would have a working head of steam ready upon arrival at the fire. At some busy stations a small fire was maintained under the boiler so that the water was kept slightly warm at all times.<sup>4</sup>

In Montreal's case, however, it was the completion of the Lachine Aqueduct project that allowed the city government to make the change to a professional department (by the early 1860s, nearly 550 hydrants had been installed in the city). On April 8, 1863, the city council passed by-law no. 288 entitled "For the Establishment of the Fire Department of the City of Montreal". It would take effect on the 1st of May of that year.<sup>5</sup> What prompted its passage at this time is uncertain.<sup>6</sup> Little can be discovered from the records of the city council. In the minutes of the August 20, 1862 council meeting, however, a motion was passed which ordered the fire committee to conduct an investigation into the administration of the Union Fire Company. Unfortunately, the results of this investigation have since disappeared. Based on the information that is available, it seems likely that the change to a

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Fire Department for 1863 (Montreal, 1864), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Due to a lack of evidence from archival documents and contemporary newspaper reports, it is impossible to determine the exact causes for the city council's support of the move to a professional department.



professional department was motivated by various factors including the new water works, the decision to install a fire alarm telegraph in 1863 (which would allow greater centralized control), and the continuing problems with the volunteer companies.

There was little opposition to this by-law from the volunteers as many of the men were given positions on the new force (with increased pay for their work). The department was headed by a chief and an assistant chief who were both responsible for its overall operation. In addition, the chief was required to present quarterly and annual reports to the fire committee of the city council, while the assistant had to conduct inspections of each station twice per week. The chief also implemented any orders passed by the fire committee.<sup>7</sup> Alexander Bertram, the former chief engineer of the volunteer organization, continued to head the department. A hose-maker was appointed to make and repair the leather hose and horse harnesses used by the firemen.

By-law No. 288 called for the formation of two units. The first of these, the City Fire-Police, was the professional division of the department. It was composed of the guardians, assistant guardians, and drivers assigned to each

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<sup>7</sup> City of Montreal, Rules - City Fire Police and City Fire Company (Montreal: James Starke & Co., 1863), p. 8.

station. They were paid salaries ranging from \$365 to \$240 per year (depending on their position).<sup>8</sup> At six of the eight fire stations, there was one of each of these men. The Central Station (on Craig Street) had two drivers, however, while Station No. 7 (located on Dalhousie Square) only had a guardian and an assistant.<sup>9</sup> These men were required to spend much of their time at their respective stations. When not standing watch, they had other duties to keep themselves busy, including street watering during the summer months (to keep the dust down). Those on watch during the night were not required to perform this duty. The fire-police were allowed to leave their posts, when not on watch, only for meals. Married men were also allowed to be absent "for the purpose of attending to their families", but it was necessary to obtain the chief's permission before doing so.<sup>10</sup> As mentioned earlier, apartments were provided for the guardian at each station, while the assistant guardians and drivers were supplied only with sleeping quarters.

The formation of the fire-police led to improvements in existing stations (accommodations had to be provided for more men) and to the construction of new stations. A

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Glackmeyer, comp., The By-Laws of the City of Montreal (Montreal: John Lovell, 1865), p. 66.

<sup>9</sup> Rules - City Fire Police . . ., p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

distinctive feature of many of these structures was the hose-drying tower where the hose would be hung after use. The riveted leather hose in use at this time required much care to keep it in good condition. A new central station was built on Craig Street in 1863. It included living quarters and an office for the chief and a workshop for the hose-maker (there were no accommodations for the guardian, however). Three double hose-reels, a hook and ladder cart, and three horses were stationed here. The department's horses did not have a particularly easy life. The "drop harness" (which attached in a few seconds) had not yet been developed, so the horses were forced to wear their harnesses for long periods when in the station. On busy days, the horses could be quite spent after pulling the equipment, at top speed, to one or two fires and several other alarms (in addition to street-watering duty<sup>11</sup>).

To ensure professional behaviour by the new fire police, they were "strictly prohibited from the intemperate indulgence in spirituous liquors and from the use of profane swearing" and were to "abstain from noisy and quarrelsome conduct."<sup>12</sup> There was still a certain amount of friendly

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<sup>11</sup> Responsibility for street-watering remained with the fire department until 1868 when this duty was transferred to the road committee.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

competition between the men from the different stations. While describing a fire, William McRobie comments that "Nos. 1, 2, and 4 reels arrived about the same time and, as there was considerable rivalry in the Brigade, each one was doing his best to get first water".<sup>13</sup> A cash reward was no longer presented for this accomplishment, however.

The other division of the department was the City Fire Company. This was a volunteer organization designed as an auxiliary to the fire-police. It was composed of three sections of twelve men each (there were also six supernumeraries per squad). The first section was led by a captain, while the other two were headed by lieutenants. They were all under the command of the officers of the fire-police. These men were required to turn out only for emergencies and for the annual parade of the fire department on the Champs de Mars. The members of the City Fire Company were paid a salary of twenty dollars per year (the officers' salaries were twice that amount).<sup>14</sup> In addition, they received pay for each fire they worked at, but those who were absent were fined from 50¢ to \$1.50 (depending on their rank).

In order to increase the efficiency of the new

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<sup>13</sup> William O. McRobie, Fighting the Flames or 27 years in the Montreal Fire Brigade (Montreal: Witness Printing House, 1881), p. 82.

<sup>14</sup> The By-Laws of the City of Montreal, p. 66.

fire department, Montreal was divided into three districts. District No. 1 contained the core of the city. Its boundaries were, roughly, McGill-College Avenue (to the west), the city limits (to the north), St. Denis Street (to the east), and the St. Lawrence River (to the south). Everything west of this region formed District No. 2, while District No. 3 was to the east of the central core.<sup>15</sup> One section of the City Fire Company was stationed in each district.

The standard response by the department for a first alarm was two or three double hose-reels (each with six hundred feet of hose) and a hook and ladder cart from stations in the district where the fire was reported. That district's Fire Company squad would also respond. This brought a total of three or four professional firemen and twelve volunteers to the scene. Each additional alarm (up to a third alarm) brought more equipment from the other districts and an another section of volunteers. In the first year under the new organization, this policy largely helped prevent the fires that occurred from spreading beyond their building of origin.

With the formation of the new fire department, the enforcement of fire-prevention by-laws was now the responsibility of the inspector of buildings. This officer was also under the control of the city council's fire committee.

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<sup>15</sup> Rules - City Fire Police . . ., p. 3.

He could enter any building during the day and had the power to charge offenders for violation of the city's by-laws. Offenders could be ". . . subject to a Fine of not less than Twenty Dollars, or an Imprisonment not exceeding Thirty Days for the first offence, and to like fine or imprisonment for every forty-eight hours such person shall fail to comply with the provisions of this By-law, or continue in the violation thereof".<sup>16</sup>

By this time, there were over seventy regulations concerning fire prevention. They covered topics ranging from wooden buildings to the storage of flammable materials to the installation and operation of furnaces, steam engines, forges, and other industrial equipment. Chimneys had to be cleaned at least twice during the winter months and once during the rest of the year. Buildings designed for gatherings of more than one hundred persons, such as churches, theatres, lecture halls, or ball-rooms, were required to provide sufficient means for the safe exit of those present in case of emergency and all exit doors had to open outwards. Finally, there was even a by-law which dictated the storage of friction matches in a container made of metal or other suitable material. The building inspector issued a total of 375 complaints in 1863. The majority of these charges fell into three categories. 131

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<sup>16</sup> By-Laws of the City of Montreal, p. 48.

of them were for defective chimneys, 116 were for wooden buildings, and 58 were for missing or defective roof ladders.<sup>17</sup> Most of those charged got off with a fine, but some of the offenders were also imprisoned for a month.

1863 also witnessed a giant step forward in efficiency by Montreal's fire alarm system, which previously consisted only of bells. That year, a fire alarm telegraph system with sixty-four signal boxes was installed by the city. The use of the telegraph for this purpose was originally conceived of in the late 1840s. The increasing size of cities had created a need for improved communication systems within urban areas and the telegraph was the best solution at the time.<sup>18</sup> One of the first cities in North America to have a fire alarm telegraph was Boston. A working design had been presented to the city in 1851 and its construction was begun soon afterwards. The city of Berlin constructed a similar system about the same time.<sup>19</sup> These alarm telegraphs helped increase municipal control over fire departments as orders could now be issued directly to the different stations from

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<sup>17</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Inspector of Buildings for 1863 (Montreal, 1864), p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> Joel A. Tarr, "The City and the Telegraph: Urban Telecommunications in the Pre-Telephone Era," Journal of Urban History 14 (November 1987): p. 39.

<sup>19</sup> "The Municipal Fire Telegraph," Scientific American VII (March 27, 1852): p. 219.

a central location. As well, it increased the speed for the transmission of alarms by a considerable margin.

The difficulty with regular telegraph systems was the need for trained operators to send and receive messages. The fire telegraph eliminated this need through the use of automatic signal boxes. These boxes would be installed around the city at suitable locations and the box keys would be kept at nearby establishments which were occupied twenty-four hours a day. The name of the key-holder would be marked on the door of the box. By turning a crank or other simple procedure, the key-holder could automatically transmit the box number to the central telegraph office. Upon receipt of this information, the telegraph operator would then transmit the box number to the fire stations and the appropriate units for that location would respond to the alarm. If more men and equipment were needed the signal box that the original alarm came from would be sounded again. This is how the custom of describing a fire by a number of alarms began. A different signal would be sent when the fire was extinguished.

Montreal's fire alarm telegraph was operated by a chief operator and two assistants from an office located in the city hall. Each of these men had to work a sixteen-hour shift per day (eight hours as the active operator and



eight as the backup).<sup>20</sup> In its first year of operation, a total of 154 alarms were transmitted by the telegraph. Forty-four of these were false alarms given for chimney or other minor fires.<sup>21</sup>

1863 was a major turning point in the history of fire prevention in Montreal. The department had undergone great improvements in terms of speed and efficiency. Other changes, however, were still to come.

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<sup>20</sup> By-Laws of the City of Montreal, p. 222.

<sup>21</sup> Annual Report of the Fire Department for 1863, p. 18.

## CHAPTER VIII

### The Early Years

The following year (1864) witnessed the continuing professionalization of the fire police. On November 7th, they were sworn in as "constables of the peace" which meant that the fire police were now responsible for assisting in the maintenance of order in the city (particularly at fires).<sup>1</sup> The chief engineer was sent to visit the United States, by the fire committee, in order to examine the fire departments and apparatus of five eastern cities (Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington) and to learn about other firefighting methods and techniques. He spent several days in each city.

In his annual report for 1864, Chief Bertram praised the conduct of the new fire department over the past year. At the same time, he pointed out some problems he saw in the department. Firstly, he felt that the city should purchase a steam fire engine as soon as possible. The water-works system, he stated, is sufficient to provide for almost any emergency as long as it properly maintained. Situations could arise, however, in which the services of a steam pump would be invaluable. This request would go unheeded for many years.

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<sup>1</sup> City of Montreal, By-Law No. 11: Concerning the Organization of the Fire Department (8 May 1867), sec. 8.

Bertram also explained that members of the City Fire Company often appeared out of uniform when summoned for duty. This made it difficult to identify them as firemen during an emergency. A regulation was needed, he continued, which stated that any member of the department who appeared without "a suitable uniform, dress and badge" would not be recognized as such.<sup>2</sup> The rules of the fire department stated only that the City Fire Company shall wear the required uniform. No penalty or fine was assessed for not doing so. Finally, Chief Bertram believed that strict sobriety by the members of the permanent force was essential for the effective operation of the department. He therefore recommended the adoption of a rule under which the fire police would not be allowed ". . . to visit a tavern, or to loiter near places where intoxicating liquors are sold, under pain of dismissal from the service".<sup>3</sup>

It seems that some members of the department did not share their chief's views on sobriety. William McRobie describes one incident which occurred during a large building fire in December 1867. The firemen had brought the blaze under control and were pouring water on to the flames still burning in the basement of the structure. To do this, it was necessary for them to pass through a bar located in the

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<sup>2</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Fire Department for 1864 (Montreal, 1865), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

building. Since the men were somewhat thirsty from their efforts, they started helping themselves to champagne while they worked (rather than see it go to waste in the fire). When McRobie saw what was going on he quickly put a stop to it and promised the firemen a good drink after the fire was out.<sup>4</sup> Another such incident took place at the station where McRobie served as guardian. A fireman (from another station) had just been appointed as assistant guardian under McRobie. "It was the custom [McRobie explains] for every new hand coming into the station to pay his footing."<sup>5</sup> This meant the new man had to send out for ale and food for the other men at the station. This individual, however, refused to purchase any alcohol and so, McRobie states, he was called many names by the others.

The severe cold of the winter of 1865-66 caused considerable problems with the city's water works. The supply of water from the Lachine Aqueduct was greatly reduced due to the heavy accumulation of ice (in addition to the usual drop in the level of the St. Lawrence River). As a result, there was insufficient hydraulic power to work the pump wheels

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<sup>4</sup> William O. McRobie, Fighting the Flames or 27 years in the Montreal Fire Brigade (Montreal: Witness Printing House, 1881), p. 105.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

properly.<sup>6</sup> This water shortage was compounded by many of the increasing number of private subscribers in the city who had the habit of leaving their water taps continually running during the winter months in order to keep them from freezing. By this time, the city was supplying 13,603 houses, 2225 stores and offices, 343 innkeepers, and 154 factories with water.<sup>7</sup> In his report for 1864, the superintendant of the water works, Louis Lesage, condemned this wasteful practice as it increased the risk of major fires and thus would lead to an increase in fire insurance rates. It is necessary, Lesage continued, to obtain the cooperation of the citizens to end this problem as it would be very difficult for the municipal government, even with the most stringent by-laws, to do this on its own. The higher risk of a disastrous fire combined ". . . with the high water-tariff and the prospect of having to spend great sums of money to enlarge the works, ought to be sufficient reasons to induce every citizen to stop any undue waste in their premises . . .".<sup>8</sup>

Several years later, the water committee began appointing agents to visit subscribers in order to reduce the

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<sup>6</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Water Works for 1865 (Montreal, 1866), p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Water Works for 1864 (Montreal, 1865), p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

wastage of water. On the first visits by these men, 562 houses and other establishments were found to have defective plumbing causing unnecessary water loss. This number was reduced to 74 by the second visits and to 13 on the third.<sup>9</sup> This last group was brought to court and fined.

Following the winter of 1865-66, the municipal government commissioned a study of the aqueduct to determine what was needed to avoid such water shortages in the future. The report submitted to the water committee recommended the covering of the aqueduct with timbers to prevent the build-up of ice and the installation of a steam pump to maintain water pressure when the hydraulic wheels were not working at full power.<sup>10</sup> The city would not act on these recommendations until the next year.

The water committee awarded a contract, on September 11, 1867, to W.P. Bartley & Co. for the installation of a steam engine, boilers, and pumps with a total capacity of three million gallons per day. The work was completed by the end of January 1868 at a cost of \$33,500.<sup>11</sup> Due to a

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<sup>9</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Water Works for 1868 (Montreal, 1869), p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Water Works for 1865 (Montreal, 1866), pp. 39-40.

<sup>11</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Water Works for 1868 (Montreal, 1869), p. 9.

developing water shortage, the contractor was unable to properly adjust the machinery, before it was put into service on February 10th. This caused breakdowns which delayed the use of the pumps for several days. As a result, the supply of water was reduced even more and the city was forced to once again rely on the services of water carters during the crisis. Once the steam pumps were working, however, they actually provided more than the required three million gallons per day.<sup>12</sup> This brought an end to the emergency.

Montreal's city council reorganized the fire department on May 8th, 1867 with by-law no. 11. Under the terms of these regulations the City Fire Company was disbanded thus making the fire department completely professional for the first time. To replace the volunteers, four additional firemen were appointed to the stations in the central district. The City Fire Police now totaled thirty-three men. Chief Engineer Alexander Bertram was given the rank of sub-chief in the regular police force (while the assistant engineer held the rank of sergeant and the other men were sub-constables).<sup>13</sup> As well, a new station was constructed that year at the St. Gabriel Market (making a total of nine stations). It was occupied by two men and equipped with one double hose-reel,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> City of Montreal, By-Law No. 11: Concerning the Organization of the Fire Department (8 May 1867), secs. 2 & 8.

600 feet of hose, and one horse.<sup>14</sup>

The city also made it a crime to interfere in the operations of the department. Section Nine of the new by-law stated that:

Any person who shall obstruct any member of the City Fire Police in the performance of his duty as fireman or who shall maliciously cut or in any way injure or damage any portion of the hose, hose reels, fire engines, ladders, or other fire apparatus shall be liable to a fine not exceeding twenty dollars and to an imprisonment not exceeding thirty days for each offense.<sup>15</sup>

A similar regulation was passed concerning the fire alarm system to discourage false alarms and damage to the equipment. In order to speed the transmission of alarms, keys for the signal boxes were now distributed to members of the regular police force while on duty.

On September 16th, 1867, the department suffered its first fatality. Early that morning, a fire broke out at the Spellman & Co. distillery at the corner of St. Maurice Street and Longueil Lane. It began with an explosion in an old brick building at the rear of the distillery and flames could soon be seen in the windows.<sup>16</sup> Shortly after the alarm

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<sup>14</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Fire Department for 1867 (Montreal, 1868), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> City of Montreal, By-Law No. 11: Concerning the Organization of the Fire Department (8 May 1867), sec. 9.

<sup>16</sup> Montreal Gazette, 17 September 1867.



was raised, the firemen arrived with their hose-ræls and went to work. The men from No. 1 Station were assigned the task, by Assistant Engineer William Patton, of attacking the fire from Longueil Lane while No. 2 Station entered the building from St. Maurice Street. William McRobie (the guardian at No. 2) realized that the structure was in danger of collapse. "I entered the building again", McRobie continues, "and ordered my men out at once, and directed them to take up a position on the other side of the building where they could do as much execution, with less danger to themselves."<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, two men from the central station, Patrick Kenny and William Sharp, were ordered by Patton to take a hose into the rear building and attack the flames directly. The two men obtained a ladder and placed it below a second-story window in that structure. Before the men could ascend, however, part of the wall collapsed, knocking Kenny off the ladder and partially covering Sharp with rubble. Mederic Rivet, another fireman present, described what happened next:

I saw Patrick Kenny under the bricks trying to extricate himself. I pulled him out and removed him. He was wounded and several of us carried him to the corner of McGill street. . . . I then returned to the fire. . . . We began to play [our hoses], and had played about 12 or 15 minutes. A large quantity of flame then burst out of the windows . . . . The light

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<sup>17</sup> McRobie, p. 83.

was so brilliant that I then saw the deceased.<sup>18</sup> The other firemen removed Sharp from the scene and quickly realized that he was beyond help. At the coroner's inquest, it was determined that a large stone block had fallen from above the window and struck Sharp on the head, killing him almost instantly.

The following year, the municipal government made additional arrangements to provide for firemen injured or killed while on duty. The city purchased a section of Mount Royal Cemetery for the exclusive use of the fire department and a stone monument was erected there (largely financed through public contributions). As well, a life and accident insurance policy for members of the department was obtained from the Accidental Insurance Company of Hartford.<sup>19</sup> The benevolent association still continued to operate, in addition to this new policy.

The department finally obtained a Shand-Mason steam fire engine from England in June 1871. Soon afterwards, it proved its worth when it was first used at a fire on Mount Royal. The steam engine provided good pressure after being connected to a nearby water tank. That same year, the

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<sup>18</sup> Montreal Gazette, 18 September 1867.

<sup>19</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Fire Department for 1868 (Montreal, 1869), p. 9.



THE FIREMEN'S MEMORIAL IN MOUNT ROYAL CEMETERY

department added three more men to its numbers and built four new stations to replace old ones (Nos. 2, 3, 6, and 8) that were becoming obsolete.<sup>20</sup> The new stone buildings were three stories tall with accommodations for all the men. There were also sixty foot towers at the front of each equipped with alarm bells.

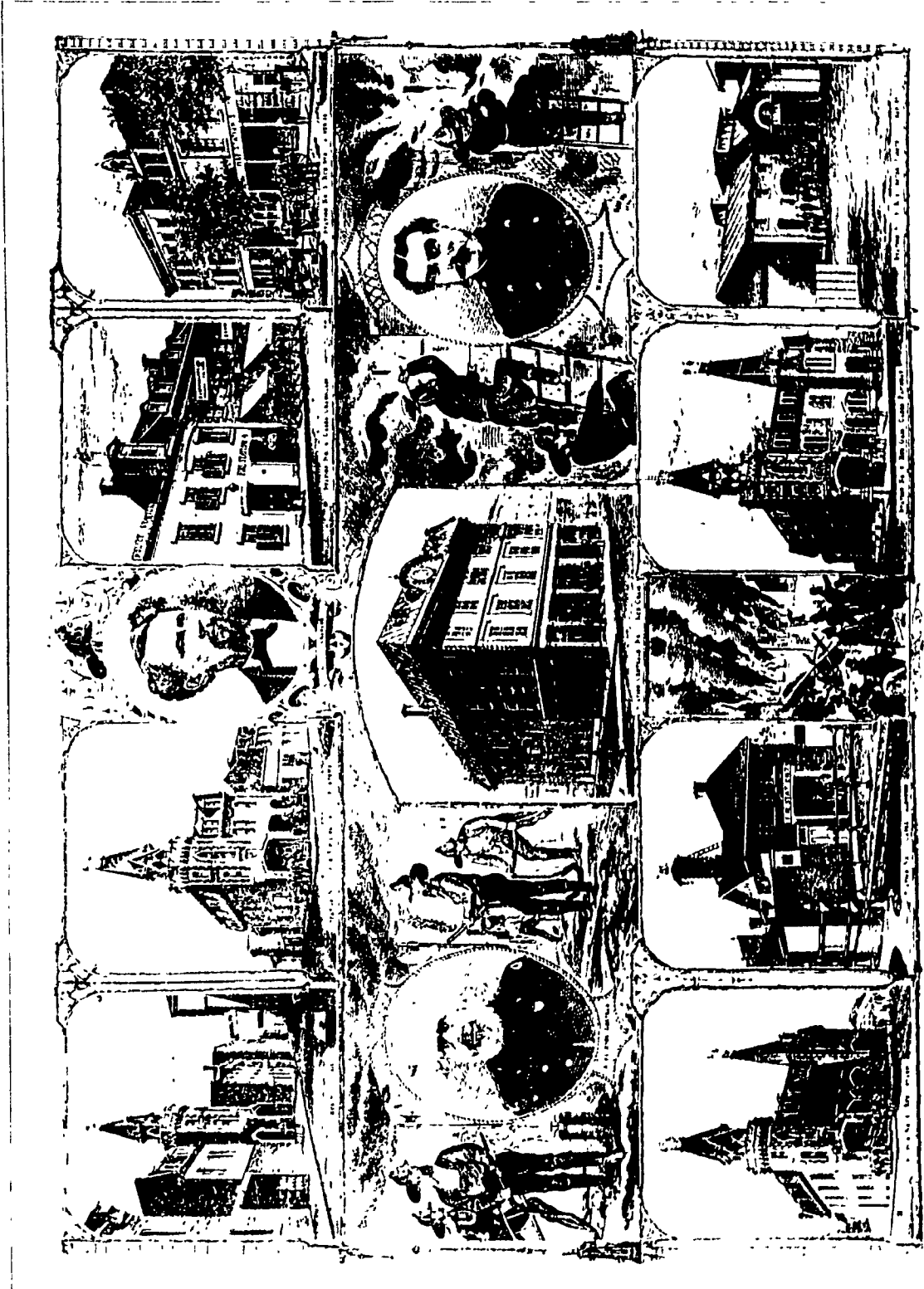
In July 1872, a salvage corps was established by the city and based at the central station. It consisted of three men and a salvage wagon containing waterproof tarpaulins and other equipment.<sup>21</sup> Their duty was to protect goods, machinery, etc. (in burning buildings) from unnecessary water damage caused through the extinguishing of the fire. William McRobie was named captain of this new force.

The increasing number of four, five, and six story buildings in the city's central core during this period was a growing difficulty for the fire department. In his annual report for 1867, Chief Engineer Alexander Bertram had pointed out this problem and explained that their usual method of splicing ladders together was becoming more and more unsatisfactory. New equipment was needed, he continued, similar to the fire escapes (ladders) that he saw on his visit to London

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<sup>20</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Fire Department for 1871 (Montreal, 1872), p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Fire Department for 1872 (Montreal, 1873), p. 5.



MONTREAL'S FIRE STATIONS

This drawing shows the department's stations in the early 1870s. The new buildings, with their distinctive front towers, stand out from the rest. The three men shown are (from left to right) the chief engineer, the head of the fire committee, and the captain of the salvage corps.

and other English cities. Such ladders would enable firemen to reach the upper floors of the tallest buildings. The fire committee would ignore his requests until 1873.

On March 18 of that year, the St. James Hotel, located on Victoria Square, caught fire. The blaze began shortly before one a.m. in a small two-story building (connected to the back of the hotel) that was used as a kitchen, laundry, and servant's quarters. By the time the squads of the central district responded, much of this structure was ablaze: Two women could be seen in an attic window calling for assistance with smoke pouring out behind them. A ladder was quickly raised and they descended to the street.

The fire soon spread to the fourth and fifth floors of the hotel itself. It was utter chaos as most of the seventy-five tenants attempted to save themselves and their belongings from the smoke and flames. William McRobie comments that when he arrived at the scene he saw numerous people in the windows of the hotel calling for help and throwing their possessions (including luggage) into the street. These actions by the residents, McRobie explains, hampered the efforts of the firemen considerably. He continues:

Some of the [fire]men were more or less injured, for after wedging numerous trunks and other such things outside, pitched from the third and fourth stories down into the street, inside you had to run the gauntlet of numerous Saratogas [a

type of trunk] which came tumbling downstairs.<sup>22</sup>

Firemen from the other two districts were soon summoned to the scene because of the severity of the fire.

Several of the people staying at the hotel became trapped on the upper floors as the staircases rapidly became filled with smoke and flames and there were no fire escapes. The department's ladders could not reach high enough to save them. As a result, the firemen attempted to make their way up to the top floor by the stairs, but the blaze, and an insufficient amount of hose, stopped them on the fourth. Once additional hose was brought up, however, the firemen were able to begin attacking the fire in earnest. In the meantime, three men on the fifth floor were forced to go out their windows to escape. An eyewitness described their fates:

. . . The ladder was only long enough to reach half-way up to the window at which Mr. Nielsdworth was standing. He then attempted to climb down by the windows, but it was too steep and he fell into the street. Mr. Belcher made a rope of some sheets and towels, but, when climbing down, the frail rope parted, and he, too, fell into the street. Mr. Thomas was so alarmed at the flames behind him, that he jumped from the window.<sup>23</sup>

Surprisingly, only one of these men (Nielsdworth) died from his injuries.

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<sup>22</sup> McRobie, pp. 140-141.

<sup>23</sup> Montreal Herald and Daily Commercial Gazette,  
18 March 1873

The crowd that had gathered in the street witnessed a dramatic rescue, as well. A woman, named Matilde Saya, was spotted hanging from a fifth floor window sill with her bare feet gripping a narrow ledge below. She managed to cling to her perch for about twenty minutes while waiting for help. Two firemen, John Nolan and Jack Beckingham, raised a ladder, but found themselves about thirty feet too short. So they lifted a second ladder to the top of the first where it was supported by the rungs. This combined ladder reached to just below her feet. While Beckingham braced the upper ladder with his back to the wall, Nolan ascended and helped the woman down to the ground where she collapsed from shock.

The three deaths (two other victims were found later) and numerous injuries caused by the blaze led to much public condemnation of the municipal government and landlords. The toll could have been much worse had the hotel been full. Many letters were published in the newspapers decrying the absence of fire escapes in hotels and other buildings or the fire department's lack of necessary equipment. William McRobie even wrote to the editor of the Gazette advocating the installation of rope ladders in all hotel rooms. The ladders could be concealed behind the furniture when not needed, he explains, and "the cost of fitting up these ladders would amount to a paltry sum, and I am convinced that parties occupying rooms in a crowded hotel . . . would be willing to



be taxed a small sum for the maintenance of the same".<sup>24</sup>

Nothing was done by the city regarding fire escapes. However, later that year they did invest in \$15,000 of new equipment for the department including a second steam engine, a Skinner ladder (an early type of aerial ladder), and a Babcock chemical engine.<sup>25</sup> This last item was basically a large fire extinguisher (containing carbonic acid gas) mounted on wheels. The chemical engine had several advantages over the use of water. This gas was particularly effective in confined spaces as it extinguished fires more readily than water. As well, this apparatus used little water (only in the form of vapour) and so the risk of water damage was greatly reduced. Finally, the light hose used to direct the gas was much easier for the firemen to handle.<sup>26</sup> On the negative side, the carbonic acid was undoubtedly more expensive than water. The continued growth of the city also forced the municipal government to increase the size of the department. Two more assistant engineers, an additional fifteen men, and eight horses were added to the force. The new equipment caused

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<sup>24</sup> Montreal Gazette, 19 March 1873.

<sup>25</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Fire Department for 1873 (Montreal, 1874), pp. 4 & 19.

<sup>26</sup> E.H. Keating, Fire Departments, Fire Apparatus, and Fire Escapes: A Report on the Means of Preventing the Loss of Life by Fire (Halifax: Morning Herald Printing and Publishing Co., 1883), p. 21.

increased specialization among the firemen. The department was now composed of one chief engineer, three assistant engineers, nine guardians, twenty-four hose men, three hook and ladder drivers, two steamer engineers, six Skinner ladder men, three salvage corps men, two Babcock chemical engine men, and one hose-maker.<sup>27</sup> The hose-maker would stop making riveted leather hose within a few years<sup>28</sup> as the department switched over to the use of rubber hose and then to modern cotton-jacketed rubber hose which did not leak as much and required less maintenance than leather.

An era came to an end with the death of Alexander Bertram on August 13, 1875 (he was succeeded by Assistant Engineer Will Patton). Bertram had been chief for twenty-three years and had overseen the change from the volunteer to the professional force. A greater tragedy for the fire department, however, would occur two years later.

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<sup>27</sup> Annual Report of the Fire Department for 1873, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> The department disposed of its remaining leather hose in 1884.

## CHAPTER IX

### The Saint Urbain Street Disaster

Early on the morning of April 29, 1877, a fire was discovered in the Canadian Oil Cabinet Novelty Works factory. It would turn out to be the deadliest blaze in the history of the Montreal Fire Department. The factory was a five-story building with large front windows located on St. Urbain Street (between Craig and Vitre). The main section of the structure was constructed of brick while the back half was made only of wood faced with brick. A report about the unsafe nature of the rear walls had been submitted by the building inspector, but he could do little else officially since they complied with city regulations regarding their design.<sup>1</sup>.

A passerby spotted the fire and sounded the alarm at five minutes to five a.m.. Units from the central district were soon on the scene. By the time the men from the central and No. 2 stations arrived, the top floor and the rear of the structure were completely in flames. The firemen swiftly went to work to contain the fire. Despite their efforts and the numerous hose streams pouring water onto the blaze, the whole of the building was soon aflame. Chief Engineer William Patton called out the rest of the department several minutes

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<sup>1</sup> Montreal Gazette, 30 April 1877.

later as the fire was threatening to spread to the neighbouring buildings which included a saw-mill and lumberyard.

As soon as it arrived, the Skinner ladder was put to use so that the blaze on the top floors of the factory could be attacked more effectively. Three firemen climbed up the ladder with a hose and began aiming a stream directly through the upper windows. They quickly found themselves trapped, however, when flames began shooting out of the building and engulfing the ladder below them. The crowd watching the action feared the three were finished as they could no longer see them through the smoke and flames. The firemen managed to fight their way back down to the ground, sustaining serious burns and other injuries in the process.<sup>2</sup> To prevent further damage, the Skinner ladder was rapidly taken down and moved further away.

In order to attack the blaze from as many sides as possible, it was necessary for some of the firemen to position themselves in Scott's Lane, a narrow cul-de-sac between the factory on one side and several houses, sheds, and an undertaker's shop on the other two sides. Most of the firemen in the alley spent their time directing their hose streams into the burning factory, while the others had to continually wet down neighbouring buildings to keep the fire from spreading.

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<sup>2</sup> The Montreal Daily Star, 30 April 1877.



**THE ST. URBAIN STREET DISASTER**

This illustration shows the three firemen trapped on the Skinner Ladder as they fight their way to safety.

Two hose-men, Richard Scholes and Sandy Beers, had a narrow escape when part of a wall fell and nearly crushed them. Beers was holding a hose by the east wall of the structure when he noticed a section of the wall come loose. Having no time to warn Scholes, Beers just pushed him out of harm's way, thus saving both their lives.<sup>3</sup> This was a warning, by the building, of things to come. As well, several small explosions could be heard from within the factory during the course of the fire as the flames consumed barrels of oil and other such flammable stores. These materials were one of the main causes for the rapid spread of the blaze. The men in the alley continued to stand their ground despite these dangers.

Around six a.m., Chief Engineer Patton realized that the walls beside Scott's Lane were in danger of collapse from the fire and so he entered the alley to order three firemen (Charles Reddy, John Nolan, and Alfred Holtby of No. 1 station) from a particularly exposed position in a yard behind the undertaker's shop. As soon as he had spoken to them, "the wall wavered, sagged, and then, with a swift deadly downfall, its upper portion was upon them in a blinding whirl of smoke, sparks and dust . . ."<sup>4</sup> Holtby (who managed to extricate himself) and Chief Patton were only partly covered, but the other

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<sup>3</sup> Montreal Gazette, 30 April 1877.

<sup>4</sup> The Montreal Daily Star, 30 April 1877.

two men were almost completely buried in the rubble. Hearing their cries for help, Jack Beckingham and two other firemen rushed into the alley even though the remainder of the wall was swaying ominously above them. However, ". . . they could not extend them the aid that was required to save them; they could not . . . remove the messy piles which buried their comrades to the neck . . .".<sup>5</sup> Seeing that additional help would be needed, Beckingham exited Scott's Lane and called for more men. Other firemen and civilians hurried into the alley to free the trapped individuals. Chief Patton had already been rescued by his son and another man. Once again, Beckingham left to find even more aid when there was "an overpowering rush of wind, a roar, a heavy murderous thud, a flying of myriad sparks, and the rising of a blinding, lurid cloud of smoke and dust".<sup>6</sup> The remainder of the wall had fallen on top of the rescuers. One of the victims, Israel Bishop (a fireman from station No. 5), staggered out with a serious scalp wound crying "For God's sake, boys, go in there and take my chums out; there are a lot of them in the ruins now."<sup>7</sup>

This proclamation led to a general scramble as most of the remaining firemen abandoned their posts to search for

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Montreal Gazette, 30 April 1877.

survivors. Many of the rescuers injured their hands removing the hot debris piece by piece. Those still living were carefully loaded into ambulances. The dead were placed into carts and taken to their homes. William McRobie helped deliver the body of Richard Scholes to his grieving wife (who had already heard about the disaster). It was nearly two hours before the last of the victims was removed from the alley. The remaining members of the department then turned their efforts towards extinguishing the fire. By the time it was out, the factory was completely destroyed.

The final death toll was four firemen (Thomas Higgins, Richard Scholes, Michael Barry, and William Perry<sup>8</sup>) and three civilians (one of whom was George Lynch, the foreman of the water works). In addition, ten members of the department were seriously injured. Two of these firemen, John Livingstone and William Ferguson, would die of their wounds within a few days. Surprisingly, both Reddy and Nolan (the men who were trapped by the first collapse) survived. Their rescuers had shielded them from further injury with their bodies.

With much pomp and ceremony, the dead were laid to

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<sup>8</sup> This is not the same William Perry mentioned earlier in the chapter describing the volunteer companies. That individual died in 1930 at the age of ninety-three. This second William Perry (who was only twenty-six) may have been related to him, however.



rest on May 1st. Many citizens turned out to pay their respects to the fallen heroes. That morning, at 8 a.m., a civic funeral was held for Michael Barry at Saint Patrick's Church. After the mass was completed, a somber procession composed of his comrades from the department, two bands, assorted other units, and many ordinary people escorted him to the cemetery where the final rites were performed.

A larger parade was organized for 3 p.m. by Alfred Perry (who had been named marshal of both this and the earlier event) for two of the civilians, George Lynch and Joseph Parker, and the other three firemen, Higgins, Scholes, and Perry. Prior to this, services were held at various locations around the city. The coffins were then brought to the central station which was the assembly point for the parade. A reporter from the Montreal Daily Star described the start of the procession:

From the Wellington street station it extended in both directions as far as the eye could reach, and was composed of representatives of every order of society. The simple black of the dress of the citizens was relieved with the scarlet of the firemen from Cote St. Paul, the brilliant uniforms of the band of the Fusileers [sic], the green-plumed Kossuth hats and gold braid of the Independent Hibernians, and the silver and blue of the helmeted firemen. . . . it afforded a grandly solemn spectacle, as the bands of music wailed forth marches for the dead.<sup>9</sup>

It included, among others, the mayor and numerous aldermen of

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<sup>9</sup> The Montreal Daily Star, 1 May 1877.

the Montreal City Council, a contingent from the Prince of Wales Rifles (Parker was a former member), representatives from the local Orange Lodges, members of the Killwinning Masonic Lodge, units from the Grand Trunk and the St. Jean Baptiste Fire Brigades, and several bands. Chief Young and Guardian Graham of the Ottawa Fire Brigade marched alongside the men of the Montreal department. The caskets of the three firemen, with their brass helmets placed on top of each, were carried on the department's salvage wagon to the mountain. The procession was followed by large numbers of those who had lined the streets to watch its passing. The crowd was so enormous, William McRobie writes, that ". . . by the time the head of the line reached the cemetery the streets in the outskirts of the city were still crowded with anxious mourners trying to get a place in line".<sup>10</sup>

In the days following the disaster, there was considerable public sympathy and support for the families of those killed. Contributions for a relief fund were received from numerous individuals and organizations. A show was scheduled for May 8th at the Victoria Skating Rink to raise money for the widows and orphans. It featured a "grand gymnastic entertainment" by the members of Barnjum's gymnasium

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<sup>10</sup> William O. McRobie, Fighting the Flames or 27 Years in the Montreal Fire Brigade (Montreal: Witness Printing House, 1881), p. 216.

and a promenade concert by the brass band of the Victoria Rifles.<sup>11</sup> The life insurance policy obtained by the department nearly ten years earlier also came to the aid of the survivors. A total of \$3,500 was paid out by the company.

In containing this major fire, the professional department had clearly demonstrated their effectiveness. Despite the presence of wooden buildings and a lumberyard nearby, the firemen had managed to prevent the blaze from spreading beyond the factory itself (although at a great cost). As well, the representatives from other fire departments that attended the funerals showed the existence of a growing professional brotherhood among all firemen.

The fire department had been severely weakened by the deaths of six experienced members and the long recoveries of several others. Steps were soon taken, however, to replace these losses with the hiring of ten new men. Two new stations were opened, as well, and another steam fire engine was purchased.<sup>12</sup> By the end of the year, the force was ready to face the future stronger than before.

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<sup>11</sup> Montreal Herald and Daily Commercial Gazette, 7 May 1877.

<sup>12</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Fire Department for 1877 (Montreal, 1878), p. 4.

### Conclusion

The remaining years of the nineteenth century saw the continued growth of the fire department as it tried to keep pace with the expanding city. New technologies helped greatly in this regard, the most important of these being the telephone. The department was offered the free use of equipment by the Bell Telephone Company in 1882.

The following year, a water pump was fitted onto a tugboat by the harbour commissioner. This would prove most effective for combatting fires on ships or on the waterfront. That same year, the department purchased a Hayes Extension Ladder (a type of aerial ladder that was a great improvement over the old Skinner ladder) and converted all its horse harnesses to the new "drop" type which could be attached in a few seconds. Not only did this make life easier for the department's horses, but it also reduced the deterioration of the harnesses caused by continual contact with moisture from the horses' bodies.<sup>1</sup>

Telephones were not installed in fire stations until 1884. A telephone switchboard was installed in the central fire alarm telegraph office as well. This switchboard was connected directly to all fire and police stations, the water

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<sup>1</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Fire Department for 1883 (Montreal, 1884), p. 3.

department, and to the main telephone exchange.<sup>2</sup> This allowed communications between the fire department and any other telephone in the city. The fact that a total of 26,000 telephone messages were received by the telegraph office during its second full year of use shows that this new technology soon proved invaluable in the transmission of alarms and other information.<sup>3</sup>

By the turn of the century, the Montreal Fire Department had grown greatly in size and professionalism since its formation in 1863. The staff at the central station now consisted of Chief Zéphirin Benoit<sup>4</sup>, three assistant chiefs (each was responsible for one of the three city districts), one supply officer & superintendant of horses, one superintendant of steam engines, and two departmental physicians. There were also a secretary and a clerk to take care of the paperwork and a hose and harness repairman. This staff oversaw a total of eighteen stations housing eighteen captains, nine engineers, nine ladder, three salvage, 1 chemical, and two water tower foremen, 109 first-class firemen, thirty-four second-class firemen, and 103 horses. In terms of

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<sup>2</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Fire Alarm Telegraph for 1884 (Montreal, 1885), p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Fire Alarm Telegraph for 1886 (Montreal, 1887), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Chief William Patton had retired in October of 1888. Benoit was the first francophone to head the department.

apparatus the department now had twenty-one hose reels, nine steam engines, three chemical engines, two water towers<sup>5</sup>, five aerial ladder trucks, six hook and ladder trucks, two salvage wagons, and one combination salvage and ladder wagon.<sup>6</sup>

After examining the history of firefighting and fire prevention in Montreal during the 1800s, several important facts become clear. Firstly, the formation of professional fire departments came about through the increasing power of municipal governments in the nineteenth century as they took over or instituted various public services in an effort to maintain order and improve the quality of life in their municipalities. Secondly, the effectiveness of a city's fire department does not depend solely on the quality of its men and equipment. While these are important factors, the existence and efficiency of technological networks such as water works, alarm telegraphs, and, later, telephone systems also play a large role in a department's ability to combat fires. Lastly, many of Montreal's fire protection reforms, like those in other cities, came about through a process of "learning from mistakes". After each disaster occurred, the municipal

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<sup>5</sup> These consisted of a collapsible tower with a high-pressure nozzle mounted at the top. They were used to direct heavy streams of water over walls or into the upper floors of burning buildings.

<sup>6</sup> City of Montreal, Annual Report of the Fire Department for 1899 (Montreal, 1900), p. 8.

government would see what needed changing and move to implement the necessary reforms. Unfortunately, up until the mid-1800s, the local authorities, after a short period of action, tended to sink back into a state of apathy regarding fire prevention until the next conflagration.

In Montreal, it was not until the completion of the Lachine Aqueduct project in 1856 (with its improved water works) and the formation of the professional fire department that real progress was made in fire protection reforms for the city. The importance of creating a professional department is due to four key points: the rapid response allowed by men and horses on round-the-clock service at the stations, ending the intense competition among the volunteer companies, eliminating the opposition of nineteenth-century volunteer firemen to new technology, and providing the technical expertise and training which the volunteers lacked. Such expertise was needed to operate much of the new technology such as steam pumps or chemical engines, and the effective use of other apparatus like aerial ladders required constant practice. Fire prevention was also aided greatly by the enforcement of increasingly strict building codes and the shrinking number of wooden buildings within the city. The practice of learning from mistakes would continue, however. For example, the need for longer ladders and fire escapes that was demonstrated by the St. James Hotel fire in 1873.

As the first professional fire department in Canada, Montreal's organization served as a model for other cities. Delegations often visited from elsewhere in Canada and the U.S. to inspect the procedures and equipment of the department. William McRobie traveled to Winnipeg in 1882 after he was appointed by its city council to oversee the creation of a new professional fire brigade. The transformation of the Montreal Fire Department from an assortment of unruly volunteer companies to the modern, efficient force it is today was a long, slow process that was well on its way by the end of the nineteenth century.



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CCA - Canadian Centre for Architecture  
CON - Concordia University Libraries  
McC - McCord Museum Archives  
McG - McGill University Libraries  
MMA - Montreal Municipal Archives  
NAC - National Archives of Canada  
UdM - Bibliothèques, Université de Montréal

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