

WESTCHESTER AND ENGINE 61

1896

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SERVICE

1996

Engine 61 was placed in service on February 1, 1896, in the newly annexed area of the Bronx. Engine 61, located in Westchester Square, Engine 62 in Williamsbridge, and Engine 63 in Wakefield, were all organized on the same day. Both, Engine 61 and 62 were organized as combination companies. These combination companies, placed in sparsely populated areas, usually had an engine, hose wagon and ladder truck, all under the command of the engine captain. Engine 61 was placed in service with a combination chemical engine and hose wagon and a ladder truck. These three companies, and Engine 64 when organized, would be in the 14th Battalion, which had its' headquarters in with Engine 62 and was organized in the new annexed area on January 1, 1896.

The village of Westchester was first settled by a colonist from Connecticut in 1654. Originally called "Oostdorp" which is Dutch for East Village, it was renamed to West Chester by the British in 1664. West Chester became a port along the Westchester Creek and most of the local population were seafaring men. During the Revolutionary War the town was bombarded for a week by the British.

The village of Williamsbridge in Westchester County had voted for annexation to New York City in 1894 but, was defeated by the towns of Mount Veron and by one vote in the village of Westchester. In 1895, the vote passed and the area east of the Bronx River, including the villages of Wakefield, Williamsbridge, Westchester, Unionport and City Island became known as the Annexed District of New York City. The volunteer fire companies were all disbanded and replaced by the paid department except for the City Island volunteers.

The first members of Engine 61 were; Captain Thomas Sullivan, Lieutenant Henry G. Mackey, Firemen Louis J. Boettner, Jr., John Crowley, Michael Gleason, John H. Griffin, Arthur J. O'Neill, John Powers, Henry W. Rommer, and Charles H. Uffelman. Even though the ladder truck was part of Engine 61 it could be special called to a box by itself and the members assigned to the ladder wore an Engine 61 front pieces on their helmets. The first year Engine 61 responded to fifteen runs and twelve of runs were for fires.

A fireman's life was a hard one. The work schedule was twenty-four hours a day for fifteen days, then a day off. Each member could go home for meals, an hour, three times a day. The starting wage was around \$995.00 a year or eleven and half cents an hour for 720 hours a month. Beside the long hours, the men basically lived in a barn with the horses, the smells, flies and the cold or heat of the season. The Department was run on a military style discipline and breaking the rules was dealt with in fines, days off being taken away and firings. Regardless of these hardships' recruits were plenty.

Engine 61 was placed in service temporarily, in a stable, located on the Morris Park Race Track, located between Williamsbridge Road, the railroad tracks, Bronxdale Avenue and Pelham Parkway. On May 1, 1896, the Fire Department advertised for new quarters in the local papers. The company moved to the former quarters of Empire Hose 1 in Bownes Square, Main and Thomas Streets sometime in May of 1896. This building was so small that the horses were kept across the street in Clara Butler Stables from May 16, 1896, until July 16. Engine 61 moved out and back to the Morris Park Race Track stables while these quarters were being rebuilt and expanded. The building was lengthened and a 2 story "L" shape addition was added to the rear for a cost of \$987.00. This "new" building opened on November 1, 1896.

Engine 61's quarters were still not suited for the needs of the Department and a new location was sought. The Board of Fire Commissioners selected two lots on Main Street (now Williamsbridge Road) and Arnow Place on March 8, 1897. The contract was signed on July 25, 1898, for a cost of

\$19,100.30 and construction started around the end of 1898. When the construction of the building started a report was received that the builder had sublet the construction and the workers were making less than the going wage. A hearing was set in February of 1899 and it was decided that the contractor was not underpaying the workers. The going rate for these workers was set at \$3.00 per day.

Engine 61 moved into the new house on June 1, 1899. This larger house was a 2 story, wood frame building with a single door for the exit of the apparatus and a hose tower in the rear. The building was 25 feet in the front and 80 feet deep. The first floor had room for three pieces of apparatus, stalls for six horses and watch desk. On the second floor was room for the bunkroom, a sitting area, with a small balcony above the apparatus door, private rooms for the Captain and Lieutenant and a bathroom. Behind the house was a one story building for the storage of the feed and hay for the horses.

After moving into the new quarters some changes occurred to Engine 61. Now that the company had some extra room in quarters they received a used steam fire engine in 1899. The chemical engine was kept and used until 1909. Engine 61 lost its combination company status when on September 4, 1904, the company lost its ladder truck to Engine 43. The horses were replaced on August 6, 1917, with a new 1917 American LaFrance 700 gpm pumper.

During the 1920's and 30's the Fire Department began replacing most of the older wooden firehouses with new brick fire proof houses. Engine 61 moved out on January 30, 1929, to Engine 64's quarters at 1214 Castle Hill Avenue. The old firehouse was torn down and replaced by a brick building. The new building was wider than the older one and deeper. On the first floor was room for the apparatus and house watch. A room in the rear, houses a kitchen and dining room. Upstairs is room for two officers, a sitting room, bunkroom and bathroom. Engine 61 moved back from Engine 64 on December 4, 1929. Battalion 20 moved in from Engine 82's quarters on January 1, 1930. They had been with Engine 82 since being reorganized on April 15, 1906.

The fireman performs his job in the most hazardous of conditions. Most jobs, a person knows he will be home at the end of his shift but, not a fireman, he could have been hurt and in the hospital. Even worst he could lose his life. In the history of the New York City Fire Department 776 members have lost their lives. Three members of Engine 61 and two from Battalion 20 have paid that supreme price with his life.

Fireman Peter J. Harmon died on September 24, 1937 when he fell down the pole hole in quarters. The second member, Lieutenant Harry G. Boyle, was injured on August 8, 1948, while fighting a fire at 1980 Union Port Road. He died on December 22, 1948, of Coronary Thrombosis. Captain Joseph A. Fay died from injuries he received on November 30, 1967. The two members of Battalion 20 who died were Chief Edward C. Huber on July 27, 1954, and Chief William H. Obrien (1) on March 20, 1966.

Engine 61 has been serving the community of Westchester for one hundred years. During that time the company has gone through some changes; from horse power to diesel power apparatus, exposure to the elements while responding on a back step to an enclosed cab, from working 168 hours a week to 40 hours, and EMS. With all these changes, one thing has not change and that is the dedication of the officers and members of Engine 61 to the people of Westchester and New York City. No matter what the emergency is, a fire, auto accident, gas leak, a leaking bicycle tire or just a smile to a small child as he walks by the firehouse the folks of Westchester can be proud of the Boys on Williamsbridge Road. Congratulation!!!!

HEADQUARTERS

Fire Department
Bureau Chief of Department
157 & 159 E. 67th Street

Hugh Bonner,
Chief of Department

General Orders,
No. 1

New York, March 7, 1896

I. Notification is hereby given to the Department, that the Board of Fire Commissioners, at a meeting held on the 4th inst., approved of the organization of the 14th Battalion, to take effect from January 1, 1896, also the organization of Engine Co. No. 61; located at Morris Park, Westchester, Engine Co. No. 62, located on White Plains Road, Williamsbridge; and Engine Co. No. 63, located on White Plains Road, Wakefield and their assignment to the 14th Battalion, to take effect from February 1, 1896.

II. The 14th Battalion District will comprise all that part of the City of New York, in the territory annexed under the Provisions of Chapter 938, Laws of 1895. The Company Districts will be as Follows; Engine Co. No. 61 all that part known as Westchester, Engine Co. No. 62, all that part known as Williamsbridge, and Engine Co. No. 63, all that part known as Wakefield.

III. The Companies will respond to all alarms for fire and perform duty in that part of the Battalion District in which they are located until the completion of the telegraph systems when permanent assignment will be made.

By Order of

Hugh Bonner

Chief of

Department

The order putting Engine 61 in service on February 1, 1896

THE WHEELS OF ENGINE 61

1896 Fire Extinguisher Manufacturing Co.
Chemical & Hose Wagon 60 gallon tank #3
Feb. 1, 1896 -1906
1896 Gleason & Bailey Hose Wagon #51
Feb. 1, 1896 - 1904
1896 Rumsey Co. 40' roller frame ladder truck
#51
Feb. 1, 1896 -Sep. 4, 1904
1881 Clapp & Jones 4th (250 to 300 gpm)
steamer #365 rebuilt in 1897
1899 - Aug. 6, 1917
1891 F.D. Shop built Hose Wagon #11
1904 - 1906
1895 P.J. Barrett Hose Wagon #44
1906 - Aug. 6, 1917
1917 American LaFrance 700 gpm pumper
#1608

Aug. 6, 1917 - Jan. 1, 1926
1925 American LaFrance 700 gpm pumer
#5299
Jan. 1, 1926 - Jul. 2, 1937
1928 FWD/Pirsch Hose Wagon #166
1941 - ????
1951 Ward LaFrance 750 gpm pumper #2599
Oct. 6, 1951 - Feb. 3, 1969
1958 Mack 750 gpm pumper #1010D
Feb. 3, 1969 - Oct. 18, 1971
1971 Mack 1000 gpm pumper #MP7107
Oct. 18, 1971 - Jan. 14, 1981
1980 American LaFrance 1000 gpm pumper
#AP8002
Jan. 14, 1981 - May 8, 1989
1988 Mack 1000 gpm pumper #MP8812
May 8, 1989 - Present rig

IN MEMORY

ENGINE 61

Fireman Peter J. Harmon September 24, 1937

Lieutenant Harry G. Boyle December 22, 1948

Captain Joseph A. Fay November 30, 1967

BATTALION 20

Chief Edward Huber July 27, 1954

Chief William H. Obrien (1) March 20, 1966