

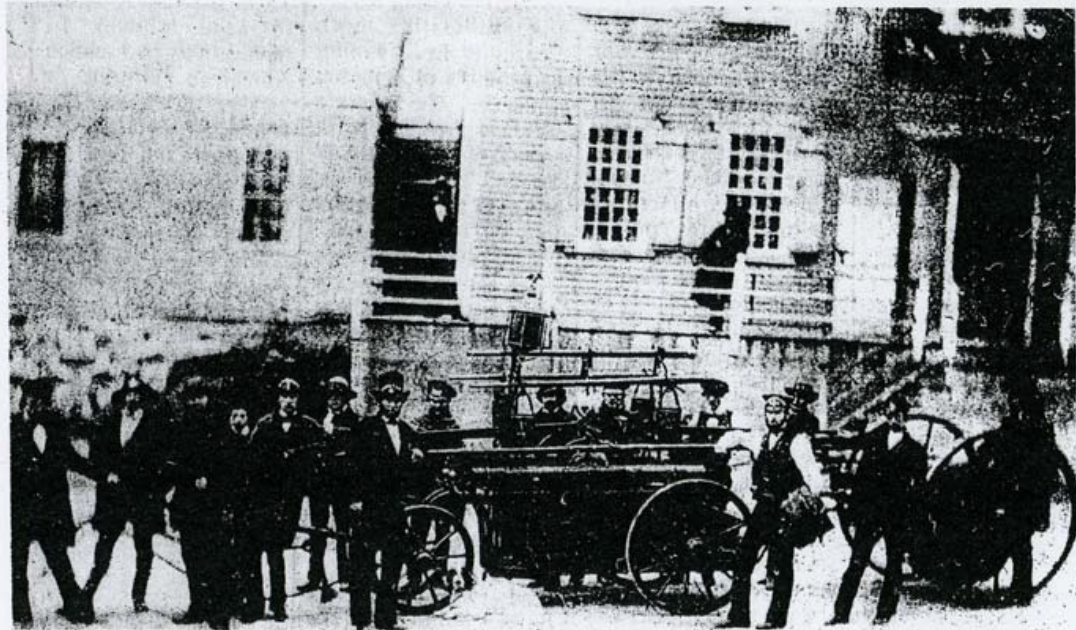
## Firefighting in 1793: "A good lively fire to dash to"

by Anthony Sammarco

It's somewhat difficult to imagine a community without a fire department, for the prevention and the battling of fires is of the utmost importance. However, the first fire department in Dorchester wasn't established until after the Revolutionary War.

The Fireward Society of Dorchester and Milton was established in 1793 with individuals from both towns assisting in the purchase of a fire engine to protect the property of share owners. The Fireward Society had one hundred share holders who subscribed not only to purchase the fire engine, but to maintain the engine in a small building that was located on the Dorchester side of the bridge spanning the Neponset River at the Lower Mills.

The Committee of the Fireward Society, and the clerk, Stephen Badlam, issued shares to subscribers for "the relief of those who may be distressed with calamitous Fire." The aspect of battling a fire at this time was to have a group of volunteers form in a line between the engine and the nearest source of water, filling leather fire buckets and passing them from hand to hand until they were emptied into the tub of the fire engine. Once enough water had been dumped into the tub of the engine, the volunteers would then squirt the water at the fire by means of a hand pump. After the assembling of the volunteers, the filling of the leather

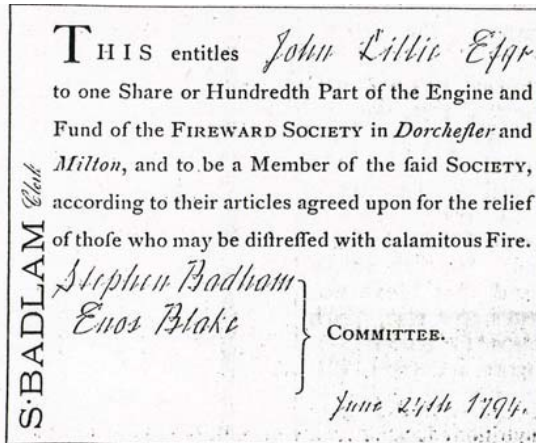


**HAPHAZARD UNIFORMS, REGULATION HEADGEAR:** The men of Dorchester's Fireward Society of Dorchester and Milton posed for the camera in 1858 in front of Talbot's Store at the corner of Washington and River Street. Lil' Peach Convenience Store in Lower Mills is on the site today.

firebuckets and the squirting of the water had taken place, one wonders how many burning buildings were actually saved two centuries ago!

The first fire engine was known as Fountain Engine Number 1 and was owned by the shareholders of both Dorchester and Milton. The fire engine, operated by a hand pump, was manned by volunteers from both towns. Their service, though voluntary, was remunerated by their exemption from military duty, and by the refunding of their poll tax (\$2.00) by the towns. Thirty-two men from the towns of Milton and Dorchester made a large enough pool of volunteers; their authority was strictly limited to the scene of a fire, where their mission of firefighting and their obedience to orders had to be observed, with penalties for refusal to obey. Their duties, strictly volunteer, were to attend all fires and to assist in both the fighting of the fire and the direction of assistance at the fire. Their uniforms were haphazard, but each volunteer was provided with a helmet emblazoned with the "Fireward Society in Dorchester and Milton, Fountain No. 1" in bold letters.

Two centuries ago, the Lower Mills, then known as "Neponset Village" (until 1832), was the site of most industrial concerns for both Dorchester and Milton. The first chocolate mills in this country were located along the Neponset River, as were paper mills, a grist mill and a playing card factory. The Lower Mills had numerous cabinet makers, among them Stephen Badlam and Edward H. Ruggles, two prominent residents. The shop of Benjamin Crehore, who produced the first



**SHARING THE RISK:** Shareholders in the Fireward Society received certificates like the one above, issued in 1794.

American bass viol, pianoforte and artificial leg on the Milton side of the river, was also located in the Lower Mills, so it is not surprising that the shareholders of the Fireward Society opted to house their new fire engine in the Lower Mills, where most of the shareholders' homes and factories were located.

The Fireward Society, though a necessary and vitally important service to both towns, was primarily a social

and fraternal group of men who often had musters and participated in parades. Their competitions, whereby they filled their engine with water and tried to shoot water from the hand pump higher than a competitor's, made for both an enjoyable competition and community pride, should they win. The thrill, and excitement, of a group of volunteers engaged in this sport led to good-natured rivalry. Edward Hamilton, author of *A History of Milton*, says that, "If one thinks of a fire company of this period [1793] as being essentially a social organization with some fire-fighting obligations as a side issue, he would not be far wrong. Even today with all our competing thrills and spectacles, a fire has a tremendous appeal to all. In those more placid days the opportunity to belong to a congenial group of friends with a clubhouse provided free, and the ever-present hope of a good lively fire to dash to and perhaps to try to fight, presented a great appeal to many a man."

As we reflect on the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the founding of The Fireward Society of Dorchester and Milton, we can look back with pride on the determination of our ancestors to establish so necessary an organization. We today salute the Boston Fire Department and the Milton Fire Department, for though our taxes now support fire engines, we are indebted to our town's earliest efforts to aid "those who may be distressed with calamitous Fire."

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