

Center Square Fire Company - Serving Whitpain Since 1913

By Russ Bellavance, President of Wissahickon Valley Historical Society
Photos by Alex Lowy Photography, LLC

If you turn right out of the main entrance of the Blue Bell Country Club, going south on DeKalb Pike, you quickly come to the Village of Centre Square, one of the six original villages in Whitpain Township. There you will find the headquarters of the Centre Square Fire Company, which recently celebrated its 100th Anniversary.

The Centre Square Fire Company exemplifies a theme we have seen in past articles, which is the rich and complex interaction of private associations and local government. Most people think of fire service as being a purely governmental activity. Not here in Whitpain! In 1913, local citizens decided that it was time that they had fire services, so they met together to do something about it. They met in the Odd Fellows Hall near the intersection of Skippack and DeKalb Pikes, an old stone building which had previously been a tannery, and which sadly is no longer with us.

So, the first thing that they did was to create the volunteer fire company itself, with 73 men quickly joining. What was the next thing they did? Why, form a Ladies Auxiliary, of course. Then they set about purchasing their first equipment; a wagon and some galvanized buckets, all for the princely sum of \$14. Where did the \$14 come from? That's where the Ladies Auxiliary came into play. The Auxiliary held many fundraisers, including suppers, festivals, socials, card games and even a play. Thanks to the money raised by the Ladies Auxiliary, by the end of 1913 the Fire Company already had its first motorized fire truck and were ready for business.

Of course, in those days there were no fire hydrants in Whitpain. Farmers maintained ponds on their properties to serve as sources of water. This work was coordinated by the Fire Company's Dam Committee. This practice continued into the early 21st century, but almost all of the old ponds have been filled in by developers.

The Fire Company moved across DeKalb Pike in 1918, into a former livery stable and adjoining house. These were remodeled and expanded, to include a meeting hall that could hold up to 400 people. The Fire Company then became one of the major centers for events in Whitpain, used by most of the local organizations (including the local Society for the Apprehension of Horse Thieves) for their events. It even housed local high school graduations.

The Fire Company became nationally famous in 1949. How did that happen? The Saturday Evening Post had one of their artists paint a picture of the Fire Company responding to a call and then featured the picture on the cover of its May 14, 1949 issue celebrating American departments.



May 14, 1949 cover of The Saturday Evening Post depicting the Center Square Fire Company in action across from Reed's Dept. Store. Note the many volunteers hustling to join the departing fire truck, including one in his pajamas! Courtesy of Wissahickon Valley Historical Society

The painting hangs proudly in the Fire Company's headquarters today, with their original 1913 banner nearby. You can also see an actual issue of the magazine in the library of the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society. In the decades following 1949, Whitpain began a period of dramatic growth, and the Fire Company had to change with the times. Their fund-raising efforts were no longer enough for the growing needs of the community, and for the increasingly complex and expensive equipment. Finally, in 1958, the Fire Company asked for a permanent public source of funding, and the Whitpain voters agreed to a new fire tax to be added to their local township real estate taxes. Eventually, the need for at least one, and later up to four, full-time employees was recognized. At first, those were Fire Company employees, but now they are employed directly by Whitpain Township. But the fundamental nature of the Fire Company as a volunteer organization did not change. The Fire Company also continues to serve the Blue Bell community as a focal point for a wide variety of social and fund raising activities. Take a look at their calendar of activities on their website at csfc33.com to see the breadth of their community activities.

The scope of the Fire Company's duties has also expanded over the years, with the inclusion of fire police and emergency

volunteer fire response teams to complement the duties of the firefighters.

Members of the Fire Company are justly proud of their past and equally proud of the modern, well-trained fire, fire police and emergency response company that they have become.



Mint Condition 1919 REO Was One of the First Motorized Fire Trucks



CSFC33 Fire Station, Circa 1954. Construction on a brand new fire house will begin in June 2016.

This is the seventh in a series of articles about local history brought to you by the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society. If there is a topic you would like to propose for a future article, please contact me at rcbellavance67@gmail.com. If you enjoy these articles, you may want to consider membership in the Society. Please see our website at wvalleyhs.org for more information.