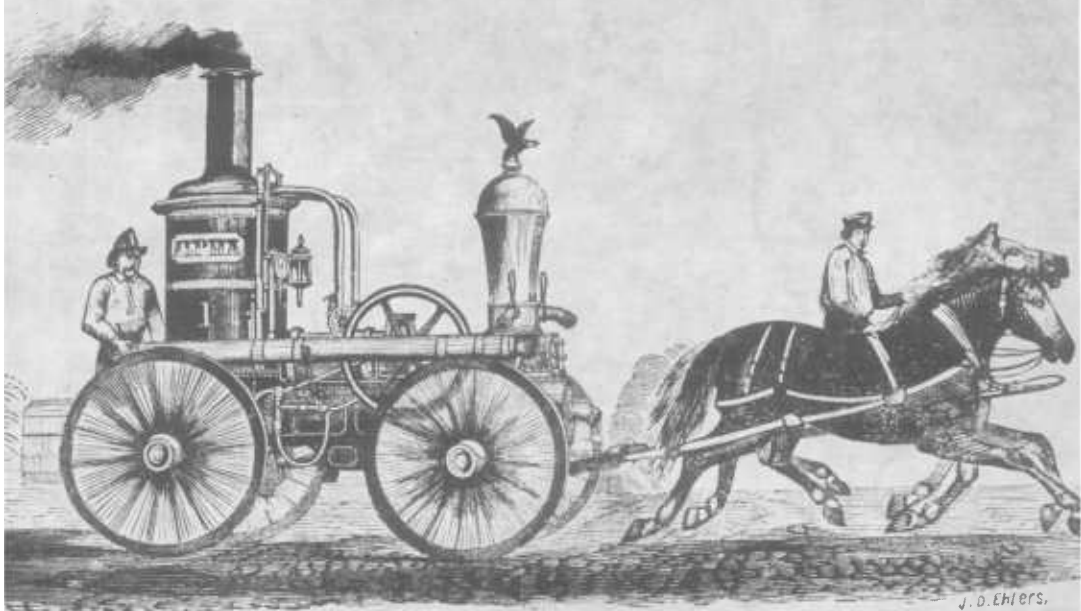# MARYLAND
HISTORICAL MAGAZINE

No. 1 STEAM FIRE ENGINE.

Builders, Reaney & Neaffie, Philadelphia. Pump, 6 in. (double acting)—stroke 14 in. Weight 9,050 lbs.

(1865) Courtesy The Peale Museum

MARYLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY
BALTIMORE

September · 1966

SIDELIGHTS

Fighting Fires the Baltimore Way—
A British View of 1862

By CHARLES L. WAGANDT

Two hundred years ago shouts of "fire! fire!" sent Baltimoreans scurrying into the streets. The alarm alerted the residents to grab their leather buckets and race to the blaze. These water carriers, simple instruments though they be, provided the primary means for extinguishing the flames. Such primitive methods soon yielded to a more sophisticated approach as citizens created volunteer fire companies with hand-operated engines. The first of these came into being before the 19th century.

Unfortunately the volunteers did not long confine themselves only to extinguishing fires. Unsavory elements engaged in the activities of the volunteer fire companies, thereby helping to justify Baltimore's nickname, "Mobtown." Not that the city was alone in expressing urban growth and unrest by riotous action, but certainly it achieved a high degree of notoriety. Rowdies set fires to draw rival volunteer companies together for a fight. Pitched battles erupted, attracting more attention than the fires.

Politics and whiskey permeated the atmosphere of many companies. Bloody fights occurred not only at fires but also at elections. By the late 1850s citizens grew tired of the expensive antics of the volunteers. Encouragement for reform came from the successful experiments in the 1850s of the steam fire engine and the police and fire alarm telegraph. Professionalism was now needed.

The year 1858 saw Mayor Thomas Swann sign into law ordinances providing for these changes. The city quickly set up a paid fire department and a police and fire alarm telegraph. This put Baltimore in the front ranks of American cities in the art of fighting fires.

Baltimore's fire protection system so impressed the British consul in this city that he took time off from his accounts of the outbreak of the Civil War to write a detailed account. Frederic Bernal was his name. Though a British subject, he came out of a Jewish and Spanish background. Educated at Eton, he worked in the House of Commons before seeing service abroad. He came to Baltimore as consul for Maryland in January, 1861, and left after the war for France to serve in a similar capacity. His father and elder brother also served Britain, both being members of Parliament.


TO RIGHT HON. JOHN RUSSELL, M.P.

No. 22   BRITISH CONSULATE FOR THE STATE OF MARYLAND
Baltimore, May 23rd. 1861.

My Lord,[1]

At a time when events of such transcendental importance are occurring in this Country, it may seem somewhat inopportune to trouble Your Lordship with an account of the Fire Department of the City of Baltimore, but so perfect is the organization—so simple, but efficient, is the working of the system—and so rare the occurrence of any large conflagration, that I think it a matter of sufficient importance to report upon to Your Lordship.

Until the year 1858 the Fire Department of the City was composed (as is still the case in New York, Philadelphia, & elsewhere,) of Volunteer Companies, many of them made up of the very worst characters. So great was the jealousy existing between the different Companies, that every fire was the scene of a sanguinary conflict between rival districts, and cases often occurred of wilful arson, perpetrated solely for the purpose of bringing on a fight. Sunday was a favorite day for this amusement, and matters came at last to such a state, that Baltimore, and its rowdies, were a byeword, and reproach. At length the City Council took up the question, and after a deal of opposition, (for these Companies had great political influence—) and much discussion, abolished the

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[1] The letter was addressed to the Right Honorable Lord John Russell M.P. (1792-1878), who was then serving as foreign secretary to Prime Minister Henry John Temple Palmerston. The letter is in the Foreign Office Papers, Public Record Office, London, England.
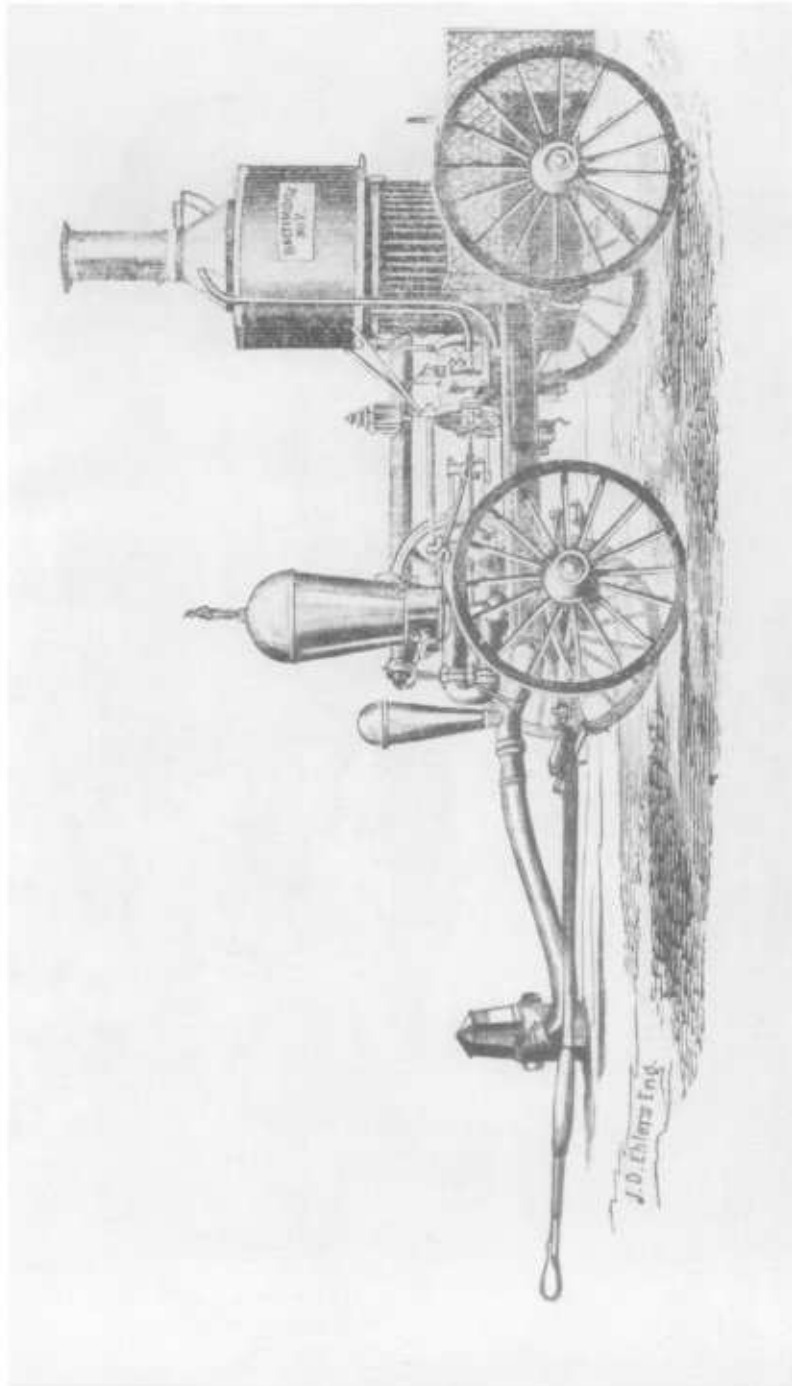
Baltimore No. 7. Courtesy Baltimore Equitable Society,
Early Fire-Fighting Museum.
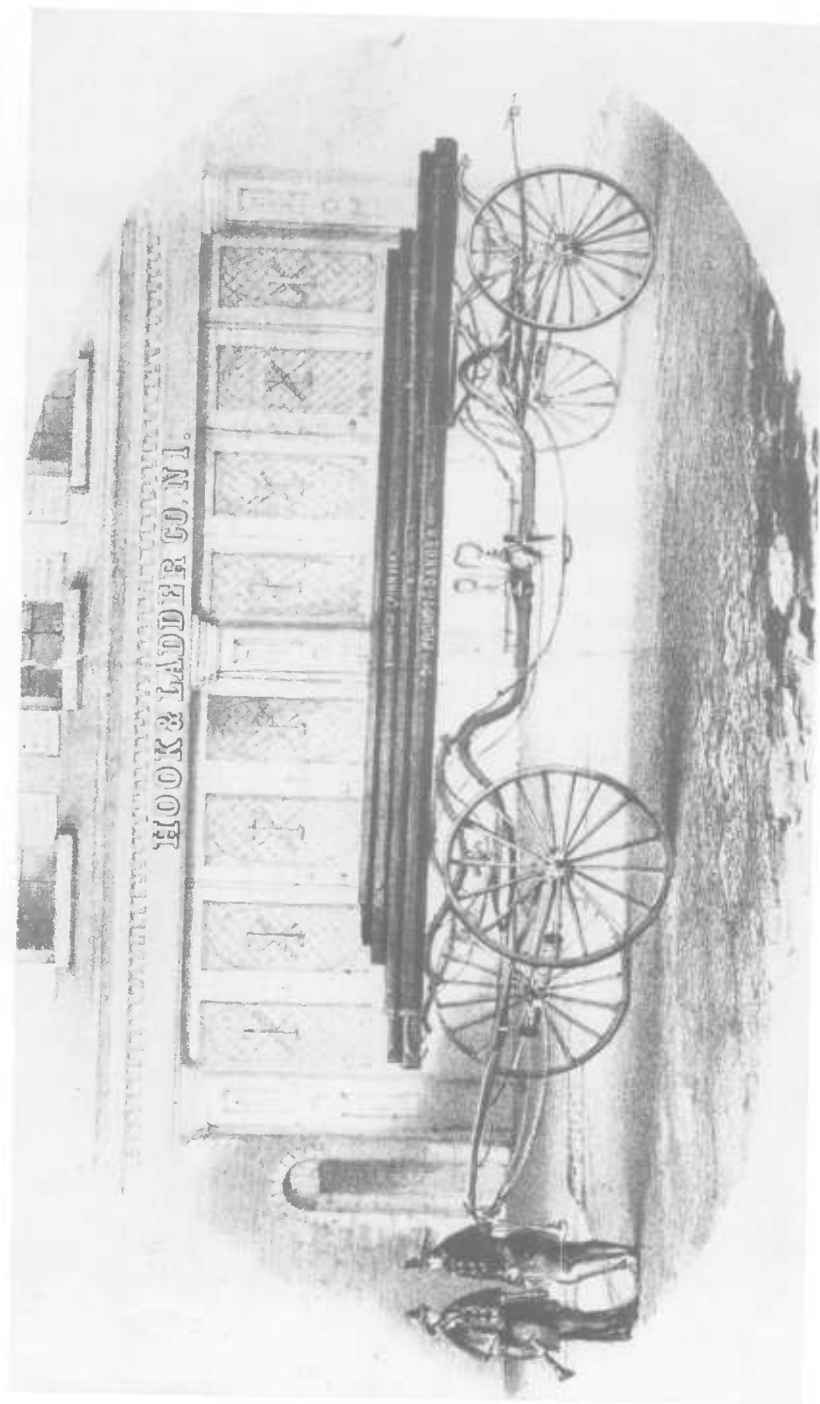
Baltimore No. 1. Early Fire-Fighting Museum.

Volunteer System, establishing in its place the present paid organization.

The Fire Department for the current year consists of seven steam Engines, of which the subjoined is a description.

Name of Engine	Steam Diam:	Cylr.[2] Diam:	Capacity of Pumps per Revolution	Pumps Diam	Stroke	Fire Surface	Weight ready for Service	Pumps
			gals			ft	lbs	
No. 1. Alpha.	10½ in	14 in	3,426	6 in	14 in	292.6	8,400	Double Acting
No. 2. Home.	9 "	10 "	2,056	5½ "	10 "	184	5,750	Worthington
No. 3. Comet.	9 "	12 "	2,040	5 " (Double)	12 "	156	6,800	Double Acting
No. 4. J. Cushing.[3]	11 "	12 "	2,948	4½ "	12 "	207.5	5,200	Fulton
No. 5. I. Swann.[4]	12 "	12 "	3,998	7 "	12 "	312.6	8,600	Worthington
No. 6. Deluge.	12 "	12 "	3,998	7 " (Double)	12 "	312.6	8,600	Worthington
No. 7. Baltimore.	11 "	12 "	2,948	4½ "	12 "	239.5	5,500	Fulton

Note. Nos. 5, and 6, are considered too large, and unwieldy, and will be disposed of.

Each Engine is drawn by two horses, has thirteen men attached to it; also a drum on two wheels,[5] carrying the hose, drawn by one horse, and a tender with fuel, likewise drawn by one horse.

There are also two hook, and ladder, Companies, with fourteen men, and three horses, each.[6] There is no fire escape department.

Steam Cylinder
[2] This should read: Diam | Stroke See *Annual Reports of the Board of Fire Commissioners and the Chief Engineer, of The Baltimore City Fire Department, to the Mayor and City Council of Baltimore* (Baltimore, 1860), p. 28.
[3] John Cushing, president of the Board of Fire Commissioners.
[4] Thomas Swann, the mayor of Baltimore who signed into law the ordinance for the paid Fire Department. Swann later became governor of Maryland and a United States Congressman.
[5] Not all were two wheels. Some were double two wheel, and some were four wheel. See *Annual Reports* for 1859 and 1861.
[6] According to the *Annual Reports* for 1861, p. 27, No. 1 hook and ladder company had only two horses though the No. 2 company did use three. The same report, p. 23, showed twelve and thirteen men instead of the fourteen noted here.

The estimate of expences for the current year (the said expences being paid by the City,) is—

Running expences.	$53,400[7]
Purchase of ground for No. 7 house.	2,000
Balance of unpaid Bills of 1860 (Construction account)	6,000
	$61,400

In round numbers £12,300, for a City of some 230,000 Inhabitants.[8]

This contrasts favorably with the City of Philadelphia, where the Fire Department is on the Volunteer System, with all its attendant demoralization, and rowdyism, and cost for 1860, $165,000.

Intimately connected with the successful working of the Fire Department is the admirable system of Fire Alarm Telegraph adopted here.

Directly a fire is discovered the system is called into operation by applying to the signal box nearest to the spot. The signal box itself is a solid cast iron box, attached to the side of an Engine House, or on a pole, & communicating by wires enclosed in a wrought iron pipe with the signal circuit over head. The Box is locked but the key may be found at the house nearest to it, and each police, and fireman, carries one with him. On opening the box a crank is seen within. On turning this the number of the Box itself is instantly communicated to the Central Office, & the longer the crank is turned the more the same signal is repeated. These signals are received, and recorded on a slip of paper by an improved Morse Register, peculiarly adapted for this purpose. At the same time a call Bell is struck to give Notice to the Operator. Each signal box is also furnished with a telegraph key for police purposes, and, by a simple set of signals, any policeman can communicate with any portion of the City. As soon as the notice of a fire is received, it is immediately notified at all the signal boxes, and also upon two large alarm bells at Nos. 1, & 3, Engine Houses. These bells can be rang independently of each other, but are

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[7] The actual running expenses, which consisted mostly of salaries, was $58,213.04 for 1861. See *Annual Reports* for 1861, p. 8. Estimated annual expenses for the last fifteen years of the volunteer system were:

"Annual and special appropriations	$22,600
Honorary membership dues	10,000
Contributions from active members	5,000
Contributions from citizens	5,000
	$42,600"

See Clarence H. Forrest, *Official History of the Fire Department of the City of Baltimore Together with Biographies and Portraits of Eminent Citizens of Baltimore* (Baltimore, 1898), p. 100.

[8] The census for 1860 credited Baltimore with a population of 212,418. See *Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census.* (Washington, D. C., 1864), p. 214.

generally done so simultaneously. Should, for instance, an alarm come from Box No. 3, the bells, and signal boxes, would strike three blows, pause, & repeat. If from No. 23, two blows, pause, three blows, and repeat.

The mode of striking the blows is as follows. The Clerk at the Central Office on receiving the notice turns immediately to the "key board." The mechanism of this starts at once, and, by telegraphic communication, causes the alarm bells in the Towers to strike the number of the box, and continues to do so as long as required. Should the clerk only want to ring one of the alarm bells he disconnects by a "switch" one of the circuits from the "key-board," and the corresponding bell is silent. While the "key board," and its mechanism, are doing their work on the bells, the clerk turns to one of the finger keys which communicate back with the signal boxes, & taps on this the number of blows corresponding with the number of the box from which the alarm has been sent. A little magnet, and armature, gives a blow on a small bell in each box for every tap, and the firemen, or other persons, who run to the nearest box, and listen, know that the alarm comes from such a number, and their pocket card tells them exactly where the fire is.

The arrangements of this system prevent interruptions either from accident, or design, and it works with uniform regularity, and promptitude, both by day, & night.

The Police Telegraph is worked on a separate wire, connecting the Central, with the outlying, Stations.

So perfect is the working of the above system that four Engines can be started with fires lighted, and men equipped for duty in from one and a half, to two, minutes from the time of giving an alarm, and an instance is on record of an Engine reaching a fire three quarters of a mile from its house, with steam up, and ready for service, in six minutes from the striking of its signal bell, and, had it been necessary, four engines could have been in full operation in less than ten minutes after getting the alarm!

I may add in conclusion, that since the establishment of the present Fire Department a reduction of twenty five per cent has been made, on an average, by the Insurance Companies.

I have the honor to be
My Lord,
with the highest respect,
Your Lordship's
Most obedient
humble servant
FREDERIC BERNAL
Consul

REVIEWS OF RECENT BOOKS

The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era. RICHARD P. McCORMICK. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966, x, 389. $7.50.

Historians have come to expect that the winner of the annual award of the American Association for State and Local History be a work of perceptive scholarship. Prof. McCormick's 1964 prize winning manuscript does not disappoint us. As an incisive analysis of the development of the second American party system between 1824 and 1836, it is an heir to the pioneer studies of Ostrogorski, Ford, Stanwood and Leutscher. This is not to suggest, however, that the Rutgers historian agrees with all of the conclusions of these earlier writers. McCormick's approach to the subject of party formations in the Jacksonian era is, in his own words, "admittedly unconventional." With Maurice Duverger, he insists that political parties in the United States are above all electoral machines engaged in nominating and electing candidates. Accordingly, he devotes a major portion of his attention to the matter of party structure and constitutional forms. He sees the Federal Constitutional environment of the 1790s as making possible the gradual emergence of the three American party systems. The first appeared in the last decade of the eighteenth century. By 1815 the Federalists were marching to their self-erected tomb in Hartford. Within five years the Republican party had all but dissolved in the midst of "the era of good feelings."

Of the second party system, which is the object of McCormick's research, he reasons that it was conceived in the heat of the 1824 election and matured during the twenties and thirties. By 1840, the Democrats and Whigs achieved an equilibrium of forces nationally and politics in every state were conducted on a two-party basis. The third party system, which came to frightful fruition in the fifties, is understandably beyond the limits of his study. As this reviewer sees it, Prof. McCormick considers the second party system as unique in its origins, its national balance and the fatal flaws which brought about its early disruption. He traces, in an overly general fashion, the formation of the second American party system in twenty-three of the twenty-four states (the exclusion of South Carolina is both understandable and annoying).

For the readers of this journal, his analysis of Maryland politics should prove interesting if not sensational. He notes that the new

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