

Boylston's Fire Department

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Did you ever wonder when the Boylston Volunteer Fire Department was formed? A recent request led me not to a specific artifact in our collection, but to focus on the written resources in our Fuller Research Library archives, particularly, the Annual Reports of the Town of Boylston.

FIRE WARDENS

The earliest references from the *Annual Reports of the Town of Boylston* on the subject of fires in our town reports in the late 1800's lists a Forest Warden was appointed annually by the Selectmen. He was the man responsible for fighting forest fires and often had a list of ten or more men as Deputy Forest Wardens since the town was heavily forested and brush fires broke out requiring men to use fire extinguishers to put out the fire. Fire extinguishers were often listed as part of the fire apparatus purchases over the years. From 1886 to 1892, the Chief Fire Warden was T.C. Sheldon, followed by Chief Fire Warden J. Nelson Ball.¹

While there was no official fire department, the town was concerned enough that in 1903 The School Building Committee furnished an H.P. Fuller & Johnson oil-cooled engine with wall pump jack and belt to run it to be placed at the school house to be used for fire protection. Cost of the engine and for instructions to run it was \$335.

“In 1908, the town, concerned about adequate fire protection purchased fire extinguishers, ladders and hoses, but stopped short of organizing a Fire Department.”²

It is fair to say that except for the forest wardens, fire fighting for many years was largely volunteer or on-call. No salary or payments to individuals are listed in the town reports for many years.

In each of the years from 1913 through 1929, there was evidence of a Fire Warden, with John Flagg being appointed by the Town Selectmen as Inspector of Fire Apparatus.

“John Nathaniel (Nahum) Flagg was born in Boylston, October 12, 1854. He pursued the primary branches of his education in the public schools of his native town, and completed his studies at a private school in Boston. When a young man he engaged in teaming, but subsequently turned his attention exclusively to agriculture in Boylston, which he is now following with profit. In politics he is a Republican and has served with ability as road commissioner. He is a member of the local grange, Patrons of Husbandry. His religious affiliations are with the Congregational church. Mr. Flagg married, January 8, 1879, Abbie Frances Ball, daughter of James Emerson Ball, a prosperous farmer of Boylston. Mr. and Mrs. Flagg have no children.”³

Payments were made every year for forest fires and supplies, but it is not clear if any dollars were for paid labor. Fire extinguishers were purchased and noted in most of the town's Annual Reports. The number of fires were noted. For example, in 1915 there were eleven fires which cost the town \$201.56. Most fires were started burning brush.⁴

The obituary which appeared in the Evening Gazette on November 5, 1929 indicates John N. Flagg had served the Town of Boylston for 18 years as its fire chief as well 30 years as its road commissioner. John Flagg, age 75 years, had died November 4, 1929 of *cardio-renal degeneration* at Main Street, Boylston, Massachusetts.”⁵

JOHN N. FLAGG DIES IN BOYLSTON, AGED 75

Special Correspondence to The Gazette
BOYLSTON, Nov. 5.—John Nahum Flagg, who was 75 years old Oct. 12, died last night after a lingering illness of heart trouble.

Mr. Flagg was born in Boylston on what was known as the Potter place, now under water and has lived all his life in this town.

His wife, who was Miss Abbie Ball of Boylston died 13 years ago. He was fire chief 18 years and road commissioner 30 years.

Services will be in his late home on Main street, Wednesday at 2 p. m. with interment in Pine Grove cemetery. George I Vickory, funeral director, in charge.

Obituary of Fire Chief John N. Flagg

Evening Gazette, page 12
November 5, 1929

¹ Boylston Historical Series, Filgate, History of Boylston 1886-1979, Boylston Historical Society

² Boylston Historical Series, Filgate, Boylston Historical Society, p. 514.

³ Historic Homes and Institutions and Genealogical and Personal Memoirs of Worcester County, Massachusetts: with a history of Worcester Society of Antiquity, Volume 1, page 533

⁴ Annual Reports of the Town Officers of Boylston, Massachusetts For the Year ending December 31, 1913 and continuing

⁵ Gravestone, John N. Flagg, Pine Grove Cemetery, managed by Carol Purinton findagrave.com volunteer

FORD MODEL A FIRE TRUCK

In 1930, Thomas G. Slack was listed as “Inspector of Fire Apparatus and also Chief of Fire Department.” He resided on Main Street, Boylston, Massachusetts.⁶

“The citizens’ concern with fire protection finally forced the issue. The Town Meeting of 1929, voted to purchase a Ford Model A fire truck for \$3,750. A Volunteer Fire Department was also created, with Thomas G. Slack as the first Fire Chief. Most of the men who had previously banded together in an unofficial Fire Brigade immediately joined the new force.”⁷



Boylston Fire Truck
1929
BHSM Photograph Collection

From the Annual Report, Year Ending December 31, 1930 it was noted that

“During the year of 1930 our truck has been called out 42 times for brush, grass, auto and building fires. Cost to extinguish these fires, \$702.56. I have issued 346 fire permits and out for drill practice 33 times.

*Respectfully submitted,
Thomas G. Slack
Chief and Forest Warden.”⁸*

This many fire-fighting requests may have taken a toll on the equipment as it was noted that wealthy Boylstonian Sumner Barton was paid \$700 for a fire truck on March 5, 1931 and again on March 5, 1932 an additional \$700. These were monies he had loaned the town.⁹

The Annual Report year ending December 31, 1931 notes that a Deputy Forest Warden was appointed by the Forest Warden and a list of ten deputies was given. Thomas G. Slack was again appointed as Forest Warden.¹⁰ That same report listed “Fire truck and equipment at \$4,200.” In 1932 expenditures include “storing fire truck \$300” along with the other usual costs of fire extinguishers, etc. Thomas G. Slack remained the fire chief and forest warden.¹¹



Boylston Fire Helmet
circa 1940
Donated by Raymond Duffy
BHSM Collection

⁶ Federal Census Records, Town of Boylston, Massachusetts, 1930

⁷ Boylston Historical Series, Filgate, Boylston Historical Society, page 526.

⁸ Annual Report, Town of Boylston, Massachusetts, 1930, page 75

⁹ Annual Report, Town of Boylston, Massachusetts, 1931

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Annual Report, Town of Boylston, Massachusetts, 1932

FIRE DEPARTMENT BUILDING

In 1942 fire specifications for a fire department building were created, but a review of 1940 -1949 Annual Reports makes no mention that a town building was erected. In March 3, 1941, the town moderator was asked to appoint a committee of three to investigate the cost of erecting a building to house town owned equipment. By March 10, the committee “voted to appoint a committee of five.” At a Special Town Meeting on October 6, 1941,

“Article 1. To see if the town will vote to construct a building... and if so borrow and appropriate a sum not in excess of \$10,000. “Subsequently an amount of \$200 was voted to determine the cost of plans. The discussion continued in 1942 when Article 18 asked to “see if the town will vote to raise \$12,000 for construction of an adequate building for the housing of the town equipment...”

Due to the increase in need for more fire protection, talk of building a proper station to garage fire trucks was considered in the early 1940s. Specifications for a fire department was paid for in 1941.¹² Evidence of a municipal building being erected in 1942 was found in the \$500 annual payments being made to a bank for a loan of \$11,500 for construction of a new municipal building. Appropriations of \$500 a year were paid through 1962.¹³ The photo of the building still used as a Fire station today appeared in the Town Report of 1966. If one looks closely, one sees that above left bay is "Fire Dept." and above the right bay is a signage stating "Municipal Light Dept." In the 1940s fires per year numbered in the teens, but in the later 1960s, fires, phone calls, and emergency calls, in one year were listed as over one thousand. By 1968 the need was so great that in addition to the fire trucks at the center station two more were housed in a new municipal building in Morningdale. The building as it stands now has undergone some changes, but one can see the basic structure as it appeared in 1942.



Municipal Building
Boylston Fire Department (left bays)
Municipal Light Department (right bay)
BHSM Collections-Town Report 1966

In 1944 Thomas G. Slack resigned (October 15) and Howard F. Libbey was appointed Fire Chief and Forest Warden on October 16, 1944.¹⁴

In 1945 Article 21 sought

“\$628 to reimburse Thomas G. Slack for loss of time and doctor’s bills caused by injuries incurred in fighting a fire on April 18, 1944, ... On March 12, 1945, this was voted. Also on Article 18, March 12, the town voted to purchase a new fire truck. In June of 1945 the town voted to buy “more pumping, storage of water and the completion of a newly drilled artesian well at the Town House and Garage.”

Howard Libbey served as chief from 1944 until his resignation in 1946 and Harold Scott was appointed December 24, 1946 as Fire Chief.^{15,16} The report of the Fire Department still lists a cost of “storage of a truck \$205” and continues to pay storage through 1949, but in 1949 it is reported that a fire truck was also stored “at Morningdale.”¹⁷

FIRE FIGHTERS’ ASSOCIATION FORMED

In 1948 a Firefighters Association was formed.¹⁸ Its purpose was education, charitable, and social so men could gather other than when at drills.

¹² Annual Report, Town of Boylston, Massachusetts, 1941

¹³ Annual Report, Town of Boylston, Massachusetts, 1942-1962

¹⁴ Annual Report, Town of Boylston, Massachusetts, 1944

¹⁵ Annual Report, Town of Boylston, Massachusetts, 1944

¹⁶ Annual Report, Town of Boylston, Massachusetts, 1946

¹⁷ Annual Report, Town of Boylston, Massachusetts, 1949

¹⁸ Copy of the Association, from manuscript collection, Boylston Historical Society

Through the 1950's a fire truck was continually garaged in Morningdale, but one or two others were also at the center of Boylston. In 1951 Chief Harold Scott resigned and Robert Kimball was appointed November 1, 1951. Chief Kimball continued until 1960, followed by Robert L. Fuller appointed Fire Chief in 1961 who continued as chief until his resignation on December 1, 1966. Harold Scott again assumed Chief for two years, 1967 and 1968 when Donald C. Parker would carry the mantle from 1969 through 2001, a total of 32 years. Roger Wentzell then picked up the 'staff' for 2002 and 2003. Joseph Flanagan was Deputy Fire Chief in 2002 and was promoted to the top job in 2004. At present, Fire Chief Flanagan who is responsible for both our firefighters and EMTs has served our community for 20 years. We acknowledge and honor each of these brave men and their firefighters, who stand ready to battle blazes to protect the property and the lives of Boylston men, women, and children.

LADIES AUXILIARY OF THE BOYLSTON FIREFIGHTERS FORMED

“The Ladies Auxiliary of the Boylston Firefighters was formed in September of 1969. Its aim is to assist the firefighters by providing food and coffee during and after a fire and to perform some constructive tasks for the firefighter's unit or the community in general. Recently these ladies donated an 8-station listening station to the Boylston Elementary School.”¹⁹ Mrs. Albert Peterson served as its president from 1969-70; followed by Mrs. Knollin Spencer from 1970-71; and Mrs. Roger Wentzell from 1971-72.



**Members of Boylston Fire Department
Memorial Day Parade – 1975
BHSM Photograph Collection**

EMERGENCY MEDICAL TECHNICIANS

“In 1975, over 40 dedicated townspeople embarked on an arduous and demanding course of training, they formed the nucleus of the Emergency Medical Technicians who service this town with expertise and care. In 1977, Boylston purchased a fine ambulance which provides the town with swift and efficient protection. Under the aegis of the Fire Department, the E.M.T.s and their ambulance have rendered life-saving service to many in this community.”²⁰

For those doing local research our Town Annual Reports and records offer a wealth of information. We are open Sundays 2-4 p.m. (except holidays). Come in to peruse our records. We will welcome you.

¹⁹ Manuscript collection, Boylston Historical Society

²⁰ Boylston Historical Series, Bruce Filgate, 2012, page 545

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