

# George Pasfield and the Early Springfield Fire Protection



Springfield's modern Fire Department can trace its roots to a potentially devastating fire in 1837 and the actions of one of our city's earliest settlers, George Pasfield. Like many other frontier towns built mostly of wood in the early 19th century, fire protection in Springfield was dependent on spontaneous brigades of citizens wielding buckets who arrived when a fire started and returned to their daily lives when the blaze was extinguished. But in January of 1837, a fire in a joiner's shop on 3rd Street owned by Mr. Fleurville ignited a call among the town's trustees for a more permanent and better organized way to fight fires. The absence of adequate fire protection equipment was one reason for the massive spread of flames setting off the pandemonium. "Fortunately there was no wind, else much more loss might have been sustained," said the Sangamon Journal of that fire.

The town fathers then turned to one of their own, George Pasfield, to purchase "two fire hooks, necessary poles, chains, etc." for the use by the town in fighting potentially dangerous fires that were feared by all. Volunteers would use this equipment to pull down a flaming building, preventing a fire from spreading throughout a neighborhood. Pasfield, who later joined Abraham Lincoln and others to secure the funds necessary to relocate the state capital to Springfield, spent the \$40 allocated by the town board on the fire protection equipment the town lacked. Benjamin Franklin is often credited with popularizing the concept of organized volunteer firefighting in America. In Springfield, it was George Pasfield who might have best understood that bringing the General Assembly and other important governmental offices to town would require capable firefighting equipment and a commitment from the community to keep people and buildings safe.

Later that same year, Pasfield's persistence was recognized when he was again authorized by the town trustees to oversee the construction of two ladders and other fire protection equipment for the rapidly expanding community of Springfield. As a further step toward organized fire protection, the equipment secured by Pasfield was stored for the common good in the Town Market House. In 1837, Springfield's fire protection equipment consisted of leather fire buckets, fashioned by its local shoemakers; wooden ladders and poles, built by its local carpenters; and hooks, chains, and axes, forged by its local blacksmiths. Because of George Pasfield's early work to raise fire protection standards in Springfield, by 1838 the town board began to actively investigate the purchase of the city's first fire engine. In late 1850, the first volunteer fire department was officially organized, and since then the safety of Springfield's citizens and property has rested with trained men and women who unselfishly answer the call when a fire erupts.

The City of Springfield owes much to George Pasfield and the other early town trustees who recognized that the growth and security of our community depends on up-to-date fire protection. This realization remains today.

**Ron Hasara**

Retiring Fire Chief

March 5, 2004

**Bob Bartnick**

Commencing Fire Chief