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Even the earliest known civilizations had great respect for the power of fire. Many groups thought of fire as gods or spirits and held rituals, gave sacrifices and conducted religious ceremonies, all revolving around the mysterious phenomenon of fire.

The first organized fire fighting force than can be traced was established in Rome by Augustus Caesar around 23 BC. They were organized much in the same way as many fire departments of modern time are, in that the organization was prompted as the result of a major fire with disastrous results.

These first fire fighters were called the familia publica and were slaves, about 600 in number. They were stationed around the gates of the city and gave alarm to inhabitants if a fire was spotted. Being slaves these first fire fighters were slow at spotting fires and somewhat unwilling to take the risks necessary to fight them. After another disastrous fire in Rome about 6 AD the Familia Publica was replaced with a corps of Vigiles who were to protect the city of Rome for the next 500 years. The Vigiles were a group of freed men some 7,000 strong and protected a population of 1 million.

Their responsibilities were to provide a fire fighting unit, fire prevention duties and inspection of buildings. The organization of the Vigiles was copied from the Roman militia with officers and companies of fire fighters operating within a chain of command. They were divided into seven battalions of 1,000 men each and were commanded by the equivalent of today's fire chief. The fire chief or prefect was an equestrian ranked officer who was directly responsible to the emperor. The cost of maintaining the corps was paid by the public treasury.

The first fire pump was invented somewhere near the 4th century BC by a Greek. This first simple device, which was a double cylinder piston pump, remained the basic mechanical method for pumping water for hundreds of years.

Much of what occurred in Rome and other early civilizations are the roots of fire fighting and fire prevention materials that are used today. Most concepts used today can be traced back nearly two thousand years.

Organized fire fighting disappeared for nearly a thousand years after the fall of Rome. In the 10th century, the French Normans conquered England and during the reign introduced the curfew concept for controlling fire in England. Under the Norman rule all house holders were to extinguish all fires by sunset. A metal cover was used to extinguish the fire on an open hearth. The Normans called the cover a "Couvre Fou" which on the English tongue became "curfew".

There is no written record of organized fire fighting for another 200 years and little known and recorded information about fire fighting activities exist until the 17th century.

After the great Fire of London in 1666, the city organized fire protection companies and required certain amounts of equipment to be on hand by all residents for use in combating fires. Equipment included leather buckets, ladders, shovels, and brass squirts. Brass squirts were large metal syringes, designed by the Portuguese, with handles on each side and a piston rod in the center. The nozzle of the squirt was placed in a bucket of water, the piston rod drawn back to fill it and water then discharged on the fire.

Another spin off of the Great London Fire was the advent of the first fire insurance companies in England. These companies has three basic duties; they posted fire marks to identify insured and protected properties, trained firefighters and salvage men who protected insured premises only, and they responded to actual calls for fire to the protected properties.

These insurance company fire fighters became England's first organized fire brigades. Gradually the brigades began competing to attend any fire for the honor of having reached the fire first. Modern traditions of fast response stems from these beginnings over 200 years ago. The traditional idea of fighting any fire also started in these early insurance company brigades.

The first hoses used by fire suppression personnel was made of leather and was designed by a Dutchman named General Jan Van Der Hyden, which first allowed fire fighters to carry water via a hose to the fire. These first hoses were 50 feet in length, and is considered the standard length even today. They were equipped with brass screw joints, allowing each section to be connected to another. The hose was sewn together to form a tube, but because most of the sewn hoses failed after use, the hose was later riveted together at the seam.

One early pump used in England consisted of a barrel mounted on wheels or a sled with a single pump immersed in the water barrel and operated by pumping handles. A swiveling nozzle called the "monitor," or gooseneck, above the cylinder allowed the water to be squirted at the flames. The range of the stream was so short that the pump had to be close to the fire, and many of the pumps actually caught fire themselves.

By 1721, an Englishman named Richard Newsham, developed a piston pump which operated by chains running over toothed quadrants, rocked up and down by the pump levers on each side. It required 20 pump handle operators and one nozzleman to run the pump.

The first fire recorded in America was in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607. The fire occurred in the community blockhouse. Subsequent fire destroyed almost every building in the settlement. The Pilgrims at Plymouth, MA also suffered devastating fires in 1623. Many of these early fires were caused and spread due to the type of building materials. Roofs were made of thatch, structures were build dose together, and chimneys were constructed of wood and mortar or mud and lined with the same material.