

## Story: Fires and fire services

## Page 2 – Early fire services

## 19th-century fire brigades

In the days before fire brigades, everyone was a firefighter. In 1856 a Wellington City Council regulation required all citizens to keep two buckets of water ready so they could help in case of fire.

A few early fire brigades were sponsored by insurance companies and fought fires only at insured buildings, which were specially marked. The first volunteer fire brigade, which attended all fire callouts, was formed in Auckland in 1854. Others followed in Christchurch in 1860, Dunedin in 1861 and Wellington by 1865. The United Fire Brigades of New Zealand, founded in 1878, promoted links between brigades.

The Municipal Corporation Act 1867 empowered borough councils to set up fire brigades and appoint fire inspectors. After this, paid firefighters were employed in some cities such as Christchurch. However, lack of funds meant volunteers remained the backbone of the firefighting force.

## Major urban fires

Some serious fires prompted the formation of brigades, or led to improvement in those in existence.

- 1858 – fire destroyed much of Auckland's commercial district around High and Shortland streets.
- 1868 – central Timaru, which had no brigade, was razed after north-westerly winds fanned a small stove fire.
- 1870 – Lyttelton's business centre burned while, in the absence of a brigade, residents frantically demolished buildings to stop flames spreading.
- 1879 – a fire in Dunedin's Octagon engulfed many buildings and killed 12 people.
- 1885 – a fire that began in a Wellington picture framer's store destroyed businesses and cottages in Lambton Quay and Woodward St, while the fire brigade's efforts were hampered by onlookers who tried to help.
- 1901 – three serious central city fires, including a blaze in the Grand Hotel that took five lives, led to the restructuring of the Auckland fire brigade.
- 1906 – another fire on Lambton Quay damaged several buildings, including banks, and wind spread thousands of bank receipts across Wellington.

## Early equipment

One obstacle for early firefighters was lack of piped water. Streams, horse troughs, and special water tanks were used, but until piped water of sufficient pressure became available, brigades often had to stand by and watch buildings burn.

At first, buckets were used; then hose reels and manual pumps which were dragged by men or horses to the scene of the fire. Steam-driven pumps were much more efficient. The Dunedin brigade acquired the first of these in 1865, and in 1878 they imported the first 49-foot (15-metre) telescopic ladder. About this time 'jumping sheets' were first used to catch people leaping from burning buildings. In the 1880s fire extinguishers were introduced. Some commercial buildings in Dunedin and Auckland had sprinkler systems by the late 1800s.

## Raising the alarm



United Fire Brigades crest



Lyttelton fire, 1870  
(1st of 4)



A jumping sheet



Horse power



Motorised engines

V2

From the 1840s to the 1870s many towns had a centrally located fire bell that was rung by anyone who spotted flames. Sometimes church bells were used. Watchmen patrolled towns at night or spotted smoke from lookout towers. In 1882 Auckland got 12 electric street alarms, and other cities followed.

### Fire at Parliament

The first Parliament building in Wellington, built of wood, was destroyed in a spectacular fire in 1907. Firemen and bystanders raced to save its books, papers, furniture and artworks. The adjacent brick General Assembly Library was also threatened by the flames, but the building and its contents were saved by its fire walls and metal fire door. Parliament sat in Government House, on the site where the Beehive now stands, until a replacement Parliament house – wisely built of stone – came into use in 1918.

### Fire Brigades Act 1906

The Fire Brigades Act 1906 set up fire boards to administer fire districts of 2,000 or more people. An inspector of fire brigades was appointed, and central government, local authorities and insurance companies were levied to cover costs. Fire brigades continued to be run locally.

### Fire engines

Motorised fire engines helped to get firefighters and equipment to fires quickly. The Wanganui Fire Brigade got the first 'self-propelled' steam fire engine in Australasia in 1903. Auckland and Wellington followed in 1906, and by the 1920s most brigades were motorised. The petrol-powered water pump, carried or towed by motor fire engines, was another advance.

### Alarm systems

A new fire-alarm system was invented by a Dunedin fireman in 1913. The alarm was activated by smashing the glass on a box mounted on a lamp post. This sent a signal to a switchboard operator, who despatched a fire engine to where the alarm was raised. The system was still used in some towns in the 1970s. With improved alarm technology in the 1930s, some city fire brigades began monitoring private fire alarms in commercial buildings, and set up inspection departments to assess major buildings for fire risk and recommend improvements.

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