





## Chapter One

# 1895 - 1919

There would be many changes in store for the Houston Fire Department when the city took over the service in 1895. The first 25 years would command new directions not only in the department but also in the city of Houston due to the expansion of population and the growth of commerce. Houston would greet the new century with a land mass of nine square miles and a population of 44,633 citizens. By the time the 1920's rolled around Houston would boast a population over 138,000 and almost 40 square miles in size.

Simple technological advancements like an oil burner for a steamer would make a big impact on the effectiveness of fighting fires and the Department's first Union would help to better the welfare of the fire fighters fighting those fires.

The city built its first Fire House (Fire House No. 7) on Milam in 1899. In 1910 the city had 843 fire hydrants and reported 661

fires, up from the 391 alarms experienced in 1904. The blending of the old volunteer brigades with the city of Houston new additions would create a department well suited to protect the citizens from harm. Those resources would be pushed to the limits during the devastating fires of 1912, a year that still holds the record as one of the worst in the city of Houston's history for disastrous blazes.

The end of an era would be witnessed as the horse, the mainstay of transportation for the department would be replaced by gasoline powered vehicles with names like American LaFrance and Chiefs Buggy. One piece of equipment that would survive the transition of horse drawn to motor assisted during this period was the Water Tower. This battle veteran of the Fire Department would be used in the ensuing decades and is currently the property of the Houston Fire Museum.

**Fire Chiefs:**

Thomas F. Ravell  
James J. Hussey  
Jacob "Jack" P. Arto, Jr.  
Thomas O'Leary  
Reginald "Kid" Ollre  
Fred C. Seibert  
William P. Wells

**Line of Duty Deaths:**

Emil "Ed" Thompson  
Frank W. Medlenka  
Clifford W. Johnson  
Barney C. Moffatt  
Thomas A. O'Leary  
Herman J. "Dutch" Wagner  
Clifford A. Wesie

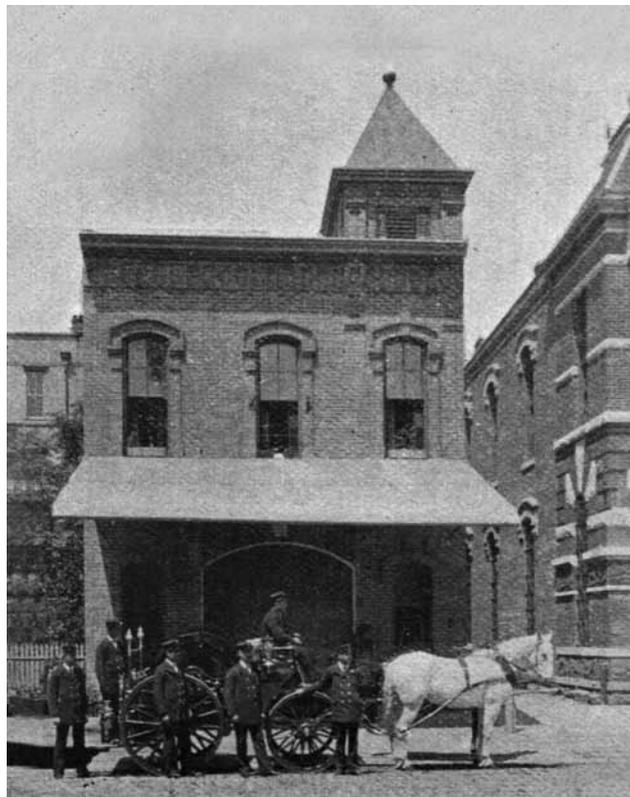
Patrick O'Hara  
Robert Rutherford Glass

**Left:** Houston Fire Department's first paid Fire Chief Thomas F. Ravell 1895 to 1898 and his driver Louis A. "Pinky" Bradley. Photo taken at Central Station, 119 San Jacinto and Caroline. (Family of Charley Burnett)

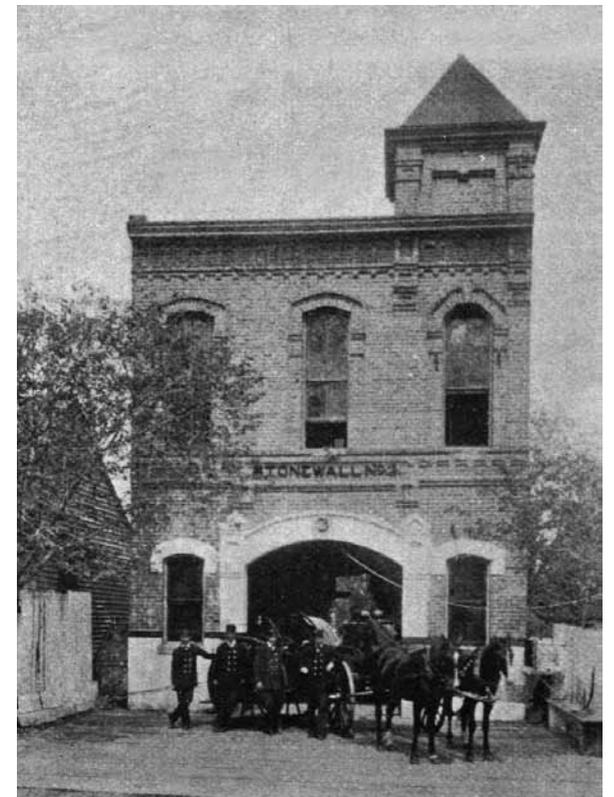


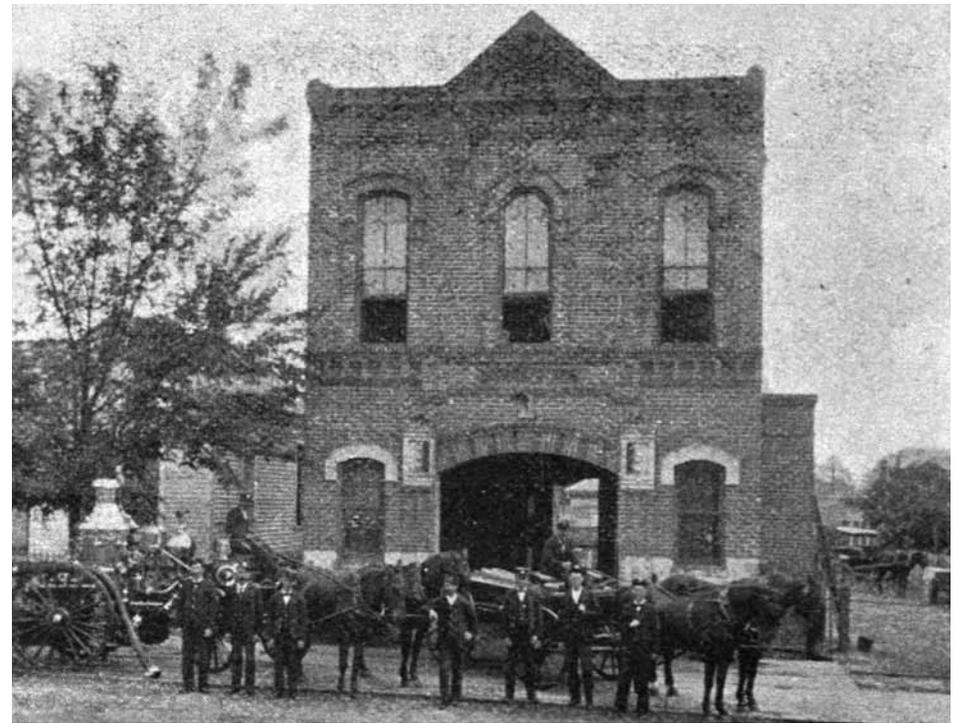
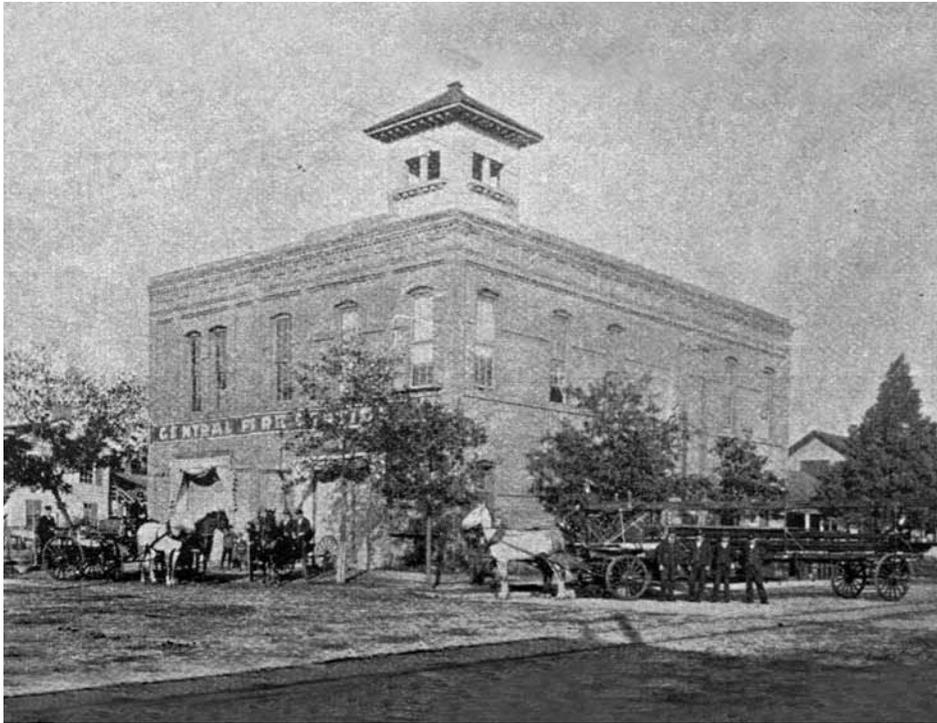
**Above:** Houston Fire Department's 10 of the first 50 Fire Fighters hired by Chief Ravell. Identified in the photo are the following Fire Fighters: third man from the left is Henry Woolery, fifth man from the left is Otto Kersten, and bottom right is Louis "Pinky" Bradley. (From the Family of Charley Burnett)

**Right:** Fire House that served as quarters for Volunteer Company Protection Hose Company No.1, Organized August 14, 1838, re-chartered in October 26, 1886. Company motto: "Semper Paratus." Built in 1889 and located 612 Fannin, it was taken over by the paid HFD June 1895 renamed Hose Company No. 1. (*Souvenir Program of the Houston Fire Department 1897*)



**Far Right:** Fire House that served as quarters for Volunteer Company Stonewall Hose Company No. 3 organized in 1868. Company motto: "Trust In Us." It was built in 1889 and located at 408 Smith. It was taken over by the paid HFD June 1898 and renamed Hose Company No. 3. (*Souvenir Program of the Houston Fire Department 1897*)





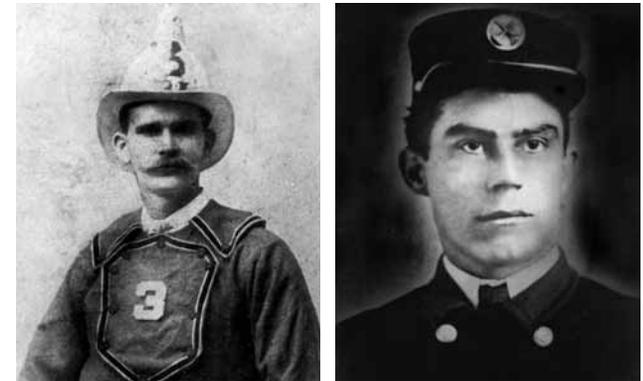
**Above Left:** Fire House that served as quarters for Volunteer Company Hook and Ladder Company No.1, which was established on April 17, 1858. Company motto: “Here We Are.” Built in 1880, located 119 San Jacinto, it was taken over by the paid department in June 1895. It was renamed Central Station and used as headquarters for the new department. In 1903 a nearby horse stable caught fire and burned the Fire House to the ground. Fortunately the HFD new Central Station (as seen on the front cover) was already under construction, and would open that next year. (*Souvenir Program of the Houston Fire Department 1897*)

**Above:** Fire House that served as quarters for Volunteer Company Curtin Hose Co. No. 9, organized May 1, 1881. Company motto: “Tried and True.” First location was 17 Commerce Street and was relocated to 910 Hardy in 1889. Taken over by the paid HFD June 1898 and renamed Hose Company No. 5. (*Souvenir Program of the Houston Fire Department 1897*)

**Left:** Fire House that served as quarters for Volunteer Company Washington No. 8. Organized August 4, 1894, building built the same year located 1307 Crawford. Taken over by the paid department in June 1895 and renamed Hose Company No. 8. (*Souvenir Program of the Houston Fire Department 1897*)



First fire house built by the paid department in 1899 located 2403 Milam. Steamer 7 and Hose 7 were quartered there.  
The building still exists and proudly serves as the Houston Fire Museum. (Family of Ralph Grant)



**Above from Top Left to Bottom Right:** Houston Fire Department Fire Chiefs 1898 - 1923. (All Photos, Houston Fire Department)

James J. Hussey, Fire Chief 1898 to 1901

Jacob "Jack" P. Jr. Arto, Fire Chief 1901-1905

Thomas O' Leary, Fire Chief 1905-1908

Reginald "Kid" Ollre, Fire Chief 1908-1912

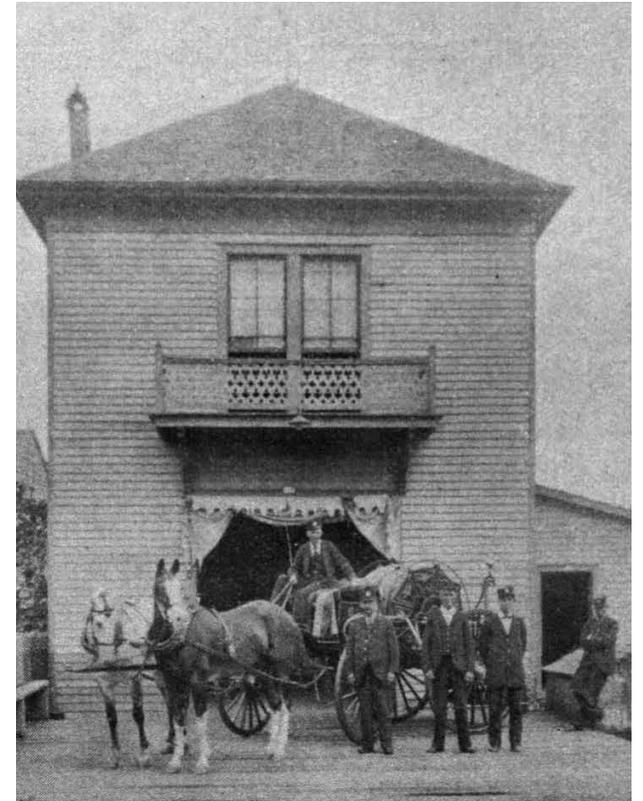
Fred C. Seibert, Fire Chief 1912-1919

William P. Wells, Fire Chief 1919-1923

**Left:** Fire Dispatch office located in the Central Station 519 San Jacinto. Photo taken Circa 1911. The office was responsible for taking calls and monitoring the City's 50 Fire Alarm boxes. (Family of Ralph Grant)



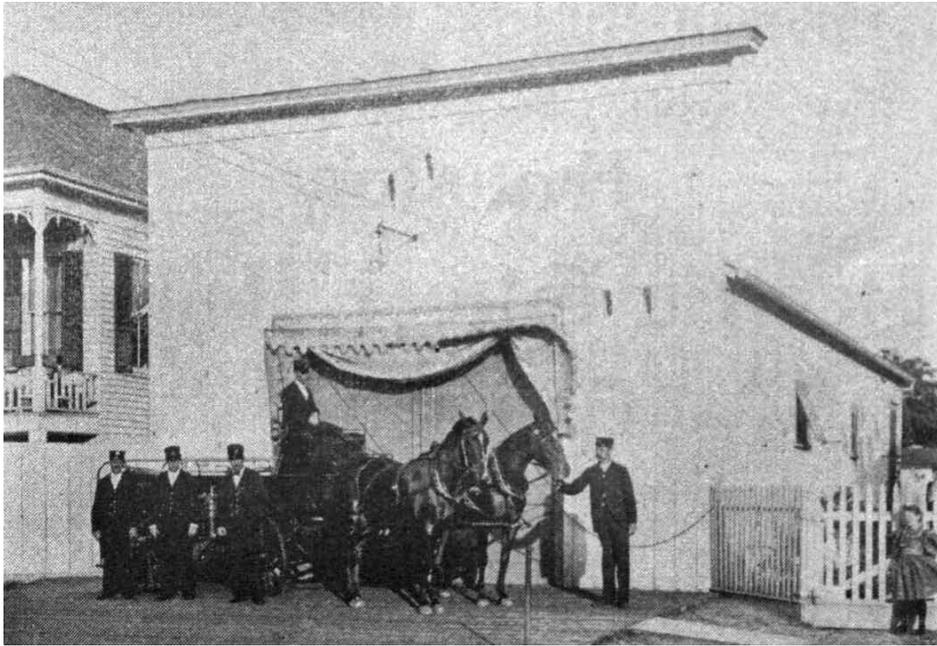
Fire House No. 3, built in 1903 located 1919 Houston Avenue. Photo taken in about 1915. Horse drawn equipment showing both bays, on the left is the department's supply wagon which was quartered there. On the right is Hose Wagon 3. Identified in the photo or in the group on the left, far left Fire Fighter is Emry Hard. The third Fire Fighter in the same group is Captain Charles Dortic. (Family of Ralph Grant)



**Above Left:** Fire House No. 6 built in 1903 located 1702 Washington, Hose Company 6 and Steamer 16 were quartered there. (Family of Ralph Grant)

**Above:** Fire House that served as quarters for Volunteer Company Mechanics Hose Company No. 6. Organized October 28, 1873. Company motto: “Rough and Ready.” First location was 144 Washington at Preston. In 1892 the company moved to 1106 Washington. It was taken over by the paid HFD in June 1895 and renamed Hose Company No. 6. (*Souvenir Program of the Houston Fire Department 1897*)

**Left:** In 1931 new quarters for the crew of Fire House No. 6 were built and located at 901 Henderson. Sometime after the closing the original Fire House was put on the market by the City of Houston and sold to a local business man. In 2005 the building was again available and purchased by the owner of a local marketing company, who bought with the intention of restoring it to the original condition and use it for his company headquarters. At the time of purchase the 102-year-old building was in very poor condition. The new “reconditioned” version was completed in February of 2012. (The Story Sloane Collection)

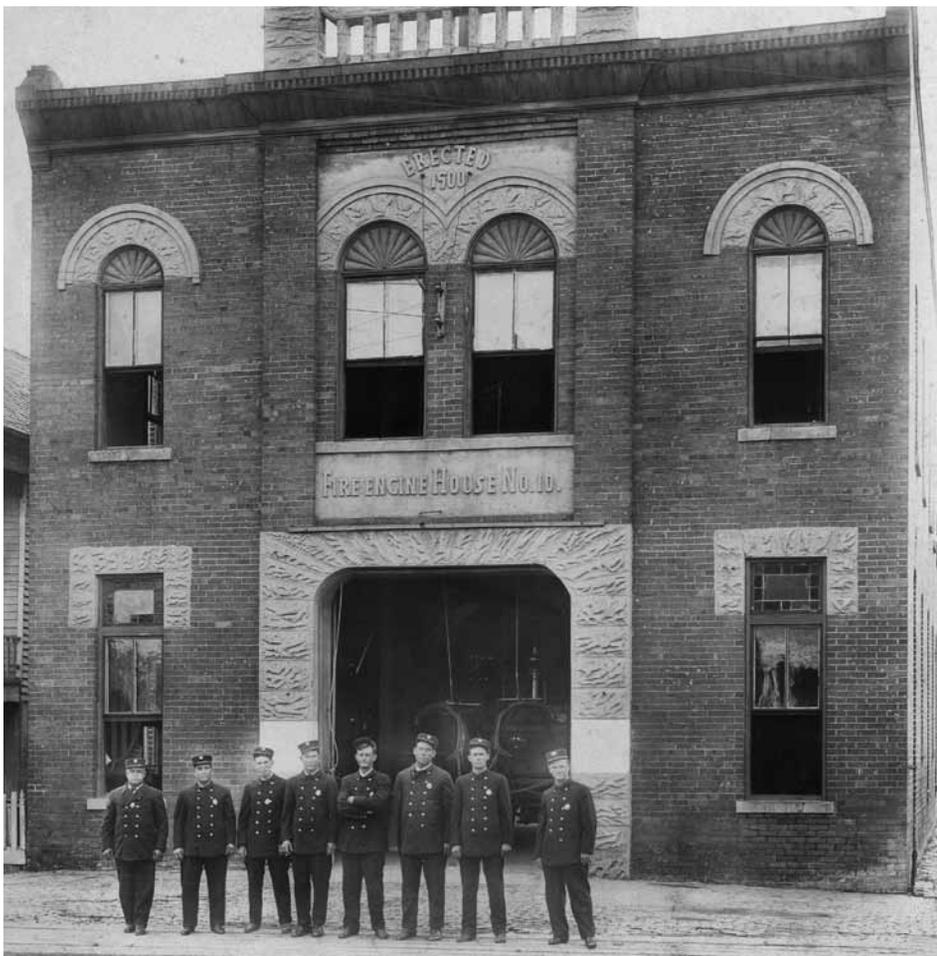


**Left:** Fire House that served as quarters for Volunteer Company Seibert Company No. 10, organized August 4, 1894, building built the same year was located at 205 Chartres. It was taken over by the paid HFD in June 1895 and renamed Hose Company No. 10. (Family of Ralph Grant)

**Bottom Left:** Fire House No. 10 built in 1900 located at 207 Chartres the same location as the quarters for the Volunteer Seibert Company No. 10. (*Souvenir Program of the Houston Fire Department 1897*)

**Below:** This is the third generation of Fire House No. 10 located at 205 Chartres Street. The Fire House was built in 1958 it served the City of Houston until March of 1977 when Fire Chief Joseph Perino closed Fire House No. 10 along with two other downtown fire companies, Fire House No. 5 and No. 24. The vacant building served as storage for the EMS Division for many years. In 2003 during Mayor Brown's administration the building was sold and torn down, and to this day is still a vacant lot. (Houston Fire Department)

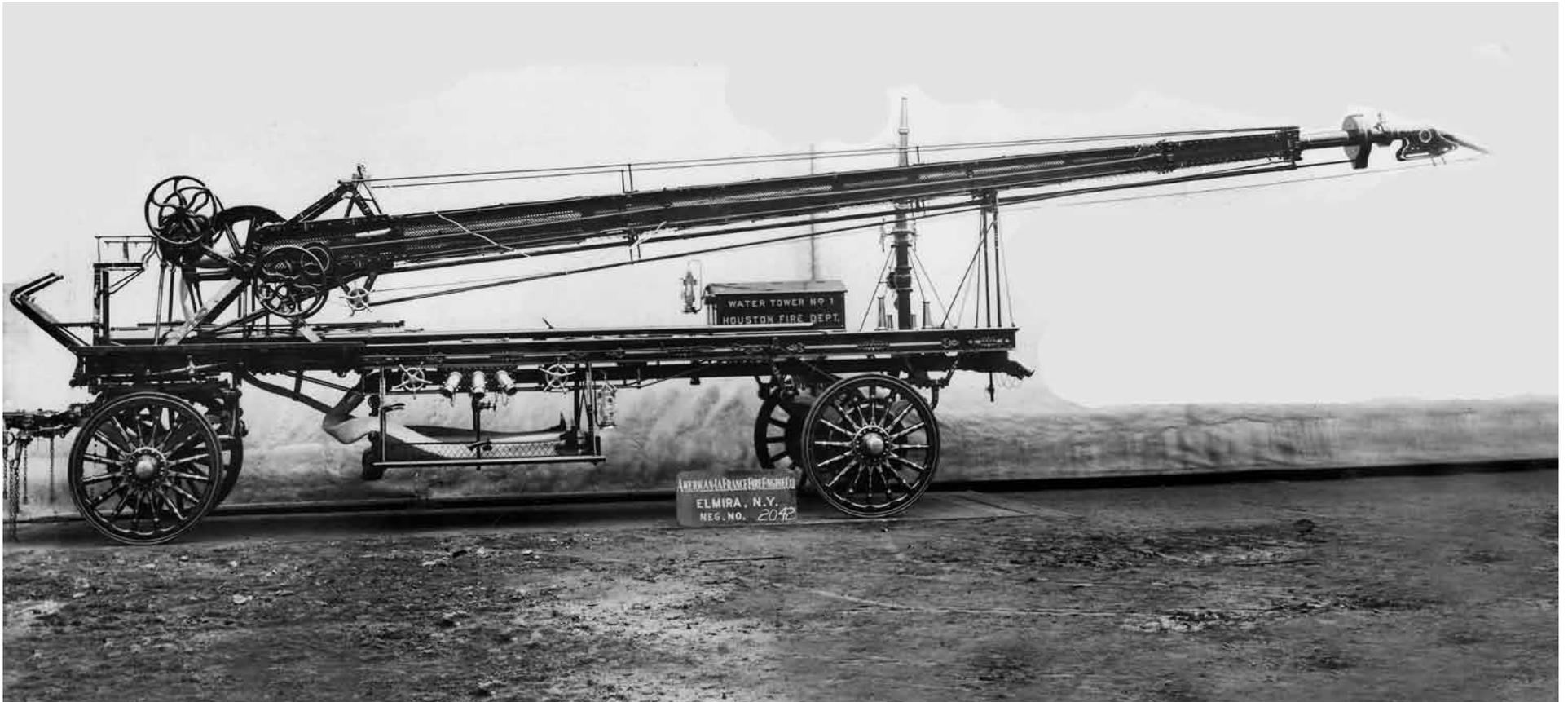
**Opposite Page:** This dynamic sequence of photographs was taken by Houstonian John Winter in 1911. They show an early fire department steamer head on barreling down Main Street in front of the old Rice hotel. The photographer captures a great side view of the steamer, smoke billowing, between Texas Avenue and Capitol. Racing down Capital Avenue and turning onto Main Street is one of the Fire Departments first fire trucks. This unique series of photographs illustrates the transition of Houston's Fire Department from horse drawn to horse power under the hood. (John Winter)







It was a cold night on February 21, 1912 in the Fifth Ward just north of downtown Houston. Vagrants, trying to keep warm started a fire in an abandoned drinking establishment. Unfortunately, the fire spread setting the structure ablaze. The fire fueled by strong north winds spread block by block and soon became unmanageable. In addition to fighting the blaze Fire Fighters had to start a door to door evacuation of the area. The ward was a mix of working class citizen homes and industrial complexes. The waterway of Buffalo Bayou helped to keep the fire contained and away from downtown but early the next morning the true extent of the damage could be seen. All in all over forty square blocks had burned. Some 40,000 bales of cotton were destroyed along with thirteen industrial plants. More than 100 homes and 100 railcars burned bringing the total property loss to over five million dollars. It was a miracle that not one life was lost. (University of Houston)



American LaFrance Water Tower 1, the pride of the Houston Fire Department, shipped to Houston in 1912. At the time Houston was in dire need of a heavy stream apparatus and that is exactly what they got. The Tower was motorized in 1918 and served the City of Houston until 1960. There are many photos through the years of this apparatus doing its job. In 2012 Water Tower 1 is still in one piece and is owned by the Houston Fire Museum and is currently in storage. (Houston Fire Museum)



On May 19, 1912 a large fire consumed a major part of Main Street in downtown Houston. Billed as the million dollar fire or “Stowers Fire” the event would contribute to the record of 1912 as being one of the worst years for fires in Houston’s history. On May 19th the Stowers furniture building on Main Street caught fire. It spread to involve a whole city block eventually consuming four buildings. Damages topped the one million mark and the fire became known as the “Million Dollar Fire”. Unlike the huge Fifth Ward fire back in February where there was no loss of life this event claimed the life of a Houston Fire Fighter, Captain Herman “Dutch” Wagner. (Top Photos Courtesy Houston Fire Department, Panoramic Photo Courtesy Library of Congress)





Central Station Fire Fighters preparing the caisson for the funeral of Herman "Dutch" Wagner, injured May 19, 1912 and succumbed to his injuries May 25, 1912. Captain Wagner was Houston's 6th Line of Duty Death since the Department became paid in August of 1895. (Family of Ralph Grant)



Group photo of the Fire Fighters assigned to Central Station, 519 San Jacinto. Pictured here are 33 of the men. Fire Chief Fred Seibert (Chief from 1912 to 1919) is the second man from the left in the bottom row. The same row the 3rd, 4th, 5th men were possibly law enforcement. (Family of Ralph Grant)

**Right:** Chemical Chief's car built in 1915 pictured in front of Central Station, 519 San Jacinto. Identified in the photo, left to right, Fred Seibert, Fire Chief, Harry Mathews, Timothy Daly, Henry Barrett, William Hundt, next man is not identified. Pictured on the right are the builders of the apparatus, Bert Cecil, John Phillips, Albert Roper, and Oscar Henning. (Family of Ralph Grant)



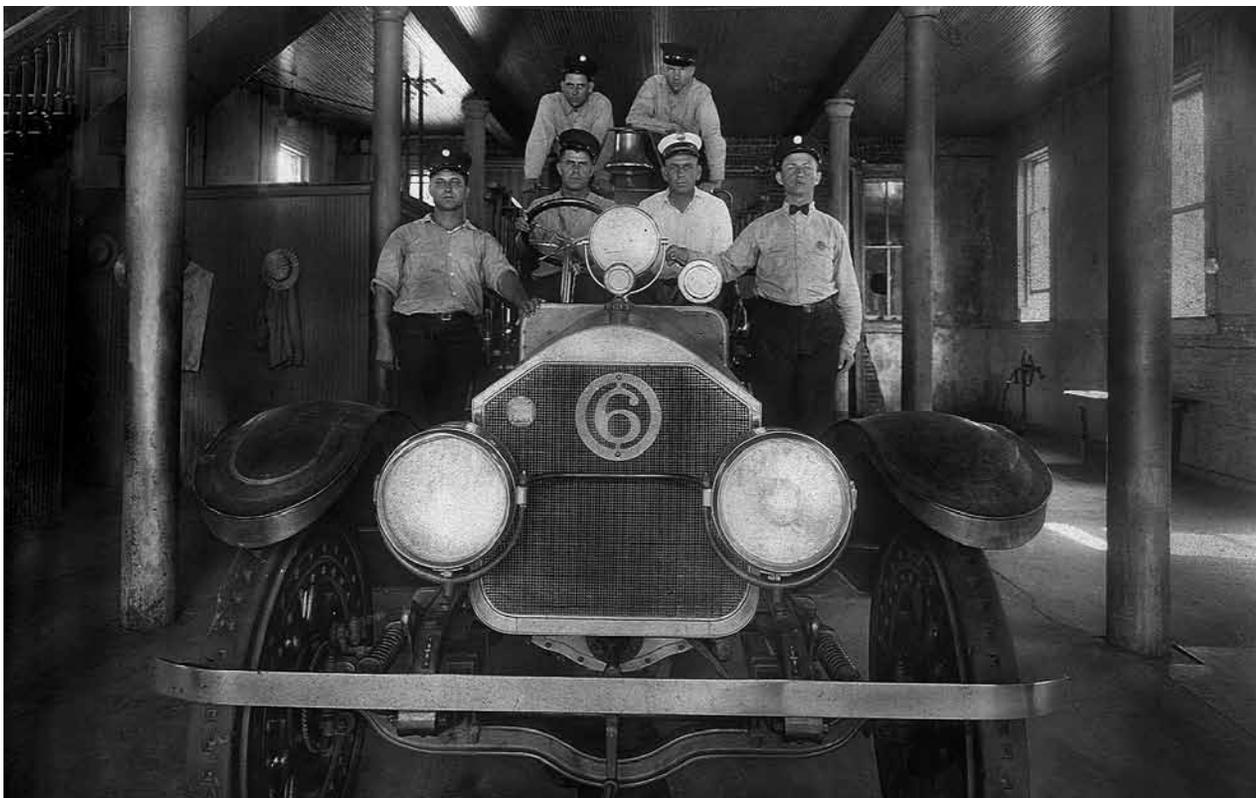
**Right:** Fire House No. 3, 1919 Houston Avenue. Photo taken in 1916 with the crew standing in front of the horse drawn hose wagon. The men identified in the photo, far left is Herman Hundt who was the Lieutenant of the crew and the man next to him is "Molly" Walker who was the driver of the Steamer. (Family of "Molly" Walker)





**Above Left:** Hose Wagon 10 out in front of Fire House No. 10 located 207 Chartres. Identified in the photo-far right John D. Ruby most likely in his first year in the department. (Family of John Ruby)

**Above:** Drew Campbell King joined the Houston Fire Department in 1898. For almost 40 years he served the city obtaining the rank of Captain of Fire House No. 7. His strong disciplinarian will was backed by the Colt 45 pistol he was known to carry, a typical accessory for the son of a Texas Ranger. Drew was instrumental in the formation of the department's first union and liked to end his shift with a bucket of beer. (Houston Fire Museum)



**Left:** Inside view of Fire House No. 6, 1702 Washington. The photo includes the crew, the 1912 American LaFrance Engine, and a good view of the apparatus bay. The captain in the photo (white hat) is John S. Little Sr. This photo was taken in 1919. (Family of John S. Little Sr.)



Panoramic photograph taken of the entire Houston Fire Department. The photo was taken on May 7, 1916 by a local photographer named J. D. Lilterst at the Central Station located at 519 San Jacinto at Texas Avenue on the San Jacinto side of the fire house. Research tells us the fire fighters and drivers were arranged by their Fire Houses. All of the department's officers were grouped in the center of the photo with the chiefs of the department sitting in front of the group. They are identified as First Assistant Chief John A "Bob" Boyd, sitting on the left, Fire Chief Fred C. Seibert, and William "Ed" Edward Franks. At the time of this photo the Houston Fire Department reported a roster of 158 men. This photo was in the May 27 edition of the Houston Press. The article in the newspaper was mostly about the transition of the HFD from the horse drawn era to the motorized era. (Houston Fire Museum)



*H. L. Lister, Photograph*



Prior to 1915 at the end of town was the City of Brunner. The City of Houston annexed that area in 1913. The Brunner Volunteer Engine Company was housed in a small building located at Washington Avenue and Parker. The Fire Company had five members. After the area was annexed the City of Houston built a new Fire House one block west of the old Bruner Fire House. This photo shows opening day of the brand new Houston Fire House No. 11. There were several City dignitaries in attendance and so far the only one identified is the Mayor of Houston, Joseph Pastoriza. He is the first man on the left. The Fire Chief, Fred Seibert, was also in attendance, he is on the right side of the photo to the left of the man in the overcoat. Prior to the City of Houston annexing Bruner, Chief Seibert had served as the Chief of the Brunner Fire Company. (Houston Fire Fighter Aaron Clark)



**Above Left:** Hose Wagon 7, Fire House No. 7, 2403 Milam. Photo taken in 1918, Captain Drew C. King Sr. is the Fire Fighter on the left. (Houston Fire Museum)

**Above:** Crew of Fire House No. 10, 205 Chartres. Photo taken in front of the horse drawn steamer about 1919. Shortly after this photo was taken the steamer was replaced with a 1920 American LaFrance engine. The only fire fighter identified in this photo is Lieutenant Steven Wells (white hat). (Family of John Ruby)

**Left:** Hose Company 3, Fire House No. 3, 1919 Houston Avenue. Identified in the photo is Johnnie Riesner, he the third man from left to right. Also pictured is Fire Alarm Box No. 117. (Houston Fire Department)



**Above:** This fire occurred sometime around 1915 at an unknown location. There were several large fires during that time period but we were unable to pinpoint which one. On the left side of the photo you see Water Tower 1 working. This was prior to the placement of a motorized tractor in 1918. (Family of Ralph Grant)

**Right:** Chief's driver 2nd Assistant Chief's Ford Model T, assigned to Central Station, parked in front of Fire House No. 6 for a photo op. Circa early 1920s. (Houston Fire Museum)

**Far Right:** A rare snow provides ample material for the fire fighters of Central Station to create a "snow woman" with the aide of neighborhood children. The rectory for Christ Church Cathedral is in the background. Photo taken January 11, 1918. (Family of Ralph Grant)







Fire House No. 9 built in 1908 located 702 Hogan at Freeman Street. The original Fire House No. 9 was built in 1899 around the corner from the new location at 1810 Keene Street. The Fire Department Motor Repair Shop was built behind the Fire House and was relocated to 1205 Dart Street in 1968. The Hogan Street Fire House was rebuilt on the same site in 1971 where it still stands today protecting the Citizens of Houston. This photo was taken with a “fish eye” lens giving the building a curved appearance. (Houston Fire Museum)



Houston in the early 1900's would continue to grow as the horse and buggy would give way to the automobile. Main Street was still considered the center of town as construction would push the city's boundaries to the south and west. This 1909 image shows trolley traffic on Main Street and the new Harris County Courthouse nearing completion on the right. The Rice Hotel on the left would soon be dismantled to make room for the new Modern Rice hotel. (Library of Congress)