

FROM THE MUSEUM

The first Chief's car to be used in the Department was a motor car called the "Peerless." It was built on runabout lines, but longer, and according to its makers strong enough to withstand anything short of a collision with City Hall.

The machine had a guaranteed speed of sixty miles an hour and came equipped with a enormous gong that had a "clang" like the crack of doom, loud enough to be heard squares away, above the roar of the city's traffic. On its first run, an extra alarm at "C" and Ontario Streets, Chief Engineer James J. Baxter, responded from Juniper and Race and made it in 11 minutes!

When the City purchased the automobile for the Chief Engineer, around October 23, 1907, Baxter was quoted as saying, "the city should have purchased automobiles for the chief and the fire marshals long ago. For the long runs were mighty hard on a horse." He also called it "the Twentieth Century way of fighting fires."

Baxter, himself, was quite a Chief and Firefighter. Born on November 24, 1845 within 50 feet of the Northern Liberty Volunteer Engine Company's station. He was a man that believed in "dropping" everything for a fire and believed that every other fireman should have the same trait. The Chief was quoted in a newspaper article in the early 1900's, as saying "you can't make firemen. They have got to have it in them or else you can't put it there." At that time he had no confidence in the schools for firemen started in some other cities.

The first indication that young Baxter was born to drop everything for a fire came when he occasionally "dropped" school for the sake of following the volunteers at a fire. He spent all his time around the firehouse and his boyhood dreams were filled with nothing but engines, flames and smoke.

When he was 19 years old and eligible to membership in the Northern Liberty Engine Company he dropped his upholstery job at every given opportunity for fighting fires as a volunteer. In those days a fireman paid for the privilege of fighting fires. Baxter was described by a newspaper reporter as having a mania for putting

out fires just like some people suffer with a mania for starting fires. All through his thrilling career this feeling never wore off. He could think of nothing he would rather have than a chance to fight a good-sized fire.

As quoted from an interview; "No, no," he answered slowly and quite seriously, after a few minutes' lapse in deep thought: "no, I don't think there is anything I like better than a good fire—that is, the chance to put out a good fire. Well, what do I like about it? I guess that's hard to tell. But the excitement is great."

The volunteer companies were exclusive in their way and exacted high dues, but young Baxter managed to earn enough as an upholsterer to keep himself in good standing and entitled to fight fires. In fact, he was so proud of his standing as a volunteer that when City Council proposed to pass an ordinance for the organization of a paid fire department, he was one of the enthusiasts who raised strenuous objections.



JAMES BAXTER

He was the first to make the transition from horse to auto.

The suggestion of pay was an insult to young Baxter's lofty firefighting ideals. Enthusiasts protested loudly against having the glory and honor of fire-fighting obliterated by a dollar mark.

Baxter finally brought himself to reason that after all the organization of the paid fire department meant nothing else than by joining it he

would not have to work anymore, but "just fight fires all the time," all free without paying for it, and getting his keep in the bargain. So Baxter joined the new department and "dropped everything" again for the realization of his one ambition.

He was kept busy fighting fires from then on. Why, he played this hobby so hard that he had time for nothing else, not even time to get married until he was 44 years old.

As a District Engineer he spent nearly all his time in the firehouse, around the engines; and it is doubtful he would ever have gotten married if he had not fallen in love with the daughter of the family living next door to the engine house. For Chief Baxter had no time for anything a square outside the fire department going on forty-five years.

Twenty-two years after entering the paid department he was appointed its Chief Engineer on October 23, 1892, a post he held for 19 years.

In 1908 he had fought fires in Philadelphia for 50 years and expressed the opinion that "Our Department is in excellent condition." The Department by then had earned an outstanding reputation. Insurance men called it "the best in the world, barring none." Then the Philadelphia Fire Department was composed of 1000 men and was equipped with 54 engines and hose-wagons, 15 trucks, 6 chemical wagons, 1 pipe-line wagon and 1 water-tower. Of special pride was a high-pressure system on the chief business thoroughfares.

In 1908 one of Baxter's special projects was a study of the causes leading to the collapse of concrete structures, when the walls become heated when water is played on them. He was skeptical regarding "fireproof" buildings and remarked in an interview that he knew of only one in the city that he would put in that class. Which one it was, he didn't say.

