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## **The Beginnings of a Cherished Town Institution: The Kensington Volunteer Fire Department**

**by Lori Kelley-Mull**

Last year the Kensington community and its dedicated volunteer fire department celebrated the reopening of the department's newly renovated home at the corner of Connecticut Avenue and Plyers Mill Road.

One of the largest volunteer fire departments in Montgomery County and Maryland, the Kensington Volunteer Fire Department (KVFD) is also one of the oldest and most cherished institutions in town. How did it all begin, you may ask? Well, the frequent fires in the all-wood buildings with their oil-fired cooking stoves, together with some mishaps, were the embers that sparked the formation of the Kensington Volunteer Fire Department. Told some years back in the newspaper titled Towne, the story is worth recalling.

Organized in 1894, the KVFD grew in many ways out of the dreams of a small group of men. In its early years, the Town of Kensington relied on its fire marshal to organize its citizens in so-called bucket brigades. As might be expected with little equipment and training, numerous buildings were lost.

Eventually, around the turn of the century, the town was able to purchase a two-wheeled chemical unit to use in their fire-fighting emergencies.

Unfortunately, the first chance to use the new equipment failed. Upon being summoned to a nearby fire, the fire team rushed to the garage housing the new chemical unit. That's when the group discovered that no one had brought the garage door key. The men eventually broke down the metal-plated door, only to find their chemical unit bonded to the floor. It seems that a recent flood followed by freezing temperatures had cemented the two-wheeler to the floor. Unable to budge their new fire-fighting equipment, the men rushed back to the fire empty-handed, forced to watch the burning structure be consumed by flames.

Things went better for many years, but other unfortunate mishaps led a young man named Eugene Raney to call for a group of volunteer firefighters who would be independent of the fire marshal's direction. At first these men formed a firemen's club, meeting at the old school house (later the Armory and now the Community Center/Town Hall) that served as the firehouse.

The group was a social one as much as it was a professional team. The volunteers frequently gathered for games of cards and pool. There was even a movie theater on the first floor of the building for members and nonmembers alike.

The firemen's club remained an informal group of volunteers until shortly after the regular firehouse and school burned down. This event spawned the volunteer firemen's club to form the more formal Kensington Volunteer Fire Department in 1922. Their first official act was to elect Raney as their first fire chief.

However, the KVFD continued to lack official recognition. Meanwhile, the Town's own arsenal of fire-fighting equipment was growing. Using insurance money from the destruction of the firehouse, the Town purchased new equipment, including a Dodge hook-and-ladder truck.

Lacking fire-fighting equipment of its own, the KVFD organized a carnival in hopes of raising funds. It was a success, enabling the group to purchase a Dodge pumper truck. Thanks to their new pumper truck and their determination, confidence grew in this group of hard-working volunteers. So much so that in 1925 the group was incorporated and became Kensington's official fire-fighting unit.

By 1927, the KVFD was very much part of the fabric of community life, participating in social events as well as maintaining a professional approach to fire fighting. The KVFD took its fire-fighting duties seriously, continually training and developing innovative solutions and programs. For example, the KVFD was the first fire

department to have its own blood transfusion team, as well as the first fire department in the area to use floodlights for fighting night fires.

In 1929, the women of Kensington took another step to demonstrate how the community felt about this group. They formed the Ladies Auxiliary to support the KVFD by providing food and encouragement during and after fire emergencies. In the years following World War II, the Town of Kensington grew and the KVFD grew right along with it.

Today, led by James P. Stanton, Fire/Rescue Chief, and with its headquarters in Kensington, the KVFD operates four fire-rescue stations with more than 225 active volunteer members and about 70 full-time county firefighters. About three-quarters of the approximately 16,000 calls for service each year involve emergency medical services.

In addition to its fire and rescue work, the KVFD helps educate children in fire safety and sponsors the First-Aid Unit program to introduce teenagers to Emergency Medical Services work. The Kensington Fire Station also has a Loan Closet of medical equipment and supplies, including crutches and wheelchairs. The KVFD administrative office at 301-929-8000 handles the arrangements for the equipment loans.

The big sign outside the fire station announces events and brings safety messages to the Kensington community. Each year the KVFD also takes part in Kensington's Labor Day Parade and Festival. The community is grateful to the KVFD and looks forward to a future as outstanding as its past.