

# Philadelphia's Pipeline Companies

by  
Jack Wright

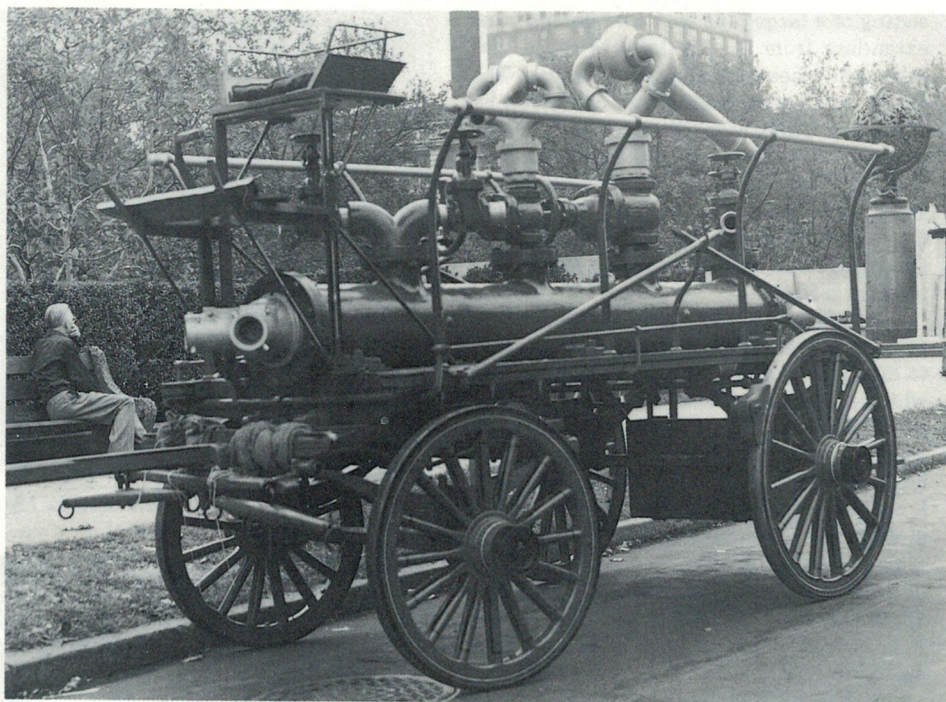
*Photos from the author's collection*

On March 15, 1993, the Philadelphia Fire Department introduced a "new" term to identify engine companies that carry 5-inch hose. These units are now known as Pipeline Companies for easy recognition and to distinguish them from conventional engine companies. While this terminology is unique to the Philadelphia Fire Department, it is not new, coming from another era in the department's history.

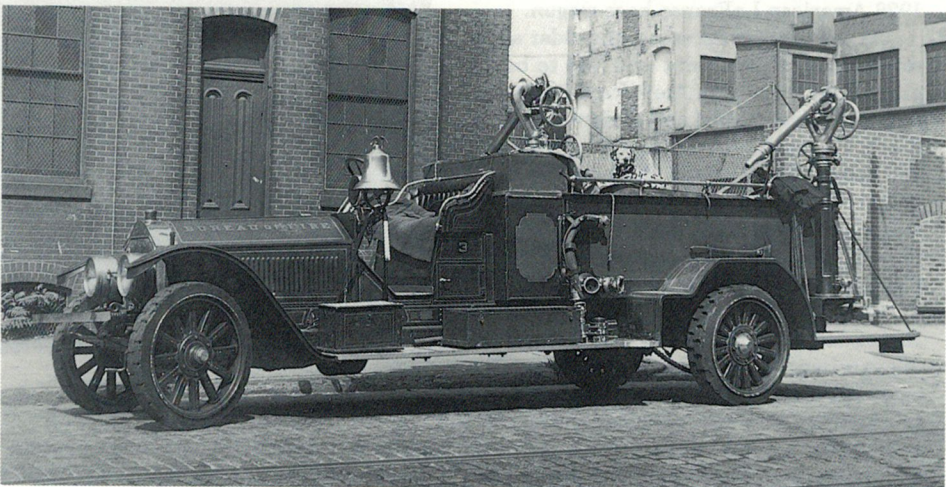
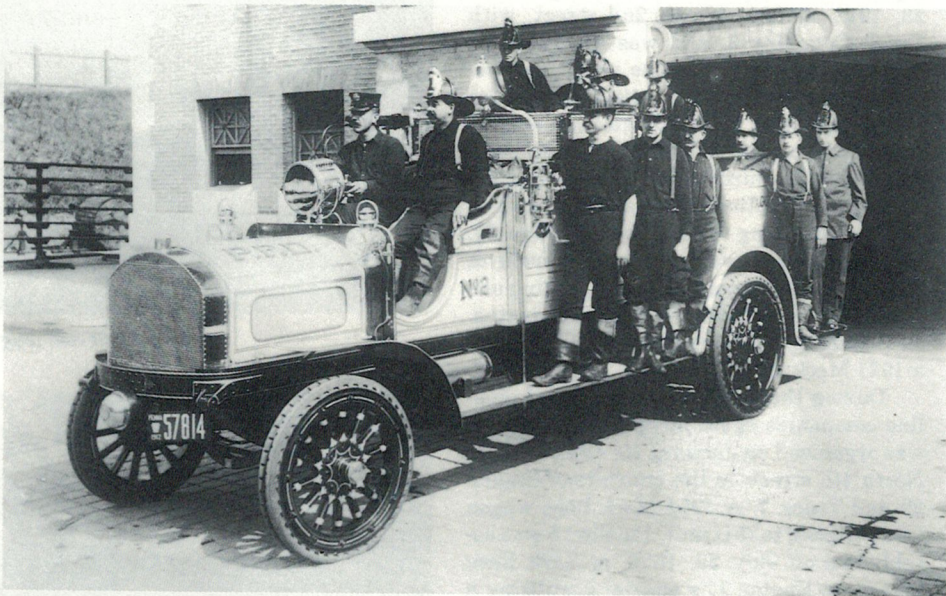
Following a series of near conflagrations in the high value downtown district at the turn of the century, insurance companies raised their premiums. They suggested that if the antiquated water mains that serviced the area were replaced, the threat of conflagration would be diminished. The insurers went before the city council to plead their case. When no action was taken, the insurance companies threatened not to write any more policies on property located in downtown Philadelphia. Facing a possible major loss in tax revenue, the city council reluctantly agreed to install a high pressure fire system.

The high pressure system was completed in November, 1903, and consisted of approximately 26 miles of pipe and 434 hydrants. A pumping station was constructed at Delaware Avenue and Race Street which was capable of pumping 15,000 gpm through the system. A bulkhead connection to allow a fireboat to pump into the system was included to keep the system operational in the event that the pumping station was out of service. This hook-up was actually used prior to completion of the system. The fireboat *Stuart* pumped into eight 4-inch lines and the police boat *Ashbridge* supplied a 4-inch line to supply water through the system to companies operating at a four alarm fire on July 2, 1902, at the Mitchell & Company yarn dealership at 122 Market Street.

The basic principle of the high pressure system was to supply large volumes of water under pressure to the scene of a fire where hand lines could then be taken directly off hydrants without using pumpers. To accomplish this objective, a new type of unit, the Pipeline Company, was organized. Pipeline 1 was established in November, 1903, and was stationed with Engine 32 and Battalion 2 at 6th and Sansome Streets. The company responded with two pieces of apparatus, a hose wagon that carried 3-1/2-inch hose, and a horse-drawn manifold con-



**Above:** Pipeline 1's 1903 high pressure wagon, built in the department's shops. **Below:** The 1912 Mack assigned to Pipeline 2 which was destroyed in a fatal collision with a train in 1920.



*Pipeline 3 using the 1927 American LaFrance wagon.*



sisting of a large pipe with two deluge guns extending from it. Firefighters could also take hand lines off the manifold wagon. The design of this apparatus was conceived by Battalion Chief Meskill and was built by George R. Bardsley in the department's shop. Its first use was on November 17, 1903, at a five-alarm fire at 117-25 North 5th Street. This was also the first time that the completed high pressure system was used for a fire.

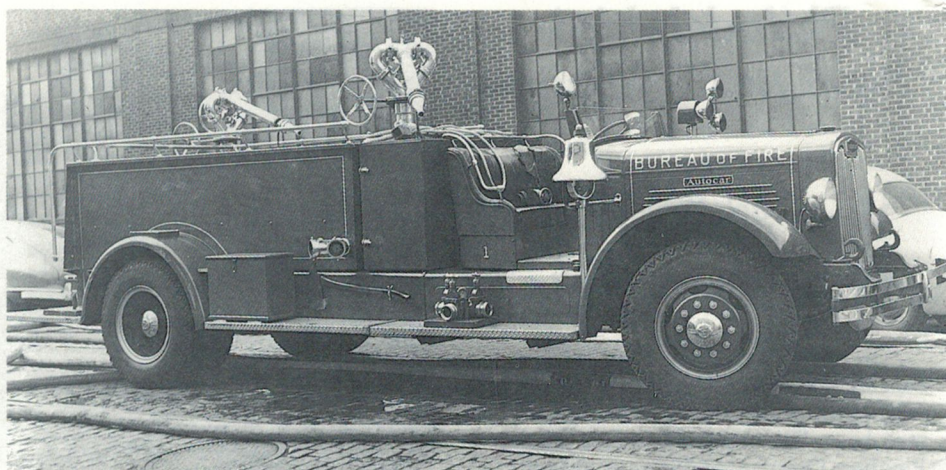
Satisfied with the success of the downtown high pressure system, the city decided to extend this service to the "Mill District," which included sections of North Philadelphia, Kensington, and Port Richmond, where a large number of textile mills were located. This portion of the system was fed by a large reservoir located at 6th Street and Lehigh Avenue. Pipeline 2 was organized on April 16, 1912, located at the rear of the reservoir and assigned both pieces of apparatus formerly assigned to Pipeline 1. A 1911 high pressure hose wagon was assigned to Pipeline 1.

As the high pressure system and the pipeline companies began to prove their worth, more such units were organized. Pipeline 3 was established on September 28, 1912, at 2003 North 2nd street, with Truck Company 3, and was assigned the original pipeline apparatus which was replaced at Pipeline 2 by a 1912 Mack hose wagon equipped with a 60-gallon chemical tank. Two commercial truck company hose wagons were purchased in 1914 and assigned to Pipeline Companies 1 and 3. While responding to an alarm on June 27, 1920, Pipeline 2 was struck by a train at American and Somerset Streets, killing one firefighter and destroying the apparatus. To replace it, the Reading Railroad donated a 1921 Mack AC hose wagon.

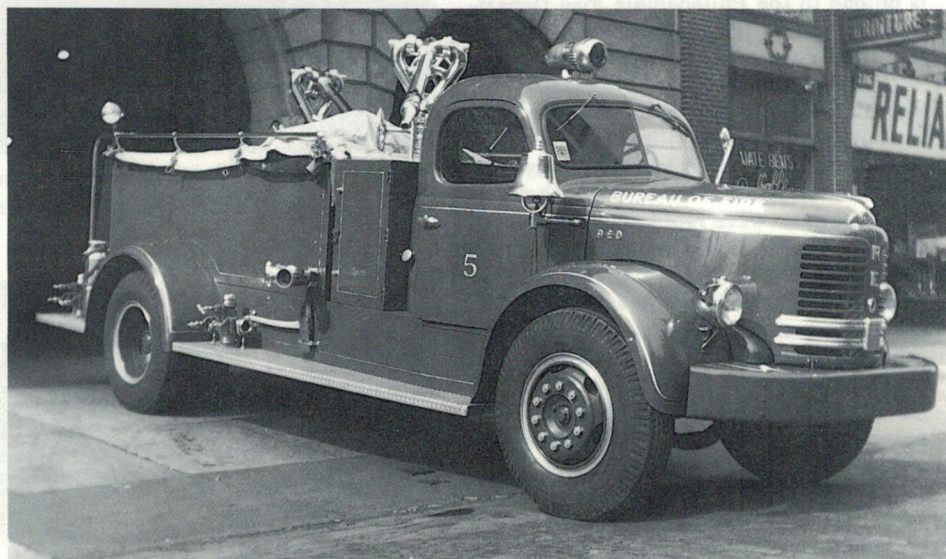
During the 1920s, the number of pipeline companies again increased. Pipeline 4 was organized on January 10, 1922, at 1225 North 4th street, in the quarters of Engine 29 and Truck 7. A 1914 Mack hose wagon was assigned to this unit. Pipeline 5 was established on July 29, 1926, at 1328 Race Street, at Engine 17's quarters, utilizing a 1926 American LaFrance hose wagon.

As the years progressed, the older apparatus began to wear out and had to be replaced. In 1927, an American LaFrance wagon was purchased and assigned to pipeline 1. Two Autocar wagons were purchased and assigned to Pipeline Companies 1 and 4 in 1941. A Reo wagon was delivered and assigned to pipeline 5 in 1949, followed by two Ford/Ward LaFrance wagons for Pipeline Companies 2 and 3 the following year.

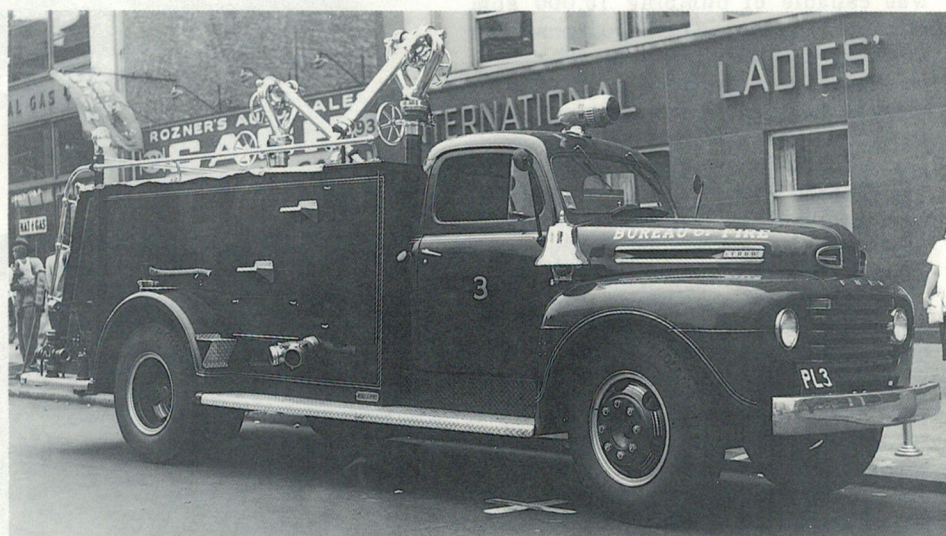
Over the years, the pipeline companies responded to thousands of alarms, providing excellent service. But the number of serious fires in the high pressure districts was increasing, and the pipeline companies were being spread too thinly. A plan was formulated to phase out the pipeline companies, with selected engine companies



*One of two similar units delivered in 1941, this Autocar wagon was assigned to Pipeline 1.*



*The 1949 Reo wagon, assigned to Pipeline 5.*



*One of two such units built by Ward LaFrance on a 1950 Ford chassis, this wagon was assigned to Pipeline 3.*

equipped with 3-1/2-inch hose picking up their functions. During February, 1954, the last of the pipeline companies were dis-

banded and the era of the High Pressure Company began. Initially there were twenty such units located within the high



pressure districts and in the immediate surrounding areas, providing greater flexibility in fireground operations. This system continued until 1972, when 3-1/2-inch hose was assigned to every engine company, and there was no longer a need for the high pressure designation.

During 1981, Philadelphia began experimenting with the use of 5-inch hose. Engine Company 6 was chosen as the pilot company, and the large diameter hose was loaded on a spare pumper marked as Engine 106. When Engine 6 was dispatched for the use of the 5-inch hose, it responded as a two-piece unit, with its only responsibility being to lay the 5-inch hose and augment water supply. This pilot program proved so successful that eventually twelve additional engine companies were assigned 5-inch hose. In addition to Engine 6, Engine Companies 3, 5, 18, 19, 20, 28, 34, 40, 49, 50, 52, and 61 have been designated Pipeline Companies. Each is assigned a 1991 Seagrave pumper equipped with a 1500 gpm pump and 500-gallon tank. There is also a Pipeline 180, which is quartered at the Fire Academy and is assigned a 1979 American LaFrance 1000 gpm pumper



A modern day pipeline company, Pipeline 49 is assigned a 1993 Seagrave 1500 gpm pumper carrying 5-inch hose. Jack Wright photo.

equipped with a 500-gallon tank, that is not staffed but fully equipped and ready to go. If needed, only a crew for it is required.

It appears that some tradition has returned to the Philadelphia Fire Department with the resurgence of the pipeline termi-

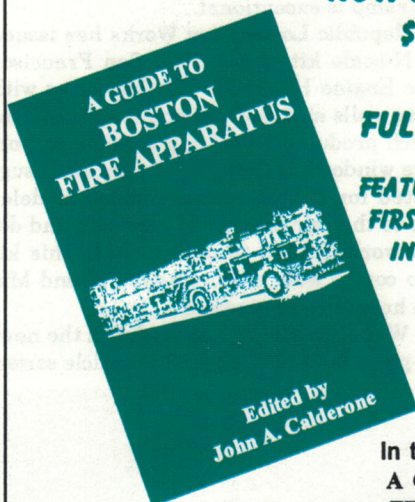
nology. When a pipeline company is heard on the radio, it is easy to think back to the days when the men with the green and white front pieces on their helmets hiked out to the tapping joker. As we've said before in *FAJ*, history does repeat itself!

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