



East Alton Fire Department Marks 100th Anniversary On Friday, May 28, 2021

by Chris Rhodes, Reporter
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EAST ALTON - East Alton Fire Department has a considerable amount to be proud of this week as Friday, May 21, 2021, is the day of its 100th anniversary. On May 28, 1921, the East Alton Fire Department started its journey. For a century, the East Alton Fire Department members have served their community in strong fashion.

East Alton Fire Chief Tim Quigley has a long history as a firefighter/first responder and he said he is so proud of all those who have served in the department for the 100 years. This year, there will not be any special celebration because of COVID-19, but he said an open house with the police department will be planned next year.

“Hitting 100 years is special and something everyone associated with the fire department should be proud of,” Chief Quigley said.

This is a history of the East Alton Fire Department compiled by Chief Larry Ringering (1921-1989), and Engineer Andrew Mortland (1989-to present).

The East Alton Fire Department was officially organized on May 28, 1921, with 14 volunteer members. The newly formed department responded to its first fire at a grocery store at the corner of Broadway and East Main on May 30, 1921. Firefighting equipment in 1921 consisted of two hose reels with 500 feet of those that were manually pulled to the scene.

1926: The department received its first motorized fire apparatus - a 500-gallon-per-minute REO Speedwagon pumper - and the first firehouse was built as an addition to the original Village Hall at the corner of West Main and North Pence.

1941: World War II brought with it the need for more volunteers, and, for the first time, the addition of two full-time paid firemen. During this time, Western Cartridge Co., located within the Village of East Alton, was one of the largest suppliers of gun power and ammunition for the war effort.

1946: The department's second motorized apparatus was purchased, a white 500 gallon-per-minute pumper. This pumper replaced the 1926 REO, and it remained in service until its replacement in 1977.

1954: On August 27, 1954, James Earl Ray was arrested by an East Alton Police officer, Charles Cope, also a volunteer fireman, for attempting a robbery at an East Alton Dry Cleaners. While fleeing from police, Ray had severely injured his bare feet. While being held in the East Alton Jail, duty firefighter Simeon Harp rendered medical aid and even gave Ray a pair of his personal socks to wear. In the late 1960s, Ray was convicted of the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in Memphis, Tenn.

1956: As the Village of East Alton continued to grow, a second firehouse was built at the corner of Third Street and East Drive. With the addition of a second firehouse, fire protection increased greatly, especially due to busy rail lines dividing the village in half.

1957: During construction of Station No. 2, a new pumper was also purchased and placed into service. The new REO pumper was rated at 1,000 gallons per minute, doubling the department's prior pumping capabilities. Around the same time, two more full-time paid firemen were added to the department, bringing total manpower to 21.

1965: Cecil McCown was appointed as the first full-time paid fire chief, bringing the total number of paid personnel to five.

1969: The construction of the Vital Services Building was completed and became the new Fire and Police Headquarters.

1970 - A new pumper was added to the fleet, increasing the department's capabilities yet again. This truck, which was very unique in appearance, was the department's first custom-built apparatus. Designated "Engine 51," it was a Young/Crusader built by Towers Fire Apparatus and came equipped with a 1,500 gallon-per-minute pump and a 300-gallon water tank. "51" was housed at Station #1. Additionally, two more paid firemen were added to the department, bringing the total full-time staff to seven.

On January 30, 1973, East Alton firefighters were summoned to the 300 block of Kent Street for a report of a fire at an apartment building under construction, which was the second of two suspected arson fires at the Kent Street Apartments. During the incident, Simeon Harp, Jr., a member of the department, suffered a medical emergency while on the scene. Sadly, Harp never recovered and passed away on March 11, 1973, due to complications from injuries. Harp was a dedicated 25-year member of the department - retiring after 21 years as a full-time fireman, he continued his service as a volunteer. Upon his retirement, from EAFD, Harp became a fireman at Olin Corporation. Simeon Harp is the only Duty Death in the history of the department.

On April 11, 1974, the full-time career firefighters were officially affiliated with the International Association of Firefighters (IAFF) as East Alton Professional Firefighters Local #2333.

In 1977, the first diesel-powered pumper, built by Seagrave and designated "Engine 52," was placed into service at Station #2. "52" was equipped with a 1,500 gallon-per-minute pump and 750 gallons of water.

In 1989, the first 1957 REO pumper was sold and the department's first aerial ladder truck was placed into service. Built by Pierce, "Ladder 1" is equipped with a rear-mounted 75-foot aerial ladder, 1,500 gallon-per-minute pump, and 400-gallon water tank. "Ladder 1," is now designated "Ladder 4331" and still operates in front-line service today.

In 1995, Janice Kochevar was the first female to be hired as an East Alton firefighter. She went on to have a successful career as a firefighter/paramedic with both the City of Forest Park (Georgia) Fire Department and Clayton County (Georgia) Fire Department, respectively. Janice is currently, a high school instructor in the healthcare and first responder field.

In December 1996, EAFD responded with mutual aid from Wood River and Rosewood Heights to a multi-alarm fire at Illinois Power/Wood River Power Station after one of the plant's coal mills had exploded. This incident provided many challenges due to water supply issues, high-voltage electricity (which created arcing and small secondary explosions), and frigid cold temperatures. Two days later, EAFD responded back to Illinois Power for a large transformer explosion/fire.

In 1998, a change occurred, as Station #2 was closed and personnel and equipment were consolidated into one firehouse where EAFD still calls home today. Also, a new pumper was placed into service at Station #1 and the 1970 Towers Pumper was sold to Venice

(IL.) Fire Department. “Engine 51,” built by Pierce, was equipped with a 1,500 gallon-per-minute pump and 1,000 gallons of water. “51” is now designated “Engine 4312” and remains in service as a reserve apparatus.

2014: Station #2, located at 701 Third Street, used as a training facility and storage up to this point, was demolished to make way for new housing development.

In 2016, a fully custom rescue-style pumper was built and placed into service. “Engine 4311” is equipped with a 1500 GM pump, 750 gallons of water, and over 2,000 feet of hose in various sizes 4311 is first out on every incident within the Village and also responds to mutual aid calls to surrounding communities.

The East Alton Fire Department is located at 209 N. Shamrock, East Alton, as part of the Fred H. Bright Vital Services Building.

“We’re staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year by two firefighters,” said Fire Chief Tim Quigley. “Over the last century, we’ve been committed to helping others within our community and for the next 100 years, we’ll continue to answer the bell for you.”





[Dan Brannan also contributed to this story.](#)