

## "State Firemen Visit Westminster"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

The annual Maryland State Firemen's convention was a major event for the host community. In addition to the prestige for the local fire company, the event drew thousands of visitors from throughout the state who pumped cash into the local economy. Westminster was selected for the 1899 convention and a description of the event was published in the June 10th issue of the Westminster American Sentinel newspaper under the headline of "Westminster's Greatest Event":

"The firemen's convention and accompanying events, this week, gave Westminster the greatest demonstration in its history. Elaborate preparations were made by the firemen of this place for the enthusiastic welcome and entertainment of their visiting brethren, and citizens generally joined with them in these efforts to make the occasion enjoyable and pleasant to all comers. During the latter part of last week the city began to put on festive garb and numbers of business places and residences were handsomely decorated. By Tuesday the decorations had become general and few houses were left unembellished. In these decorations the national colors predominated and "Old Glory" was never more in evidence. The decorations in many instances were profuse and beautiful.

An arch, erected in front of the firemen's building, was particularly noticeable for its beauty and appropriateness.

One of the prettiest features of this arch was a star formed of red, white and blue electric lights, which at night presented a beautiful and attractive appearance. Within the span of the arch a miniature hook and ladder truck gave it distinctive character and made its design fully apparent to all beholders."

The convention opened with a long parade of fire companies with their apparatus, bands and military units. The paper also carried a description of the various demonstrations and contests that were at the core of the annual convention:

"Following the parade came one of the most notable features of the occasion, an exhibition of the methods of fire fighting and life saving in large cities by the detachment of the Baltimore companies. Mr. Theo. Derr's large building was selected as the scene of this exhibition. The apparatus was stationed in the vicinity of the Sentinel office, and, when the pre-arranged alarm was sounded, was driven on the run to the Derr building, which was supposed to be the locality of a fire. Arriving at the scene ladders were placed in position, and in less than three minutes from sounding of the alarm a line of hose had been run to the roof. The performance astonished the crowd, many of whom had never seen a big fire department in operation.

No. 6 Truck Company, which is probably the most expert in Baltimore in the fire drill, gave a further demonstration with the Hayes ladder and the rescue by rope. Men were tossed from windows and caught in nets, and others were taken from the roof by a fireman, with the assistance of a rope. An exhibition was likewise given with the chemical pipe line. Both Captains O'Keefe and Todd were warmly applauded by the crowd after the performance.

The town was given over to the firemen for the remainder of the evening and the air literally throbbed with the music of the bands, while hilarious groups rode or marched back and forth, blowing tin horns, shouting and chaffing each other and citizens who bore the badinage with great good humor."

#### "Drill Contest

The crowd more or less interfered with every contest of the day, and this was particularly the case in the hose race, which began at 2:30 p.m., on Pennsylvania avenue. There was a human jam at the finish, which could not be broken for more than an hour. In one instance the spectators, in their eagerness to make a close inspection of the preceding, closed in and actually knocked the hose out of the hands of a man who was trying to make a connection of the sections. In consequence the race had to be run over a second time. It was finally won by the Independent Hose Company, of Frederick, in 40 2-5 seconds. Hagerstown No. 1 was second."

The competitions were hard fought and, as noted in the paper, "Rooting for this company or that very often approached the danger line." Despite the spirited competitions and the huge crowds, there were no serious incidents and the victorious and vanquished firemen and the spectators generally enjoyed their visit to Westminster.

Photo caption: Westminster's E. Main St. was thronged with spectators and firemen during the 1899 Maryland State Firemen's Convention. The piece of apparatus in the foreground appears to be Baltimore's No. 6 Truck Company which raised their ladder to the side of Thomas Derr's building at 77-79 E. Main St. Historical Society of Carroll County collection, gift of Mrs. W. Frank Thomas, 1954.