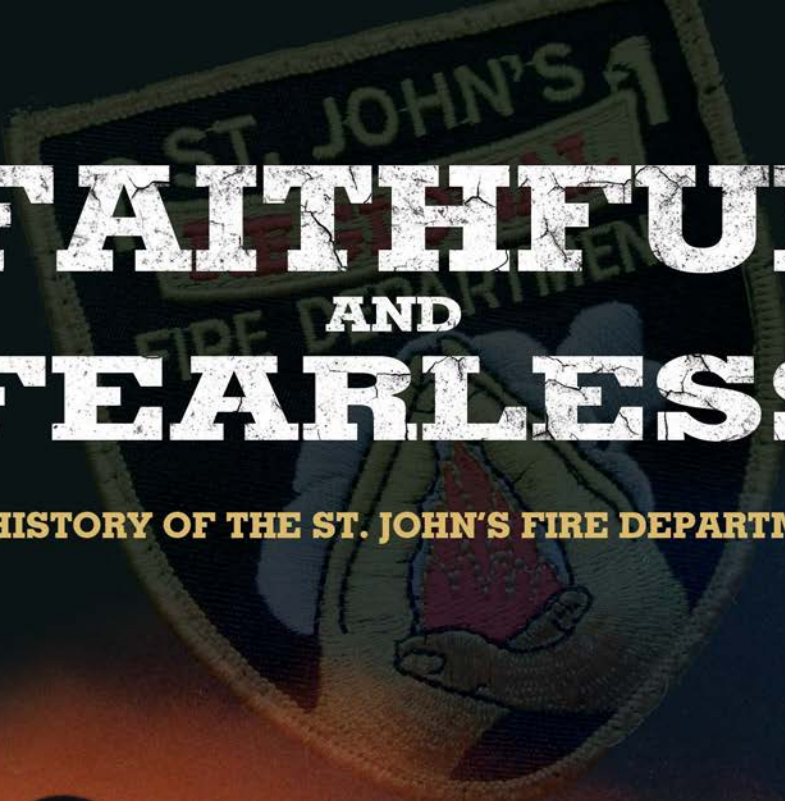
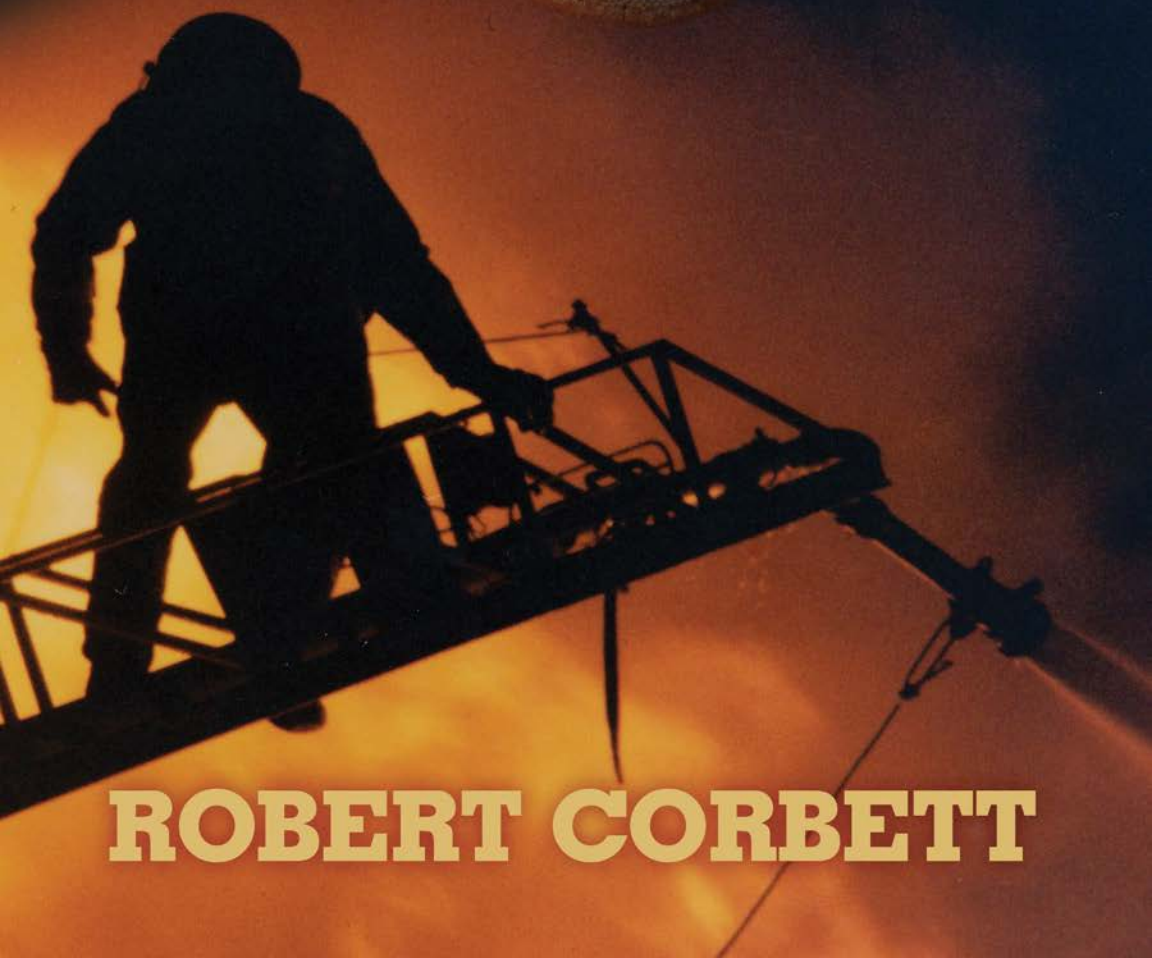


The background of the top half of the cover features a large, semi-transparent shield logo of the St. John's Fire Department. The shield is dark with a lighter border. Inside, there is a red cross and a blue banner with white text. The words "ST. JOHN'S" and "FIRE DEPARTMENT" are visible in a circular arrangement around the central emblem.

FAITHFUL AND FEARLESS

A HISTORY OF THE ST. JOHN'S FIRE DEPARTMENT



ROBERT CORBETT

FAITHFUL
AND FEARLESS

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FAITHFUL AND FEARLESS

A HISTORY OF THE ST. JOHN'S FIRE DEPARTMENT

Robert Corbett

FLANKER PRESS LIMITED
ST. JOHN'S

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Corbett, Robert, 1946-, author

Faithful and fearless : the history of the St. John's Fire Department
/ Robert Corbett.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-77117-278-3 (pbk.)--ISBN 978-1-77117-279-0 (epub).--

ISBN 978-1-77117-280-6 (kindle).--ISBN 978-1-77117-281-3 (pdf)

1. St. John's (N.L.). Fire Department--History. 2. Fires--Newfoundland and Labrador--St. John's--History. 3. Fire extinction--Newfoundland and Labrador--St. John's--History. 4. Fire fighters--Newfoundland and Labrador--St. John's--History. I. Title.

TH9507.S75C67 2013

363.3709718'1

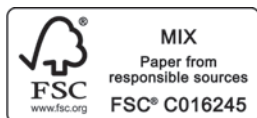
C2013-902672-X

C2013-902673-8

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Cover Design: Adam Freake Edited by Marnie Parsons and Helen Peters

FLANKER PRESS LTD. PO BOX 2522, STATION C ST. JOHN'S, NL CANADA
TELEPHONE: (709) 739-4477 FAX: (709) 739-4420 TOLL-FREE: 1-866-739-4420

WWW.FLANKERPRESS.COM

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) for our publishing activities; the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested \$157 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout the country; the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation.

Through our ministrations to our suffering fellow man we dedicate our lives humbly to your praise and glory. In joy or sorrow we ask only that you may be pleased with our service. That when the last alarm shall have been sounded for us, we may receive our eternal assignments with you.

Anonymous: "A Friend of Firefighters"

I dedicate this book to my wonderful wife, Mary; my two daughters, Colleen and Nicole; and my three beautiful grandchildren, Rebecca, Aaron, and Paul.

And to all firefighters, past and present, who served, "faithful and fearless," in loyal service to the people they were sworn to protect, especially those who served in World War II and the Korean Conflict, or who died on duty or fighting fires in the city.

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PREFACE

This book has been written with the sole intention of telling the story of an organization that planted its roots in the 1700s and exists to the present day. St. John's was, and to a significant degree remains, a wooden city: fire has been a constant hazard. It quickly became evident to livyers that to survive an outbreak of fire, some form of firefighting force had to be organized. Yes, fire was an essential tool for providing warmth and comfort in this temperate climate, but left unchecked, it would bring death and destruction.

From a makeshift brigade armed with buckets, to a dedicated force utilizing horse-drawn carriages, then motorized vehicles, and finally contemporary modern equipment, the St. John's Fire Department has evolved into its current level of skill and expertise.

This professional, dedicated, and well-equipped department stands ready to save lives, fight fires, and protect property in this wooden, hilly, and diverse mercantile city. Its firefighters stand ready to live up to their motto: "Faithful and fearless."

This is their story.

* * *

The St. John's Fire Department came from very humble beginnings. Throughout the 1700s, there were meagre attempts to fight the numerous fires that occurred in this wooden town. The men and women in the bucket brigades, with water drawn from horse troughs or nearby streams or rivers, did their best with what they had. During

the 1800s, the town had numerous fires, but the two great fires that almost completely destroyed the town, leaving thousands homeless and countless buildings destroyed, stand out.

It was after the Great Fire of 1892 that a dedicated firefighting force was deemed necessary for the town to survive. The force established prior to 1892 had been made up of volunteers; no authority had been willing to fund these departments or pay the volunteers. As the Colony of Newfoundland was under British rule, it fell to the British Commission of Government to find the funds necessary to operate these makeshift forces.

The Royal Newfoundland Constabulary (RNC) was already well-established; so, in order to save money, it was decided to have a number of firemen, along with the regular constables, operate under the RNC's control. This arrangement continued to the mid-1900s.

Finally, it was decided the fire department should operate as a fully-paid department, separate from the constabulary. The position of fire chief was established; three fire stations were built and operated with fully-paid men and separate equipment in the east, central, and west end sections of the city.

Today, there are six fire stations—with a composite seventh station—operating within the City of St. John's, the City of Mount Pearl, and the Town of Paradise. From its humble beginning to the present day, the St. John's Regional Fire Department continues to provide fire protection to its citizens, but this service has come at a price.

The difficulties the fire department has encountered over the years cannot be overstated. For years, its men made a meagre living; they had to get by on low pay, and had no voice. The master-servant relationship and the authoritarian mindset of governments provided endless challenges to the firefighters.

However, in 1953, the firefighters organized into an association. The firefighter who put forth the idea was summarily dismissed, but the seeds of unrest had been planted. On September 23, 1969, a meeting was held in St. John's, which would eventually undermine the provincial government's master-servant attitude.

FAITHFUL AND FEARLESS

This is the story of the St. John's Fire Department and the St. John's Fire Fighters Association (Local 1075): how they came into being and evolved following the sacrifices many firefighters have made over the years, and how present-day firefighters now enjoy the fruits of those labours.



Cap badge worn by the firemen of the St. John's Fire Department.
(Courtesy of William Neal)

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CHAPTER 1

THE EARLY YEARS

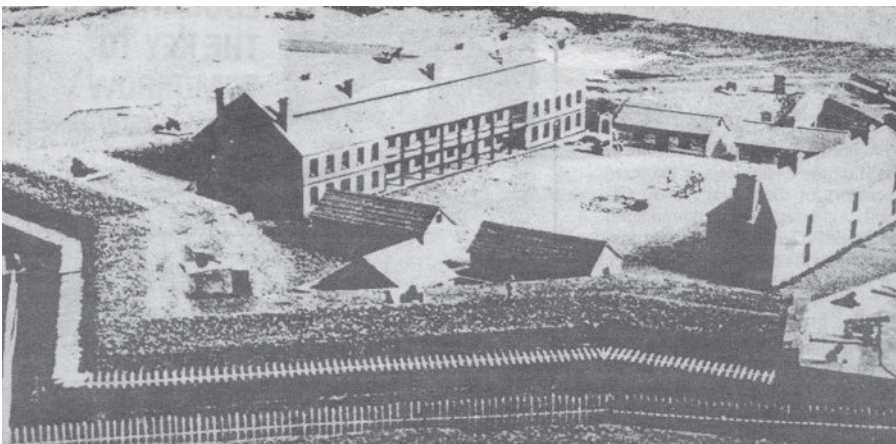
“San Johan,” the Portuguese name for St. John’s, was in an atlas found in Portugal after John Rue came into the harbour on August 3, 1527. Rue was to write the first letter from North America to King Henry VIII of England about the rich fishing grounds found here. Nineteen years later, Water Street was developed on the north side of the harbour; it remains the oldest street in North America.

Sir Humphrey Gilbert claimed this colony on August 5, 1583, under Royal Charter for Queen Elizabeth I. Newfoundland was the first overseas colony in the New Land. Soon Water Street became the gathering place for England’s West Country fishermen, along with hundreds of Irish fishermen. By 1677, St. John’s was the principal prize in all the country. Commercial buildings—sheds, shacks, and wharves—began to spring up all along the harbour’s north side.

This commerce did not go unnoticed by other countries. It attracted first Holland, which twice attacked the colony in 1665 and 1673. The British repelled the Dutch, and in 1696 built fortifications and barracks to protect their riches and population. Next the French attacked St. John’s in 1705 and captured the colony, but the British drove them out in 1708; when they withdrew, the French forces devastated the colony by burning civilian structures. This was probably the biggest fire in St. John’s to that time; unfortunately, it would not be the last.

After the Battle of Signal Hill, the British were firmly established in St. John's under Colonel William Amherst. From 1711 onward, the town began to take form: its hills were stripped of wood, and mud pathways and roads were established. The residents began to erect dwellings, mostly shacks, in which to live. The buildings crept north, up from the harbour, and spread east and west. The commercial buildings were mainly on Water Street and were also built on wharves stretching out into the harbour, for off-loading supplies and shipping fish to European markets. Little did these residents realize that the shape, layout, and geographical design of the town was being set for years to come; these same elements eventually would almost cause its demise. City officials recognized that some means of fighting fires was necessary; in 1711, lookouts were positioned throughout the city, along with fire patrols, and a bucket brigade. Crude cisterns were constructed to catch water in various parts of the city.

The commerce in the city caused the occasional fire; several homes were destroyed. The cold climate was also terribly hard on the wintering residents, so they used various makeshift devices to burn wood to stay warm. The results, not surprisingly, could be incendiary.



Old Fort Townshend, 1780.
(Courtesy of the Dowden Family collection)

The eighteenth century brought major changes to the colony. St. John's became the commercial hub of Newfoundland. With the

establishment of the government, the erecting of churches and a major military garrison, along with the development of commercial businesses, the city began to expand and grow. It also served as a naval base during the American Revolutionary War, and again in the early nineteenth century during the War of 1812.

In 1780, four or five steam engines were brought into town from England and regular fire companies were established. They were under the control of Messrs. Marmaduke Hart and Company. When required, volunteers assisted the regulars to fight the many fires in the wooden city. On November 28, 1782, the first fire insurance policy in the Colony of Newfoundland was issued on the premises of Messrs. Newman and Toope for £3,000.¹

The hills around the harbour, on which the city was built, rendered much early firefighting equipment inadequate. This circumstance was compounded by the habit of building in wood by the inhabitants. During the nineteenth century, St. John's would be devastated by two major fires; there would be thousands homeless and millions of pounds in damages. The town would be almost reduced to ashes.

Mr. Jenkins Jones, of the Phoenix Fire Company of London, England, wrote in 1809, seven years before the first great fire of St. John's, "that as far as construction and contiguity of buildings constitute fire risk, it is impossible not to consider the mercantile port of St. John's as one of the most hazardous and formidable of its kind."²



PHOENIX

Assurance Co., Ltd.,

OF LONDON, - - - ESTABLISHED 1782.

Total Funds exceed	\$80,000,000.00
Claims Paid exceed	\$470,000,000.00

Ad for Phoenix Fire Assurance Co. Ltd., circa 1800.
(Courtesy of the *Newfoundland Quarterly* magazine, 1902)

The first formally organized fire brigade was begun in 1811 by a merchant's society to protect its members' property and goods, and was commanded by Major James Braire, the president of the society. The majority of these men were volunteers, and paid for services rendered only when they fought fires.

During this period, fires were also fought by naval personnel and the army garrison, with the help of the townspeople. This informal arrangement continued until the garrison was withdrawn, leaving St. John's with little or no fire protection, save that provided by the volunteers. The equipment for fighting fires also began to fall into disrepair—a cumulative result of lack of funding, non-involvement by the town council, and citizens who did not pay for fire protection.

At 10:30 p.m. on February 11, 1816, a fire started in a house owned by a Mr. Walsh at King's Beach (near the War Memorial) and spread north to Gower Street and east from Prescott Street to Fort William, quickly consuming buildings. With the city's streets a mere twenty feet wide, the fire quickly gained headway. By 6:00 a.m. on Saturday morning, a swath of land, measuring one mile by 300 yards, had been completely cleared of buildings. The fire left 1,500 people homeless and 130 buildings destroyed; it had caused approximately \$2,500,000 in damages.

A spectator noted, "Amidst this awful scene of confusion, so unavoidable on such occasions, it is a melancholy fact that many of our population were more intent on plundering the unfortunate sufferers."³

The very next day, a fire started in what remained of a burnt house on King's Beach at around 8:00 p.m. and grew so quickly that approximately 120 homes, stores, and warehouses were destroyed, leaving a further 1,000 people homeless, all in the space of six hours. Damages would be in the amount of \$500,000. That winter, families were left destitute and had to find shelter from the cold.

As the winter of 1817-18 approached, the plight of the residents was extreme. Makeshift shacks, crudely constructed dwellings, and narrow streets in the town were a powder keg waiting to explode. In addition to the mix of longer-term residents in St. John's, 11,000 immigrants—who had fled Ireland for Newfoundland in 1814 and 1815 because of the potato famine, evictions, and landlords extorting excessive rents—added to the housing problem. Lacking accommodations, these new immigrants were forced to accept any type of housing in which to lay their heads down—clearly, the stage was set for another disaster.

The first of the “Great Fires” in November 1817 was, in fact, two fires that occurred within a week of each other. Already much of the town had been destroyed in the 1816 fires, which had left thousands homeless. Now, more of the city would be devastated.

On November 17, 1817, a fire started on Water Street and consumed all the buildings from the courthouse to the Hill o' Chips. The fire burned for six hours. Then, on November 21, 1817, at 3:30 p.m., a fire broke out again on Water Street and consumed both sides of the street from Adelaide Street to the courthouse. The fire could go no farther: everything was burned from the November 17 fire. The fires destroyed 400 buildings; the total cost of the damages was \$4,000,000. One out of every three persons was homeless.

This time became known as The Winter of the Rals (or “Rowdies”)—looting was rampant; after every fire, hooligans would gather and salvage anything saleable. Someone attempted to set fire to a house owned by Mr. Hogan, of Maggoty Cove, an area spared by the two fires. A reward of £300 (\$1,500) was offered. Certainly, for that amount of money, someone would report the arsonist.

The social class in St. John's was beginning to be established, in which businessmen, fish merchants, politicians, and clergy occupied the top of the social pyramid. Then there were the middlemen: land sharks, and bloodsuckers also known as landlords. And finally, the lower class or poor.

The wealthy could afford fire insurance on their properties, but the poor could not. Slum landlords took advantage of the poor;

businessmen and merchants bought up sections of St. John's and gave the property to slum "bloodsuckers," men who collected their rent money for a fee. To protect their properties, they put pressure upon both the city and the government to provide some form of fire protection. Funding by an assessment was established to provide for what little fire protection equipment was on hand, but many of the residents could not afford to pay this fee.

One of the Newfoundland Legislature's first acts was to deal with the reorganization of the city's fire companies. A new volunteer fire company was organized on May 12, 1824, for the east ward of St. John's. Its captain was Newman Hoyles; its three lieutenants were Robert Brine, Thomas Houlton, and James Todridge. The brigade had forty-seven firemen.

The central ward brigade, formed on October 16, 1826, was under the command of Captain P. Kough and funded by the Water Street merchants. It existed mainly for those who supported the brigade through subscription. Because the military was well-trained and disciplined, its engines were used more than those of the fire companies. The cost was borne by the military, and thus saved St. John's monies it would otherwise have had to spend on firefighting.

As devastating as they could be, fires were sometime almost welcomed. Mr. J. B. Jukes observed during a small fire in 1839, "the stupid indifference of the lower classes, many of the population, looked on a fire as a godsend and more especially if it involved a mercantile establishment, as a chance to loot and pillage." To many of the population, a fire, such as this, was looked on as a "dry-land shipwreck."⁴ Some of the merchants were also known to use a fire to escape bankruptcy.

At this time, according to historian Paul O'Neill, "A very dense population for the extent of the town is collected within. The houses generally are of a very wretched description and filthy in the extreme,

and while a succession of fires has led to a widening of the principal streets, many are too confined.”⁵

In March of 1839, large fires continued to plague the city: Bowring’s, on Water Street, and dozens of dwellings were destroyed. Again in 1839, a block of homes was lost on the north side of Water Street. Even with streets widened to twenty feet (previously six feet in some areas), dozens of homes and buildings could still be lost at a time. Wooden row houses, all joined together with their flat pitch/tar roofs, sometimes remade over existing constructions, were common at the time, and contributed to the spread of fire. As the city grew and slum areas began to grow, there were many calls to organize a paid firefighting company.



Town of St. John's, 1846.

(Courtesy of the *Newfoundland Quarterly* magazine,
volume I, 1903, AC Hunter Library Archives)

On June 9, 1846, a fire started on George Street at the premises of Hamlin Cabinet Makers. Less than an hour after ignition, both sides of Water and Duckworth streets were ablaze. The fire advanced toward the east end of the city. When some firefighters were told that their homes were being evacuated, they left their fire engines and raced to their homes to remove their belongings. After the fire, 2,000 people were homeless and the cost was approximately \$4,000,000 in damages.

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