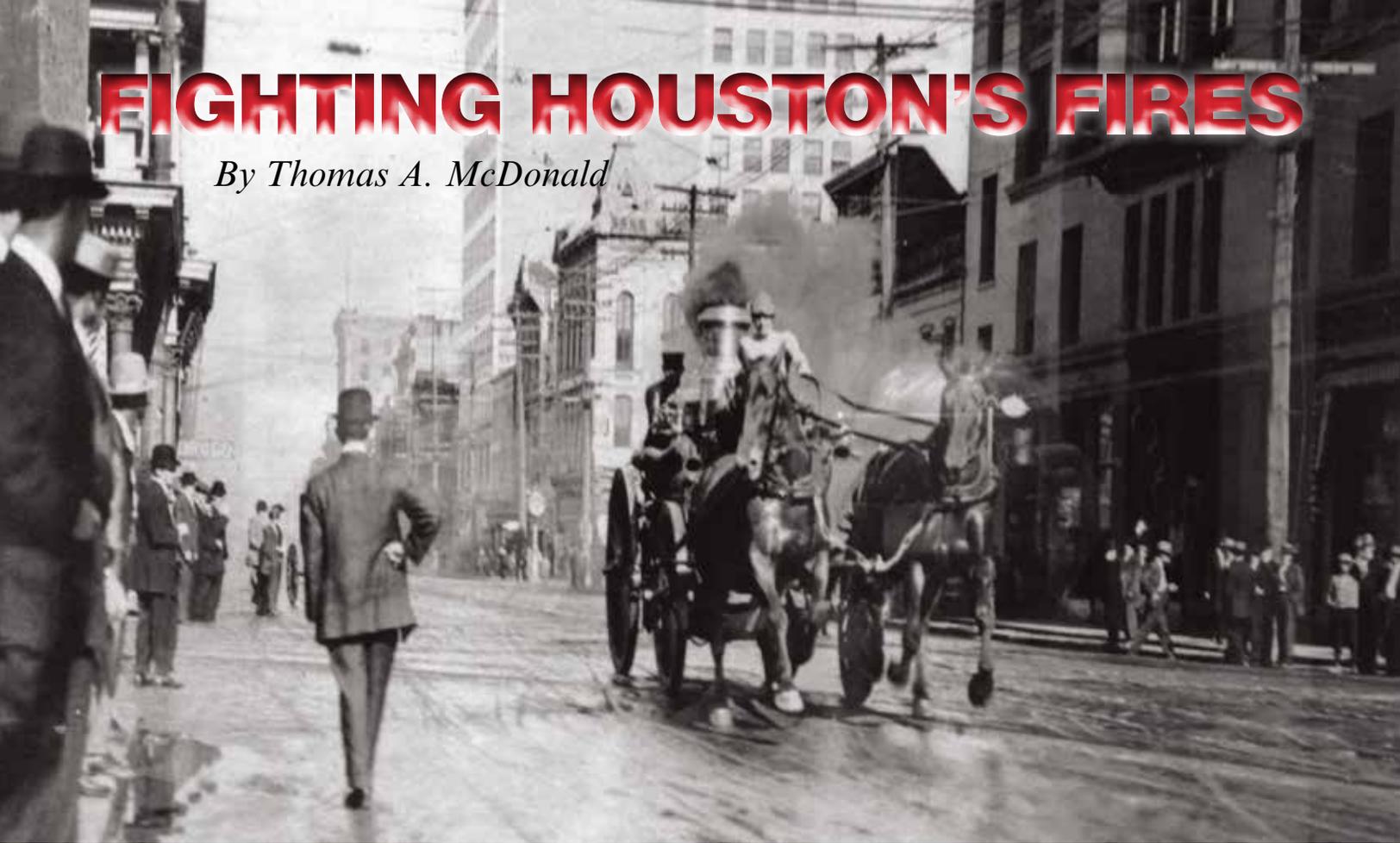


# FIGHTING HOUSTON'S FIRES

*By Thomas A. McDonald*



*At the turn of the twentieth century the Houston Fire Department used horse-drawn steamers, like this one heading south in front of the Rice Hotel on Main Street at Texas Avenue in 1911. The steamer took water from a low pressure source and increased the pressure to improve the reach and effectiveness of the fire hose. Over the next decade, the department made the transition from horse-drawn to motorized vehicles.*

*All photos courtesy of the Houston Fire Department unless otherwise noted.*

**F**or 178 years, organized groups of firefighters have battled Houston fires, with the first volunteer bucket brigade established less than two years after the city's founding in 1836. In a town where wood was (and still is) the most abundant and convenient construction material, structure fires have always posed a serious concern.

The city's first major fire in 1859 destroyed all but one structure on a crowded downtown block of wooden buildings along Main Street between Franklin and Congress, ironically just a year after the first fire insurance policy was issued by a Houston company. The following year another major fire one block south resulted in brick structures not only replacing those that burned but also becoming the standard for new construction along the Main Street commercial corridor. It was not until 1894, though, when more than half of the all-wooden St. Joseph's Infirmary complex at Franklin and San Jacinto burned to the ground and two nuns died trying to move patients, that city leaders insisted on having a paid fire department to replace the volunteers. The career Houston Fire Department was established the following year. As the city grew, so did its fire department. Initially firefighters lived in the stations for fifteen straight days before having one day off – a cycle that kept repeating. By 1991 this had evolved into a four-shift, 46.7-hour workweek, a schedule still in use today. In 1895 the department was composed of forty-five white men. Today the number of firefighters is closer to 4,000 and includes men and women from many different ethnicities.

The largest fire (involving urban area) in the city's history consumed forty city blocks just northeast of downtown on a cold, windy night in February 1912. The Fifth Ward Conflagration started in a vacant saloon at Hardy and Opelousas, then spread southeast to Buffalo Bayou, claiming more than 100 homes, thirteen industrial plants, dozens of boxcars, a school, a church, and tens of thousands of bales of cotton awaiting rail transport. It even jumped the bayou where firefighters stopped it near the present-day intersection of Navigation and N. Sampson. Miraculously, no deaths or serious injuries occurred among firefighters or the residents displaced.

Houston's deadliest fire was reported shortly after midnight on September 7, 1943, at the Gulf Hotel on the corner of Preston and Louisiana, one of many "flop houses" downtown catering to traveling, working, or homeless men. As smoking was commonplace then, mattress fires occurred regularly, which was how the fire started. Someone quickly threw a bucket of water on a smoldering mattress, and the night manager stuck the still burning soggy sack of cotton in a broom closet at the base of the sole stairway to the hotel, which occupied the top two floors of a three-story, brick building. Not long after the lodgers had gone back to sleep, flames and smoke enveloped the open dorm areas of the hotel. Men who managed to wake before dying in their sleep raced to jump out windows, most to their deaths. When the smoke cleared, firefighters counted fifty-five bodies.

Throughout the department's history, seventy-one men

and women have made the supreme sacrifice to protect Houstonians from fire. That number, however, reflects just those whose deaths are attributable to specific incidents – fires, vehicular accidents, and heart attacks proximate to a stressful firefight or training drills. Yet, dozens of additional HFD firefighters' deaths are presently recognized as job-related by the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) due to illness – typically cancer – presumed to have been acquired from doing the work of their chosen profession. Such disease is the greatest latent risk posed to firefighters active or retired today.

The photos shown on these pages represent a brief visual history of the department, and the men and women who

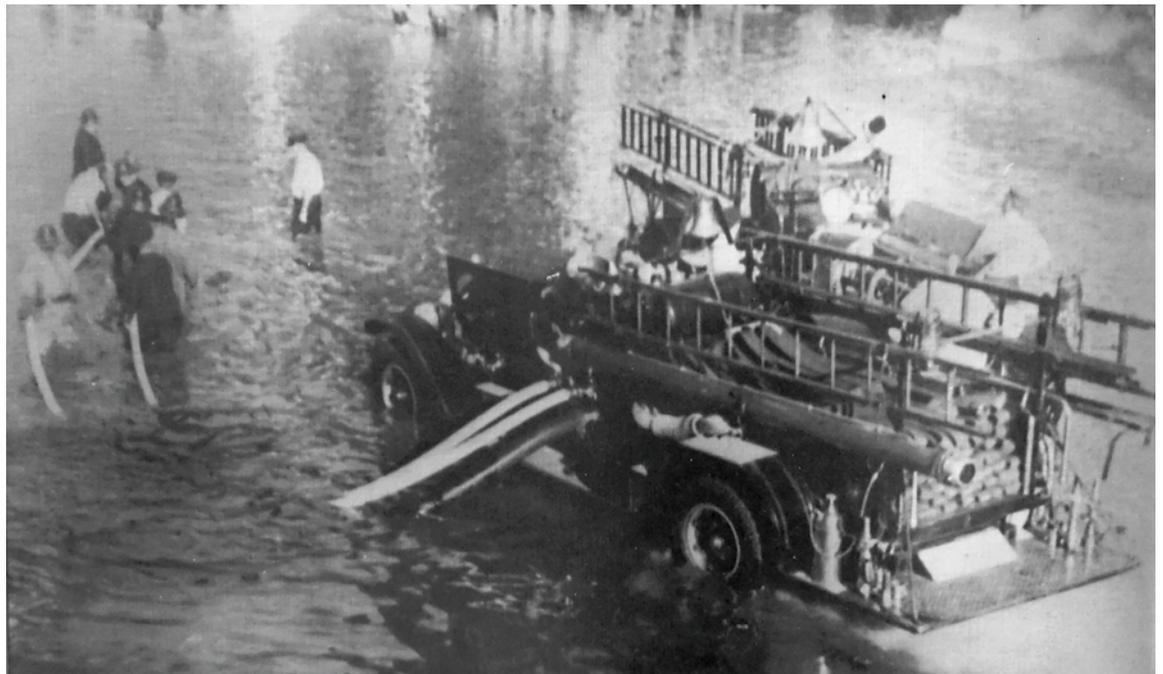
protect Houstonians every day. To learn more about the department's history, visit the Houston Fire Museum at 2403 Milam Street, housed in the original Station 7 built in 1898. [www.houstonfiremuseum.org](http://www.houstonfiremuseum.org).

**Tom McDonald** is president of the non-profit Houston Fire Museum, Inc., but spent twenty-six years as a member of the Houston Fire Department (1981-2008) fighting fires, as well as serving as a paramedic and dispatcher, retiring at the rank of Senior Captain. While on the job, he also served as HFD's last director of the museum (now staffed by the non-profit corporation) and, during his nearly three-decade affiliation with the museum, edited three books about the HFD. He took his first fire pictures at age fourteen.



*National insurance underwriters in 1910 advised the city that a fire truck that could direct water into the upper floors of new tall buildings downtown was badly needed, so HFD ordered this vehicle, received about the time of this photo in 1912. It became HFD's only water tower, called such because the boom would elevate to vertical and extend to fifty feet above ground. Hoses then were connected at ground and piping carried water to the nozzle, which could be directed from the ground. By 1920 the truck was motorized and remained in use until the mid-1960s. Today it is the HFD's most unique truck and part of the Houston Fire Museum's collection.*

*Major floods in 1929 and 1935 plagued downtown Houston until the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers created the earthen Addicks and Barker Reservoirs to control water destined for Buffalo Bayou. HFD crews pumped floodwaters directly from downtown streets to fight fires during the 1935 flood.*





*HFD's motorized water tower applies the highest stream out of at least five during a multiple-alarm fire downtown in the 1930s. When firefighters deem a structure unsafe to fight a fire from inside it, "master" streams from outside are used. The amount of water being applied on this blaze just by the visible exterior streams exceeds 1,500 gallons per minute.*

*The Woodway Square Apartments fire on July 31, 1979, was the first 7-alarm fire in department history, the largest modern-day conflagration to date. More than 300 units in the mostly wood-shingle-roofed complex were destroyed and led to a city ordinance restricting use of such materials.*



*Weary firefighters survey the aftermath after the five-story Waddell Furniture Building at Prairie and Fannin burned to the ground just before dawn on March 22, 1938, in what has been deemed one of the most spectacular fires in the city's history. Intense radiant heat from the inferno and collapse resulted in serious damage to at least sixteen other structures, including the adjacent Christ Church Cathedral.*



*Just days after the HFD's worst day in history – May 31, 2013 – a memorial service was held at Reliant Park for four firefighters killed during a roof collapse while fighting a fire at a motel on the Southwest Freeway near Hillcroft. The HFD's Pipe & Drum Corps leads the procession down Kirby Drive honoring Captain Matthew Renaud, Engineer Robert Bebee, Firefighter Robert Garner, and Firefighter Anne Sullivan. Garner and Sullivan's captain Bill Dowling was rescued from certain death but lost his legs and suffered severe brain trauma from lack of oxygen during the tragedy.*

Photo courtesy of Tom McDonald.



*The Pipe and Drum Corps wears the Houston, Texas Bluebonnet tartan and performs at award ceremonies, memorials, and parades in addition to funerals.*



*The city's most recent apartment complex conflagration occurred on March 25, 2014, on West Dallas and Montrose. Fortunately, no residents had moved in yet, but exposed wood-framing throughout much of the interconnected complex of 396 units allowed the blaze to spread rapidly and the entire project lay in ruins within hours. The crew of HFD Tower 18 received instant world-wide notoriety when uploaded videos taken from a nearby office showed them rescuing a construction foreman from a third-floor ledge just as a wall of flames approached him.*

*Photo courtesy of Tom McDonald.*



*The Houston Fire Museum is housed in the oldest firehouse still standing in the city. The first fire station built after HFD became a career city department in 1895, former Fire Station No. 7 answered fire calls from its Milam Street location from 1899 to 1969, going from horse-drawn rigs to trucks so tall the floor had to be dug out to fit them. City Council deservedly gave it a second life as the museum just over a decade after its fire doors closed. In continuous operation since the early 1980s, the museum was an HFD operation initially but since the 1990s, has been leased and operated by the non-profit organization Houston Fire Museum, Inc. (HFMI). In 2015 HFMI bought the property from the city and recently embarked on a million-dollar-plus preservation of the nationally, state, and city recognized historic structure.*