

Bag, Bucket, Bedkey and Screw Driver

By LAWRENCE B. ROMAINE

THE ALERT EAGLE FIRE SOCIETY was instituted in Boston, March 5, 1799. There seems to be no other record of the organization or any of its activities. Mr. A. W. Braley says in his *History of the Boston Fire Department 1630 to 1889*: "The records of the engine companies from 1800 to 1824 are not in existence, the selectmen's records ceasing to make entries of the members after 1799, and with the exception of one or two roll books—no authentic data is left." One or two roll books is not a very large reference library, and with this in mind it is important that the contents of the small calf and board *Laws & Regulations of the Alert Eagle Fire Society* should be reprinted, at least in part, for the historian, student and even the casual reader.

Perhaps it does not contain as important nuggets as Henry Steven's recollections, but I am sure that many of them are of interest to Boston, and far more amusing in some instances. The *Laws & Regulations* (see illustration) were reprinted in 1805 to bring the roll up to date both in name and address. The grand old eagle on the title page—"Benefacere Celer Currimus"—surely looks as though he would play his part well, serving the company faithfully and with speed.

The purpose of this small band of thirty Bostonians is very clearly and rather well stated in the Articles:

Taking into view the dreadful calamities to which populous towns are exposed by the distressing ravages so suddenly and frequently occasioned by Fire; actuated by the purest motives of humanity, and impressed with the strong hope of becoming beneficial to each

other; and, at the same time conceiving it to be the indispensable duty, the interest, and for the safety of the Citizens to adopt and execute such measures, which are the best calculated to arrest its devouring progress; to alleviate the misfortunes of those, who become its victims; and as far as the most active exertions and mutual services will contribute to attain such desirable ends;—

WE, the subscribers, do agree to form ourselves into a Society by the name of the ALERT EAGLE FIRE SOCIETY; at the same time do pledge ourselves, and tender our services each to the other for reciprocal protection, assistance and benefit, and as such to be governed by the following Articles of Regulations. . . .

This pleasant preamble gives the impression of a rather Utopian organization. However, a careful perusal of the regulations makes it quite evident that they were men among men who understood their own frailties and weaknesses. They were conscious of the fact that they could not operate without money, and one can be sure their system of fines and penalties kept the treasury well filled.

The company was limited to thirty members. Meetings were called quarterly on the first Tuesday of March, June, September and December—in December, "precisely" at 6 o'clock P.M.; in March and September at 7 P.M.; and in June at 8 P.M. The cost of candles was obviously taken into consideration. Their daylight-saving plan was not governed by politics, but rather by common sense. If one was late, it cost twelve and a half cents; if he didn't feel like attending a meeting, it cost him fifty cents, and if he went to a meeting and was bored with the speaker or thought the "debates" trivial, and left, this privilege cost him twenty-five cents. One can see how thirty mem-

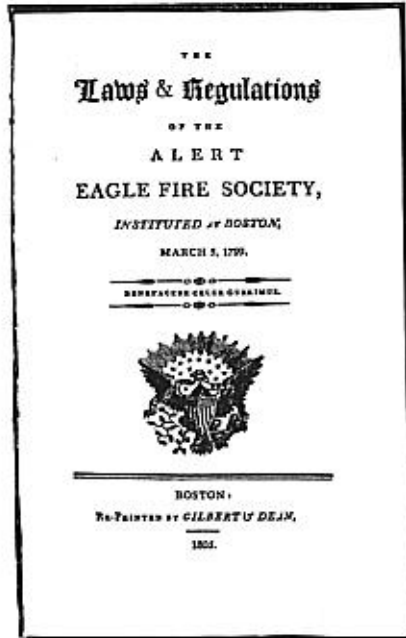
bers in a year's time might build up quite a substantial balance in the treasury.

For governing this group a president was chosen "by written ballot" each year in March. He had the power to penalize any member fifty cents for not being "attentive" to the debate. The secretary was also chosen each year in March, and if chosen, it cost him "one dollar for the right to decline to serve." However, if he saw fit to serve, he might then be entitled to the right to decline for two successive years. His salary was ten dollars. His duties were many. He kept accurate records of all business, made all changes of address, issued tickets of meetings, dues and debts, called special meetings on the application of six members and announced proposed candidates. His penalties for carelessness in office ran *not* from twelve and a half cents, but from fifty cents to two dollars! It is hard to think how little of that ten-dollar salary most of the secretaries ever pocketed.

The treasurer was well protected not only from the members but from himself. He received no salary and his fines for mistakes matched the secretary's. Finally, there was a committee of six who served in rotation. They warned the members of meetings and regularly inspected all equipment. They were fined one dollar for each neglect of duty.

Article 6 of the *Laws & Regulations* bears quoting in full: "EACH Member shall keep in good repair, in some conspicuous part of his dwelling-house, shop or store, two leather buckets and two bags, measuring 6-1 long, and 6-4 round, marked with the owner's name. The buckets shall be painted red within and sky-blue outside, with initials of the owner's christian name, and his surname in full length; also an iron Bed-Key, and a Screw Driver, under the penalty of

One Dollar each, for the Buckets and Bags, and fifty cents each, for the Bed-Key and the Screw Driver: New Members to have two months to equip them-



selves, as expressed in this article." If a member of the committee found a bucket he didn't think clean and fit, that cost a dollar, *and*, if it wasn't fixed to suit him within four days, that cost another dollar.

When fire was cried, every member had to be there on the double. If any member missed a fire from start to finish, without an excuse "judged sufficient" by a majority, he lost his job and his membership. No fooling around with fines at times like that! If the fire happened at the house, shop or store of a member, that member was instructed to direct operations.

Every member had to have his printed copy of the *Laws & Regulations* with him at every meeting. The cost was fifty cents.

Old and worn-out copies were replaced by the secretary for fifty cents. What Gilbert & Dean charged for printing we aren't told. Between the fines for not having a copy, and fifty cents for every copy mutilated or lost, the treasurer probably had a fair chance of making money for the company!

The Society agreed to pay damages for loss of buckets and equipment at fires if and provided the losing member advertised in a Boston newspaper within twenty-four hours. Any member who moved his dwelling or store had to notify the secretary, who in turn agreed to print a ticket to that effect. Each member then changed the address in his *Laws & Regulations*, and exhibited his copy at the next meeting—or else! A member had the right to resign, but left behind him his four dollars initiation fee, and whatever he had contributed to the fund. If, however, anyone started false rumors or scandals about other members, he didn't have to resign—he was thrown out at once.

Any member reduced in circumstances by fire was entitled to financial aid by majority vote. In case of death, a widow was also entitled to protection and assistance “during her remaining his widow.” Widows were instructed to keep in touch with the secretary and notify him of a new address or any other change in circumstance.

The only excuse considered valid for absence from a meeting was sickness. Religion and politics were forbidden as “far

too intricate and complicated in their nature for any benefit arising from extemporaneous discussion.” If this ruling was really enforced, the meetings must have been quite unusual, and the founders a company of Solomons.

“Whenever the funds amount to twenty dollars,” state the *Laws & Regulations* at one point, “the same shall be loaned, provided it be on demand, to any person—giving security which shall be thought satisfactory to two thirds of the members.” Here was indeed a company of real businessmen who considered the facts and provided for idle investments as well as for delinquent members. The Society “shall continue forever, provided any three of its members shall wish to continue it in being; and each and every member wishing to dissolve the same, shall relinquish all interest in the funds.” A wise stipulation, which is followed by the one exception, that it may be dissolved by a unanimous vote of the entire company. The final articles forbid divulging any subject matter of debate or conversation at meetings to any non-member under penalty of expulsion, and close on a tender note about cultivating affection and esteem, “as brothers,” within the group.

Following the regulations we find the tabulation of members, printed in two columns, one page for each, with most of the page left for changes of address or other notes. The changes, written in with quill and ink, are here indicated by italics:

MEMBER	PLACE OF ABODE	STORE, SHOP, ETC.
Bela Clap	Copley's street	ditto
Jonathan Whitney	Russell street	ditto
<i>Moved—</i>	<i>Vine street</i>	<i>ditto</i>
Peter Osgood	Leverett street	ditto
<i>Moved—</i>	<i>Poplar street</i>	<i>ditto</i>
Thomas Kendall	Half Court Square	Congress street
<i>Moved—</i>	<i>Congress street</i>	<i>No. 82 State street</i>

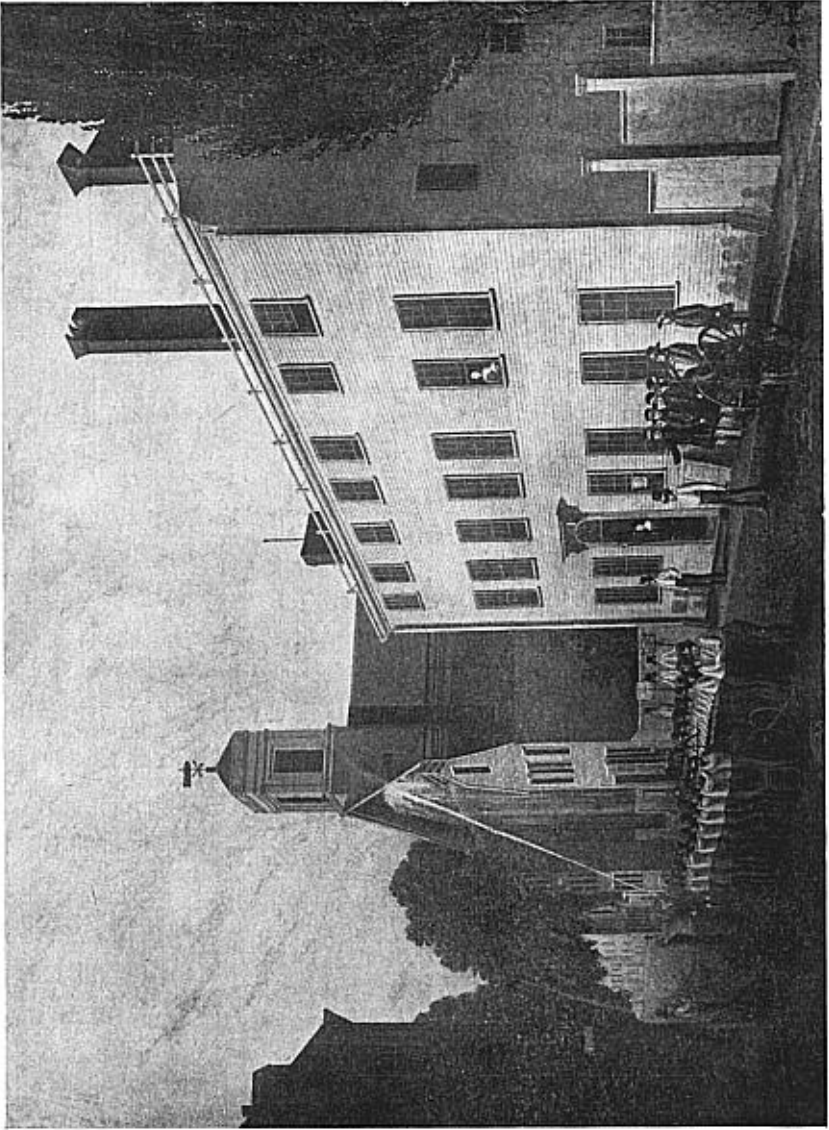
John Kuhn	Cambridge street	State street
Thomas French	Sudbury street	ditto
Samuel Adams	Cambridge street	State street <i>Moved to Cambridge st.</i>
Turner Crooker	Lynde street	Garner & Crooker's
<i>Moved—</i>	<i>Cambridge street</i>	Wharf
Ward Jackson	Russell street	ditto
Atherton Penniman	Russell street	ditto
Michael Roulston(e)	Poplar street	No. 2 Kilby street
Job Drew	Staniford street	Court street
Ephraim Beaman	South street	Russell's Wharf
<i>Moved—</i>	<i>Purchase street</i>	
<i>again to—</i>	<i>High street</i>	
John Randall	Poplar street	Ship street
<i>Moved to—</i>	<i>Second street</i>	
William Farmer	Prince street	Ship street
Joseph Allen	Blind Lane	ditto
John Gilbert	Pleasant street	ditto
<i>Moved to—</i>	<i>Nassau street</i>	
Peter Gilman	Proctor's Lane	Ann street
William Alexander	Back street	ditto
Braddock Loring	Copper street	ditto
Samuel Singleton	Purchase street	Wheelright's Wharf
<i>Moved—</i>	<i>No. 5 South street</i>	<i>Fort-Hill Wharf</i>
Matthias Crocker	Fish street	ditto
John Chadwick	Prince street	North side of the Market
Benjamin Owen	Oliver street	Battery March street
Robert Evans	Hanover street	ditto
<i>Moved—</i>	<i>N. 50 Cornhill</i>	<i>ditto</i>
David Vinal	Russell street	Common street
Abel Robinson	Purchase street	Atkinson street
Jeremiah Gardner	Belknap street	ditto
Nathaniel Leeds	Orange street	ditto
<i>Moved—</i>	<i>No. 3 Newbury street</i>	<i>ditto</i>
<i>" again—</i>	<i>South Bennet st.</i>	<i>N. 3 Newbury street</i>
Noah Porter	Warren street	ditto

NEW MEMBERS—[written in on extra pages with printed headings]

Thos. Redman	Temple street	Elm street
Benjamin Hurd	Copelands Alley	Court street

As a contribution to Boston history, perhaps this short record may not be of great moment. A good painting, however, takes many strokes of the brush, and Boston is a very large canvas. This copy of the *Laws & Regulations*, incidentally,

belonged to Samuel Adams. "S. Adams" is neatly written on the front flyleaf. In all probability this man was the only son of the famous Revolutionary patriot and statesman. Since the home address in the *Laws & Regulations* checks with the



EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY PAINTING SHOWING FIRE FIGHTERS IN BOSTON'S WEST END WHERE MOST OF THE ALERT EAGLE FIRE SOCIETY MEMBERS LIVED

Boston directory for 1805, I feel safe in enrolling Samuel Adams (Jr.) as a member of this company. He seems to have been entirely lost in the shadow of his famous father, and the only accomplishment accorded him in history seems to be his career as a surgeon in the Continental Army. The directory for 1805 gives his vocational address as "intelligence office, No. 9 Ann street"; the *Laws & Regulations* list his shop, or office, at his home.

To add one more splash of color to this self-appointed fire department who had agreed to contribute their spare time to the protection of their community, consider them at their trades—suddenly called upon by their committee members to collect bag, bucket, bedkey and screw driver and race to a fire. According to the direc-

tories they were bakers, bookbinders, blockmakers, bricklayers, cabinetmakers, coachmakers, cordwainers, coopers, clerks, glaziers, goldsmiths, grocers, housewrights, hatters, paperstainers, saddlers, tailors, truckmen and merchants.

There are still many small volunteer fire departments all over the country made up of automobile salesmen, grocers, lawyers, merchants and small town businessmen. They are good, sound, public-spirited citizens—and yet somehow I don't believe their laws and regulations have the same meaning, or the same delightful historic flavor, as those herein offered, carefully considered and laid down so many years ago by the ALERT EAGLE FIRE SOCIETY.