



EARLY OLYMPIA FIRE DEPARTMENT

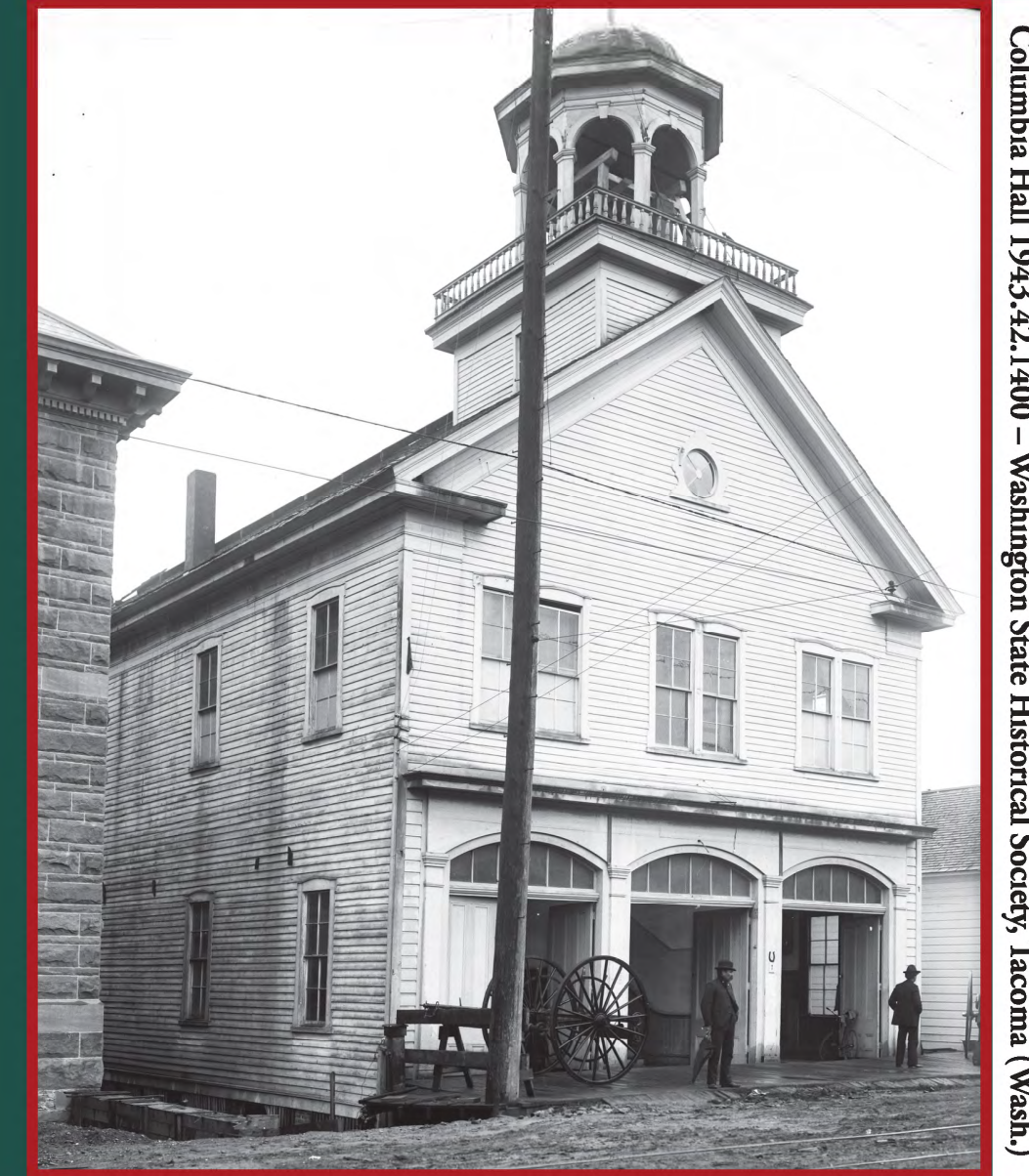


In the Beginning

In early days, communities used bucket brigades to deliver water, ladders to reach higher floors, and hooks on poles to create fire breaks.

Alert Hook & Ladder

After a series of suspicious fires, thought to be set by hobos, citizens organized at the district schoolhouse in late 1859 and, in January 1860, chartered a fire company at the first annual meeting of Alert Hook & Ladder. (In early days, fire companies were exclusive clubs with dues, but over time they transitioned to government.) Early on, officers tried to buy a fire engine with city funding (taxes), but no luck. In the “social season of 1864–65,” Foreman Charles E. Williams saw an ad in a fireman’s journal, resolving to buy a 2nd-hand Button hand-engine. Williams followed the lead of local women who had raised money through benefit balls to fund Long Bridge and the Westside Wharf, a busy landing serving ocean steamers. He gave a grand ball (\$10 per ticket, about \$200 in 2025 dollars) in Olympic Hall, which he owned... and it succeeded!



Columbia Hall 1915-21, 1900 - Washington State Historical Society, Tacoma, Wash.

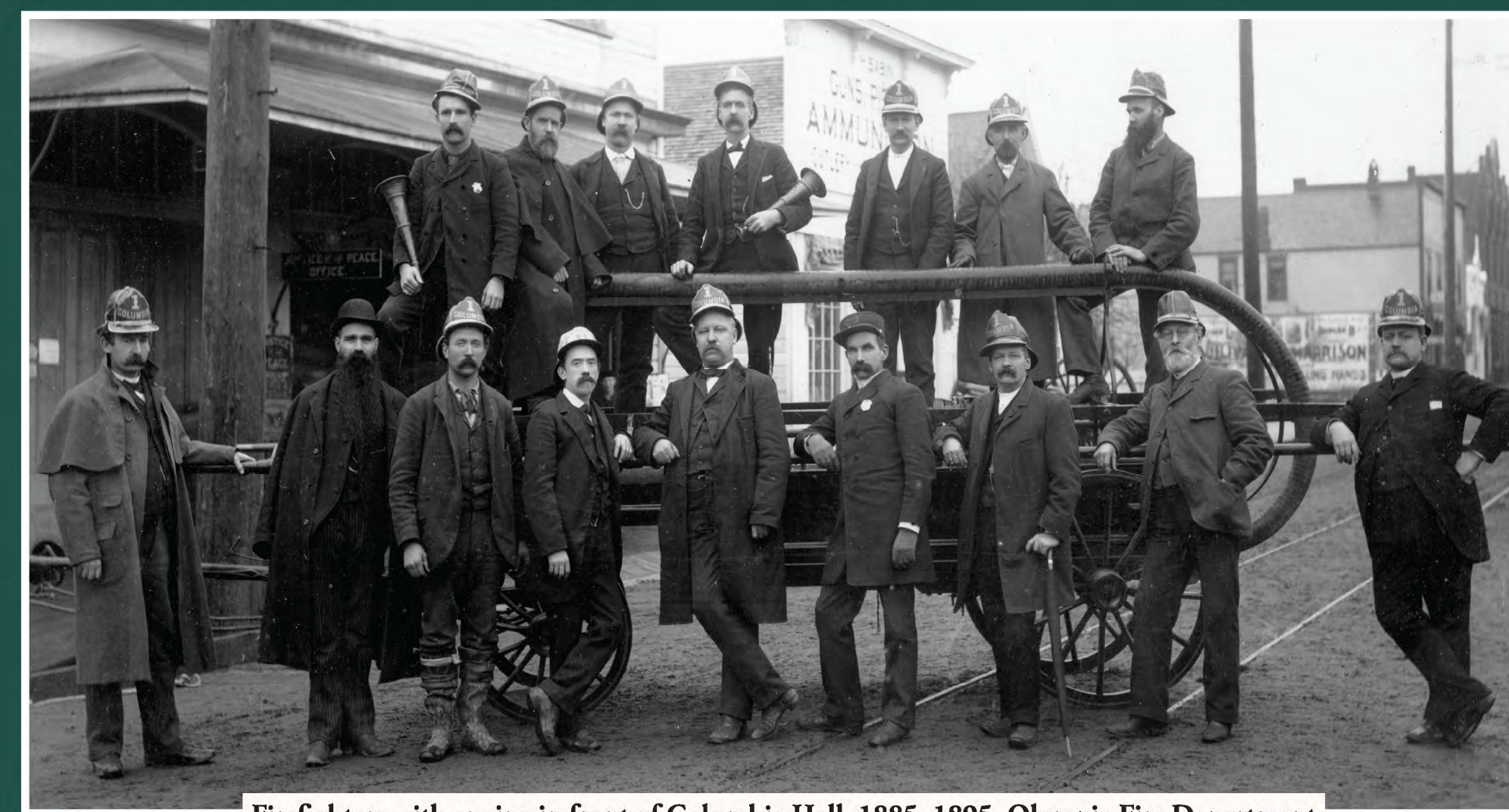
Columbia Hall

Built in 1869 at 210 Fourth Avenue East, Columbia Hall was a symbol of Olympia’s growing community spirit. The first floor housed the Olympia Fire Department, while the second served as City Hall—together forming the city’s first true seat of government.



1870 Barnes

After a fire destroyed his and other downtown buildings, George Barnes organized a hook-and-ladder company, buying uniforms and equipment and continuing the fund-raising-ball tradition. Organization and community spirit were essential. The firemen were community leaders, not only fighting fires but also appearing at fairs and parades in uniform and with their engine.



Firefighters with engine in front of Columbia Hall, 1885-1895. Olympia Fire Department Photograph Collection, 1885-1980. Washington State Archives, Digital Archives. Retrieved Nov. 21, 2025, from <http://www.digitalarchives.wa.gov>

1865 Button Engine

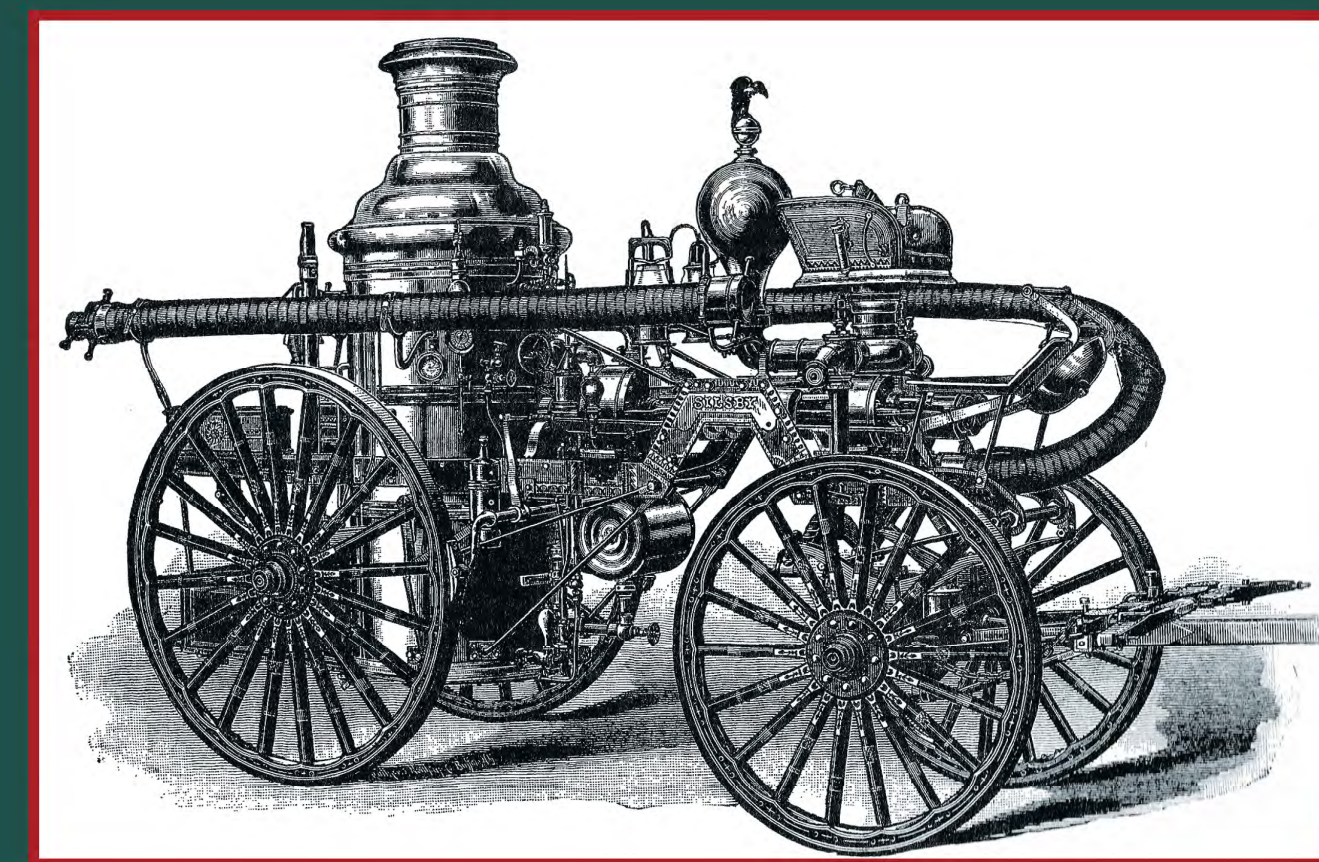
The engine arrived in 1865 by ship, around the horn. It was inscribed Columbia Engine No. 1 and they kept the name. They later nicknamed it Old Reliable. It was, “a splendid machine, with 9-in. cylinders and 8-in. stroke, calculated to be manned, at full capacity, by 60 men, 30 per shift.” Williams decided to keep the engine privately but relented when firefighters built a mock engine, Squilgees, and set a fire in front of Williams’ business and only pretended to extinguish it! The engine had arrived without hoses or a hose cart, so ordering hose from San Francisco and awaiting a two-wheeled cart took months.

Speaking Trumpets

Large crowds often pressed in at fire scenes, adding to the commotion. In the days before electronic speakers or even megaphones, officers relied on speaking trumpets, sometimes engraved as honorary gifts. *Images:* The trumpet and OFD helmet are from the Olympia Fire Department archives.



Back inscription: “Fire Company, Olympia, Washington Territory, approximately 1885.”



Line drawing of the Modern Silsby coal-fired steam rotary engine. Silsby Fire Engine Co., Portland, Oregon. Smithsonian Institution, 17th St. NW, 20540-0001.

Line drawing of the Modern Silsby coal-fired steam rotary engine.

1882 Modern Silsby

In October 1882, after the *Great Olympia Fire*, the city bought a coal-fired rotary steam engine, a Silsby, 5th size, plus a lot at 407 Columbia St. SW, to house it. They named the engine Columbia Engine No. 1—so both Olympia’s engines shared the same name, upsetting the Button supporters. It almost caused a riot!

The Great Seattle Fire

In 1889, the OFD sent the Silsby north by ship to assist in battling the *Great Seattle Fire*. When Seattle’s water supply failed and water had to be drawn directly from Puget Sound, Olympia’s Silsby proved indispensable. It lifted seawater up the steep hillside where Seattle’s own steamers could not, delivering powerful streams of water that made a decisive difference. This accomplishment brought distinction to Olympia and is said to have influenced which city became the state capital.

Those Who Run With the Machines

In 1890, Olympia City Council (finally) decided to purchase horses. Firefighters had “run with the machines,” as the saying goes, over the years pulling both ‘Old Reliable’ and the 4,800-pound Silsby to fires.



Copied from Firefighters with engine in front of Columbia Hall, 1885-1895

1st Fire Chief

Longtime member George Smith Allen was the first fire chief, serving in 1887, 1897, and 1898. The Columbia Engine Co. serenaded Allen and his wife Annie Furquhar on their wedding evening, December 1, 1877.

Jesse Mars

Jesse Mars, Olympia’s earliest known African American firefighter, joined the OFD at age 13. He died in 1891 at age 21 of tuberculosis and was honored with a firefighter’s funeral.



Remember the Ladies

Early newspaper stories noted women pitching in to fight fires, including the hauling of water. In Olympia, Oct. 5, 1870, “while hundreds of men were standing idle... Miss Cynthia Shelton took hold of the engine brake [pump] and worked until her strength was completely exhausted.” Cynthia married Philemon B. Van Trump, mountaineer/writer. The first OFD female firefighter, Barbara Greene, started over a century later, in the 1980s.



Courtesy of David and Mary Helms, 1907 OFD with 2nd Ladder on back step

Horses Prove Their Worth (1907)

For 25 years, Olympia’s fire engines were pulled by hand, then for 15 years by horses—until motorized vehicles came under consideration. A lively contest was held to see which could reach a fire faster. The horses reportedly won, but progress prevailed: a Seagram motorized fire truck was delivered in 1911.

Cisterns

In 1859 and over the next 35+ years, a dozen plus cisterns were built, sized to collect 1,000–144,000 gallons of rain and sea water. (The first two cisterns were built and filled before the hose was delivered!)

Hydrants & Alarms

In 1890, 20 fire hydrants were supplied by the city’s first water system, which was completed in 1889. Statehood, water mains, and fire hydrants—that’s progress worth celebrating! Then, in the year 1891, came the amazing telegraph alarm system—street boxes with levers were installed. Pull a lever if you see a fire! With good water pressure and many hydrants, by 1899 a third hose company, the 5th Ward, added valuable city coverage.



Old Fire Department Station, 1912-1916 - Washington State Historical Society, Tacoma, Wash.

City Hall & Fire Dpt.

Of the three historic fire buildings in Olympia, only the one at 108 State Avenue NW remains intact as of 2026. Built in 1912, it replaced Columbia Hall at 210 Fourth Avenue East. (The additional station at 407 Columbia Street SW, which housed the Silsby steamer, went out of use when the Silsby was retired and Company No. 2 disbanded.)

For 80 years (1912-1992), the above pictured station served as the Olympia Fire Department, and for more than 50 years, it also housed City Hall. At various times, the building also accommodated the public library, the police department, and the Chamber of Commerce.

