



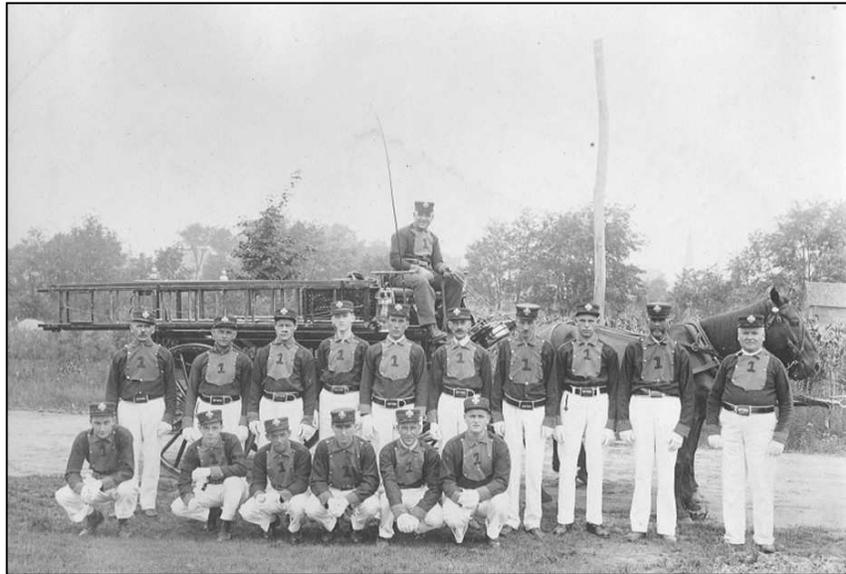
## A Brief History of the Oxford (MA) Fire Department

*And the Role of the*

Oxford Firefighters Association

in the Preservation of its Storied Past

July 2010



*Oxford Fire Department  
Circa 1915*

## **A Department is Born**

The Town of Oxford Fire Department was officially organized in 1856 under the name of the Colonel DeWitt Hose Company. Colonel Alexander DeWitt was a prominent Oxford resident, businessman and statesman of the day whose family had donated the land on which the first fire barn was constructed. As a show of appreciation for that donation, the Town named the first fire company and their first fire engine after Colonel DeWitt.



*Colonel Alexander Dewitt*

For many years the Town of Oxford was protected by this one fire company which utilized an 1857 Jeffers Hand Tub (named the Colonel DeWitt) and a 300' hose reel as the sole means of fire protection for the entire town. Originally the hand tub fire engine was stored outside on the town common, however it was eventually relocated to the newly constructed "fire barn" on the land donated by the DeWitt family.



*Colonel DeWitt Hose Company  
Barton Street, Oxford MA  
(retouched to approximate original configuration)*

In the late 1800's, as Oxford continued to grow and more industry came to town, it was decided to establish a second fire company in the north section of town to provide protection to the residents and the growing number of mills that had been established there. Accordingly, in 1884, the town appropriated money to purchase a Silsby Steamer, 5th size, and constructed a fire station to house it. Known as the Huguenot Steamer No. 1 (named after the French Huguenots who had originally settled Oxford), this fire company served proudly for many years with Silsby Steamer No. 767 in their charge.

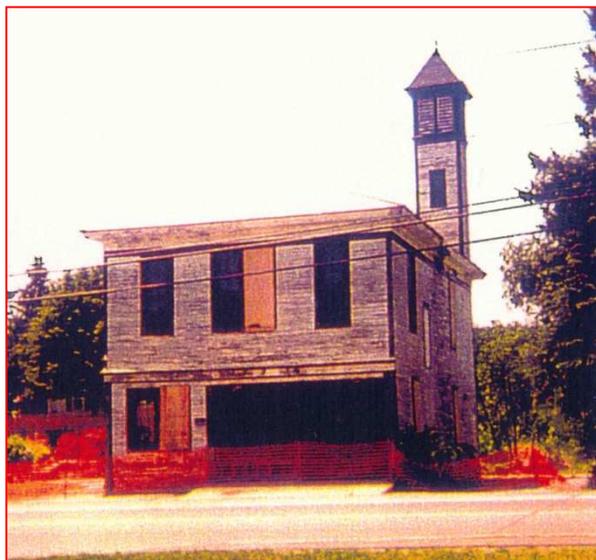


*Colonel Dewitt Hand Tub (1857 Jeffers) and Huguenot Steamer (1884 Silsby)  
The first two fire engines owned and operated by the Town of Oxford Fire Department  
2002 Photo*

### **The Huguenot Steamer No. 1 Fire Station**

The original plans to construct a fire barn to house the newly purchase Huguenot Steamer reflected a modest, single story structure suitable for its use as a fire station of the day. However as work began on the station, residents petitioned the Town to include a second floor to serve as a meeting hall for the residents of North Oxford who, up until that time, had been forced to travel the 5 miles to the center of town (to Memorial Hall) whenever a public assembly was called. Accordingly, construction plans were revised and a second story was added to include what came to be known as Huguenot Hall.

Since its original construction, the Station has undergone very few changes, mostly associate to the introduction of motorized apparatus in the 1920's. These changes included the addition of roll-up doors for the apparatus bays, and a partitioning of the interior space on the first floor for insurance purposes. The station served the Oxford Fire Department and residents of North Oxford until 1975, at which time a new station was constructed across the street.



*Huguenot Steamer No. 1 Fire Station  
Main Street, North Oxford MA (circa 1999)*

The Town of Oxford essentially abandoned the building, and it had sat vacant since 1975. In late 1998 the Oxford Firefighters Association (see below) began to develop a more ambitious element of its Historic Preservation Project, namely the restoration of the Huguenot Steamer No. 1 Fire Station, and its utilization as a firefighting museum and meeting facility. Early plans were not well received by the Town of Oxford, however a microburst storm damaged the building in late 1998/early 1999, and an immediate decision had to be made regarding the disposition of the building. After additional presentations, pleas, and planning, the Town of Oxford finally agreed to sell the Huguenot Steamer No. 1 Fire Station to the Oxford Firefighters Association in late 1999 for the sum of \$1.00.

The Association established a 6-year restoration plan for the building, culminating with the opening of the fire museum in the summer of 2006, to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the Oxford Fire Department.

Since taking ownership, the Association has secured registration for the Huguenot Steamer No. 1 Fire Station as one of the Ten Most Endangered Historical Resources in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Additionally, the Association has also secured several grants which, along with private donations, have allowed restoration to proceed on schedule.



*Huguenot Steamer No. 1 Fire Station  
Phase I Stabilization  
"Dressed for the Holidays 2002"*

### **The Oxford Firefighters Association**

Originally established in 1991 as primarily a fraternal order, the Oxford Firefighters Association was reorganized in mid 1997 with a new charter having three primary elements: Service, Brotherhood, and History. The last of these elements refers to the identification, restoration, and preservation of the historically significant artifacts of the Oxford Fire Department. Among these remaining artifacts is the Colonel DeWitt Hand Tub (the first fire engine ever purchased by the Town of Oxford). Although it is unknown as to when and how The Colonel was taken from the Fire Department, it eventually came to be included as part of the collection of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA) where it sat in storage for many years. In 1989, the Town of Oxford was contacted and presented with the opportunity to reacquire the hand tub. The Colonel was purchased from SPNEA for the sum of \$3500.00, and has been restored to original condition, down to the twin lanterns which adorn the front of the engine.

Another historic artifact, the Huguenot Steamer itself, was also shrouded in some secrecy, as it is unknown as to how and when it left Oxford. The only record of note was made in the 1944 Town of Oxford annual report where it was voted to allow the Board of Selectmen to sell the Steamer off; however no record of an actual sale can be found. In more recent years, the

Steamer was discovered in the collection of the New England Fire and History Museum in Brewster, MA. Discussions with representatives of that facility indicated that the Steamer might have found its way to a private collection in New Jersey, prior to its stay in Brewster. Early inquiries in the mid 1990's by the Oxford Fire Department relative to the reacquisition of the Huguenot Steamer were not met with much success, as the owners of the NEFH Museum utilized it as the centerpiece of their collection and were reluctant to part with the engine.

Meanwhile, the efforts of the Oxford Firefighters Association were noted by the Oxford Fire Department which cited the restoration of the Huguenot Steamer No. 1 Fire Station as additional justification for bringing the Huguenot Steamer back home.

After repeated inquiries with representatives of the NEFH Museum in Brewster, it was learned that the Museum did not plan to open for the 2001 season, as the primary owner had passed away, and the family had no desire to operate the facility. For this reason, the Town of Oxford was finally afforded the opportunity to purchase the Steamer, and return it home. Independent appraisals were subsequently performed, and in late 2001, at the Town of Oxford annual meeting, voters approved an article to expend \$52,000.00 to reacquire the engine. Finally, in March of 2002 a contingent from the Oxford Firefighters Association and Oxford Fire Department traveled to Brewster to retrieve the Steamer.

For more details on the Colonel DeWitt Hand Tub and the Huguenot Steamer, please see the attached *Apparatus Description Sheets*.

An inauguration ceremony was held on 29 July 2006 to formally install the Colonel DeWitt and the Huguenot Steamer into the fire museum.



“Before”: Huguenot Steamer No. 1 circa 1999



“After”: Inauguration Ceremony July 2006

## Apparatus Description Sheets

## **1857 JEFFERS HANDTUB – “Colonel DeWitt” HAND DRAWN SIDE-STROKE PUMPER**

### **9-INCH CYLINDER with 5 ½ INCH STROKE**

This pumper was the first fire engine purchased by the Town of Oxford shortly after the fire department was organized in November of 1856.

It was manufactured by William Jeffers Co. of Pawtucket, Rhode Island and was delivered via the Norwich & Worcester Railroad in early 1857. The handtub was purchased for the sum of \$1,037.12, and an additional hose cart and 300 feet of hose was procured at a cost of \$558.80. Shipping charges from the Jeffers Co. totaled \$7.50.

This pumper was named after Colonel Alexander DeWitt, a prominent Oxford citizen, businessman, and statesman of the day. In 1858, Colonel DeWitt donated a parcel of the family estate located near Main and Barton Streets for the construction of the town's first fire station to house the new handtub. (This station, known as “Col. DeWitt Hall” is no longer standing, but was located on Barton Street, just west of the former OFD HQ.) As a show of gratitude, the engine company took the name of “DeWitt Engine Company No.1”.

The handtub was typically pumped by 10-20 men at a time. A typical training drill involved shooting a water stream over the Universalist Church spire, which was 90 feet high. At the Worcester Fire Department Muster on September 4, 1857, the Col. DeWitt placed 24<sup>th</sup> out of 60 contestants, shooting a stream 142 feet high.

The Colonel DeWitt proudly served the OFD until 1918 when it was replaced by Oxford's first motorized fire engine, purchased from Jackson Ford in Oxford.

In 1948, the handtub was donated to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA) in Boston. A “thank you” letter dated July 9, 1948 was sent to Fire Chief Woodman to thank him for the gift, and a copy of this letter remains in our files.

The whereabouts of the Colonel after 1948 remain somewhat of a mystery, however in the late 1980's a family living on Cape Cod sent a letter to Chief Ralph Miller. It seems that the Colonel had been discovered in a barn on the Cape among a collection of antique fire engines. The letter stated that a member of the family had intended to open his own museum, but had recently passed away. As a result of this, the collection was disbanded and the family decided to offer pieces to the original owners. At the urging of the Chief and other like-minded members of the fire department, Article 26 was placed on the Spring 1989 town meeting warrant which sought \$3,500.00 for the purchase and transportation of the Colonel back to town. This article was passed unanimously and the Colonel returned home shortly thereafter. Interestingly, the town report from 1989 indicated that the handtub was purchased from SPNEA, and not a private collector.

In 1998 the Colonel was restored to its original splendor by Mr. J. Donald Lennerton, Jr. of Leicester, MA. Everything you see on the Colonel is original with the exception of the new wooden cover on the rear of the tub. You will note the two lanterns bearing the name “Colonel DeWitt” on the front of the handtub. Interestingly these lanterns had become separated from the Colonel at some point in time, but had been discovered in a Connecticut flea market in the 1970's by Captain Olney of the fire department. The Captain purchased these lanterns not realizing that they would be reunited with the Colonel a decade later.

The Colonel is a true historical treasure for the people of the Town of Oxford and the Oxford Fire Department itself. It is rare that an engine of this type and vintage would survive to this day, much less be reunited with the fire department in which it originally served.

**1884 SILSBY HORSE DRAWN STEAM ENGINE – “Huguenot 1”  
SERIAL NUMBER 767 – 5<sup>th</sup> SIZE  
NO. 5 HOLLY ROTARY PUMP (500 GPM)  
MODEL TYPE 9  
GROSS WEIGHT 4800 LBS**

This steam engine was the second fire engine purchased by the Town of Oxford as a result of the growth and expansion of mill industry in North Oxford, and the associate need to provide improved fire protection for its residents and industry.

It was built by the Silsby Manufacturing Company of Seneca Falls, NY and was delivered on or about April 1884 via the Boston & Albany Railroad. The steamer was purchased for the sum of \$3,320.30, plus \$29.70 freight for total cost \$3,350.00. Additionally, a hose wagon (built by Smallridge and Bourget of Worcester) was purchased at a cost of \$225.00.

This model of steam engine was selected by a town appointed purchasing committee that conferred with the fire chiefs of Boston and Worcester (and other towns having steam apparatus) on the type of steam fire engines “best adapted to the wants of a country town”.

Silsby steam fire engines were of a unique design, utilizing a rotary pump as opposed to the piston or reciprocating type pumps used by other manufacturers. A Silsby employee, Mr. Birdsall Holly, patented the rotary design. By the mid 1800's, the Holly Rotary Pump was widely acknowledged by experts to be the best fire pump in the world. It was said “that the machine stood perfectly still, even when doing the heaviest fire duty, such that a glass of water could be placed on one of the wheels and not a drop be spilled”.

Also in 1884, during the April town meeting, Article 19 on the town warrant sought funds to build a new station to house the steam fire engine. Construction began shortly thereafter on the building in which you are now standing. In 1885, Article 17 was approved which sought additional funds “to complete the fire engine house with a hall in the second story of same”.

In 1888, the “Huguenot Steamer No. 1 Company” was officially formed to operate the Steamer. This name was taken in honor of the French Huguenots who played a major role in establishing the settlements that later became the Town of Oxford. In addition to the fire engine, hose cart, hose, harnesses, coats and other equipment, the Company listed among its property “1 table – a gift of the Company to the Town”. This table still occupies space in the small room adjacent to the truck bays.

The Huguenot Steamer proudly served the OFD until 1923 when it was replaced by a motorized fire engine. By many accounts, the Steamer remained tucked away in the rear of this truck bay for many years. Sometime in 1941 the Steamer disappeared from town under unknown circumstances, but eventually became part of a private collection owned by Mr. Franklin Reed. Mr. Reed graciously donated approximately 60 pieces of antique fire apparatus to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA) prior to his death in 1996. Subsequently, SPNEA loaned the Huguenot Steamer to the New England Fire and History Museum located in Brewster, MA. The Steamer served as the centerpiece of that collection until 2000 when the founder and president, Mr. Eugene Morris, passed away and the decision was made to close the museum.

Working with SPNEA, the OFD and Oxford Firefighters Association initiated a campaign to repurchase the Huguenot Steamer and return it for safekeeping and display in its original fire station. At the 2001 special town meeting, residents of Oxford approved Article 11 to authorize the expenditure of \$52,000.00, the appraised value of the apparatus. On March 5, 2002 a contingent from the Oxford Fire Department and Oxford Firefighters Association traveled to the Brewster museum to secure the Steamer and carefully transport it back to town. Upon arrival, the group was met by other members of the Oxford Fire Department, and a parade of all department vehicles escorted the Steamer through town with an interim stop at the Huguenot Steamer No. 1 fire station. In July of 2006, the Steamer finally “returned to quarters” after an absence of over six and a half decades. There were about 5,000 steam fire engines produced in America, but unfortunately most were scrapped during WW II. Today, only about 400 remain, 15 of which have been documented in Massachusetts. The Huguenot Steamer is one of only 40 of the Silsby Model Type 9 that remain in existence today.