

An 1890s Municipal Fire Well

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Crews installing a sewer line in Old Town in March 2006 made an interesting discovery. Alexandria Archaeology received a call that a large brick structure had been uncovered in the intersection of Gibbon and South Pitt Streets. City archaeologists found that the underground portion of one of the city's old fire wells had been found, nearly intact. This was a circular dry-laid brick cylinder, nine-feet in diameter and eight-feet deep, filled with water. It was partially in the street and extended well under the sidewalk. It was completely covered over with wide planks that rested on big timber supporting joists. In the center, there was a hole cut in the planks and a large, telephone pole-like pump stood vertically. The upper part of the pump which would have stood above the street had been broken off and the 3 ½ foot-long pump handle and a foot long iron faucet valve handle had been inserted down into the hole in the top of the pump. The planks were removed and the pump lifted out. The bottom of the well was sampled and found to contain gray sand. No artifacts were observed inside the well. The water was then pumped out and the

structure was recorded. The brick well structure was left intact in the ground and was filled with gravel.

The pump was a solid wooden timber nine feet long and 1 foot in diameter. It had a 2 ½-inch hole bored through its length, aligned just off the center of the timber. The bottom of the timber was cut flat and the bore hole was plugged by a small piece of wood. Another hole, two-inches in diameter, ran through the timber crosswise, about a foot up from the bottom. This was where the water was drawn in from the well. The top two feet of the pump consisted of a cone-shaped piece of wood with an iron collar at its bottom end and its narrow end at the top. It may be a separate piece of wood fitted over the upper end of the timber which had been cut to a narrower diameter to fit into this second piece. The two pieces now are tightly fit together and appear to be one. The estimated weight of the water-logged pump is about 400 pounds. After the pump and well were recorded, a city crew took the pump along with the pump and faucet handles to the Alexandria Archaeology storage facility at Payne Street.

This type of well is often referred to as a Fire Well. These are municipal wells, most near one corner of street intersections (more where fires are more likely), scattered throughout Old Town. A rough count of these wells recorded on the Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of 1921, shows there were 284. In addition to their purpose of providing water to put out fires, they were used as neighborhood sources of water. Study of the Sanborn maps found that this fire well at Gibbon and S. Pitt Streets was not present in 1891, but is shown on the 1896 map, providing bracket dates for its construction. It is labeled on the 1896 map, "T.H.," which the map key indicates stands for "Triple Hydrant," which presumably means that there are three faucets for fire use in addition to the hand pump.

The pump found in the fire well is undergoing conservation at the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Lab at Jefferson Patterson Park. Funds for this project were raised by Sara Borgatti through the Virginia branch of the Children of the American Revolution.



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