

STROUDSBURG 1871 STEAMER

The Stroudsburg steamer, quite possibly the oldest steam-powered fire engine in the United States, stands as a symbol of both the nation's early technology and the town's early concern with adequate fire protection.

Stroudsburg bought its steamer in 1871, and a study of one local newspaper of that time, "The Jeffersonian," gives considerable insight to the thought, effort and planning that went into the town's defense against fire.

In the summer of 1871 "the Borough Fathers" contracted to buy a used \$4,000 steam pump engine from Thomas Peto, formerly chief engineer of the Philadelphia Fire Dept.

The steamer was referred to as "der mercheen" by many of the Dutch farmers in the area, and was seen as a way of preventing the ravages of fire which "in many a village, just as beautiful, as thriving as ours, as it were in the twinkling of an eye replaced the useful and beautiful evidences of thrift, wealth and comfort with a heap of charred ruins."

When the Peto steamer arrived in September of 1871 it was put through a number of tests, and while it passed the first trial it completely failed the second. The borough then refused to accept the Peto steamer and contracted with "Messrs. Clapp and Jones of Hudson, N.Y." to build a completely new steamer for only \$4,100, financed through the sale of seven per cent municipal bonds.

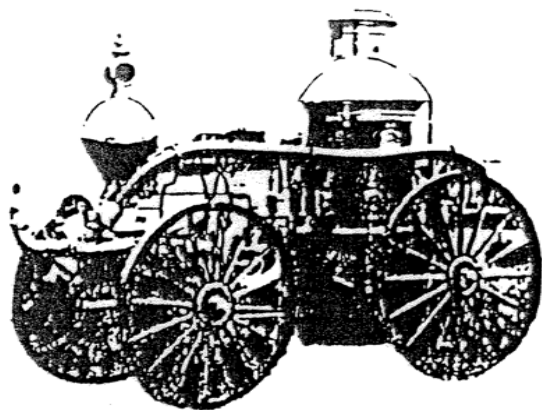
Get ready, folks

The local paper kept the citizenry posted of the steamer's progress, and as delivery neared the Jeffersonian boasted that "The boys better begin to get ready, as the time we are to have a steamer, sure."

In November, 1871, the "Pocono No. 1" steamer arrived, and was given a detailed and glowing description by the Jeffersonian.

". . . Handsome is hardly the word to be used in describing her appearance; she is more than that, she is beautiful, and an ornament which all our citizens may feel proud. In form she is unique, and unlike the machines of any other manufacturer . . . no town in the State or Union can possibly turn out a neater, handsomer steamer than can Stroudsburg," the paper boasted.

The article went on to say that "In the several trials had of her capacity she has proved herself fully up to all requirements, and satisfied all our people that she is just the thing needed to save us from exorbitant insurance premiums and to protect our property against fire."



Still good record

One of the tests consisted of drawing water through 500 feet of hose and pumping a stream of water 160 feet "in the face of heavy wind and through a damp, murky and extremely dense atmosphere" using a 1-3/16th inch nozzle. Fire company engineers say that even the most modern fire equipment of today facing similar restraints, can not better the record of the 1871 steam pumper by very much.

Stroudsburg fire historians say the pumper was kept warm by pumping hot water through it when not in use, and when a fire call would come in a coal fire would be started in the burner. The steam powered the pumping mechanism which forced water through the hoses at high pressure.

The pumper was taken to fires all over Monroe County, usually by being placed on a railroad car and shipped to the fire, as was done with fires in Tobyhanna and Analomink in the late 1800s. While rail was faster than horses, it still took an hour or more to get the steamer to a fire.

While steam engines were the most practical and efficient power plants of those times, they were also dangerous, and many steam fire engines elsewhere in the country blew up while in service, killing and injuring firemen.

In the Aug. 3, 1871 issue of the Jeffersonian, right next to an advertisement for the municipal bonds being sold to finance the Stroudsburg steamer, ran a story about 150 people being killed or injured when the steam boilers exploded on a Staten Island ferryboat in New York.

But the Stroudsburg 1871 Clapp and Jones steam pumper never gave its fire department much trouble, probably because of the excellent design and expert engineers. The steamer was last put to use in 1927, 56 years after it was built, to fight a fire at the Stroudsburg High School, then on Thomas Street.

Until the Monroe County Bicentennial Parade on June 12, the last time the steamer was shown was in the East Stroudsburg Centennial Parade in 1970.

At that time the original wooden wheels, shrunken with age and dryness were soaked in a creek for a number of days to swell back to size, for the Bicentennial, the fire company had new wheels built – at a cost of more than \$300 per wheel – by an Amish carriage maker in Lancaster.

Stroudsburg firemen mention with pride that no other steam fire engine has yet been found that can be proven older than their 1871 Clapp and Jones – not even the one in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C., which is a year or two younger. They mention with pride that Stroudsburg owned its steamer seven years before the electric light bulb was invented (1878) and 22 years before Henry Ford perfected the gasoline-powered automobile (1893).

Tom Phillips, Past Stroudsburg fire chief, said the company has never had the steamer's value appraised because of the money it would take and because the company will never sell it.

"It's ours, it's paid for, and we don't really care about the monetary value of the steamer," Phillips said. "As long as there's a Stroudsburg Fire Company we will never get rid of it."