

Union Fire Society Papers 1804-1860

MSS: #034

Processed by: Katelynn Corrigan (Mar. 2019)

Volume: 1 box, .5 lin. ft.

Abstract:

The Union Fire Society was founded in 1804. Members of the Society were to assist each other in the event of a fire at their home or business. The Society provided its members with 2 leather water buckets a large cloth bag with which to retrieve possession, and a bed key, as well as providing ladders and other fire-fighting equipment to be used by its members. Additionally, the Society provided insurance coverage, to assist those members who had suffered losses due to the fire. Annual meetings were held in January and there was a constitution by which members of the society abided. The society was funded with dues, fines and stock investments. The Union Fire Society appears to have ceased operations around 1860.

Collection Creator:

Union Fire Society

Provenance:

Unknown (possibly as part of Robert Rantoul papers)

Conservation/Processor's Note:

The papers were previously processed and placed into folders in loose chronological order. Several documents retain evidence of having once been fastened in scrap books. Some scrapbook backing paper remains on documents and a few documents are attached to each 0 with scrapbook paper. Metal fastenings have been removed and most documents have been unfolded. Several documents have weak areas where they were folded and have been placed in protective paper folders.

Original order is unknown; therefore it was decided to re-order the collection in a way that would suit potential researchers. This collection was initially cataloged and scanned into Past Perfect by Jane Codding in 2014, and has been updated to reflect the new folder arrangement.

Copyright:

Request for permission to publish material from the collection must be submitted in writing to the Curator of Collections in the Cabot House of Historic Beverly.

Preferred Citation:

Title of Document, Union Fire Society Papers, Historic Beverly, 117 Cabot Street, Beverly, MA 01915.

Historical Note

The late 17th and early 18th centuries saw the creation of numerous public and private fire-fighting operations in the United States. In 1774, the city entered its first private contract with citizens to provide firefighting apparatus and labor, but this initial effort was dissolved in 1795.

In 1804, the Union Fire Society was established. It served both as a private fire-fighting organization and a fire-insurance provider for its members. Each member was provided with two leather buckets, a two bushel bag, a bed key and a screwdriver. The society also maintained a wagon supplied with ladders, fire hooks, sails and axes. These supplies were used to salvage the subscriber's possessions, as well as to attempt to extinguish the fire.

The Union Fire Society met four times a year, in July, April, July and October, in a variety of locations, such as the City Clerk's Office. Members were organized into a number of committees, including a "Committee on Bags and Buckets," "Committee on Sails," and "Committee on ladders and hooks" which were responsible for inspecting and reporting on the condition of the fire-fighting tools in possession of the society.

The Union Fire Society maintained a membership of 30-40 members, which included many prominent Beverly residents. Robert Rantoul served as treasurer of the Society through most of its existence. Funding for the Society's activities was provided through a combination of member dues, fines assessed on members absent from meetings, and stock investments. By 1859, the Society held cash and stocks worth \$3,000-\$4,000.

The exact reasons for the dissolution of the Society are unknown, but Rantoul's death in 1857 may have been a contributing factor. By the mid-19th century a municipal water supply was established in Beverly, and steam-powered fire engines were introduced, changing the nature of fire-fighting from a volunteer activity to a professional one.

Scope and Content Note

The Union Fire Society collection is primarily made up of loose manuscript documents relating to transactions and membership activities of the society. The founding of the society in 1804 is well documented in this collection as well as via a record book also found in the archive (MV 8/ 9,031). The dissolution of the society is assumed to have occurred in the late 1850s, and though the scope of the archive collection does not include documents after 1858, there is no material documenting the decision to cease or how the remaining funds were distributed.

Keywords/Access Points

Union Fire Society
 Fire-fighting
 Fire department
 Organization
 Insurance

Related Materials**Historic Beverly Material**

- **MSS #001:** Robert Rantoul Papers, 1796-1854
- **CH MV 8:** 9,031 record book 1804-1821 (?)
- **CH MV 8:** 25,443 Union Fire Society ledger 1821-1839
- **CH33 Unit 7, Shelf B:** 005.019.001 W. Lamson Fire Bucket
- : 2018.003.001 R. Rantoul Fire Bucket
- **CH33 Unit 7, Shelf A:** 005.019.002 Bed Key
- **CH33 Unit 7, Shelf A:** 005.019.003 Bed Key

Series List

This collection is arranged into two series:

Series I: Financial documents, 1804-1860

Series II: Organizational documents, 1804-1859

Container List

**Series I: Financial documents
(1804-1860)**

Series/Arrangement Note: Grouped by date range. Documents include bills/receipts for goods and services provided to the Union Fire Society, such as the purchase of fire buckets, repair of ladders and storage of the wagon for transport of the ladder, sails and other supplies. A Treasurer's Account was created each year, summarizing the years expenses and expenses.

Location	Box	Folder	Content	Date
MV-Unit 9, Shelf C	1	1	Bills/Receipts, Treasurer's Accounts	1804-1810
	1	2	Bills/Receipts, Treasurer's Accounts	1811-1820
	1	3	Bills/Receipts, Treasurer's Accounts, Insurance Claim	1821-1826

Location	Box	Folder	Content	Date
	1	4	Bills/Receipts, Treasurer's Accounts,	1827-1829
	1	5	Bills/Receipts, Treasurer's Accounts	1829-1833
	1	6	Bills/Receipts, Treasurer's Accounts	1834-1840
	1	7	Bills/Receipts, Treasurer's Accounts, Treasurer's Report	1841-1845
	1	8	Bills/Receipts, Treasurer's Accounts	1846-1850
	1	9	Bills/Receipts, Treasurer's Accounts	1851-1855
	1	10	Bills/Receipts, Treasurer's Accounts	1856-1860
	1	11	Bills/Receipts	undated

**Series II: Organizational documents
(1804-1859)**

Series/Arrangement Note: Grouped by date range. This series contains manuscript rosters of members present and missing from meetings (“member assessments”), Statements in regards to membership dues received, fines issued, correspondence, and committee reports. Several printed documents are included in the series, notably two editions of the Society's Constitution pamphlet, and a broadsheet issued by “a lover of good faith” (an anonymous community member) recommending the dissolution of the society in 1856.

Location	Box	Folder	Content	Date
MV-Unit 9, Shelf C	1	12	Member assessments, correspondence, invitation	1804-1807
	1	13	Member assessments	1808-1810
	1	14	Member assessments, correspondence, report	1811-1830
	1	15	Broadside, correspondence, comprehensive members list	1831-1859
	1	16	Constitution pamphlets	1826, 1842
	1	17	Document, letter	undated

Bibliography

William C. Morgan, *Beverly, Garden City by the Sea*, 1898.