

The AOI of DC: Conservators of DC Object History

1865-2015

1955-1956: The Union Firehouse Sold to the International Monetary Fund

In 2001, Historical Society Library Director Gail Redmann wrote in *Washington History*, "In 1909, the District Commissioners, in recognition of the association's support for the city, passed a resolution allowing AOI to create a permanent meeting place in the old Union Engine Company building at 19th and H Streets, N.W. There AOI shared the building with the Veteran Volunteer Firemen's Association, which had been granted use of the building in 1891 and had established a museum of firefighting equipment and memorabilia. AOI met for the first time at the Union Engine Company on July 11, 1911, and continued to meet there until 1956, when the building was demolished for the construction of the International Monetary Fund headquarters. At that time, part of the valuable fire equipment collection was donated to the Smithsonian Institution and part to the Columbia Historical Society [Ed. then the HSW, now the DC History Center], where the association subsequently held meetings."

On July 3, 1956, C.G. Sloan Incorporated appraisers provided the AOI leadership an 8-page inventory of all items and artifact then housed in the old Union Firehouse on H Street which was being sold to the International Monetary Fund for their new headquarters. Many of the items referred to below are included in that original inventory.

One-hundred and seven years since welcoming the remaining few members of the Veteran Volunteer Firemen's Association into our organization in order to preserve their charter, the AOI turned over to the Friendship Fire Association Museum the four pieces of apparatus and two bells that AOI had served as custodian for all these years. Together with the AOI-donated artifacts that the HSW presented to the FFA Museum in October 2014 (see Nov. newsletter), this transfer of property (see Resolution page 3) resulted in all of DC's historic firefighting memorabilia being under one roof.

1959-1972: M Street Property

A congressional bill in the late 1950's would grant the AOI title to the old Eng. 5 Fire House on M Street in Georgetown for one-half the appraised value, then about \$26,000. Certain riders required any improvements and contents would revert to the D.C. government if the organization folded. Those conditions were not acceptable to the organization's leadership.

After years of appeals to congressional sponsors to modify the restrictions placed on the AOI in the original legislation, the amendments were never introduced and the AOI leadership determined that the costs to bring the old M Street Fire House up to code, after being a sanitation depot for decades, was not in AOI's best interests and the rights to the building were forfeited in a letter to the city's first elected Mayor, Walter Washington.

The "dream" of having its own club house/headquarters never came to fruition. After the Historical Society relocated to the Carnegie Library building, the official mailing address of the organization became then-President William N. Brown's residence in Foxhall Village until 2022 and eventually returned to the Heurich House Museum & Foundation for DC government registration purposes.

1968-1973: Selected Items Deaccessioned to the Historical Society of DC, Alexandria's Friendship Fire Association Museum, the Smithsonian Institution, and the U.S. Navy Museum

In 1968, Burton L. Langhenry – AOI President – arranged for the Smithsonian Institution to examine and remove any items from the AOI collection they deemed significant (except for the fire apparatus). The items which the Smithsonian accepted are noted to the extent that descriptions in the original inventory and in their correspondence could be matched. Langhenry's proposal was after the Smithsonian took what they deemed significant, then the remainder

would be available on March 2nd & 9th 1968 to any AOI member on a first-come basis. Any remainder would be turned over to the Smithsonian.

Langhenry was contacted on Feb. 19, 1968, by US Grant, III then President of the Columbia Historical Society asking that E.E. Billings, their curator, have an opportunity to review and select from the inventory items which would be appropriate for the Historical Society. No further correspondence between these two was ever located to indicate that property had been transferred at that time; however, there is an accounting of items transferred to the HSW in 1973 from the AOI which may be the result of the 1968 initiative or may have been in addition to it.

Several nautical items were transferred to the Navy Museum in 1973 and an “engraving of the death of Abraham Lincoln” provided to the National Park Service.

2014: Fire Memorabilia Donated to the Historical Society Deaccessioned to the Friendship Fire Association (DC) Museum (narrative from AOI Deaccession Resolution)

Whereas: The Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia donated a number of historic artifacts and collectables to the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. (then the Columbia Historical Society) in 1973; and,

Whereas: These eight (8) of the approximately twenty-six (26) donated items related specifically to the Veteran Volunteer Fireman’s Association; and,

Whereas: In 2003, the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. opened the City Museum of the District of Columbia, which is now closed, where these donated objects would be displayed; and,

Whereas: The Historical Society of Washington, D.C. no longer considers itself a museum and foresees no future opportunities for exhibition and storage of these large, 3-dimensional objects; and,

Whereas: The Friendship Fire Association now supports a museum at its location at Engine Company 3 on New Jersey Avenue, N.W. which already contains a number of AOI-related, Veteran Volunteer Fireman's artifacts; and,

Whereas: The Collections Committee of the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. has recommended to the HSW Board of Trustees to deaccession these items and transfer them to the Friendship Fire Association museum;

Therefore, Be It Resolved: The Board of Directors of the Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia agrees to the Historical Society's deaccession of eight objects (classified according to their records as 1973.002.02-1973.002.07 and OB 0960-0961) to the Friendship Fire Association Museum and that the conveying documents clearly state the origin of the objects to be the Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia.

2015: Fire apparatus and two bells to the Friendship Fire Association Museum (DC). (narrative from AOI deaccession resolution 2015)

WHEREAS: The Association of Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia incorporated the last surviving members of the Veteran Volunteer Firemen's Association into its membership in 1909; and,

WHEREAS: As part of the AOI's affiliation with the Veteran Volunteer Fireman's Association and beyond the tenure of their last living member, the AOI came into possession of an extensive collection of antique firefighting artifacts and memorabilia; and,

WHEREAS: In 1973, the AOI donated a number of these artifacts to the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. and, by resolution in September 2014 approved of the deaccession of these items and their transfer to the Friendship Fire Association Museum; and,

WHEREAS: The only remaining Fire Department-related artifacts in the possession of the AOI are four vehicles (1905 American La France Steam Pumper; 1909 Robinson Fire Apparatus Chief Engineer's Buggy; 1853 Rogers Hand Pumper;

1870s Parade Hose Reel) and two bells (1956 Jones & Hitchcock Bell (mounted); and, an unknown year/make smaller bell (un-mounted)); and,

WHEREAS: The Friendship Fire Association now supports a publicly accessible museum at its location in Engine Company 3, 439 New Jersey Avenue, N.W., which already contains a significant number of AOI-related Veteran Volunteer Fireman's artifacts; and,

WHEREAS: The Officers and Board of the Association of Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia have voted to approve this resolution; and,

WHEREAS: The By-laws of the AOI of DC require the approval of the membership for expenditures and disbursements in excess of \$5,000 (Section VI "Board of Directors", AOI By-laws, Revised Sept. 21, 2007);

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED: The membership of the AOI of DC approves the recommendation of The Board of Directors of the Association of Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia to transfer these four vehicles and two bells to the Friendship Fire Association Museum and that the conveying documents clearly state the origin of the objects to be the Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia, custodian of these artifacts by virtue of the AOI's relationship with the Veteran Volunteer Firemen's Association.

With the deaccession of the fire apparatus and bells to the FFA Museum, the AOI effectively freed itself of all physical objects and property which it had in its possession between December 7, 1865 and December 2015.

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Compiled July 24, 2024 by Bill Brown, Past-President