

The Story of the Portland Firefighter Memorial

Compiled by Don Porth

The story of Portland's Memorial to Fallen Firefighters begins on a dark day for Portland citizens. On June 26, 1911, fire alarm box 267 called fire crews to duty shortly after 7:45 AM. This was prompted by a fire at the Union Oil Company at SE Water Avenue and Salmon Street. Fire Chief David Campbell arrived soon after and began directing crews. At 8:35 AM, an oil tank exploded within the building and Chief Campbell knew this was a bad sign. Crews were called out of the building over concern for a larger explosion. Campbell entered the building to ensure all crew members were out. It was then that an ominous rumble began. A tank explosion hurled smoke and flame skyward. A second tank then blew, propelling debris and firefighters upward and outward from the blast. The building collapsed. Campbell was nowhere to be seen. Crews finally had control over the fire at 10:15 AM. The search confirmed everyone's worst fears...Fire Chief David Campbell was dead.



Who Was Fire Chief David Campbell?

Affectionately known among Portlanders as “Our Dave,” David Campbell was unlike any Fire Chief before and for a long time after. Campbell was a charismatic personality that was both likeable and accomplished. With over 30 years of service at the time of his death, his long tenure with Portland Fire was matched by his depth of community involvement. Campbell was an accomplished bare-knuckle boxer who had won some major bouts in his younger years. He became a boxing instructor at the Multnomah Athletic Club. He was a member of civic groups and generally well known all over town. David Campbell would overcome political setbacks as Chief but found ways to rebound with more credibility than ever. He would champion the change from horse drawn equipment to gasoline-powered fire apparatus. He would also bring the first fireboat to Portland’s waterways. While he was the fourth acknowledged line of duty death within Portland Fire, a memorial to Portland’s fallen firefighters had yet to be considered. Chief Campbell would change that in a big way.



Public Outpouring For The Fallen Fire Chief

Fire Chief David Campbell's death brought the city of Portland to a standstill. Within two days, a funeral service and burial were planned. Campbell's funeral procession would wind its way through the streets of Portland, beginning at the Elks Temple at SW 7th Avenue and Alder Street. It would conclude at his grave site in River View Cemetery in southwest Portland. Along the way, a reported 150,000 citizens would line the streets to bid their Chief farewell. The procession would include many city service workers and civic organizations. Campbell's hearse would be drawn by his three favorite horses, Baldy, Bob, and Bid, a team he had driven in his early days as a firefighter. His Chief's vehicle would be driven by his long-time driver, Thomas Gavin. His turnout coat and helmet would rest in their usual spot and in the place where Campbell's feet would rest lay his faithful dog, Cole. It was indeed a day of mourning for all Portlanders and Portland Firefighters.



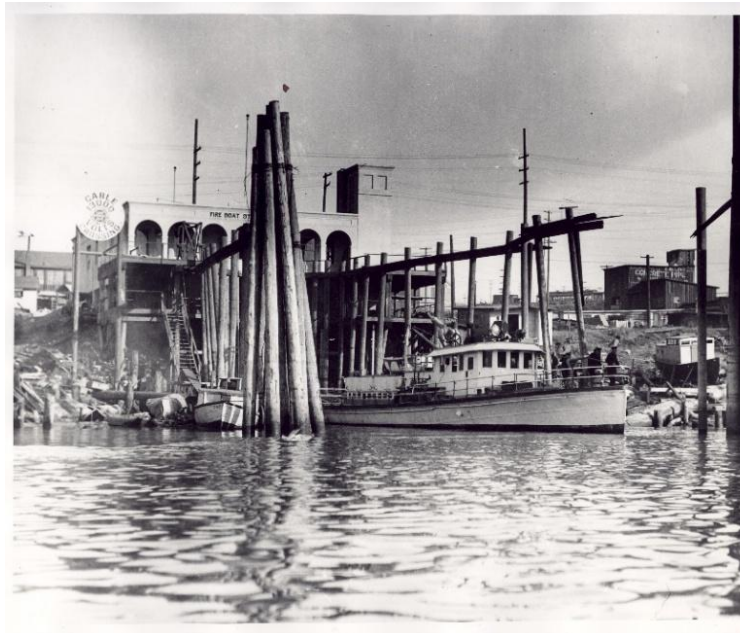
The Beginning Of A Memorial To Portland Firefighters

It would be the evening newspaper of June 28, 1911 when the first idea of a memorial for Fire Chief David Campbell would be suggested. The *Oregonian* newspaper offered to collect donations on behalf of the project. The first donation arrived with a note that said, “*always on the square.*” Two potential purposes were suggested for the fund. First was a relief fund for disabled and retired firefighters. Second was a public monument to Chief Campbell’s dedicated service. The monument idea won out and efforts would begin to raise the funds and develop a concept for what would become the “David Campbell Memorial.” A site was finally secured in a small traffic triangle surrounded by SW Alder Street, 19th Avenue, and 18th Avenue. Many would contribute to the design and features of the memorial. It would take 17 years for the public contributions to total enough to complete the project. On June 26, 1928, the project would be publicly dedicated.



Other Tributes To Fire Chief David Campbell

The impact of Fire Chief David Campbell has sustained for more than a century. Tributes are numerous and exist in more than the David Campbell Memorial (DCM) at 1864 SW Alder Street. An organization was needed to manage the funds collected for the DCM. The "*David Campbell Memorial and Medal Fund*" would be established. It remains in existence today as the "*David Campbell Memorial Association*" and has caretaken the legacy of Chief Campbell and the remembrance of Portland's fallen firefighters since June 21, 1913. In the wake of Campbell's death, fire codes were modified to include removal of fuel storage facilities in or near residential areas. The fuel distribution centers, located in NW Portland, were a direct result of Campbell's death. In 1913, a second fireboat would be christened. It would be named the "David Campbell." And as importantly, the decision was made on June 12, 1923 to utilize the yet-to-be-built DCM as a place to also pay tribute to all fallen firefighters. Three line of duty deaths preceded Campbell yet no place of honor had yet been established.



Decades of Service By Portland Firefighters

Beginning on June 26, 1912 (the one-year anniversary of his death), an annual remembrance was held for Chief Campbell. With no formal memorial site, the service would take place at Campbell's gravesite at River View Cemetery. The David Campbell Memorial (DCM), as it is known today, was completed and publicly dedicated on June 26, 1928. This first service included recognition of all Portland Firefighters who had died in service, of which there were 17 at that time. Over the next several decades, the list of Portland's Fallen Firefighters would continue to grow, yet the DCM did not seem to keep pace. A 1948 Oregonian Newspaper article reported 19 name plates for fallen members were in place. By 1948, at least 27 members should have received recognition. Care seemed to turn a corner in 1966 with the death of Firefighter Virgil Spencer. Spencer's name was recognized on the list as he became the 31st Portland Firefighter to be recognized for his sacrifice.



The Decline of a Monument And City Heritage Site

The David Campbell Memorial (DCM) is not just a memorial, but also a unique architectural gift to Portland. However, its construction materials were not suited for the climate in the Pacific Northwest. Mainly constructed of Italian limestone, portions of the stonework would begin to fail within two years of completion. Repairs were made using more durable stone, but problems continued to occur. An April 4, 1948 Oregonian newspaper article described the DCM as “crumbling and forgotten.” Indeed, the outdated presentation of fallen firefighters and the overall condition would raise concern. But things would change. In 1963, the realignment of SW 18th Avenue south of Burnside Street with NW 18th Avenue to the north would expand the memorial triangle and bring renewed interest. The Portland Junior Chamber of Commerce would take on the task of creating “Portland Firefighter Park” in the new greenspace on the east side of the triangle. However, despite the name, it was never a city park. This designation would create some confusion of ownership and care responsibilities for the site. Regardless, the profile of the hallowed ground changed. In 1966, Firefighter Virgil Spencer would die in a fire in SW Portland. His death seemed to spark a renewal in care for the DCM. It also showed renewed activity by the David Campbell Memorial Association, which seemed to have languished in the decade’s prior.



A New Era For The Portland Firefighter Memorial

By 1975, the David Campbell Memorial was in need of additional repair. The Italian limestone portions of the memorial that remained continued to fail and desperately needed refurbishing. A synthetic coating of protective material was applied to the portions surrounding the fountain and the memorial headpiece. The lantern bases would receive the same treatment. This improved appearance made for easier care. Around this time, the David Campbell Memorial Association would also become more active. In 1977, Firefighter John Devaney would die of a heart attack following a SW Portland fire. His name would become the 32nd on the roll call of fallen Portland Firefighters. A 1988 amendment to the David Campbell Memorial Association bylaws indicates a refocusing of efforts. Additionally, a collaboration between the Portland Firefighters Association and the Fire Bureau would create a display space for the 1874 Messenger Bell. The alarm bell was purchased in the wake of the 1873 conflagration that leveled 22 square blocks of the city. A special enclosure resembling a bell tower was created near the south tip of the triangle and dedicated in the year 2000. Over the next 30 years, no line of duty deaths would be recognized, leaving the number of members recognized totaling 32. This would soon change, but not for the expected reasons.



An Expanding List of Fallen Firefighters

Beginning in 2003, deep research on the history of Portland Fire would begin to take place. One discovery was of Portland Firefighters who died prior to retirement and received service-connected designation for their death. This would mean it was related to the job, even though it may not have occurred at an emergency scene. Included were death by cancer, heart/cardiovascular disease, and other health issues directly related to the job. Among those discoveries was a name that existed on the line of duty list in 1923 but was somehow forgotten. In an April 4, 1948 *Oregonian* article, it was stated that only 16 of the 19 name plates at the David Campbell Memorial were intact. Nothing was said about whose name plate was missing. In 2008, a list of eligible names were presented to the David Campbell Memorial Association, resulting in the addition of only 4 names to the roll call of fallen firefighters. This left many others unrecognized. In 2021, a resubmission of these names resulted in 39 additional members being recognized for losing their life in service to the citizens of Portland, bringing the total to 75. In late 2021, a Portland Firefighter would die of occupational cancer while still on the job, becoming member number 76. And in 2023, the family of a past member who died in 1981 would share compelling information that resulted in the addition of Roger Brandenburg, bringing the total to 77. A problem now existed...There was no public display to recognize these members.



Rebuilding And Refocusing the Memorial

Throughout the first decade of the 21st century, Portland Fire conducted a comprehensive upgrade and remodel of fire stations. One such place was Station 21, located on the riverbank at the east end of the Hawthorne Bridge. Upon its completion in 2010, a small area of pavers to the north, between the Eastbank Esplanade and the Willamette River, resulted. It was envisioned as a place to build a proper memorial to Portland's Fallen Firefighters. While the David Campbell Memorial (DCM) had been the home of this honor for nearly a century, it was felt this move could improve the presentation of these important stories. The project languished for a few years, having nothing more than a rendering to project the potential. Funds were raised, but no action would occur until 2020. An effort entered the city planning processes but quickly identified a number of challenges, including flood zones, environmental zones, proximity to a protected waterway, and existence in the shadow of an interstate freeway. The location was abandoned for those and other reasons. The need to properly display fallen members in a public way remained. A decision to modify the entire memorial triangle, at the site of the DCM, would result. The plan was to restore the languishing DCM and add a Portland Firefighter Memorial Plaza adjacent to it, thus creating a comprehensive memorial plaza. This would include the DCM, the Messenger Bell, the Memorial Wall, and various interpretive elements to better share the significance of the site.



A New Idea For The Portland Firefighter Memorial

The renovation of the Portland Firefighter Memorial Triangle, located at 1864 SW Alder Street, seemed a good plan. It would not only restore the nearly century-old David Campbell Memorial (DCM) but also add a proper tribute to all Portland Firefighters who died in service to the community. The first step was to consult with the surrounding community. The key stakeholders within the Goose Hollow and Stadium District proved very supportive and embraced the project. Next were Portland Firefighters. Efforts were made to share the plan among active and retired firefighters to get a sense of support. They also backed the project. The final approval needed to come from the architectural heritage community. In 2010, when word got out that the DCM memorial might move to the Station 21 location, the Architectural Heritage Center and the Bosco-Milligan Foundation nominated the DCM for the National Parks Service Registry of Historic Places. It was accepted. Clearly, their interest as an architectural heritage site in the city of Portland was serious. To some, this seemed a setback. But the status and attention from the action of the architectural community benefited the entire project and improved the potential for community support. With support in hand, the project moved forward. It began with contracting a project manager and architects for the project.



Funding And Foundation To Complete The Memorial

To create a memorial site that can withstand another 100 years of service takes a solid plan and quality construction. As a public space, the Portland Firefighter Memorial would need to meet the many codes and ordinances of the city. A project manager was selected and a team assembled to carry the project through the design, engineering, and permit preparation phases of the project. This would constitute Phase 1. Phase 2 would restore the David Campbell Memorial (DCM). Restoration would include repair of the stonework, a deep cleaning of all surfaces, regrouting of stonework, creation of entry portals for ADA access, improved water drainage, restoration of the lanterns, restoration of the fountain, repair of the curbing, and the addition of a protective utility vault for electrical and water connections and the safe containment of a variety of tools to support the site. Phase 3 would build the new Memorial Plaza. This will contain the memorial wall, the Messenger Bell, a flagpole, seating benches, planters, and interpretive panels to allow visitors to learn the significant stories of the entire memorial triangle. The cost would be approximately \$1.3 million. The project would be managed by the David Campbell Memorial Association using contractors outside the city in order to expedite the project and save cost. However, fundraising proved difficult. Support by various administrations in the City of Portland have allowed great progress, but support from the community was needed to close the gap. Efforts continue in earnest. Time will continue to write the final chapter for the Portland Firefighter Memorial.

