



The Clerk's Black History Series

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Engine Company 21

(1872)

"First All Black Fire Company /Inventors of the Fire Pole"



Engine Company 21 was established in 1872, in Chicago, Illinois. The company consisted of only six black firefighters, some of who were previously enslaved men that had relocated north after the Emancipation Proclamation. The firefighters were considered heroes who responded to hundreds of fires in the city of Chicago.

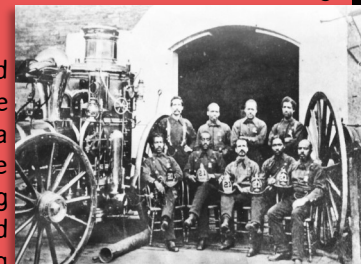
Their appointment was as a result of a desire to integrate the city services, and respond to the fear that permeated the neighborhoods after "The Great Chicago Fire" burned in the American city during October 8–10, 1871. The fire killed approximately 300 people, destroyed roughly 3.3 square miles of the city including over 17,000 structures, and left more than 100,000 residents homeless. The fire began in a neighborhood southwest of the city center. A long period of hot, dry, windy conditions, and the wooden construction prevalent in the city, led to the conflagration spreading quickly. The fire leapt the south branch of the Chicago River and destroyed much of central Chicago before crossing the main stem of the river, and consuming the Near North Side.



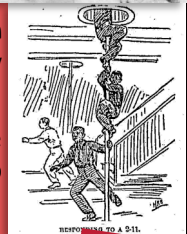
Engine 21 was Chicago's first organized paid African American Firefighting Company. Chicago city officials sought to ease the nerves of citizens that were rebuilding their lives in the aftermath of the fire, by rebuilding their city fire services. Chicago's Mayor, Joseph Medill, was committed to reconstruction and committed to the freedom of black people, relocating north for a better future. His plan was to hire six black firefighters that would be stationed on the foot of May Street, under the supervision of one white fire captain. Officials knew that black firefighters would cause a backlash from the community, so they warned the public that any infringement on the rights of the black men by the local citizens would be punished by the removal of the engine. Unfortunately, the warning didn't stop some residents from taunting the black firefighters.

When two black firefighters stopped in a local bar, they were told that black people wouldn't be served. Although one of the firefighters accepted their response, the other argued that this was an insult to the entire Engine Company 21. An argument and a physical scuffle ensued, and although the firefighters left the bar unserved, they made a memorable statement of what they would not tolerate.

In the 1870s, water pumpers were drawn by horses stabled on a fire station's lower floor. The firemen lived and slept on the upper floor and were graded on how fast they could get down the tight spiral staircase and move the water pumper out the door, because seconds matter to someone trapped in a building on fire. During this time, a firefighter named George Reid was stacking hay on the third floor of the station with Captain Kenyon when a fire alarm rang out. Instead of using the spiral stairs, which would slow his response, George slid down the long wooden pole that was fastened to an opening in the floor and used for hoisting up hay bales, to reach the ground floor faster than the other men could descend on the spiral stairs. The next week the team practiced descending the pole until they were able to convince their superiors to cover the cost to install a permanent pole in the station, allowing them to shave precious seconds off their response time to fire alarms. News of their faster responses spread around the nation and by 1878, Chicago installed sliding poles throughout the city's firehouses to increase response times.



In 1874, Engine Company 21's fire station and equipment was destroyed in a fire known as the "Second Great Chicago Fire". The fire wiped out more than 18,000 buildings in the city and especially devastated a part of the city that was known as Black Chicago where many African Americans lived. More than 200 lives were lost. Sadly, the Engine 21 firehouse was never rebuilt.



According to an 1888 Chicago Tribune article, at the time, no other engine company in the city had a better record of responding to fires. In drills, the full team could go from men upstairs and horses in stalls to a fully hitched and mounted rig in 11 seconds; the team's typical time in practice was 14 or 15 seconds in daytime, 25 or 26 at night, according to the 1888 Tribune article. The company recorded at the top of Chicago's list for responding to the most working fires, run time, and overall responses. According to the 1894 Fire Marshall's report, the company responded to 474 alarms, travelled 744 miles, performed duty at 148 fires, worked 184 hours, and discovered 7 fires in 1893. In 1900 the company won an award for fastest work.



The iconic fireman's sliding pole started out as wood, but that design was discontinued because of splinters. In 1880, the city of Boston patented the brass fire pole. In 2022, Chicago's African American firemen celebrated the 150th anniversary of Engine 21, which in 1872 was the nation's only Black paid firehouse.