

Nanaimo's Firehalls: A brief history

The official opening of Nanaimo's new Fire Station #1 (right) was held on June 21, 2023. The event featured the unveiling of a welcoming pole carved from red cedar by Snuneymuxw First Nation artist Noel Brown. Home to Fire Rescue Operations, Emergency Operations Centre and Fire Rescue Command and Business Centre, the new building is built to post-disaster standards.

The former Fire Station #1 at 666 Fitzwilliam Street (below), built in 1966, remained in use during construction of the new building on the same property from October, 2020 until operations moved to the new building, beginning in July, 2022. The old building was demolished in September, 2022.



Nanaimo's new Fire Station #1



Nanaimo's former Fire Station #1 1966 - 2022



Image Credit Nanaimo Museum: F1-1 The hose team and silver cornet band (near Nanaimo's first Fire Station at Wharf and Front Streets, 1879-1894)

Long before these modern fire stations, Nanaimo had 2 predecessors.

In the city's early days, there was no formal fire fighting institution. Nanaimo relied on citizen volunteers to step up and do their best to quench fires (in flammable wooden buildings). By the mid 1800s, it became apparent that the old "Bucket Brigades" were no longer adequate fire protection.

At a public meeting on May 4, 1878 the "Black Diamond Engine Company" was founded. The first fire station was built at the corner of Wharf and Front Streets in 1879 on donated land and with donated materials. The first fire engine was purchased from the City of Portland for \$700. Also purchased was five hundred feet of hose for \$250. The original personnel consisted of thirty volunteers who lived in the area of the fire station. This original fire station was destroyed by fire that started in the Royal Hotel in 1894.

Four years before that fire, in 1890, a subscription list was started to secure funds to construct a new modern brick fire station. The new station, at the foot of Nicol Street, was officially opened December 15, 1893. This building is still standing and is presently owned by private interests.

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At left:
Image Credit
Nanaimo
Museum F1-2
Postcard of
Firehall on
Nicol St. with
nine fireman
and No.1
Firewagon in
foreground
1890



Image Credit Nanaimo Museum F1-6 Nanaimo Fire Department 1910. H. Weeks, Chief J. Parkin, W. Cowie, H. Peters, A. Dixon, Tom Matheson, J. McGill, W. Ritchie, H.L. Horne, F. Robinson, J. Gordon, H. Freeman, T. Robinson. The horses are Tom and Jerry.

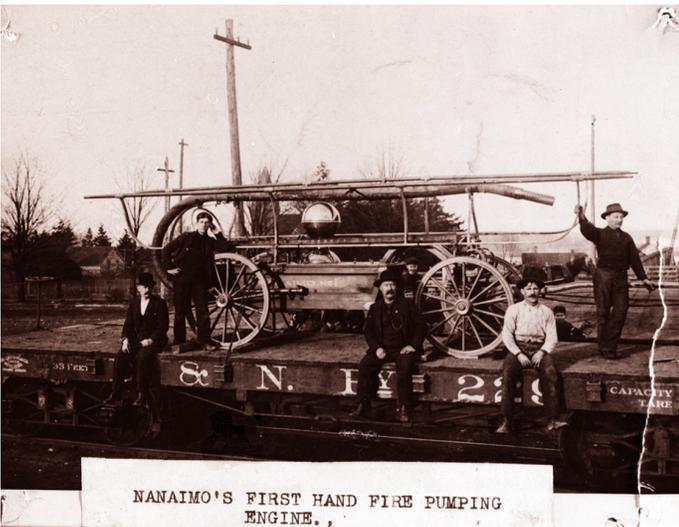


Image Credit Nanaimo Museum F1-24 Nanaimo's first hand fire pumping engine date unknown.

With problems that developed over the years between the Fire Department, the Provincial Government and the City, it was decided that the City of Nanaimo would take over the fire department. John Parkin was appointed the first Fire Chief and two Firefighters were hired to drive the horses, "Tom and Jerry".

In 1951, the area served by the Brechin Volunteer Fire Department was annexed by the City of Nanaimo. That fire hall, at 598 Brechin Road, became a small satellite station that housed one of the 1913 engines.



Image Credit Nanaimo Museum F1-19 Nanaimo Fire department on 24th May Celebration, 1897. Members of the department pictured with the Ronald Steam fire engine. Driver - William (Bill) Ritchie, Hans Peters, Vernon Stewart, James Cowie, Bert Horne, Tom Porter.

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By the early 1960s, the fire station at Nicol Street was becoming too small and in 1967 the department was relocated to the new station at 666 Fitzwilliam Street. An addition was added in 1979, and an upgrade was done in 2000. As mentioned earlier it was replaced in 2022.

During the coal mining years, many small communities had sprung up around the original City of Nanaimo; Harewood, Northfield, Wellington, Chase River, Departure Bay, and Protection Island all had their own fire departments. In 1975 when the City of Nanaimo amalgamated, these individual fire departments all became part of the Nanaimo Fire Department.

The Fire Training Centre on Labieux Road (the first of its kind in B.C.) was opened in 1986 and provides training to Firefighters in Nanaimo.

In 2009, Nanaimo Fire Administration took over the former branch of the Vancouver Island Regional Library at 580 Fitzwilliam Street, which was built in 1961.

Nanaimo's current main stations are Fire Station 1 - 618 Fitzwilliam Street (completed 2023), Fire Station 2 - 2499 Dorman Road, Fire Station 3 - 6230 Hammond Bay Road (built in 1992), Fire Station 4 - 1425 Cranberry Avenue (built in 2008), Fire Station 7 - 26 Pirates Lane, Protection Island (built in 1970) In addition, there are a number of volunteer fire departments within the boundaries of the Regional District of Nanaimo.

In a future newsletter we'll find out what happened to the buildings those volunteer fire departments (VFDs) occupied prior to amalgamation. If you have some history to share about these buildings, we would love to hear from you!

Information courtesy of Nanaimo Fire Rescue and Nanaimo Professional Firefighters Local 905. Photos courtesy of the Nanaimo Museum.



*Image Credit Nanaimo Museum F1-4 Firehall team
Permanent personnel of Nanaimo Fire Department in
front of No.1 firehall*

Member News

On November 7 2023, NHS member Tom Parkin gave a Zoom presentation to the Bytown Railway Society of Ottawa **“So You Always Wanted To Know About Railway Stonemasonry (but were afraid to ask)”** This presentation is on Youtube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HR113Pe5nCU>

On November 18 2023, NHS member Roger Prior gave a live presentation **“Gone, But Not Forgotten, the story of Stovely and neighbourhood (North Cedar area)”** at the Ladysmith Museum as part of the Ladysmith Museum Historically Speaking series.

The Port Theatre Discovery Series presents: **Scenes from the Nanaimo Indian Hospital** Wednesday January 31, 2024 at 2:00 pm. Adults \$25, Members \$20, Students \$10. In this staged reading of a play by Dr. Laura Cranmer, an Indian hospital and residential school survivor, the Nanaimo Indian Hospital is re-imagined to be the confluence of the Island's great linguistic diversity embodied by three young girls. **Warning: Mature content.** Mental health support workers will be available for survivors & audience members.