

# The Firing of the Fire Department

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February 2026

In the year 1885 the city council of Whitehall, Michigan received complaints from members of the fire department that led to a battle of wills that tested the authority and validity of the council.

The fire department had their annual meeting on June 2, 1885, where the members elected certain individuals to leadership positions:

Chief – John Bell	Assistant Chief – Charles Hinman	Assistant Chief – James Johnson
Foreman – Charles Dean	Assistant Foreman – Ira Johnson	Secretary - James Hazeltine
Treasurer – Frank Glazier	Hose Cart Foreman – James VanHusen	Hose Cart Foreman – Fred Winslow

Additional members of the fire department included: Hiram Staples, Elmer Curtis, Charles Anderson, Joshua Knudsen, Albert Christy, Henry Roe, Samuel Gotts, Wayland Nicholson, William Stebbins, Fred Hinman, and William Flynn.

The fire department members were paid for performance based upon individual runs. The fire department foreman submitted a bill to the city council after each fire response, and payment of the bill by the council using taxpayer funds led to the members receiving payment for their efforts.

The Nufer shingle mill went up in flames on May 27, 1885, and the fire department responded accordingly. Shortly thereafter, a bill was submitted to the council in the amount of \$112.80 but was not approved for payment. The council directed the fire committee to confer with the fire department to determine if the bill could be reduced. The bill was not reduced and at the June 17, 1885, council meeting, it was approved for payment. Resulting from this issue was a council directive to the secretary of the fire department to submit itemized bills for all future fires.

The position of a fire department member dictated how much pay was received. Low ranking members received less pay than the higher ranking members, and this disparity caused complaints to the council. The complaining members were never identified but claimed that certain higher ranking members were being paid for performance that never occurred.

The council began investigating and their focus fell upon Charles Dean, the foreman of the fire department. They granted fire certificates at the June 24, 1885, council meeting to everyone on the fire department roster except for Charles Dean. This clarified that the council did not recognize Charles Dean as an official fire department member, and that any performance made by him would not receive payment. A request from the council to the fire department to dismiss Charles Dean was ignored. A committee from the fire department waited until the meeting was over to approach the council members and dispute their authority to remove a member without providing any reason. The council knew the ramifications of revealing the fire department members that originally made the complaints, therefore they remained mute regarding the reason.

The council was subsequently challenged at the August 25, 1885, meeting when the fire department submitted a \$4.80 bill for services rendered. The council allowed \$4.50 and notified the fire department chief that Charles Dean was not recognized as a member and would not receive payment for any duties performed, which led to a lower bill total. Additionally, the council approved a resolution that basically said that if the fire department does not dismiss Charles Dean within 15 days the council will disband and reorganize the entire fire department and will suspend the entire payroll of the fire department until the dismissal occurs.

The fire department opted to ignore the resolution, and on September 15, 1885, a meeting was held at the fire department engine house for the purpose of forming a new fire company. The meeting was called to order by city marshal Charles McKenzie, William Nufer was the chairman, and George Frost served as the clerk. A group of men signed their name to a paper with a heading that said, "We the undersigned offer our services and agree to perform the duties of firemen for the village of Whitehall, and request that our names be presented to the common council of said village for their approval."

The September 16, 1885, council meeting passed a resolution to discontinue and discharge the current fire department due to their failure to comply with previous resolutions except for the chief John Bell. John Bell was directed, in conjunction with the city marshal, to organize a new fire department with 24 able bodied citizens with not more than 18 as paid members.

A new fire department was organized under the name "Steam Fire Company No. 1" and consisted of the following individuals: Hiram Staples (Chief), Charles McKenzie (1<sup>st</sup> Asst. Chief), Charles Aber (2<sup>nd</sup> Asst. Chief), Frank Weiler (Foreman), Charles Ocobock (1<sup>st</sup> Asst. Foreman), Charles Barnes (Foreman hose cart No. 1), Andrew Larson (Foreman hose cart No. 2), Even Knudsen (Treasurer), George Frost (Secretary), Ed Brown, Ed Skeels, Robert Creer, Joshua Knudsen, Adolph Peterson, William Stebbins, Mark Covell, William Nufer, Louis Klett, Julien Newman, Martin Johnson, Charles Anderson, Charles Bergland, Charles Tornblom, and William Flynn. All of these individuals were presented to the council, recognized, and accepted as members.



*Figure 1. Steam Fire Company No. 1, Whitehall, Michigan circa 1886*

The council must have been pleased with the new fire department as they voted to acquire 2 dozen belts and 1 dozen spanner loops for the member uniforms. They also notified the previous fire department members via the local newspaper to return all firemen's articles belonging to the village.

All of the previous fire department members went on with their lives, and the new fire department commenced providing quality fire protection, and the council answered the question "Can the fire department be fired?"