

## **History of Chatham Borough Fire Department**

The Chatham Volunteer Fire Department responded to its first alarm of fire on May 16, 1898. As originally organized in 1898, the department was composed of two companies, each of which was limited to just twenty members.

The fire departments original quarters were in the Ryerson Building, which was located on South Passaic Avenue, on the site of the parking area in front of the old Post Office. In May of 1906 a special election was held at which time citizens approved an \$11,000 bond for the purpose of acquiring land and constructing a new municipal building on Fairmont Avenue. Completed in early 1907, firemen held their first meeting on April 2nd.

In 1913 the Chatham Fire Department took a sizable step forward technologically when it replaced its horse drawn hook and ladder with its first American LaFrance motor driven fire apparatus. This rig began a long tradition of using LaFrance apparatus to protect the Borough.

During the first 50 years of existence, Chatham Volunteer Fire Department fulfilled its purpose-the suppression of fires and the protection of lives and property-with one death in the line of Duty, Doyle Butler. In that first half century the department responded to a total of 897 alarms.

### **The Next 50 years**

In the mid 1950's and 60's the department began several of the community service projects and recreation events that Borough residents still enjoy today. Fire Prevention Week, the Annual Fishing Derby, Christmas tree pick up, and of course the always brilliant Fourth of July celebration, complete with parade and fire works, are undertakings that the department continues to take pride in presenting.

In the late 1970's an era came to end when William R. Kelley, Jr. retired as the departments Fire Chief. Chief Kelley had served in that position for twenty years. During Chief Kelly's storied tenure as Chief he embodied the characteristics of a true leader and was a man the men of this department admired greatly.

In 1982 Chatham Heavy Rescue merged with the Chatham Fire Department following a Borough Council meeting on June 14th. Rescue Company, as it became known, was the department's sixth company, and joined Engine Company 1, Engine Company 2, Hose

Company, Hook and Ladder, and Wardens Company. The community benefitted from this merger as all firemen would become trained in the latest rescue techniques.

A tragedy struck the department early on the morning of April 1, 1993. A house fire on Bartow Lane claimed the lives of veteran firefighter, 51 year old Lewis R. Sheats, and the homes 81 year old occupant. An estimated 2,000 firefighters, police, and emergency personnel from around the state and beyond stood shoulder to shoulder on the streets of Chatham to salute this fallen hero.

In 1996 the Borough Council authorized the building of an addition to the fire house now located on Fire House Plaza just off Main Street. In its current form, the firehouse consists of five bays, a commons room that is often used for community events, kitchen, conference room, three offices, and member's area.

Today, just as in years gone by, the 54 members of the Chatham Borough Fire Department volunteer their time to protect each and every Borough resident by day and night. From our humble beginnings to the vibrant department that exists today, we remain ready to serve the community no matter what the alarm.