

## **Harold Breen Sr.**

Date: January 24, 1978  
Interviewer: David Heinlein  
Transcriber: Laura Cabbage-Draper, August 2019  
Editor: Jennifer Warren, October 2019

Abstract: Harold F. Breen Sr. (1910-1982), son of John W. Breen and Margaret A. Breen, was a lifelong resident of Metuchen. He was a fire inspector and fire chief (1949-1951) of the Metuchen Fire Department, and also served as secretary of the Fireman's Relief Association for thirty-two years. Mr. Breen, who lived at 447 Main Street, was married to Anita "Nettie" (Katz) Breen and had three children: Harold Breen Jr., Elaine Breen, and Maureen (Breen) Seabasty. His son, Harold Breen Jr., also served as a member of the Metuchen Fire Department for forty-five years. Mr. Breen is buried in Hillside Cemetery alongside his family.

The Metuchen Fire Department is a consolidation of two separate fire companies: Eagle Hook and Ladder Company (formerly located at 398 Main Street) and the Washington Hose Company (formerly located at 505 Middlesex Avenue). The Eagle Hook and Ladder Company was organized in 1882 by residents concerned with the threat of fire due primarily to the sparks and hot embers falling off passing railroad locomotives. In 1897, another group of dedicated residents organized the Washington Hose Company. Together, these two groups of volunteers have protected Metuchen for well over a century. The Metuchen Fire Department is currently located at 503 Middlesex Avenue and features three pumpers, one ladder truck, and one heavy rescue truck.

This interview starts with Harold Breen Sr. reading passages from "The History of the Eagle Hook and Ladder Company No. 1" and "A Short History of the Washington Hose Company No. 1." He concludes the interview with a final recitation of the names of former fire chiefs and fire inspectors as well as a brief history of the Fireman's Relief Association.

*Disclaimer: Please note that all oral histories presented by the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society are unaltered. The language, comments, and thoughts contained therein are solely those of the individuals interviewed. Our goal in presenting them is to make the personal recollections of these individuals available, to be considered within both their historical context, and during the time the comments were made, as a part of the historical record. The content and language of these interviews should not in any way be attributed to any of the past, current, or future members of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society Board of Directors, or to the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society membership as a whole.*

D. Heinlein: Today is January 24, 1978. David Heinlein is interviewing Harold Breen Sr., former fire chief in Metuchen, New Jersey. [recording paused]

H. Breen: [reading from an excerpt] "**The History of the Eagle Hook and Ladder Company No. 1**":

**Realizing the need for a fire department in Metuchen, citizens gathered at Robins Hall [at 401 Main Street] on May 2, 1882, at 7:30 o'clock for the purpose of organizing a hook and ladder company.**

**O. F. Browning was elected general chairman of the meeting and St. George Kempson, secretary.**

**The following officers were elected to serve until May 1, 1883: Foreman James Oliver, First Assistant Foreman Nathan Robins, Second Assistant Foreman Paul M. Diver, Secretary St. George Kempson, Treasurer O. F. Browning, and Steward Frank B. Smith.**

**Each member was required to sign the by-laws adopted by the meeting. The company was named the Eagle Hook and Ladder Company No. 1 of Metuchen.**

**Unlike rules today, any member who didn't attend a regular meeting and answer to an alarm of fire was made to pay twenty-five cents fine if he did not have an excuse which was accepted by the majority of the company.**

**A fine of one dollar was charged to any member who left the company during a fire or meeting without a good reason.**

**Initiation fee of one dollar was paid by the charter members during the first meeting. The charter members were Nathan Robins, Frank Smith, St. George Kempson, James Oliver, Paul M. Diver, John Lehlein, J. C. Badgley, J. C. Martin, Charles Tausig, A. B. Winans, L. Grieshaber, John Craig, Walter Van Sicien, H. P. Fowler, J. H. Foreman, J. F. Marshall, O. F. Browning, Edward Kramer, E. B. Dana, A. C. Kelly, L. S. Ayers, F. C. Ayers, John Hampton, and Charles Watson.**

**Although the company was called out to the first fire on May twentieth, the services of the company or truck were not needed.**

**According to the minutes, the company was called to active duty on June the fifth about one o'clock. A story printed in the news [*Metuchen Inquirer*], the only publication in Metuchen, was as follows:**

**"On Monday, June fifth, about one o'clock, a fire broke out in Mr. Jerry Hayes house. The house, together with furniture and \$100 cash (the hard-earned money of Mrs. Hayes) was totally destroyed. A prompt alarm was sounded, and Eagle Hook and Ladder Company was on the spot in a few minutes. They did good service in preventing the spread of the fire to the barn and outbuildings, also in saving some articles of household furniture. The house and furniture consumed were valued at \$1,500, with an insurance of only \$700."**

**The records show the efforts of A. B. Winans, E. Kramer, and E. Talmadge saved the *Inquirer's* office and surrounding buildings on the evening of July fourth. The awning of the building had been found ablaze.**

**During this time the fire company met in the truck house, which was built on Woodbridge Avenue in 1882 where the [First] Presbyterian Church now stands.**

**The company discussed purchasing lots to move the truck house in 1883 and tried to negotiate with the Presbyterian Church to purchase lots at the corner of the old burial ground [Old Colonial Cemetery] near the railroad. This could not be done and it was not until 1885 when the truck house was finally moved. Lots**

were purchased from Elis Ayers on the opposite corner near the railroad track. The track then was a grade crossing. The first meeting held in the truck house after it was moved was May 5, 1885, and happened to be the third annual meeting.

Later the building was moved to the firehouse on [398] Main Street and an addition built. The company meant to purchase the corner lot where the Metuchen Pharmacy stood, but through an error, purchased the present site. Later the old building was purchased by William T. McAdams, who had it moved back of his store for a feed house.

The borough took the fire company over in October 1927. At that time, Nathan Robins was president of the company and William A. Smith Jr., chief. Other officers were: Foreman Otto P. Rosenvinge, First Assistant Foreman Phillip Kreps, Second Assistant Foreman Fred McGuinness, the Secretary William J. McGuinness, Treasurer William A. Smith Sr.

Nathan Robins was president of the fire company from May 4, 1886 until February 1929, when he passed away. He was elected foreman in 1886 and served until the company became incorporated in 1888 and then was elected president. Each time the election was unanimous. Harry Oliver was elected in his place until July.

The company was changed to the Eagle Hook and Ladder Holding Company on July 23, 1929.

When the change was made, Otto P. Rosenvinge was made president. Harry Oliver was vice president, Walter Tausig, treasurer and William J. McGuinness, secretary. The Board of Directors included Otto P. Rosenvinge, Harry Oliver, William Smith Sr., James Lawless, and Fritz Hokanson. Shares in stock were taken by each member.

Otto P. Rosenvinge was elected chief of the [Metuchen] Fire Department in 1933.

Robert McGuinness was captain of the Eagle Hook and Ladder Company, Sylvester Hartman, lieutenant and Charles Carney, secretary. James Bonis was assistant chief of the department. [recording paused]

[reading from an excerpt] "A Short History of the Washington Hose Company No. 1":

A meeting of the Metuchen Hose Company was held in Fire District No. 1 on November 23, 1897, to prepare and file a certificate of incorporation for a fire company in the borough. It was decided a meeting would be held at the barber shop of Charles Hartman on Main Street on December eleventh at eight o'clock for the purpose of incorporating a company and choosing a name at that time. Notice of the proposed meeting was published in the *Home News* in New Brunswick and on November twenty-sixth and signed by David J. Keenan, chairman and John Noble Pierson, secretary.

The name of Washington Hose Company No. 1 was selected at the meeting in December.

The directors chosen during that meeting were Thomas Van Siclen, Charles Ayers, William E. Carman, William Almond, John T. Gedney, John W. Breen Sr., and Michael Ronnan.

Thomas F. Van Siclen was elected president of the company and the remainder of the first officers were as follows:

Secretary David Keenan, Treasurer William Carman, Steward William Almond, Foreman Joseph Randolph, First Assistant Foreman Enos Fouratt, Second Assistant Foreman Charles A. Johnson.

The charter members were Joseph Randolph, Enos Fouratt, Charles Johnson, Michael Ronnan, John Gedney, Martin Whalen, Alfred [Fulkinson], John W. Breen Sr., Charles A. Bloomfield, Joseph Whalen, Charles [Hartman], Thomas Van Siclen, William Almond, Howard Selover, Sidney Hulseizer, James Breen, Charles H. Dudline, John Pierson, R. W. Horn, William Carman, James Powers, Clive Waite, David J. Keenan, John Dempsey Jr., Fred Hubble and J. J. Almond.

“Lady Washington” was the first apparatus of the company. This was a hose jumper and cart [that] was built by the late John J. Almond. The 1,000 feet of hose used on the cart was donated by Manning Freeman through N. J. Schureman.

The Almond building on Main Street, opposite the Eagle Hook and Ladder Company, which was the Big Dip Store, was the place chosen for the first regular meeting. The company moved to Washington Hall on Middlesex Avenue, the present site of Ives Needle Works, in January 1900.

The company planned to build their own home in November 1901, and on November 7, 1902, the first meeting was held in this house, their present home [at 505 Middlesex Avenue]. The plans for the building were prepared and donated by John Noble Pierson.

The first pumper was purchased in 1901 from the Rahway Fire Department. This truck was the original “White Ghost” belonging to Fulton Engine Company No. 21 of the New York Fire Department.

The records show this pumper was able to produce seventy-five pounds of pressure, then considered a great amount.

The first horse-drawn hose cart was purchased in October 1906. A team of the U. S. Rule Stables was usually hired to draw the apparatus. The expense of keeping a team and the size of the firehouse did not permit the company the use of their own team. Later the body of the cart was placed on a Mack chassis and this was the first motor truck of the company.

The first motor driven truck was purchased on August 5, 1914. This was a Mack, which was the first used in the section of the county. This truck served the company until the borough assumed control of the fire company.

The first to take office after the borough assumed control of the company were the following: Assistant Chief John W. Breen Jr., Captain William A. Breen, Lieutenant James A. Bonis, Secretary James P. Knox.

James Bonis, member of the company and assistant chief of the Metuchen Fire Department, was the representative on the Board of Fire Commissioners.  
[recording paused]

The Fife and Drum Corps was organized in June 1930 by the Washington Hose Company. This was made possible by the financial assistance of the Metuchen Police Department, Washington Hose Company, and many other individual contributors.

The name was changed to the Metuchen Fire Department Fife and Drum Corps in 1933. This organization won many prizes in competitions held throughout the state.

The first parade, in which the organization participated, was the Halloween Parade sponsored by the Fugle-Hummer Post No. 65, American Legion, in 1930.

A minstrel show was sponsored by the organization in 1933 and the proceeds were used to purchase uniforms. The uniforms were red and white.

The present officers of the Fife and [Drum Corps] are as follows: President Harold Breen, Vice President Leo Roxbury, Secretary James W. Ronnan, Treasurer Nicholas Knox, Drum Major George Landers, Drum Sergeant Leo Roxbury, the fife sergeant was Harold Breen. [recording paused]

These are the names of fire chiefs who served from 1928 until the present time in 1978: William Smith, John Breen Jr., Otto Rosenvinge, James Bonis, Michael Donato, John Roxbury, Joseph Yeats, Harold Breen Sr., Chris Sorensen, Walter Dudasko, Warren Montagna, George Schmelzer, Russell Finegar, Greg Salamone, Joseph Davala, Chester Jean, George McGuinness, and James Wallace, Jr. [recording paused]

The following members also served as fire inspectors: Henry Rumler, who at that time was permit inspector. And their Superintendent of Public Works Herb Jensen was also named the fire inspector. From there, [Mayor] Joseph Costa was elected. He appointed Harold Breen Sr. as the fire inspector, and the following members continued along that line: Michael Donato, George Montagna, George McGuinness, Chester Jean and James Wallace Jr. [recording paused]

In 1928, Metuchen Fireman's Relief Association was organized. It was admitted to the state association in August of 1929. The local relief association collects 2 percent of all fire insurance premiums sold by fireman insurance companies in the Borough of Metuchen. By fireman insurance company, I mean any out-of-state fire insurance company. And these funds are used for injured fireman, also for a burial benefit for any members who have obtained exemption. That is, attending 60 percent of all fires and drills.

[END OF INTERVIEW]