

# Scenes from the Past

The District of Columbia Fire Department was officially organized on September 23, 1871, although several neighborhoods had volunteer and paid crews prior to that date. The first of these began in Georgetown with a fundraiser held in 1789 to purchase a hand-pumping engine and buckets. Fire Station No. 4 at 931 R Street, NW was built between 1884 and 1885, and later became notable as an all-black engine company.

The first firefighter in the District to lose his life in the line of duty occurred on May 6, 1856, when Benjamin Grenup, a member of the Columbia Engine Company, fell from a horse-drawn pumper on the way to fighting a fire at the Shreeves' Stables on Capitol Hill. His grave in Glenwood Cemetery is marked with life-sized fire hydrants carved in stone at each corner of his plot.

Regulations for the volunteer fire companies were first introduced in September of 1856, and a short time later, Mott-street fire call boxes were placed in strategic locations throughout the city, recognized by their harp-shaped cast iron poles and gas lights. Citizens would pull a trigger at these locations to send a telegram-like alarm to a central station, which noted a fire in progress near that particular pole. The call boxes cost an estimated \$200 each to purchase, install, and wire. The Gamewell Company later expanded the system to include more than 1,500 such call boxes in the city, expanded to include police call boxes using a similar system.

Records kept by the Fire Department were meticulous, as reported on a yearly basis in the *Report of Commissioners of the District of Columbia*. In 1880, for example, salaries totaled \$71,840, and the Department had 15,600 feet of hose in good condition, 3,700 feet in fair condition, and 3,400 feet in bad condition. They had a total of 38 horses, of which 32 were in active condition. Each firehouse had an inventory of all items on the premises, down to the number of pliers and combs. Gas jets, chimneys, and gas stoves seem to have caused most of the fires reported in 1880.

Fire Station No. 4 at 931 R Street became the first all-black fire fighting company in Washington on April 3, 1919. Prior to the forming of this company, the fire department had been racially integrated, but it was difficult for blacks to pass arbitrary and impromptu physicals and exams sprung by white leaders effectively preventing them from advancing in the ranks within the department. The request for the all-black company was instituted by one of the four black firefighters working for the city at the time who apparently believed that his only opportunity for advancement was within an all-black unit.

In January of 1943, Gordon Parks photographed the fire company at Station No. 4, recording their daily activities and routines,



photo—Scurlock Studio Records, ca. 1905-1994, Archives Center, National Museum of American History. The early crew of Engine Company No. 4 at 931 R Street, NW was photographed by the Scurlock Studio about 1928.



Photographer Gordon Parks documented the crew of Firehouse No. 4 at their jobs in January of 1943. Courtesy, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

seen here. He included pictures of Lt. Mills and Captain J.B. Keyes, and other crew members. Parks followed them to calls and fires, including one in front of the Mid-City Theater in the 1200 block of 7th Street, built

in 1913. The Department was integrated again in the early 1960s, but advancement for blacks remained difficult, often conflicting with a multiple generation immigrant population.

Following the 1968 riots, however, an aggressive recruiting campaign resulted in a more racially balanced department. Washington, DC had its first black fire chief appointed in 1973. Fire Station No. 4 was later changed

to Fire Station No. 7, but is today a private artist's studio and residence.

—Paul Kelsey Williams  
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## ROSS SCHOOL

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praised by the City Council in June for "its pioneering work in inspiring, educating, and stimulating young children through the arts and architecture." The Fillmore program's move to Ross managed to bring in even more children from the surrounding community.

In its 27th year, the Fillmore Arts Camp, which once enrolled about 30 children each summer, now holds two, three-week sessions of over 90 students each. The children range in age from kindergartners to eighth graders and are separated into junior and senior classes.

Juniors are encouraged to try many different kinds of classes, while seniors choose classes in their areas of interest. The campers' options spread across a wide range of art, dance, drama, and music, from painting to graphic design, interpretive dance to yoga. "They come up with really creative ideas and classes," said Amalia, 12, a four-year Fillmore Arts Camp veteran. "It's nice to try new things over the summer, other than what I normally do."

Many children return year after year, some staying on after eighth grade to work as camp counselors. Longstanding loyalties to the Fillmore program don't stop at the students. Mangan lives and works in California, but returns to the District every summer specifically for the camp.

Director of Fillmore Arts Workshops Sara Friendly, who acts as camp administrator, attributes much of the program's success to the instructors. Many are working artists, and bring their love of the arts into their classrooms.

The instructors' creativity and dedication has carried the Fillmore program above and beyond a standard summer camp. Children don't just draw or paint — in Glenna Johnson's junior class, elementary-school-age children wrote and illustrated hardcover books. Other campers wrote, edited, and published the Fillmore Camp Newspaper, complete with movie reviews and op-eds.

According to Friendly, the instructors often collaborate across classes to put together larger projects. In the mummy film, a young actress playing an Egyptian princess wore a necklace she'd made in a beading

workshop and a paper mâché gold armband made in another art class. The mummy's sarcophagus was a cardboard refrigerator box decorated with Egyptian hieroglyphics, which campers studied in an art history discussion.

Still, Mangan gives the real creative credit to the campers. "The teachers are good at focusing the children's ideas, but they make the children come up with them on their own," he said.

One of the most striking things about the atmosphere of the Fillmore Arts Camp is the energy level of the campers. The place is hectic, loud, sometimes downright chaotic — but the instructors manage to channel that youthful energy into amazing artistic accomplishments. All the while, the campers still get to have fun, be silly, and



photo—courtesy, Stephanie Lipscomb, Adams National Bank.

Shown here is Ms. Butler (far left, 2nd row, wearing orange blouse) with her first graders. Behind her is Fillmore Art Center's director Katherine Letterner and on the far right is the then Ross School Principal Gonzalez and immediately on her right is Fillmore art teacher Glenna Ross who, with Ms. Butler, works with the Ross students.

generally act like children. "We like it because it's really laid back," said Wendy Cresswell, a parent from Adams Morgan. "It gives kids the confidence to do things. You'll see four kids get up and sing Motown."

For more information on the Fillmore Arts Center and its programs, visit [www.fillmoreartscenter.org](http://www.fillmoreartscenter.org).

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## Innovative Arts-Focused Charter School Honored

Children's Studio School, located in the former Harrison School building at 13th and V Streets, NW in the heart of the Cardozo-Shaw neighborhood, received special recognition from the DC City Council in June for providing outstanding arts educations to the city's children for 30 years and counting.

The Council declared May 1 to be "Children's Studio School Recognition Day" throughout the city. Among the school's other distinctions is that it is fully accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools.

Children's Studio School conducts a full, day public charter school, as well as evening and seasonal programs. Founded in 1977, the school provides young children, ages 3 to 13, with the opportunity

to learn from dedicated local multi-media artists and architects in a studio environment.

In addition to regular classes, the school holds performances of poetry, music, and the performing arts throughout the year, as well as workshops and other community events. Through the summer months, the City As Studio® program provides children with an opportunity to work with artists, writers, and architects for six weeks on a variety of projects centered on the history of Washington, DC.

For more information about the school and its programs, call the school's founder Marcia McDonnell at (202) 387-6148 or visit [www.studioschool.org](http://www.studioschool.org).

—Megan Miller