

TJ, Fireman?

by Anna Berkes - July 9, 2010

From the Reference Question files: "I've heard that Thomas Jefferson was a volunteer firefighter. Is this true?"

If I had better PhotoShop skills, I would whip up a picture of TJ wearing a firehat. You all will just have to imagine how funny that would be.

Well, now we have to be serious, because you never know when the seemingly-unbelievable story happens to be true, and then we have egg on our face if it turns out we've made too much fun of the story.

This one took some doing to track down, because there's a confusing swirl of fire-departmental websites that all say Jefferson (and usually Washington and Franklin too) was a volunteer firefighter of some sort - yet more evidence that Jefferson is all people to all people.

Finally, my friend Google Books yielded a gobbet of information. A book which might be called *The Reader's Companion to American History* has an article on "Fire Departments," (<https://books.google.com/books?id=tZeHAgAAQBAJ&pg=PT424&lpg=PT424&dq=the+reader%E2%80%99s+companion+to+american+hist>) states the following:

"Actual fire companies and departments...were active in Boston, New York and Philadelphia early in the eighteenth century. Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson, as well as other prominent men, were among the ranks of these early volunteers."

(If I were an annoying stickler, I might point out that Jefferson was not yet a twinkle in his father's eye in the early eighteenth century, and was not old enough to even make himself reasonably useful in a bucket brigade until past the halfway point of the eighteenth century, not having been born until 1743. I'm just saying.)

There are three secondary works cited at the end of this article, so I continued my hunt for the source of this information. I finally managed to get my paws on one of the books, the excitingly-titled *Heritage of Flames* (http://openlibrary.org/books/OL7437382M/Heritage_of_flames), ed. Donald J. Cannon. Here's what it had to say about TJ and firefighting:

“[Jefferson] may have helped neighbors bucket water on a blaze if the need arose, but there is no tradition with Jefferson, as there is with Washington, of consistent firefighting service in a town.”

The book then goes on to mention Jefferson’s interest in various fire-suppression devices, all documented in his letters. How very reasonable.

I was able to search one of the other works cited in the *Reader’s Companion* in Google Books, and neither does it seem to contain any claims about TJ being a fireman; I haven’t been able to look at the third title, however (Dennis Smith’s *History of Firefighting in America* (1978)). I’ll get to it someday. In the meantime, I shouldn’t wonder whether lots of people read the *Reader’s Companion* and somehow got the idea that TJ was a firefighter.

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