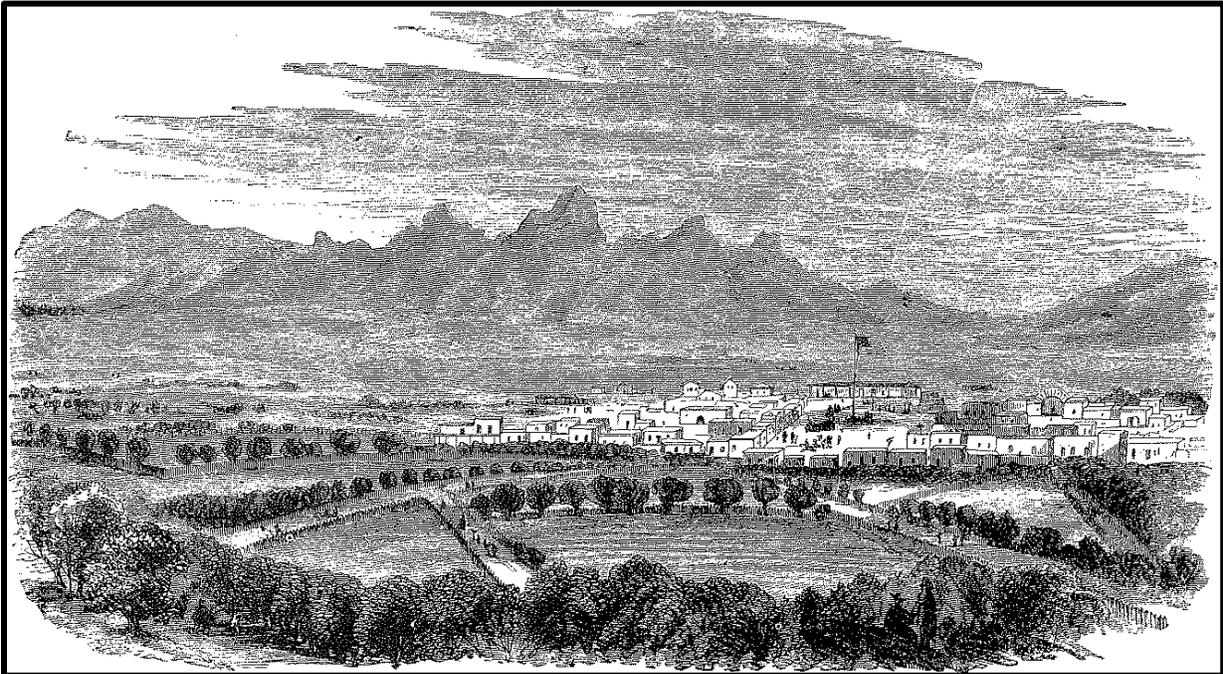


Tucson Fire Department

Before the Tucson Fire Department



Al Ring

Bob Ring

Before the Tucson Fire Department: 1854-1880

From the *Arizona Weekly Star*, June 16, 1881: “DISASTROUS FIRE - The Most Destructive Fire in the History of Tucson. The fire in a wholesale and retail liquor store at the corner of Church Plaza and Mesilla Street. The fire spread to many other buildings on Congress Street.”

As Tucsonans in June 1881 were debating whether or not the town needed a fire department, businessman A. Dachena’s wine and liquor store burned down with the loss of all contents - the fire also destroyed property of the *Citizen* newspaper, and damaged Goldsmith’s furniture store, the Western Union telegraph office, and Nilson’s jewelry store.

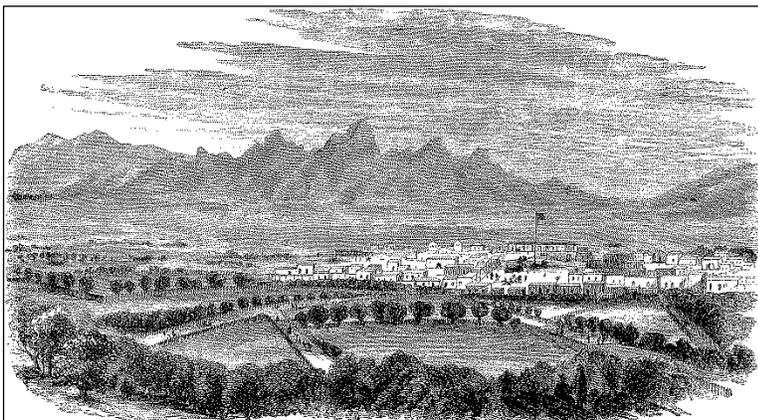
Before addressing the birth of Tucson’s fire department, let’s set a little background by answering these questions: How had Tucson changed since the Gadsden Purchase in 1854, when Tucson was described as a sleepy Mexican village? What kind of a town was Tucson by 1881? Was it time for Tucson to have a fire department?

Tucson Development

When the U.S. Congress approved the Gadsden Purchase in 1854 that brought southern Arizona into New Mexico Territory, Tucson was a village of perhaps 500 people, virtually all Mexican.

By 1857 Texas-California stage coaches were traveling through Tucson, putting the village on the American map. Soon a growing colony of Americans had settled in Tucson - attracted by local mining and ranching possibilities. Development - including homes, businesses and stores - expanded outside the walls of the original presidio. Apaches were still a menace but stayed away because of the presence of American troops.

The great transition of Tucson was beginning. Business was good and the American village was growing with an 1859 inventory that included three stores, two butcher shops, two blacksmith shops, and at



Journalist J. Ross Browne’s sketch of Tucson in 1864. Tucson was transitioning from a Mexican village to an Anglo town. (Courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society, 91791-B882t)

least two drinking establishments. The 1860 census counted 623 people (10% Anglo, 90% Mexican) including newcomers from all sections of the U.S. and 12 foreign countries. The walls of the old presidio were rapidly being dismantled.

But the 1860s brought violence to southern Arizona and Tucson. Apache raids against ranches suddenly increased. The U.S. Civil War started in 1861; the U.S. was forced to withdraw soldiers from

Arizona to fight in New Mexico and back east. This left Arizona defenseless against the fierce Apache.

Turbulence increased when the Confederate States of America claimed that southern Arizona was part of Confederate territory in mid-1861. Confederate troops actually “captured” Tucson in early 1862 and later that year skirmished with Union troops at Picacho Peak, before withdrawing from Arizona in mid-1862, leaving Tucson in federal jurisdiction.

Tucson, with all of Arizona, remained part of the New Mexico Territory until February 23, 1863 when President Abraham Lincoln signed legislation creating a separate Arizona Territory.

After the Civil War ended in 1865, Tucson resumed a major role in campaigns to fight the Apache. A military supply depot formed in 1862 near the center of town, was reestablished as Camp Lowell in 1866 to provide supplies and manpower to outlying military installations.

In a political war, in 1867 Tucson successfully lobbied the governor of the Arizona Territory to move the Arizona capital from Prescott to Tucson.

By 1870, transcontinental stagecoach service through Tucson, which had been discontinued during the Civil War, was resumed between the East and California. Tucson also became the hub for local stagecoaches and freight wagons trading with Mexico and serving mining communities within a hundred miles of town. Tucson’s population had grown to over 3,200 people in 1870, with the Anglo population accounting for 15% and Mexicans 80% of the total.

Tucson was incorporated as a village in 1871, becoming a municipality with a mayor and four councilmen. For the first time land titles were issued; property ownership became certain.

Hundreds of Tucson militia served in expeditions against the Apaches. In 1871 a group of Tucson citizens became so upset with the deaths from Apache raids, that they took matters into their own hands in what became known as the Camp Grant Massacre to attack a peaceful group of Apaches about 50 miles northeast of Tucson, killing 130 people, mostly women and children.

In 1873 Camp Lowell was moved to a new location a few miles east of town at the confluence of Pantano and Tanque Verde Creeks, and commissioned as Fort Lowell to continue support to the fight against the Apache.

The territorial capital remained in Tucson until 1877, when unhappy Prescotttonians succeeded in recovering “the coveted prize.”

The 1870s saw Tucson’s first public schools, the first public library, the debut of the *Tucson Citizen* and *Daily Bulletin* (forerunner of today’s *Arizona Daily Star*) newspapers, and the development of several mercantile stores.



Tucson's first public school was built at Congress Street and Sixth Avenue in 1875. (Courtesy of UA Special Collections, 655)

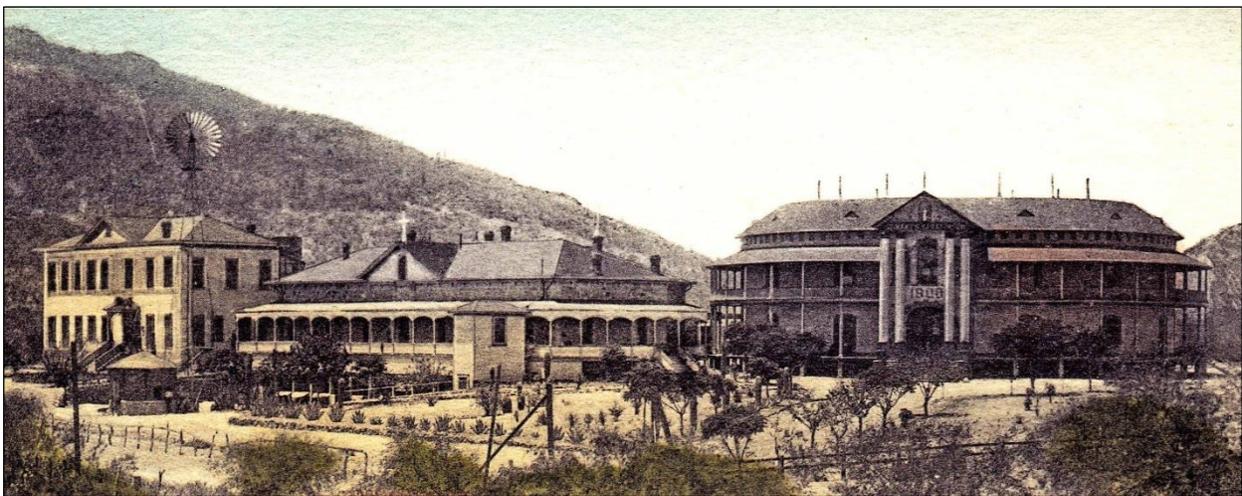
In 1877, a huge silver strike was made in Tombstone about 70 miles southeast of Tucson. People “flocked to the area in droves” and soon Tucson established regular stagecoach service between the towns.

By 1880 Tucson had become the largest and most important community in Arizona Territory. The population of Tucson had grown to just over 7,000, with the Anglo portion now at 25% and Mexicans at 70%. The Southern Pacific railroad arrived in Tucson from California in

March and St. Mary's Hospital opened in April. Tucson's future looked bright indeed.

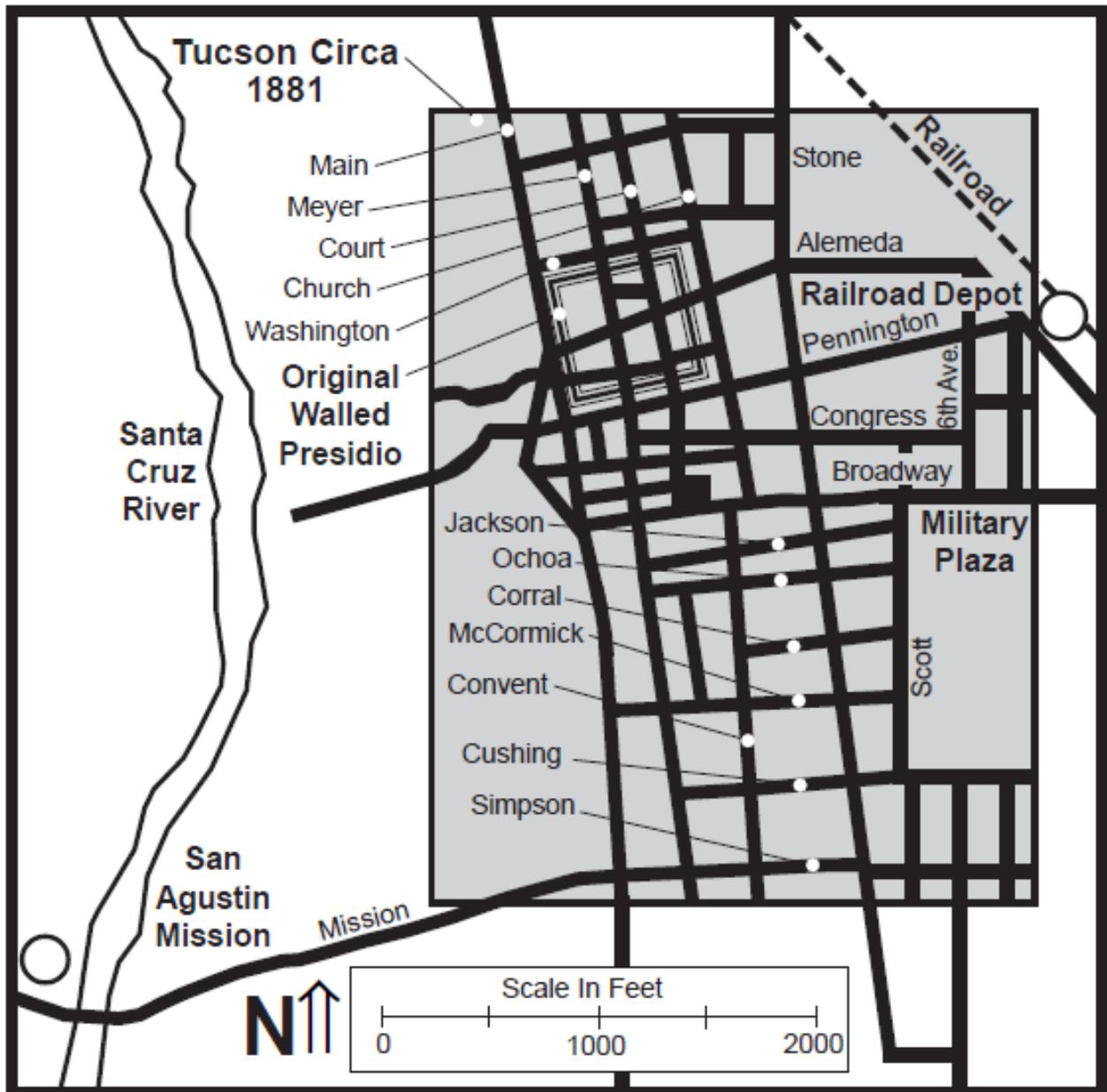
Tucson in 1881

The year 1881 was a big year for Tucson. On January 1st a telegraph system was hooked up to connect Tucson with the rest of America. In early March the Southern Pacific Railroad, which had been building eastward from Tucson since March of the previous year, reached Deming, New Mexico and connected with the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad to complete the southern transcontinental railroad through Tucson. On April 1st the first local telephone exchange was completed. The city waterworks were nearing completion, a gas works for street lighting were under construction, and steam-generated electricity was about to be introduced.



St. Mary' Hospital opened in April 1880. (Postcard image courtesy of Al Ring, circa 1908)

By 1881 Tucson had grown from the original 700-foot square presidio to an area a little over one-half mile square. The streets (especially around the old presidio location) were crooked and all streets were packed dirt.

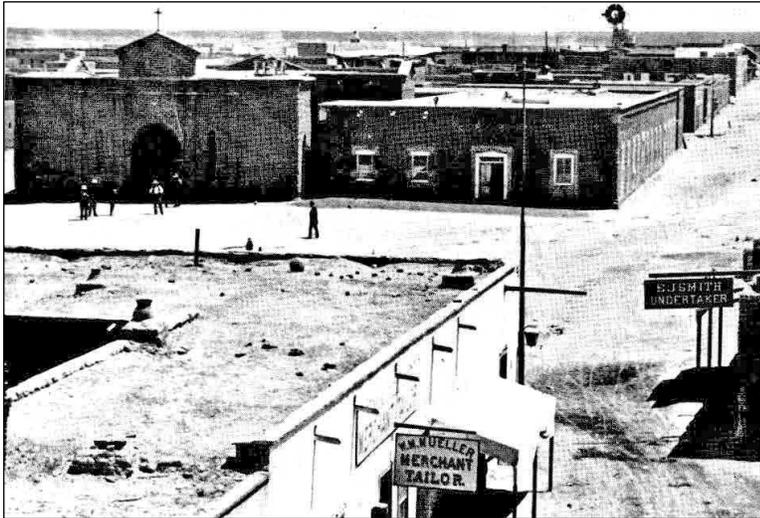


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By 1881 Tucson had expanded southward and eastward from the old presidio to cover an area about a half-mile square. (Map Courtesy of Tom Bergin)

The center of town was only 2,000 feet from the Santa Cruz River to the west and on both sides of the River were irrigated fields that supplied the town with fruits and vegetables. There was also a large cemetery area about a half mile north of town center.

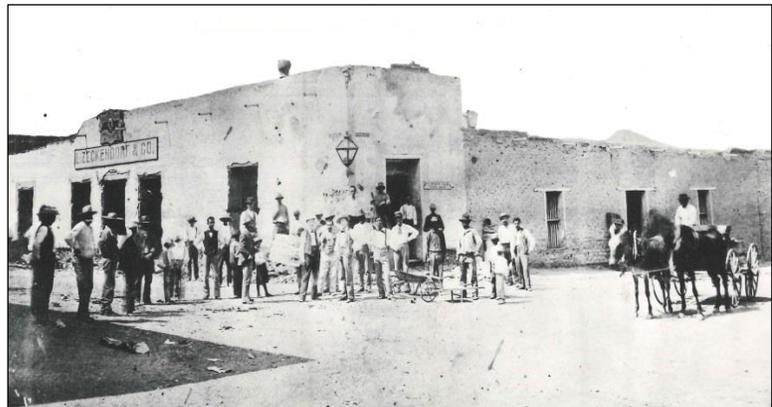
Apache raids were less frequent, but Fort Lowell east of Tucson was very active supplying horse soldiers and cannon to now farther flung Indian wars.



Broadway (formerly Camp Street) looking east towards St. Augustine Church. Typical "old" architecture: one-story adobe buildings with flat roofs. (Courtesy of Carleton E. Watkins, 1880)

Assayers; Bakers; Blacksmiths; Breweries; Brokers; Cigars and Tobacco; Clothing; Crockery; Dairy; Drug Store; Gun Smith; Importers; Jewelry; Lumber Company; Merchandisers, including *Zeckendorf* and *Company* and *Solomon Warner's* Store; Music Teacher; Shoes; Soda and Ice; Saddle and Harness, including *Mariano G. Samaniego*; and Wagonmakers, including *Ronstadt & Co.* Blacksmiths and Wagoner.

Coaching and Freighting: *Butterfield Overland Co.*; *Pedro Aguirre & Co.*; *Southern Overland Mail*; *Tombstone and Tucson Stage*; *Tully, Ochoa & Co.*; and *Wells Fargo & Co.*



L. Zeckendorf and Company at Main and Pennington, ca 1880. Adobe building with flat roof. (Courtesy of Bettina Lyons)

The houses, stores, stables, hotels, and saloons were mostly made from adobe - dried mud and straw. Mesquites trees here and there broke the light brown monotony.

With the coming of the transcontinental railroad, the population in mid 1881 had swelled to well above 7,000 people; some claimed 9,000.

Tucson's classified directory for 1881 listed a multitude of enterprises - many of them associated with (now) well-known Tucson pioneers.¹

Business Enterprises: Architects;

¹ In the following listing, the names of people identified as Tucson Pioneers are shown in italics. See the "Tucson Territorial Pioneer Project" online for the complete list of Tucson pioneers.



Southern Pacific Railroad Depot shown in the 1890s. Built in 1880 - wooden building with sloped roofs. (Courtesy of UA Special Collections, N11,058)

Federal Properties: Military Plaza, and Post Office.

Newspapers: Including the *Arizona Daily* and *Weekly Star*, *Mansfeld's Pioneer News Depot*, and *Tucson Weekly Citizen*.

Pioneer Bankers: Including Lord and Williams; Pima County Bank (First National); and Safford, Hudson and Co.

Outdoor Amusements: Including *Carrillo's Gardens*, *Levin's Park and Theater*, *Park Brewery*, and *Silver Lake*.

Professional Services: Attorneys, including *L. C. Hughes*; Mining Engineer; Medical Doctors; Photographer *Henry Buehman*; *Thomas J. Jeffords* Capitalist; and Undertakers.

Public Buildings: Including County Court House and Second Territorial Capitol.

Transportation: Including Railroad Depot and *Robert Leatherwood* Corrals.

The directory also included five churches, three flour mills, four groceries, seven hotels, five Chinese laundries, seventeen restaurants and saloons, four schools, and three sporting (red-light) districts.

Need for a Fire Department

Now we're back to June, 1881 and the discussions about whether or not Tucson needed to organize its first fire department. To help answer that question, let's look at three factors: 1. How many fires was Tucson experiencing? 2. How vulnerable were Tucson structures to fire? 3. Was there sufficient water available to fight fires?

Recent Fires. The Tucson area was no stranger to fires. Large wildfires occurred in the Santa Cruz River valley in 1874, 1877, 1879, and again in 1880. In 1877 widespread fires broke out in the foothills east of Tucson, traveled over the Santa Catalina Mountains and burned miles beyond, almost to the summit of the Santa Ritas, consuming valuable forage.

Over that same period, the city of Tucson also experienced several fires, including a Chinese Restaurant (1877), the Ohio Saloon (1878), the Courthouse (1878), and two fires already in 1881: Fish's Mill on May 19th and the most destructive Dachena Liquor Store fire on June 16th.

Meanwhile, Tombstone, whose population had skyrocketed to rival and surpass Tucson's, was experiencing fire problems of its own. As Tucsonans were debating the merits of a fire department, on

June 22nd Tombstone suffered a major fire, destroying 66 businesses making up the eastern half of the business district.²

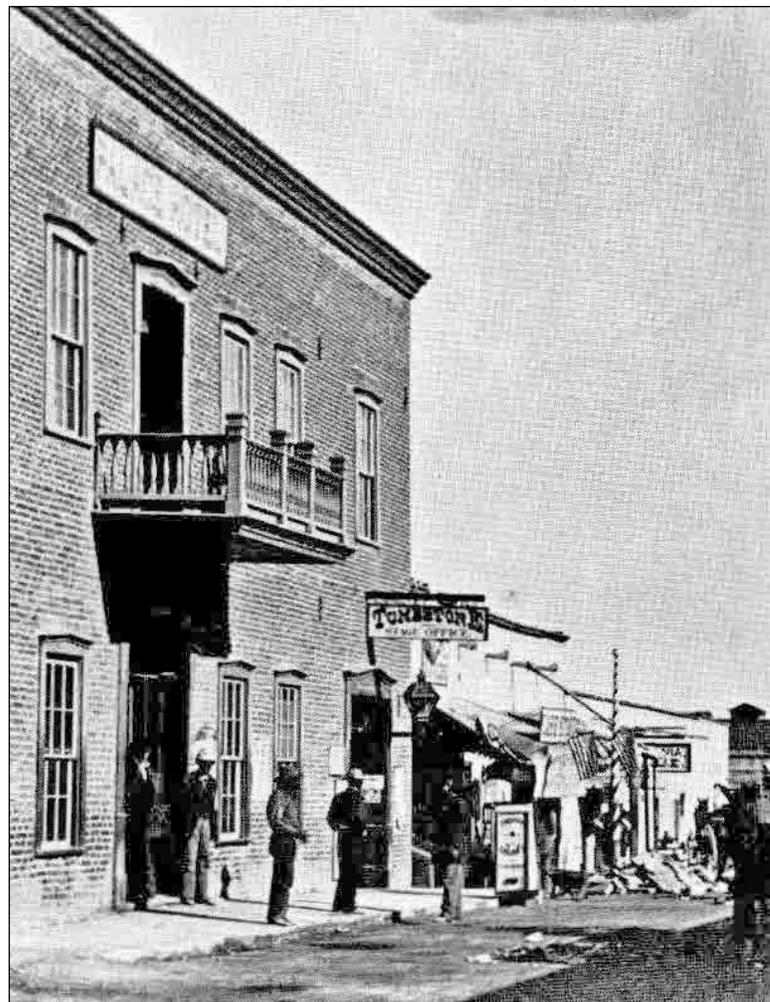
Unfortunately, horribly destructive fires were not uncommon in poor fire protection boomtowns in the American frontier west. The indiscriminate construction of closely packed wooden buildings was asking for trouble. Slapdash stores and saloons, and shambles of tents and crude shacks, typical of mining camps, made perfect tinder for fires.

The primary causes of fires were spilled oil lamps, poorly vented stoves, careless use of flaming torches or lit cigars, spontaneous combustion, and believe it or not, rats or mice chewing on wooden matches. Indeed, Tombstone's June 1881 fire supposedly started when a lit cigar ignited a barrel of whiskey in a saloon.

Even more mature towns had serious fire problems too. San Francisco, California suffered six major fires in the first three years of the population explosion following the discovery of gold in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Sacramento, California was destroyed by fire five times in its early years! Virginia City, Nevada and Crede, Colorado also suffered major destructive fires.

Tucson Vulnerability. Tucson was not a mining boomtown. By 1881 Tucson had existed for over a hundred years! Tucson's buildings were mostly in the Spanish-Mexican style, one floor, constructed primarily of adobe, many with dirt floors and flat dirt roofs. This minimized the likelihood of fire spreading out of control.

But Tucson architecture was beginning to change. In the 1870s some prominent Tucsonans built new homes in the territorial style. Wooden door and window frames were introduced. Lumber mills in the



Example of "new" architecture - the two-story, brick Palace Hotel on Meyer Street. The Tombstone Stage Office was located in the same building. (Courtesy of Carleton E. Watkins, 1880)

² Less than a year later in May 1882, Tombstone would suffer an even more destructive fire.

Santa Rita Mountains began to supply wood to Tucson builders. Structures of more than two stories made the adobe tradition impractical for new commercial buildings. Newer buildings were capped with a roof, usually pyramidal, sweeping out to cover wooden porches on one or all sides of the building. Wooden shingles were introduced in 1877. Finally, in 1880, the railroad began bringing in new building materials and furnishings that contributed to Tucson's overall fire vulnerability.

Availability of Water. For more than a thousand years, people in the Tucson Valley had been getting water from the Santa Cruz River and springs or artesian wells that brought free flowing ground water to the surface. Starting in the 1850s, newly arrived Americans also began hand-digging wells for domestic use.

The northward flowing Santa Cruz River seldom flowed continuously, instead disappearing frequently along its course to continue underground, only to resurface at some point downstream. For years, Tucsonans had been tapping the River for water where they could find it, dammed the River in several places to power flour mills and form lakes for recreation, and built ditches to irrigate crops in wide-spread fields west of Tucson.

But by the end of 1870s, Tucson was running short of domestic water. Most domestic water came from the El Ojito artesian well south of town, along the road to the San Augustin Mission, and a hand-dug well on South Main Street. Tucson awarded its first municipal water contract in 1875 to develop a supply from artesian wells. When this effort failed, the city tried again in 1879, this time awarding a contract to supply water from new wells to be dug around town, trying to tap into an artesian flow, and another contract in March 1881 to develop a reservoir and system of mains to bring water into the city. Both of these efforts were unsuccessful.



Former Tucson Mayor Robert Leatherwood proposed a scheme to deliver Santa Cruz River water to Tucson. (Courtesy of Wikimedia)

On December 15, 1881, Tucson's Common Council awarded Tucson's water franchise to (former Tucson mayor) Robert Leatherwood, who devised a scheme to tap the underground flow of the Santa Cruz River six miles south of town and divert it to the city through a series of gravity mains and heavy sheet metal pipes. The city transferred the water franchise to experienced water system developers Sylvester Watts and James W. Parker who incorporated the private Tucson Water Company and on September 16, 1882, successfully delivered Tucson's first reliable water supply to the corner of Main and McCormick Streets for distribution to the city through a network of small mains.

The Decision. In a series of meetings in June 1881 at various saloons around Tucson, a group of about 20 Tucsonans debated the need for a fire department. They discussed the recent fires in Tucson, especially the disastrous liquor store fire on June 16th. They discussed the horrible fire in Tombstone on June 22nd.

Then at about ten o'clock on the night of June 27th, forty thousand

pounds of gun-powder spontaneously exploded in merchandizer Louis Zeckendorf's powder magazine, just outside city limits, about a half mile northwest of Tucson. The explosion literally broke every window in the city, left a hole in the ground 15-feet deep by 75-foot diameter, and caused extensive damage around town.

Three days later, on June 30th, 14 ½ months before an adequate water supply became available, the minutes of the Tucson Common Council recorded discussion of fire alarm systems and firefighting equipment. Tucson's first fire department had been organized and christened as Tucson Hook and Ladder Company No. 1.

Primary Sources

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3. *Arizona Weekly Star*, Tucson, 1877, 1878, 1881.
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7. "Guide to the Historic Landmarks of Tucson," Ray Brandes, *The Journal of Arizona History*, Summer, 1962.
8. "History of the Tucson Fire Department," Tucson Fire Department, date unknown.
9. *Mining Frontiers of the Far West, 1848-1880* (Rodman Wilson Paul, 1980).
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11. *Tucson - The Early Years* (William F. Greer, 1982).
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13. Tucson Territorial Pioneer Project, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.
14. "75th Anniversary of the Telephone in Arizona," pioneertelephonemuseum.org.

Greater Tucson Fire Foundation

Thank you for taking an interest in Tucson Fire Department history —

This is one of many sections that contain information, documents, letters, newspaper articles, pictures, etc. They have been collected and arranged in chronological order or by a subject. These items were collected, organized and entered into a computerized database by Dave Ridings Retired Assistant Chief Tucson Fire Department, Al Ring friend of the department, Greater Tucson Fire Foundation and with the help of many friends and fellow firefighters.

All graphics have been improved to make the resolution as good as possible, but the reader should remember that many came from copies of old newspaper articles. This also applies to other items such as documents, letters, etc.

Credit to the source of the documents, photos, etc. is provided whenever it was available. We realize that many items are not identified and regret that we weren't able to provide this information. As far as the newspaper articles that are not identified, 99% of them would have to be from one of three possible sources. The *Arizona Daily Star*, The *Tucson Citizen* and the *Tucson Daily Citizen*, for which we want to give a special thanks.

Please use this information as a reference tool only. If the reader uses any of the information for any purpose other than a reference tool, they should get permission from the source.

Should the reader have additional information on the above subject we would appreciate you sharing it with us. Please see the names and contact information on the 1st. TFD Archives page right below this paragraph.

