



Engines Part 2: The Steamer

The 19th century brought the development of steam power, and with it, the steam powered fire pumper, or steamer. The first steamer was developed in London in 1829 but did not become prevalent until much later. While the fire chiefs feared the powerful jet of water produced would damage buildings, the firefighters themselves worried that the more efficient steamers would render volunteer firemen obsolete. They were correct in assuming the steamer would change the face of the fire department, but it was not quite what they imagined. When steamers finally did enter into popular use in the 1860s, many cities did begin to disband superfluous fire companies. However, they also hired the first paid firefighters from among the ranks of the volunteers. The new paid companies could also afford a new form of transportation for their apparatus. While steamers originally were hand pulled, the heavy engine proved difficult to manage, causing companies to turn to horses to pull them. Smaller sized steamers were often pulled by two horses while larger sizes required three. Some inventors even experimented with self propelled steamers, such as one that was built in New York in 1842, but firefighters thought of these engines as even more of a threat. Additionally, self-propelled engines were slower and heavier than horse drawn units and the general feeling was that the steam power should be conserved for the pump. As a result, many of the self-propelled steamers created at this time were later converted to horse drawn rigs.



By 1881, Denver had a new way to pump water as a 3rd size Silsby steamer had arrived at Central Station. Several more arrived gradually over the decade and by 1891, Denver had seven steamers available. While the particular steamer displayed here is on loan from New York, it resembles the twenty-seven different steam engines Denver purchased between 1890 and 1912. This steamer weighs over 7500 lbs, was pulled by three horses, and manned by a crew of three. It is a “1st size” double engine meaning that it was the largest model available with a dual set of steam pistons to drive a set of dual water pistons. The steamer was connected to a fire hydrant to draw water and could pump at 900 gallons per minute. The stream of water produced could equal one hundred feet or more. It came complete with five foot rear wheels with brake drums and bands, which attach to the pedal at the driver’s seat, and a locomotive style whistle on the boiler. Currently, original Denver steamers are unable to be located as many were sold to greenhouses and cemeteries to be used as irrigation pumps.

The featured podcast is an interview with retired Denver firefighter Dan Day in which he describes what it meant for firefighters of the time to acquire and use a steamer.