

MANSFIELD MEMORIES: Why the town's fire engines aren't white

By Kevin McNatt and Andrew Todesco | Mansfield@wickedlocal.com

May 22, 2019



A new "fire pumper" was purchased in December 1936 at a cost of \$5,600 and the Board of Selectmen at the time were torn between painting it red or white. [Courtesy/Mansfield Historical Society]

Have you ever driven through our northern neighbor and noticed something unusual in front of their fire station? Yes, Foxborough has white fire engines. Like most other cities and towns, Mansfield has traditional red engines. But Mansfield nearly joined Foxborough in painting its fire engines white. Let's take a look at an interesting political debate from yesteryear.

A new "fire pumper" was purchased in December 1936 at a cost of \$5,600. Selectman Edward Richardson proposed it be painted white so it would be "different than other trucks and will attract a lot of attention." Richardson noted that some engines on the West Coast were painted white and are "nobby" in appearance. Selectman Henry Olsen agreed, and indicated that he would vote for Richardson's measure.

Chairman William P. McDermott was skeptical, stating that most fire chiefs seemed to prefer red. Selectman Everett W. Robinson was noncommittal but wondered what Mansfield Fire Chief Arthur Soper might have to say. Selectman

Lewis Richards stated no position on the matter. The issue was tabled until the next meeting.

When the board reconvened the following week a half-hour of “good-natured debate” ensued on the fire engine issue. It began when Town Manager Harold Everett stated that the new engine was ready for paint and that a decision would be needed that night. Edward Richardson moved to paint the apparatus white, and Henry Olson seconded it. As the debate continued McDermott and Robinson questioned whether white paint would hold up as well as red. Lewis Richards now made his position clear, stating “I believe it will be a sorry day for us when we paint a fire truck white.”

Olson said he believed that white would hold up better than red. Richardson declared that the “progressive” city of Los Angeles has white engines. McDermott replied that New York City experimented with white and went back to red. Robinson indicated that Brookline Fire Chief Selden Allen, who was “well known” in Mansfield, prefers red. The same was true for the fire chief in Brockton. Explaining his opposition to white, Robinson said, “to me it would be too much of a novelty — like a pink limousine. It does not look good as a 20-year proposition.”

When a vote was taken, McDermott, Robinson and Richards defeated Richardson’s measure 3-2. They then voted in favor of a new motion to paint the new engine “regulation fire department red.” They reiterated their positions that most fire chiefs preferred, and that red paint would hold up better.

Who knows what might have happened if just one more selectman had changed his vote in favor of white fire engines? Perhaps they would have started a new local tradition, and Mansfield would have joined Foxborough in having white fire engines.

Kevin McNatt and Andrew Todesco are members of the Mansfield Historical Society. They can be reached at mansfieldhistoricalsociety@yahoo.com. Follow the society on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.