

Historical Personages of New Bedford: Edward F. Dahill

Fire crew cleaning a steam engine (Spinner Publications)



*Edward F.
Dahill
Portrait
(Spinner
Publications)*

Welcome to the fifth installment of the series “Historical Personages of New Bedford.” The first being pharmacist [Robert H. Carter III](#), the second being photographer [James E. Reed](#), the third was businessman and contractor [Dudley Davenport](#) and the fourth was blacksmith extraordinaire, and innovator [Lewis Temple](#).

My intention with this series is to shine some light on the lesser known names and figures of New Bedford’s past. I won’t focus on the more popular and well-known figures since they have not only been covered in substantial depth, but information about these figures is something most people already have a cursory knowledge of. Though redundant to say, if any more information is desired, it is readily available and easily accessible.

Some of these great and popular figures got to be well known, wealthy, or famous on the shoulders of names vaguely recalled or ne'er heard. I don't want to swing all the way to the other side and overcompensate by saying that these great figures would be no one without those you haven't heard of. Perhaps they would have, but I think since history has traditionally ignored the lesser known figures, let's give them their due!

Edward Dahill (1862-1950) was one of those guys who no one has heard of, but has left an indelible mark on the city itself, and even the nation as a whole. He has saved many lives and in an indirect way, continued to save countless lives after his passing.



*Dahill Hoist Trucks
(Spinner
Publications)*

Mr. Dahill, was born here in New Bedford and spent his childhood growing up at 772 County Street. His first job in the city was as the owner of a modest Boot and Shoe dealership at 667 Purchase Street just few blocks down the street. Selling shoes, however, is not what Edward Dahill was known for. He certainly saved no lives selling shoes. At least there is no historical mention of a miracle of this sort.

What made Edward Dahill important enough to be discussed a century later, is his service as a fireman for the city and as

an innovator. The first semblance of firefighting in New Bedford was a citizen's brigade of bucket passers, that was finally assisted by the purchase of the city's first fire engine in 1772. It wouldn't be until circa 1832 that a "Protecting Society" – the precursor to a genuine fire department – was founded to officially handle the breakout of fire in the city. It consisted of seven fire engines, and a sole hook and ladder company, all manned by volunteers.

Of course, at this point in time, all the engines were horse drawn. Slowly but surely motorized engines began to replace the horse-drawn engines. By 1850 a value was seen in a highly trained, motivated force to battle outbreaks and the volunteers became regular city employees by 1850. Mr. Dahill climbed through the ranks of the Fire Department at a rapid pace and by 1901 he was the 1st assistant engineer with an annual salary of \$649.26. By 1904 he was Chief Engineer with a substantial raise to \$1500.00. Within a year after that he would be Fire Chief until retirement.



Dahill proudly posing with his crew, Engine 3 in 1928 (Spinner Publications)

Where Dahill enters the history books in general, and specifically New Bedford, is his contribution to firefighting technology. Up until the turn of the 20th century spring mechanisms were used to extend the engine ladders. In 1902,

Dahill invented an air-hoist aerial ladder to be used on the fire trucks. Instead of manually turning a crank, compressed air would do the work easier and faster. Within 7 seconds a 70 foot ladder could be extended. So ahead of it's time was the air-hoist that it would not find something more efficient with hydraulics, until more than 30 years later.

Edward F. Dahill gave New Bedford over 50 years of service in the Fire Department and his innovation not only saved lives in the city, but countless lives all over he world.
