

Name _____



Date _____

Law Enforcement and Fire Fighting

By Sharon Fabian

Any community can have its problems, and it wasn't any different in the settlements built by the first American colonists. Criminals committed illegal acts. Careless actions started fires.

Some of the crimes were the same ones that make the headlines today - murder, kidnapping, and theft. At that time, cursing a parent by a grown child was also a criminal offense. All of these activities were illegal according to the laws of England. Some things that were illegal in the colonies are not much of a problem today, such as witchcraft.

Fires were a problem for the communities too, since houses were usually built of wood, and a fire could spread quickly. With fireplaces used for heat, and candles and lanterns used for light, fire was a constant threat.

To deal with these problems, the colonists needed law enforcement officials and firefighters.

Sheriffs were some of the first officials in the new colonies. Sheriffs for the colonies were first appointed by the king and later were chosen by the local colonial governments.

The sheriff patrolled on horseback, and his home might have also served as the local jail. Shackles, which could be bolted to the floor, could be used to keep a prisoner from escaping. The sheriff's wife cooked food for the prisoner.

The sheriff had other duties besides riding out to apprehend the bad guys. One duty was to raise a "hue and cry" when reinforcements were needed. This meant that the sheriff put out the call for a posse of citizens to assist in keeping the peace or capturing a criminal. Any man over the age of 15 was required to help out when needed.

Sheriffs were also responsible for carrying out punishments and for maintaining their law enforcement equipment. This equipment included the local stocks or pillories, whipping posts, and ducking stools. Punishment on one of these items would be both humiliating and painful for the criminal.

From the beginning, the colonists saw a need for fire fighters too. By 1650, New York had already appointed four wardens who had the responsibility of inspecting chimneys and fining anyone whose chimney didn't meet the requirements.

In some towns, volunteers kept a lookout for chimney fires and called out the bucket brigade when a fire was spotted. The bucket brigade was simply the citizens of the community, each one armed with a bucket. They would pass bucket after bucket of water down the line of volunteers to put out the fire.

In the late 1600's, the city of Boston got a "fire engine." This fire engine consisted of a wooden box with handles so that it could be moved to where it was needed. A pump and a hose attached to the box could be used to aim the water where it was needed. The bucket brigade was still needed to keep the water box full. Boston hired firefighters to man the engine.

Although these early fire fighters often could not save a house that was burning, their efforts were important in keeping a fire from spreading. The firefighters also performed a valuable service by acting quickly to salvage some of the family's most valuable belongings.

Law enforcement and fire fighting were some of the first public services provided in the colonies. These sheriffs and firefighters were some of our first public servants. The posses and bucket brigades were everyday people exercising their responsibilities as citizens.

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Questions

- _____ 1. Which of the following was a crime in the early colonies?
- A. witchcraft
 - B. murder
 - C. cursing
 - D. all of the above
- _____ 2. Fires were a problem because _____.
- A. homes were built of wood
 - B. homes were heated by a fireplace
 - C. candles were used for light
 - D. all of the above
- _____ 3. The first sheriffs _____.
- A. patrolled on horseback
 - B. were elected by the community
 - C. were not allowed to carry a weapon
 - D. all of the above
- _____ 4. A "hue and cry" was a call for _____.
- A. a bucket brigade
 - B. criminals
 - C. soldiers
 - D. a posse
- _____ 5. A bucket brigade was a form of _____.
- A. fire fighting
 - B. punishment
 - C. advertisement
 - D. recruiting
- _____ 6. A ducking stool was a form of _____.
- A. recruiting
 - B. fire fighting
 - C. advertisement
 - D. punishment
- _____ 7. If a 16-year old man was asked to join a posse, he could _____.
- A. join the posse
 - B. say, "No"
 - C. any of the above
 - D. say, "Maybe later"
- _____ 8. The duties of the sheriff's wife included _____.
- A. neither
 - B. both
 - C. feeding the prisoners
 - D. feeding the sheriff

