Room One: San Francisco in the New Century

Fire Fighting

Fighting fires in turn-of-the-century San Francisco required not only fire engines, firefighters, and water, but also four-legged creatures like horses and dogs. Horses, of which the fire department had 320 in 1904, pulled hook and ladder wagons as well as pumping steamers to fire sites. Dogs, often Dalmatians, performed as sirens as they cleared traffic at intersections with their loud barking warnings. Of course, before the animals and men could begin to fight a fire, they had to be notified of one. San Francisco at this time was dotted with fire stations and towers equipped with alarm bells, which were triggered when people pulled fire alarm boxes. Upon arriving at a fire, firefighters had to tap sources of fresh water in underground cisterns and pipes to provide steam power for their engines, which could then douse the flames with a stream of water.

The San Francisco fire department at this time was fairly well equipped and prepared for a major conflagration. The city's fire chief, Dennis Sullivan, had drawn up a plan to fight any major citywide fire. According to Sullivan, the city's resources were inadequate for providing the utmost protection. To make the city safe, Sullivan suggested decreasing its reliance on freshwater by creating a supplementary saltwater system for dousing fires. Municipal officials, though, paid little attention to Sullivan's recommendations. In 1905, the National Board of Fire Underwriters' Committee of Twenty judged the fire department "efficient and in general adequate," though it did note that the department's strength was "slightly below standard."