



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO
Historical Resources Board

DATE ISSUED: October 10, 2014 REPORT NO. HRB-14-062

ATTENTION: Historical Resources Board
Agenda of October 23, 2014

SUBJECT: **ITEM# 7 – San Diego Fire Department Shops at Station 6**

APPLICANT: San Diego Firehouse Museum/Pioneer Hook & Ladder Co.

LOCATION: 1572 Columbia Street, Downtown Community, Council District 3

DESCRIPTION: Review the National Register Nomination of the San Diego Fire Department Shops at Station 6

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Recommend to the State Office of Historic Preservation listing of the San Diego Fire Department Shops at Station 6 on the National Register of Historic Places, with a period of significance of 1915 to 1963, located in the Little Italy area in Downtown San Diego.

BACKGROUND

This item is being brought before the Historical Resources Board pursuant to a request from the State Office of Historic Preservation to review and comment on this National Register nomination. The San Diego Fire Department Shops at Station 6 is being nominated to the National Register under Criteria A and B as a significant historical resource at the national level for its association with the invention of the world's first internal combustion, gas-powered fireboat, the *Bill Kettner* (Criterion A); and also at the national level for its association with Robert Ely, a person who made significant contributions to our history in the areas of invention and engineering (Criterion B). The building is listed on the San Diego Register as HRB Site #251 and was designated on June 27, 1990.

ANALYSIS

A National Register of Historic Places Nomination Report was prepared by Stu Sprung which concludes that the resource is significant under Criteria A and B. Staff concurs that the structure is a significant historical resource under National Historic Register Criteria A and B, as follows.

CRITERION A – Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

Constructed in 1915 at the corner of Columbia Street and West Cedar Street, the fire station was built to provide services to the growing Little Italy neighborhood and the bustling waterfront. The building was sited to take advantage of a centralized location for a facility/machine shop and to address the developing need for maritime fire protection. The building is a one and two story building in a simplified Mission style. The exterior features uniform sand finish stucco and fenestration is primarily wood double hung windows. The one story portion of the building on the southern portion of the parcel houses the facility and machine shop while the two-story northern portion was reserved for the Engine Company 6.

The east façade of the facility and machine shop originally featured a centrally located door flanked by two large windows and a decorative parapet. The two story firehouse portion featured a large central door on the first floor with an upper level of windows that matched the proportion of the garage opening below. The north façade features a number of double hung window spaced evenly on the wall plane. The northwest corner features the fire house tower which replicates the Mission style designs found elsewhere on the building. The west facade are utilitarian and without ornamentation featuring some windows and a door to access the rear yard. Over the years a number of alterations have occurred on the building, including the removal of the large windows flanking the main access to the shops and replacement with access doors, the removal of the large bay of windows on the east façade of the upper floor of the firehouse, and the construction of an addition at the south façade and the west façade.

After the completion of the building in 1915, Fire Chief Louis Almgren directed the construction of a gas-powered fire boat to address the growing need for maritime fire protection. Fireboats of that era were all steam, but the purchase and operational costs of one were cost prohibitive, so the department opted to use a gas-powered boat. While there was a general fear over using a gas-powered boat, it was determined that it was more feasible to build a gas rather than a steam engine. Since there were no gas-powered boats in existence, they were creating it from scratch. Utilizing the skilled craftsman assigned to the facility and machines shop allowed the fire department to construct a lost cost model. A six-cylinder Atlas 220 HP Marine Gasoline Engine was selected to provide propulsion and the machine shop crew designed and built a custom ignition system. The keel of the boat was assembled in the rear and side yards. Once the 55-ton, 50-foot fire boat was completed it was carefully moved to the waterfront, christened the *Bill Kettner*, and launched at the Santa Fe Wharf. In the 1920s, New York City's fire chief visited San Diego and viewed the gas-powered fire boat, shortly thereafter New York City launched its own internal combustion gas-powered fire boat with several other cities following suit. San Diego's gas-powered fire boat was in service for 41 years.

The San Diego Fire Department Shops at Station 6 is significant at the national level for the National Register under Criterion A under Engineering, Maritime History and Invention. The building of the world's first internal combustion, gas-powered fire boat, the *Bill Kettner*, at that site was the model for all modern fire boats. Fire boats have a presence around the world in all major ports and harbors, and have been instrumental in saving billions of dollars in damage and untold number of lives.

Criterion B—Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

In the American fire service, in the mid-1950s it was estimated that there were ten different sizes of fire hose that used 462 different sizes of couplings and seventeen different types of threads. If a fire took place that required the help of surrounding municipalities, there was a high likelihood that other jurisdictions would be unable to help due to the incompatibility of the hoses and nozzles. During the Great Standard Oil Fire in 1913, the neighboring city of La Mesa was unable to assist with the firefighting efforts due to the incompatibility of the equipment. Due to the high cost of firefighting equipment many of the nation's fire departments were unable to afford new standardized hoses and nozzles. Most of the departments were unable to absorb the financial cost of a complete transition to a common thread and to take the hose off to change the couplings took too much time.

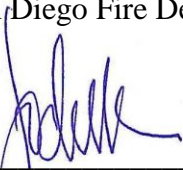
In 1957, Robert Ely designed and built a machine that could meet the standardization needs. The machine could take the brass couplings and re-thread them to what would become the National Standard Thread (NST). The machine was portable, and could convert a coupling without removing it from the hose in 90 seconds. After examining multiple couplings, it was determined that a design using 9 threads-per-inch would allow for the various existing fire hose couplings to be converted to a standard size without destroying or rendering them useless.

Once the machine was developed, Ely spent the remainder of his career promoting and sharing the machine on a national level. Concerned about the incompatibility of the equipment, he also shared the machine with other departments at no charge. In October 1957, the state of California was the first to adopt legislation to make Ely's hose standardization mandatory for the 1.5" hose, the primary fire attack hose line for firefighters. Following California's adoption, Ely's NST quickly became the standard throughout the United States. In 1963, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), the federal governing body for fire codes and regulations in the United States, adopted national hose standards based on Ely's NST.

The San Diego Fire Department Shops at Station 6 is eligible at the national level on the National Register for its association with the productive life of Robert Ely, a person who made significant contributions to our nation's history in the area of invention and engineering. His invention of the 90-second *Ely Fire Hose Thread Standardizer* reduced the hundreds of different types of fire hose thread used around the United States to one, providing all fire departments across the country with the ability to attach to each other's fire hydrants and engines. This commonality has prevented billions of dollars in property damage, not to mention countless lives saved.

CONCLUSION

Based on the information submitted, it is recommended that the Historic Resources Board forward a positive recommendation for listing on the National Register of Historical Places the San Diego Fire Department Shops at Station 6 with a period of significance from 1915 to 1963.



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Senior Planner



Cathy Winterrowd
Deputy Director/HRB Liaison

Attachment: Applicant's National Register of Historical Resources Nomination Report under separate cover