

They don't build municipal fire stations like this anymore.

The hub of this weekend's activities – the Elgin Fire Barn No. 5 – is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is a designated City Landmark and was declared an official Illinois Heritage Site by Governor Jim Edgar. Not a bad list of accomplishments for a building nearly demolished in 1934.

Local architect and builder Smith Hoag, who charged the city \$225 for his services, designed the Fire Barn as a contemporary municipal building for horse and fire equipment storage. The second floor contained the captain's quarters, a sleeping area and a study. Peter Van Nostrand, a major landholder in southeast Elgin, donated the lot. The Fire Barn opened on Jan. 1, 1904, with a construction tab of \$10,939. The building would have been more costly, had firefighters not helped with construction. Their signatures are still intact inside the cupola.

While modern fire stations boast the latest in high-tech equipment, Fire Barn No. 5 was equipped with three men, two horses and a hose wagon. Aside from seven years during the 1930s, the station delivered continuous service to Elgin residents until it closed on Dec. 13, 1991. Thankfully, the Elgin City Council refused the fire chief's recommendation to demolish the building during the Depression.

The firefighters who occupied this historic building for more than 80 years deserve a big round of applause for preserving many original features. Aside from the apparatus door, which was replaced to accommodate larger equipment, the exterior is largely unchanged since 1904.

The museum contains minutes of volunteer fire fighter meetings and station logs dating to 1867, including the receipt for \$8,475 for Elgin's first fire engine, an 1869 Silsby Steam Fire Engine. The piece of equipment was loaded onto a flat car and sent by train to Chicago to fight the 1871 Chicago Fire. Nearly destroyed after decades of abuse, the old engine has

The 1903 Elgin Fire Barn No. 5 Museum

533 St. Charles Street

Neoclassical Style

Designed by Smith Hoag



been restored. Also at the museum is a restored and fully functional 1929 American LaFrance type 145.

Architectural Details

Exterior

Neoclassical and Beaux Art details, including contrasting brick quoins at the corners, brick keystones, an arched window on the east façade flanked by pilasters, and a Palladian window in the west dormer. The revival of interest in classical models dated from World's Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893.

Prairie-school detailing reflected in the extended overhang.

Masonry detail. Notice the light-colored brick façade, with contrasting brick in the band, flat keystone arch lintels over the windows and brick patterning underneath.

Decorative glass. Diamond-paned glass remains in the double-hung windows of the dormers. A stained glass fanlight window tops the faux entrance on the east façade.

Octagonal cupola with a faceted dome

roof. Firefighters accessed the bell tower through an attic door. Unfortunately, the bell is gone.

Interior

Apparatus Bay. Horse harnesses once hung from the ceiling of this large, open area on the first floor. The original horse stables were in the back where the kitchen is now. Horses pulled wagons from the Fire Barn until 1920.

Detailed second floor. The captain enjoyed the commanding view of St. Charles and May streets from the front bay window above the apparatus door. Going north from that room is the sleeping area featuring built-in closets. The third room has built-in bookshelves and originally served as a study for firemen on duty for a five-day, 24-hour period. The firemen stored grain in the rear room.

Original fire pole from the second-floor sleeping quarters to the first floor desk.

Other original details, including doors and door hardware, wood trim, a curved oak banister, a wainscot ceiling and maple flooring. Some of the wood was either stripped or refurbished after the building became a museum. ☺