

Bella Vista Buildings We Love
Building of the Month - Engine Company 11
1016 South Street
Built 1871

The tradition of volunteer fire service in Philadelphia dates to the 18th century, when fire brigades composed of all white men were defined by neighborhood boundaries, political party, and ethnicity. By the 1870's there was a loose confederation of 92 volunteer fire brigades which often were in competition with each other, sometimes resulting in rowdy behavior. The Philadelphia Fire Department was established in 1871 to professionalize firefighting and improve the fire service for the city. It initially organized 22 engine companies and 5 truck companies spread out across the city.



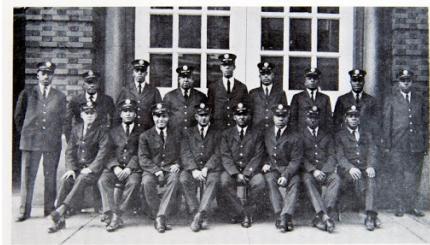
This building was first used as a firehouse by a volunteer brigade in 1871. Engine Company 11, one of the original 22 engine companies of the Philadelphia Fire Department, was organized at 1035 Lombard Street, and relocated to this building in 1902.

Engine Company 11 was Philadelphia's de facto African American firehouse. Isaac Jacobs was hired as its first African American firefighter in 1886. Although designated as a hose man, he was relegated to caring for the horses and cleaning the stable, serving until 1891. It was almost twenty years later until Philadelphia hired Stephen Presco as its second African American firefighter in 1905. Unlike Isaac Jacobs, Presco actually fought fires, and died in the line of duty in a shirtwaist factory blaze.



Firefighter Stephen Presco, Engine 11

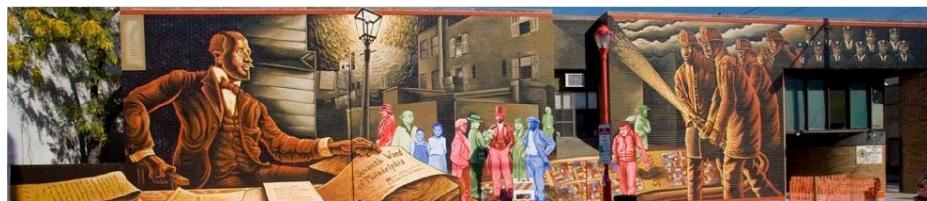
In 1919 the Philadelphia Fire Department established an official policy of racial segregation, when Engine Company 11 became the first and only all black company.



Front Row: L to R—Hosemen Dailey Grimes, Augustus K. Wood, Thomas M. Sodom, Adolf Reyes, James G. Davis, James A. Beale, Samuel Singletor, James Jenkins.
Back Row: L to R—Hosemen John R. Jackson, David G. Mullin, David F. Lee, Edward Johnson, Joseph A. Marshall, Howard Graham, Eugene Greene, Harry J. Archer, Peter C. Graham.

Despite their treatment as second-class citizens and firefighters, the members of Engine Company 11 provided first-class service, risking their lives for all citizens, and for the fellow white firefighters who would not work alongside them. In 1949 eleven African

American firefighters were transferred to other stations throughout the city. Although the policy of segregation officially ending in 1952, integration proceeded slowly. In 1962 African American firefighters formed Club Valiants, the founding chapter of the International Association of Black Professional Firefighters.



In 1976 Engine Company 11 was relocated to a new firehouse at 601 South Street, where it is still active. In 2008 Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program memorialized the history of Engine Company 11 with a mural on a wall at 6th and South Streets.

Today the building is still a vibrant part of the Bella Vista community. It is owned by Waters Memorial AME Church and is the home of the Willie G. Williams Community Center. The center is used for church related programs and is also made available to community groups for meetings and other activities.



Interested in learning more about Bella Vista's historical buildings? The BVNA Preservation Committee meets on the last Wednesday of the month at 7:00 p.m., usually at the Palumbo Recreation Center.