

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic LIBERTY FIRE COMPANY NO. 5

and or common LIBERTY FIRE COMPANY NO. 5

2. Location

street & number 501 SOUTH FIFTH STREET N/A not for publication

city, town READING _____ vicinity of

state PENNSYLVANIA code _____ county BERKS code _____

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational	<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> <u>N/A</u> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> <u>N/A</u> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other: FIREHOUSE

4. Owner of Property

name LIBERTY FIRE COMPANY NO. 5

street & number 501 SOUTH FIFTH STREET

city, town READING _____ vicinity of 19602 state PENNSYLVANIA

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. BERKS COUNTY COURT HOUSE

street & number 6TH & COURT STREETS

city, town READING _____ 19601 state PENNSYLVANIA

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

CODE 011
title PA. HISTORICAL & MUSEUM COMMISSION has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1977-1978 _____ federal _____ state _____ county local

depository for survey records BUREAU FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

city, town HARRISBURG _____ 17120 state PENNSYLVANIA

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		date <u>N/A</u>

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance LIBERTY FIREHOUSE
(EXTERIOR)

The Liberty Firehouse is located at the southeast corner of South Fifth and Laurel Streets in southwest Reading. Due to the building site, the largest facade faces Laurel Street rather than South Fifth Street, the latter being the main thoroughfare. Although the narrower width of Laurel Street lessens the impact of the main facade, the impression of grandeur, which is the hallmark of the firehouse, can still be appreciated from the South Fifth and Laurel Streets intersection.

The original Liberty Firehouse was a 25' x 40', two-story brick building constructed in 1854 by J.V. Craig, contractor. In 1876 the structure was demolished for the erection of an imposing two-story building designed by Reading architect Edward K. Mull, who resided two blocks from the site on South Fourth Street. The firehouse was expanded later with the addition of a third story constructed by L.H. Focht and Company, and designed by Alexander F. Smith, who also designed the interior renovations of the Beaux Arts style Boys' High School which in 1928 was converted to Reading's City Hall.

Built in the Italianate style, the firehouse is ornamented with a fine face brick and had a serpentine stone facade on its west elevation, since removed and replaced in 1929 by a buff-colored brick. The structure is designed with pilastered walls on its north elevation, topped by a classical stone balustrade and culminating in a Second Empire slate roofed cupola. The 1895 third floor addition altered the appearance of the original design and brought it to the then fashionable Victorian Romanesque style which was popular in the newer developed areas of Reading. This metamorphosis did not detract from the building's attractiveness due to the judicious manner in which the lower stories were harmonized with the upper third floor. According to a Reading Eagle news story of July 7, 1895, "the new addition will be carried on steel girders and the ceiling of the second story will not be disturbed at all."

The architectural motifs employed to unify the earlier Italianate style of the original two-story structure with the later Victorian Romanesque third floor addition was, in part, accomplished by repeating the arched window hood pattern of the first floor in a larger format, and by enclosing the second floor windows with large pilastered arcades. This rhythmic element is repeated on the third floor by encompassing a set of three arched windows within three gabled dormers.

The discriminate use of the Victorian Romanesque style lexicon is used quite successfully and presents sophisticated sense of architectural design. Many of the features associated with this style can be found on the building, as for example, the checkerboard brickwork band below the cornice and the pilastered arcades. Also typical of this style are the foliated capitals, acanthus keystone ornamentation used atop the brick arches, and the inclusion of belt courses. Worthy of note is the penchant for using a variety of building materials including molded brick, red and buff face brick, brownstone quoins and sandstone window hoods. The quoins date from the original Italianate style two-story structure.

Certain undesirable alterations have occurred such as the removal of swinging entrance doors to the engine room with motorized overhead doors. Also two side doors, facing Laurel Street, were replaced with contemporary glass and metal swinging doors. Fortunately the "stained" glass transoms are still intact and in decent condition. An original door entrance on the west facade was also replaced with what appears to be a 1930's entrance door with side lights. The door is camouflaged by an aluminum storm door. The south facade has been stuccoed and the hose drying tower windows boarded up.

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Contiguous to the main structure on its eastern end (Laurel Street side) is a garage housing fire apparatus. It appears that this part of the building was probably constructed at about the same time as the 1876 firehouse. A portion of this building can be discerned from an old photograph. Originally used to house fire apparatus and stables, the exterior was "modernized" in 1964. This is the only main discordant aspect of the entire structure but it is of relatively minor impact due to the fact that it is only a one-story structure and entirely overshadowed by the grander presence of the main building.

In summary, the exterior design of the Liberty Firehouse was attractively proportioned; the large facade on Laurel Street divided into seven equally spaced pilastered arcades express a well regulated rhythm. The South Fifth Street facade is likewise well designed, by repeating the arcade motif in dividing the fenestration in a group of three's, culminating on the third floor with the three arched dormer windows. The architectural features to be observed on the building are, for example, the molded brick ornamentation, carved stone work, carpentry, masonry and colored glass details all reflect a high quality of regional craftsmanship.

(INTERIOR)

While one would probably not dispute the architectural worthiness of the exterior of the Liberty Firehouse, it is doubtful that one would be prepared to find such an extraordinary Victorian interior essentially unchanged after nearly one hundred years of existence. What is so striking about most of the rooms of the firehouse is their preservation which includes nearly all their appointments and the original 1876 furniture.

The first floor is divided between the sitting room and the engine room with a stairway leading to the third floor. Fire apparatus comes in and out from the Laurel Street side. The second floor is likewise divided into two rooms of imposing proportion. The library and meeting room on the east side retain all their original appointments including their furniture. Across the landing on the western side of the building is the parlor and music rooms, 33'x 27' and 37'x 22', respectively.

Except for the use of a solid dark blue-black color linoleum in the library and hallway, all the original appointments are intact. Wood (oak) and plaster moldings, base boards, 12' double sash windows, Victorian wallpaper, brass door hardware, bevelled Queen Anne glass doors, lincrusta decorative paneling, original chandeliers, stair railing and ballusters, newel post; it is all there, intact, well maintained as though time had mysteriously left these rooms untouched.

The third floor is one large space devoted to recreational purposes and includes trophy cases, two billiard tables, playing card tables, etc. The only addition which does detract somewhat from the overall original appearance is the accoustical tile ceiling.

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However, one can only wonder how the interior of this firehouse managed to survive from the onslaught of cheap wood paneling, dropped ceilings, bricked-up windows (typical of numerous public buildings) and other disfigurements which old buildings are heir to. Even such features as the Italianate style windows on the first floor north facade have somehow survived. Note the upper sash configuration. This room is somewhat less imposing and is the most frequently used, especially by the older members who sit and read in its cosier atmosphere. Note the oak chair rails.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

Specific dates 1876 and 1895 **Builder/Architect** EDWARD K. MULL / ALEXANDER F. SMITH

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Liberty Firehouse constructed in 1876, with a third floor addition in 1895, is the last remaining firehouse in Reading to retain its original appearance and use. Although there are six firehouses remaining in the City from the late 19th Century, these have been either remodeled, abandoned, or adapted for other than their original purposes (1). Another outstanding aspect of the Liberty Firehouse is the highly successful combination of the original Italianate style design of the first and second floors with the Victorian Romanesque style of the third floor addition. The unusual combination of utilitarian purpose and architectural quality of the structure and its nearly intact original character makes it one of the most important landmarks in the City and County. No other local firehouse, past or present, can compare to the quality of design and craftsmanship lavished on its construction.

Only the finest materials were used for the interior and exterior construction of the building: quality face brick and stone masonry, as well as stained glass manufactured by J.M. Kase Glass Company. This firm, which operated from 1888 to 1975, was one of the leading art glass studios in eastern Pennsylvania and was responsible for at least 90% of the unusual abundance of residential, religious, commercial, and institutional art glass in Reading. Also the finest lumber was lavished for the construction of the building, in part, due to the Deysher Lumber Mill's contribution; Jacob H. Deysher, having been one of the original founders and organizers of the fire company. According to the Liberty Fire Company's Minutes, materials and craftsmanship were provided locally. The local press lauded the construction of the 1876 building with a number of superlative remarks describing the building in the August 30, 1876 Reading Daily Eagle as a "splendid structure". Their headline reflects the attitude of the day: "Liberty Fire Company's New Palace: One of the Most Magnificent Fire Company Buildings in America". A detailed description of the firehouse is given, some very interesting information may be culled from it, including the cost of the structure: \$10,000 - a very large sum for the period. Included in the article is a description of the latest innovations for harnessing the horses to the fire apparatus.

A close scrutiny of each room, other than the engine room, discloses an interior unchanged from the original appearance of the 1870's. From brass door knobs to wall-paper, every detail has been retained over these many years. The lincrusta decoration on the stairway wall is intact and unpainted. Wood and plaster moldings, base boards, wood paneling, original lighting fixtures, chandeliers, furniture (the best quality), trophy cases, billiard tables, etc., have been preserved, cared for and loved. Modern intrusions have been resisted, wherever practically possible; exceptions such as the use of solid color linoleum for some floors, and yet the building is not a museum but a functioning firehouse, on call day and night with the latest fire apparatus, trained drivers and volunteer members.

The original two-story Liberty Fire Company firehouse was constructed in 1854 when the southwest area of Reading saw a dramatic increase in industrial and residential development. As early as 1840, the railroad had become a significant economic factor to the growth of the City and spurred the growth of residential housing. With the area

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becoming more densely populated, a need for fire protection arose. Organized by prominent citizens who lived and owned commercial enterprises in the neighborhood, the Fire Company boasted such eminent men as Captain Frederick S. Boas (1834-1888), lumber mill owner, railroad investor and officer in the Civil War. Continuing industrial expansion occurred in the area during and after the Civil War with, for example, the establishment of the Reading Hardware Company (1851-1888) located a block south of the Liberty Fire Company site; the firehouse has hardware fixtures manufactured by the Reading Hardware Company. Population increased from 15,743 in 1850 to 23,162 in 1860. By the 1870's the population had nearly doubled; many of the new residents were foreign immigrants who moved into southwest Reading to work for the Reading Railroad and developing metal, hardware and clay industries. As housing density increased, the need for fire protection became essential. The closest fire company was located at Peach and Franklin Streets, the Friendship Fire Company. Although this firehouse was only eight streets away from where the present Liberty firehouse was eventually constructed, the limitations of mid-19th Century fire apparatus required the establishment of the Liberty firehouse for the southwest Reading neighborhood.

The Liberty Fire Company firehouse, due to its continuing service and longevity has become more significant each passing year as an example of late 19th Century firehouse construction and use. The unusual combination of utilitarian purpose and architectural quality of the structure and its nearly intact original character makes it one of the most important historical landmarks in the City and County. No other local firehouse, past or present, can compare to the quality of design and craftsmanship which was dedicated to the construction of this building (2).

In conclusion, the Liberty Fire Company No. 5 firehouse is one of the finest examples of Victorian architecture in the City of Reading and Berks County. It has retained nearly all its original interior and exterior appearance except for some minor renovations. While the Hampden Fire Company, nominated to the National Register in 1982, competes very favorably in quality of design, the interior as well as its use is no longer dedicated as a firehouse. The Liberty Fire Company firehouse is the only firehouse which has retained its original appearance and original use for over 100 years. As part of the 1977-1978 Comprehensive Architectural Survey of Reading of 27,000 structures surveyed, the building received one of the highest rankings and was determined to be a candidate for the National Register. We believe that according to the role it has and still plays as a firehouse and for its architectural quality of design, it meets the National Register criteria for its contribution to the local architectural heritage.

- (1) - Reading Volunteer Fire Department
- (2) - See Bureau of Planning Report; Appendix "A"

9. Major Bibliographical References

SEE ATTACHED SHEET.

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property _____

Quadrangle name _____

Quadrangle scale _____

UTM References

A
Zone Easting Northing

B
Zone Easting Northing

C

D

E

F

G

H

Verbal boundary description and justification

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries N/A

state code county code

state code county code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title MICHEL R. LEFEVRE, HIST. PRESERVATION SPEC. & KATHY KLINK, PLANNING AIDE

organization BUREAU OF PLANNING & DEVEL., CITY HALL date APRIL 10, 1984

street & number 8TH & WASHINGTON STREETS telephone (215) 320-6102

city or town READING state PENNSYLVANIA 19601

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature _____

title _____ date _____

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date _____

Keeper of the National Register

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

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Continuation sheet MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REF. Item number 9.

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Raymond W. Albright - Two Centuries of Reading, 1748-1948; Reading, PA. Historical Society of Berks County.

Reading Daily Eagle (Reading, PA.), July 7, 1895.

Liberty Fire Company No. 5 "Minutes", November 27, 1876.

Polk's City Directory; Reading, PA., 1877.

Reading Planning Commission: Historic Preservation, Reading, Pennsylvania; City Hall, Reading, PA., September 1980.



Liberty Fire Company #5
 Berks Co., Pa.
 Zone 18 Reading Quad
 E. 421 280 N. 4464 300