

# History of the fire pole

The fireman's pole (also called a sliding pole, fire pole, or tom) is a wooden pole or a metal tube or pipe installed between floors in fire stations, allowing fire fighters responding to an alarm to quickly descend to the ground floor faster than by using a standard staircase.

The device was invented in the 1870s by David Kenyon in Chicago, Illinois, USA.

The fireman's pole allows fire fighters to move down much more quickly, although it is not suitable for climbing up. The pole connects the ground floor to the ceiling of the floor above through a hole in the ground floor ceiling.

## Spiral staircases

Until 1878, spiral staircases or sliding chutes were common but not particularly fast. Fire houses were usually multistoried and the horses lived in the stable on the ground floor while the firemen were on the upper level. Nevertheless, the horses, attracted by the smell of food eaten by the firemen, sometimes climbed the stairs. To avoid this, spiral staircases were installed because it could not be navigated by the horses.

## Origination

Captain David B Kenyon of Chicago's Engine Company No 21, an all-black engine company, worked in a three-storey fire station; the ground floor containing the fire fighting equipment, the floor above being the floor for recreation and sleeping and the top floor being the hayloft, which was used to store the winter supply of hay for the fire engines' horses.

During transport, the hay was secured to a wagon using a wooden binding pole, which was stored in the hayloft when not in use. Fire fighter George Reid slid down the pole to respond to a call for help once, which inspired Captain David Kenyon to create a permanent pole.

In 1878 he convinced the chief of department to make the necessary hole in the building and install the pole, after agreeing to pay for any necessary maintenance. The company crafted a pole out of a Georgia pine beam by shaving and sanding it into a 7,6cm (3 inch) diameter pole, which they gave several coats of varnish and a coat of paraffin.

After being the target of many jokes, people realised Company 21 was usually the first company to arrive when called, especially at night and the chief of department ordered the poles to be installed in all Chicago fire stations. In 1880 the first brass pole was installed in the Boston Fire Department.

## Safety issues

Losing one's grip on the pole can result in falling from a great height. The fire fighter may hit an object such as a door extending from a truck; poor speed control can result in injured or even broken legs upon impact with the floor and burns can occur due to friction against the pole.

Slide poles can be made safer. Cushions can be placed around the base of the pole to soften landings. Other safety features include railings, baskets or closets that surround part



*City of Cape Town's Goodwood Fire Station still makes use of fire poles*

of the opening, weight-activated doors that open only when weight is applied to the pole to prevent accidental falls, and exhaust control systems that prevent fumes from the apparatus bay from coming into the living quarters.

Despite the strong tradition and time advantage of slide poles, the US' National Fire Protection Association has called for the removal of all poles from US fire stations due to safety hazards.

Many cities in the US have removed poles from their stations but some new multilevel fire stations include slide poles with appropriate safety features.

Most multi-storey fire stations in South Africa still make use of fire poles. It is still the quickest way to the engine/truck.

Source: Wikipedia and others 



*Vancouver firemen turning out for a fire alarm in 1910*