

# Pretend: Bucket Brigade

## Materials From Home

- Small sand pails or other clean buckets
- Two larger buckets/mini pools/ etc. to be your “water source” to fill your bucket and your “fire engine”
- Family members to help form your bucket brigade!



## “Fire!” in Early Alexandria

Imagine that we are in Alexandria 200 years ago. We are Friendship Firefighters! Fires were much more common in the past. Why was that? People in the past cooked on open fires and used candles to light their homes. Here we are in the past, and there’s a fire in a building a few streets away!

In early Alexandria there were no telephones to dial 911. *How do you think firefighters knew there was a fire?* Patrol men walked around the city streets looking for fires. They would use a special rattle that was very loud to help them spread the word.

Once the firefighters know there’s a fire, what might they do? Go to the firehouse and get supplies. *What supplies do you think they need to bring to help fight the fire?* Axe, ladder, fire engine, buckets.



Fire rattle. Source: Friendship Firehouse Museum

*How would they get their engine to the fire?* They didn’t drive it like today, and Friendship firefighters didn’t have horses to pull it. The firefighters pulled their engine to the fire!

Firefighters today can use hoses to get water from fire hydrants to fill their fire engines. In early Alexandria, they didn’t have hoses. There were water pumps on each corner that could be pumped by hand, but *what did they use to get the water from the pump to fill their engine?* Buckets! Citizens kept at least one fire bucket in their home or business.

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When citizens heard there was a fire, they grabbed their buckets and ran to the fire to help. Citizens and firefighters formed a bucket brigade to fill the fire engine with water and to help put out the fire.

Last Monday about one o'Clock, P. M. this Town was alarmed by the Cry of Fire, which proved to be in the Corner House of Mr. McKnight's, a large three-story wooden Building, but through the Activity of the Fire Companies and Inhabitants it was soon extinguished.—It was occasioned by the Pipe of a Stove.

Citizens could form two lines – full buckets passed along one line, and empty ones were passed back along the other to be refilled.

Being at a fire was noisy! Sometimes, a fire company's captain would use a speaking trumpet – sort of like a cheerleader's megaphone – to amplify and direct his voice and help the firefighters hear what they needed to do.

*“Through the Activity of the Fire Companies and Inhabitants it was soon extinguished...”*

- Account of a fire at McKnight's tavern from the Alexandria Gazette, April 19, 1787.

Some fire engines had a hand crank that teams of firefighters turned to spray the water from the engine onto the fire. Meanwhile, other firefighters and citizens continued the bucket brigade replenishing the water inside the engine's reservoir. Finally, if all went well the fire would be extinguished thanks to the teamwork of our firefighters and citizens!



Two fire companies race to a fire, pulling their equipment with them. A fire company captain holds his speaking trumpet high (far left) and dogs and pigs scatter as the firemen race past. Detail from “The White Turtle & the Red Crab of Philadelphia.” Library Company of Philadelphia. <https://digital.librarycompany.org/islandora/object/digitool%3A65546>



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## Instructions

- Form your bucket brigade!
  - ⇒ Gather as many family members together as you can.
  - ⇒ Have them help assemble your supplies—small sand pails or other clean buckets. Find two larger buckets, tubs, or small children's pools—one will be your “water source” to fill your bucket and one will be your “fire engine” that you will use your buckets to fill with water. Fill your “water source” container with water.



A bucket brigade supplied from a hand pump. Detail from “Fighting a Fire” by William P. Chappel. Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/10448>

- ⇒ Tip: Even careful firefighters can accidentally spill water as they pass buckets. If you can form your bucket brigade outdoors it's a great way too cool off on a hot day! If you are indoors, use a kitchen or another space with a floor where spilled water can easily be cleaned up. Or use something else as your “water” like pompoms, plastic balls, or Legos.*
- Have your firefighting team stand in two lines facing each other between your “water source” and your “fire engine”. Pick a fire captain to explain to your firefighting teammates how your bucket brigade will work:
  - ⇒ The person closest to the “water source” fills the bucket with water.
  - ⇒ Pass the full bucket up the first line! The first line quickly and carefully passes the full bucket along the line. The last person dumps the water into the “fire engine” reservoir.
  - ⇒ Send that empty bucket back down the second line! The second line passes the empty bucket along their line until the bucket returns to the start. Then repeat whole process again, filling and passing each bucket continuously!
- The fire captain can cup their hands around their mouth to amplify their voice, just like a fire captain would have used a speaking trumpet during a real fire in the past. Use your “speaking trumpet” to tell your the bucket brigade when it's time to start and stop. “Are you ready? No time to waste! Let's fill the engine!” Continue cheering on your firefighting team on. When time is up, tell them the engine is filled. Great job!

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- We're not done yet! In the past firefighters would use a hand crank on their fire engine to spray the water from the engine onto the fire while the bucket brigade continued filling the reservoir. Since our families don't have as many hands as a firefighting team in the past, we'll pretend to crank the engine now. Have everyone stand where they are and pretend by moving their hands and arms as if they are turning a crank on a fire engine.
- The fire is out! Huzzah! Hooray! Great job, Friendship Firefighters!

FIRE.--On Saturday morning, about five o'clock the BAPTIST MEETING HOUSE on Washington Street, in this Town, was discovered to be on fire. The flames had made such progress in the interior of the building before the alarm was given, that it was found impossible to subdue them, and in a short time the Meeting House was entirely destroyed. In consequence of the vigorous exertions of our citizens and of the Fire Companies, the adjoining houses were all preserved.

The fire, we understand, originated accidentally, but from what particular cause is not ascertained--probably from carelessly putting away ashes from the stove in a barrel.

*"On Saturday morning, about five o'clock the Baptist Meeting House... was discovered to be on fire... in a short time the Meeting House was entirely destroyed. In consequence of the vigorous exertions of our citizens and of the Fire Companies, the adjoining houses were all preserved."*

- Account of a fire at the Baptist Meeting House from the Alexandria Gazette, November 30, 1829.



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