

# City of Newburgh Press Release

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## Fire Chief James Merritt Retires Aug. 30

*“I have no ambition in this world but one, and that is to be a fireman. The position may, in the eyes of some, appear to be a lowly one; but we who know the work which the fireman has to do believe that his is a noble calling...”*

-Chief Edward F. Croker

Unlike many boys, young James Merritt did not aspire to be a firefighter when he grew up. In fact, he nearly became a florist. In high school, he worked in Merritt’s Florist Shop for his aunt and uncle, who offered to send him to business school to prepare him for possibly taking over for them when they retired.

But, before he took that route, at age 18 a friend brought him to meet the Chief of Storm King Engine Company II (Cornwall on Hudson Fire Department) about being a volunteer firefighter. Within six months Merritt knew he had found his calling. On August 30, after 25 years of service to the people of the City of Newburgh, James Merritt is retiring from the Newburgh Fire Department as Chief.



“I credit former Chief Robert Brophy and Training Officer Dennis Wood with getting me interested in the fire service, and providing me with the training to get started. I owe them both a great deal,” said Jim.

As a 20-year old new recruit on the City of Newburgh Fire Department, he was assigned to Engine 3 in Group 4. His job, as Merritt describes it, was to “hook up the hose to the hydrant, and then catch up to the officer in the building.”

Some of his fellow-fighters at that time were Donald Hoos, Gary Dreyer, Fred Fairweather, Michael Vatter, and Tom Walsh. “These guys took care of their crew, never got excited, and they were absolutely fearless,” Jim recalled.

Assistant Chief Donald Hoos was a role model, said Merritt. “Donald could have the whole block burning down around him, and his voice and calm demeanor would never change. I tried very hard to be the same kind of Assistant Chief.”

As he moved through the ranks, Merritt’s advice to new recruits has always been, “Support your union, remember that you work for the people of the City of Newburgh, and at all times conduct yourself in a way that will reflect positively on your department.”

Jim and his wife Kerry are the parents of two children. When asked what he would do if one of them decided to become a firefighter, Merritt replied, “That would be fine with me. It is an honorable profession that involves helping people.”

Reflecting on his 25 years, Merritt said, “The best and worst times of being a firefighter both revolve around our citizens. The best were when our fire crews were able to rescue people from certain death. This always involved a team effort and heroism. The worst times were when, despite our efforts, people perished. There is nothing worse than to have to tell one of our citizens that were not able to save one of their loved ones.”

The day Fire Chief Robert Paden died was also one of the bad times. Paden’s “approachable style,” was an example Merritt said he sought to follow.

There has been a lot of change over 25 years in the City, said Merritt. “There is much more reconstruction of buildings and neighborhoods going on now. All City departments now work together in a coordinated effort, and this was not always the case. Departments, including the Fire Department are much better funded and equipped than they were.”

That’s a bit of an understatement. Merritt recalls that when he first joined the fire department, it was not uncommon for doors on the fire trucks to be secured with ropes. The compartments were rusted out, and they would sometimes fall out when the rig hit a bump. He also remembers that the starters on some of the trucks didn’t work, and someone would have to hit them with a hammer to start the truck.

“Now we have state-of-the art apparatus,” he said.

His last boss before becoming Fire Chief was James Morrill. “Chief Morrill taught me a lot about decision-making,” said Merritt.

Jim Morrill also has high praise for the man who stepped into his shoes as Chief. “When I left I was very comfortable leaving him (Merritt) in charge. He is a dedicated

professional, and was a great Deputy Chief and a great Chief. He always put the needs of the Fire Department and the City before his own interests. I really enjoyed working with Jim.”

As he leaves Newburgh, Merritt said, “I look forward to watching the City continue to revitalize its neighborhoods. The Leyland project by the waterfront along with the restoration of East Parmenter Street with Habitat for Humanity will have a significant positive impact on the City.”

City Manager Jean-Ann McGrane said Merritt will be missed throughout City departments. “He was our Emergency Management Coordinator, and our Acting City Manager when needed. Most of all, he was absolutely dedicated to providing the best possible service to the people of the City of Newburgh. One example of that is his commitment to recruiting Spanish-speaking firefighters to help ensure better communication with all members of our community, especially in emergency situations.”

Mayor Nick Valentine, who has known Jim since he began his career in Newburgh said, “He was such a natural at doing the job, from firefighter all the way up to Chief. It will be difficult to think of him doing anything else. He will be missed without a doubt, but I am confident he will leave the Department in capable hands. He set a fine example.”

Rosanne Burton, long-time secretary to many of Newburgh’s Fire Chiefs said, “Jim has been an extraordinary Chief. He is conscientious, hard-working, and devoted to the Fire Department. He has kept the Department running smoothly with carefully thought out ideas and wise decisions and finesse. I feel privileged to have worked with him and I wish him much success in his new endeavor.”

So what will he be doing after retirement? Well, it won’t have anything to do with flowers, or fighting fires. Instead, Jim will be embarking on a new career as a partner in a Cert-a-Pro Painters franchise.