



---

Moses Henry Nathan and the Great Charleston Fire of 1861

Author(s): Marie Ferrara

Source: *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Vol. 104, No. 4 (Oct., 2003), pp. 258-280

Published by: [South Carolina Historical Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27570653>

Accessed: 11/10/2010 13:59

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=schs>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*South Carolina Historical Society* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## MOSES HENRY NATHAN AND THE GREAT CHARLESTON FIRE OF 1861

MARIE FERRARA\*

**EIGHTEEN SIXTY-ONE WAS A DECISIVE YEAR FOR CHARLESTON,** South Carolina. The bombardment of Fort Sumter that ignited the Civil War occurred in April, and a scant eight months later, on December 11, the city was devastated by a cataclysmic fire. It swept in a southwesterly direction from Hasell Street at the eastern Cooper River boundary of the city across the peninsula to the Ashley River. Over 540 acres and nearly 600 private homes were destroyed, along with churches and the buildings that had recently hosted the Secession Convention and the signing of the ordinance that dissolved the Union. One witness to the fire was General Robert E. Lee, who was in Charleston at the time inspecting the city's defenses. He was quartered at the Mills House Hotel, which was saved from the flames by the staff covering its walls and roof with wet blankets. The 1861 fire was the largest and most destructive in the city's history, and its effects were visible for generations.<sup>1</sup>

After the peace, in the popular imagination, the war and the fire became linked. Photographers came to town to document the ruins of the city and often misattributed the destruction of the 1861 fire to the siege of the city that began in 1863 and lasted until the Confederates abandoned Charleston in February 1865. Travelers came, too, and spoke of the "proud city [that] lies humbled in its ashes, too poor to rise again without the helping hand of Northern capital."<sup>2</sup>

Since that fateful year of 1861, scores of volumes have been written on the firing on Fort Sumter and the start of the war in April, but very little has been written on the December fire.<sup>3</sup> The reason is a lack of documentation

\* Marie Ferrara is the head of Special Collections, Robert Scott Small Library, College of Charleston.

<sup>1</sup> The Halsey map of historic Charleston shows the path of the 1861 fire. See Alfred O. Halsey, *Historic Charleston on a Map, Showing Original High Tide Water Lines, Fortifications, Boroughs, Great Fires, Historic Information, Etc.* (Charleston, S.C.: n.p., 1949). A "bird's eye view" of the city in 1872 shows the path of the fire and how little had been built back. See C. N. Drie, *Bird's Eye View of the City of Charleston* (1872; Ithaca, N.Y.: Historic Urban Plans, 1976). A full list of property losses from the fire can be found in the December 21, 1861, edition of the *Charleston Mercury*.

<sup>2</sup> J. T. Trowbridge, *A Picture of the Desolated States and the Work of Restoration, 1865-1868* (Hartford, Conn.: L. Stebbins, 1868), 513.

<sup>3</sup> For a vivid description of the 1861 fire, see John F. Marszalek, Jr., "The Charleston Fire of 1861 as described in the Emma Holmes Diary," *South Carolina*

attributable to the destruction of the records of Charleston Fire Chief Moses Henry Nathan, who played a role in both 1861 events. Nathan kept his records in his store on the corner of Wentworth and Meeting Streets and planned a lengthy report based on them, but a regiment of Confederate troops quartered there in 1863 destroyed his papers. Furthermore, at some point, a crucial page with data on the 1861 fire was torn from the Board of Fire Masters' minutes.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, scholars have lacked the primary information necessary to adequately historicize the event. Before his death, however, Nathan penned a short description of the fire, and the document's recent resurfacing after a generation of being "lost" may now help fill in some of the blanks about the great conflagration.

The cause of the fire was debated early on. "The origin of this stupendous fire still remains a mystery," one 1865 visitor noted. "It is looked upon as one of the disasters of the war, although it cannot be shown that it had any connection with . . . [it]. When Eternal Justice decrees the punishment of a people," the writer, obviously a Unionist, continued, "it sends not War alone, but also its sister terrors, Famine, Pestilence, and Fire."<sup>5</sup> In his description, Fire Chief Nathan stated what he knew to be the cause, but oddly, he agreed with this northern visitor and saw the fire as an act of Providence. He believed it was not sent to punish, however, but to save people. According to Nathan, the horrible blaze proved God's benevolence.

Born in Charleston on November 7, 1821, Moses Henry Nathan was the son of Henry Nathan (1790-1837) and Esther Levy (1789-1871). In 1846 he married Leah Cohen Peixotto (1822-1909), daughter of Solomon Cohen Peixotto (1785-1837), the hazan, or reader, of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, Charleston's preeminent Jewish congregation.<sup>6</sup> The couple had four children: two sons, Henry Hutchinson (1847-1902) and Theodore (b. 1860); and two daughters, Isabel (b. 1851) and Corinne (1864-1944). Nathan was a prominent member of the Jewish community, joining the benevolent Hebrew Orphan Society in 1848.<sup>7</sup> In 1840 the congregation of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim installed an organ in its new synagogue on Hasell Street (built after the Charleston fire of 1838 on the same site as the original); the introduction of

*Historical Magazine* 76 (1975): 60-67, and "Extracts from the Jacob Schirmer Diary, 1861," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 62 (1961): 237.

<sup>4</sup> City of Charleston Board of Fire Masters, Minute Book (May 1848-March 1872), meeting of November 17, 1863, Special Collections, Charleston County Library, Charleston, S.C. (Unless otherwise noted, all minute book citations will be to this volume.)

<sup>5</sup> Trowbridge, *A Picture of the Desolated States*, 513-514.

<sup>6</sup> James William Hagy, *This Happy Land: The Jews of Colonial and Antebellum Charleston* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 381-382.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas J. Tobias, *The Hebrew Orphan Society of Charleston, S.C. Founded 1801: A Historical Sketch* (Charleston, S.C.: The Society, 1957), 39.



**City of Charleston Fire Chief Moses Henry Nathan (1821-1875) during the Civil War. Private collection, Charleston, S.C.**

---

instrumental music in worship, along with other reform practices, sparked the ire of many traditionalists. Seeking to adhere to more strict ritual, this group of conservatives seceded from Beth Elohim the same year and established its own congregation called Shearit Israel. Shearit Israel's synagogue, completed on Wentworth Street in 1847, was just a block away from where Nathan operated a coach and carriage business on the southwest corner of Meeting and Wentworth Streets. Since its early records are lost, it is not known if Nathan, like his father-in-law, had been a member of Beth Elohim before the split. (It may be assumed that he was since it was the only Jewish congregation in town at the time.) He belonged to the Shearit Israel congregation for the better part of two decades and became a member of Beth Elohim in 1866 when the two congregations amalgamated.<sup>8</sup>

Not just a businessman, Nathan worked his way up through the hierarchy of the Charleston Fire Department, beginning as a fireman in 1839 and joining the Firemen's Charitable Association in 1847. On July 19, 1854, upon resigning as a commissioner of the City Market, he was appointed third assistant to Fire Chief F. P. Porcher and became a member of the Board of Fire Masters. On December 13, 1854, he became second assistant to Fire Chief George A. Bowman. The following year he was appointed first assistant and placed on the Fire Masters' Committee of Pumps and Wells.<sup>9</sup> During the temporary absence of Chief Bowman, Nathan became acting chief in May 1856 and again in December 1858. When Bowman resigned in January 1859, Nathan was elected chief, and it became his supreme duty to defend the city against the menace of fire.

#### FIREFIGHTING IN CHARLESTON

Fire had plagued Charleston since the city was founded in 1670. After destructive fires in 1698, 1699, and 1700, commissioners were appointed to oversee firefighting and enforce building codes. Despite this legislation,

<sup>8</sup> Nathan is listed in the 1849 *Charleston City Directory* as a coach maker. He purchased a two-story brick building cater-cornered to the City Fire Station at 262-264 Meeting Street in 1856 from George N. Reynolds. City of Charleston Assessor, Ward Book 4, 1852-1856, Special Collections, Charleston County Library, Charleston, S.C. See also Charleston County Register of Mesne Conveyance, Deed Book U13, 16, and Deed Book T13, 84, Charleston, S.C.; Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, Minute Book (1866-1875), meeting of February 3, 1867, Special Collections, College of Charleston Library, Charleston, S.C.

<sup>9</sup> The Firemen's Charitable Association, Minute Book (1840-1864), meeting of October 7, 1847, Charleston Museum, Charleston, S.C. *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 20, 1854, and August 19, 1854; Minute Book, July 19, 1854, December 13, 1854, December 13, 1855, and December 17, 1873.

Charleston continued to suffer one devastating fire after the next. A fire in 1740 burned 300 houses, and another in 1778 destroyed 250 houses.

When the city of Charleston incorporated in 1783, city council assumed the responsibility for firefighting and passed it to the Board of Fire Masters. After a fire in 1796, the city fire ordinance was amended. Henceforth fire masters were to be chosen annually by city council to manage and direct the city fire engines and form a company of axemen as well as companies (each with a distinguishing mark) to remove household goods from sites endangered by fire. Every house in the city was required to keep buckets and a ladder to be used for firefighting.<sup>10</sup>

In these early days, the police force doubled as firefighters, and during Chief Nathan's time firefighters doubled as police. Before the Revolutionary War, the police kept night watches in the steeple of St. Michael's Church at the central location of Broad and Meeting Streets to spot fires and ring the bells in alarm. When the alarm sounded, Charlestonians rushed to the fire with their buckets and formed two lines—one with buckets full of water and one with empty buckets. The buckets were passed hand-to-hand from a well or other supply of water. Later, when engines were used, the buckets kept the engine tanks filled.<sup>11</sup>

It was still every man for himself, though. There was much confusion in Charleston when the fire bells rang and responders ran into the streets. If the fire gained any headway, the bucket brigades were useless. The only alternative was to blow up buildings in the path of the fire. With no police protection of property, looting was a problem during fires as well.

As early as 1766, a volunteer company composed of citizens was established to fight fires. In June 1784 the Hand-in-Hand Fire Company was formed. Members were required to maintain buckets, a large linen bag, and a bed-key. They rushed to the blaze when a member's property caught fire, used buckets of water to douse the flames, the bag to remove household goods, and the bed-key to dismantle beds so that they could be moved.<sup>12</sup> After the Revolution, in 1789, a group of citizens formed the Vigilant Fire Company. This was followed by the Charleston Company of Axemen in 1801 and the Eagle Company in 1816. These companies also functioned as social organizations, which paid dues and held monthly meetings, dinners, balls, and parades.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Edwards, *Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston, In the State of South Carolina, passed since the incorporation of the city* (Charleston, S.C.: W. P. Young, 1802), 151-160.

<sup>11</sup> Harold S. Walker, "Early Days of Fire Fighting in Charleston," MS, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, S.C.

<sup>12</sup> Walker, "Early Days of Fire Fighting in Charleston," 5.

<sup>13</sup> Michael E. Stevens, "The Vigilant Fire Company of Charleston," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 87 (1986): 132-133.

Despite the formation of these companies and mandated precautions, Charleston continued to go up in flames. One broke out in 1800, and another in 1810 destroyed 194 houses. A city ordinance passed in June 1815 directed fire masters to appoint managers of city-owned fire engines and to raise a company of axemen, consisting of a foreman, two assistants, forty-seven privates, and forty free persons of color. Another new responsibility assigned the fire masters was to distribute the pay of the firemen, who were to be compensated only for active duty. The ordinance stipulated that "white men shall, be paid a sum of fifty cents each, and if slaves or free persons of colour, twenty-five cents each, for every hour they shall be employed working the engines." To further encourage companies to attend fires in a timely manner, a reward of forty dollars was given to the first three engines arriving at the fire.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, provisions were made in the 1815 ordinance for fire companies to remove household goods from sites endangered by fire. These items were to be taken to the markets, the first floor of the Exchange, the courthouse yard, and the churches or burial grounds. Once the alarm sounded, the doors and gates of these places were to be unlocked. In order to minimize chaos during the emergency and aid in recovery efforts afterwards, personal property recovered by the fire companies was to be removed to specific, assigned locations. The companies were to be identified by a particular mark and their deposit points given a corresponding mark.<sup>15</sup>

Still fires erupted. There was a blaze in 1819, and another in 1826 which burned over thirty houses and outbuildings. After the 1826 fire three more volunteer companies were formed: the Phoenix (1826), the Charleston (1826), and the Aetna (1829). Despite an increased level of preparedness, four more devastating fires occurred in the city in the 1830s. In 1833 a fire destroyed forty buildings. Another in 1835 destroyed sixty-three buildings, including St. Philip's Church. Barely four months later, yet another fire destroyed 125 buildings.

The rash of fires in the mid-1830s led the newspapers to criticize the city engineer, the fire masters, and the volunteer companies for their lack of expertise and dispersed authority. Following the 1835 fire, the *Charleston Courier* reported on the inefficiency of the fire companies:

The exertions made by our Fire and Axe Companies and citizens generally, to subdue this conflagration were worthy of all praise; but it is the universal opinion that the operations were badly managed—There was an utter want of system, and proper organization—and too great squeamishness about blowing up houses . . . The Fire and Engineer Departments, too,

<sup>14</sup> *Digest of the Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston, from the year 1783 to 1818* (Charleston, S.C.: Archibald E. Miller, 1818), 83-84.

<sup>15</sup> *Digest of the Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston*, 82-96.

should be re-organized—not only competent persons, but with competent remuneration, should be put at the head of them, so as to ensure an efficient system.<sup>16</sup>

The newspapers also suggested that firefighting be turned over to the militia. Charleston City Council left the responsibility for managing firefighting to the fire masters, however. This meant that the volunteer companies were free of city supervision except when actively fighting fires. It also meant that city council continued to endorse a system that was insufficient to fight large fires. By 1837 the Charleston Fire Department consisted of five white volunteer companies and sixteen city engines manned by African-Americans with white officers.<sup>17</sup>

Another fire followed in 1838, which started at the corner of Market and King Streets and burned through to the Cooper River. Nearly one third of the city was consumed, including the homes of one thousand families. Part of the destruction was due to the recent lack of rains. The *Charleston Courier* reported that:

The houses had become so dry, that a single spark was sufficient to ignite them, and the rapidity with which the fire progressed and the intensity of the heat, not only created a high wind, but produced currents and eddies which hurrying the flames in various directions, formed the basis of new conflagrations . . . It needs no skill in natural philosophy, to understand the necessary action of highly inflammable gasses [*sic*], driven forward by the fury of an intensely excited atmosphere, upon a city of wood parched by season of uncommon drought, and thereby deprived of all means of protection.<sup>18</sup>

But some action could have helped, the newspaper writer believed. For, again, it reported that “in the blowing up of buildings, there was not, in our opinion, sufficient judgment used, or there was too much fear of responsibility exhibited.”<sup>19</sup>

As had been the case with all previous fires, on the heels of the 1838 blaze city council tried to legislate change, passing an ordinance to prevent the erection of wooden buildings within the city. And, as seen before, the fire of 1838 prompted the formation of additional fire companies: the German (1839), the Marion (1839), the Palmetto (1841), the Hope (1843), the Palmetto Protection (1849), and the Washington (1849). By 1849 the Fire

<sup>16</sup> *Charleston Courier*, June 8, 1835.

<sup>17</sup> Jane Pease and William H. Pease, “The Blood-Thirsty Tiger: Charleston and the Psychology of Fire,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 79 (1978): 288-290.

<sup>18</sup> *Charleston Courier*, April 30, 1838.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*





**Portrait of the fire masters and officers of the Fire Department of the city of Charleston with their caps and bugles in 1841. The painter, Christian Mayr, was a member of the German Fire Company. Courtesy of the Collection of City Hall, Charleston, S.C.**

---

Department consisted of ten volunteer companies, but there were only four ward engines manned by blacks with white officers.<sup>20</sup>

Because of white Charleston's paranoia about slave insurrection, the use of non-whites in firefighting was long a point of friction in the city. The incorporated volunteer companies were white and employed African-Americans. The city engines were manned by African-Americans with white officers appointed by the city. In 1821 there were complaints about the "improper conduct of the Negroes going to [and] returning from fires with public Engines by whooping, yelling and running races" which damaged the engines and alarmed white Charlestonians.<sup>21</sup> Nathan, too, was concerned about the large number of slaves attached to the volunteer companies. He

<sup>20</sup> For the list of the names of the fire companies, dates of incorporation, year in which the station was built, name of the builder, president of the company, number on company rolls, and list of equipment and condition, see Minute Book, May 16, 1855, May 21, 1856, and May 20, 1857.

<sup>21</sup> City of Charleston Board of Fire Masters, Record Book (1819-1836), meeting of July 13, 1821, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.

considered it "detrimental to the interest of the Department."<sup>22</sup> However, the fire masters felt that "in many instances they [slaves] can be usefully employed, with every satisfaction to whites, as supply engines." They might also "be held in reserve for a sudden emergency, or to meet any extraordinary demand for additional force, in case of extensive conflagration. Besides, they have been found of great service after a fire has been subdued, in relieving the white companies from their labours, in keeping down the flames, and extinguishing the burning wood and cinders that remain." The volunteer white companies had the honor of putting out the fires, while the black city engines were left to extinguish the embers.<sup>23</sup>

With no action taken, the disagreement over the use of non-whites lingered. City council finally passed a resolution in February 1846 prohibiting slaves from working in the Fire Department without the written notice of their masters. The fire masters balked at this restriction and asked the council to reconsider. In their words, it was "impossible to obtain a requisite number of blacks to man the Ward Engines."<sup>24</sup> To save the situation, city council decreed that slaves already licensed by their owners to work out could be recruited in times of fires.

Still, the white managers of city fire engines, already smarting over legislation that required the wearing of uniforms, wanted more African-Americans to aid them in firefighting—if not slaves, then free people of color. Reporting to the Board of Fire Masters, Chief James Macbeth noted that the managers were:

still unable to make up the Enrollment [and] the Ward Engines are in consequence in a state of virtual disabandonment—under the circumstances the Chief would call the attention of the Board to the enrollment of Free coloured men, many of whom are owners of Property, which should [make them] feel under obligation to contribute to the protection of [the city;] they no doubt would be willing to do the services [and] receive the amount of pay allowed to the Negroes—should the above organization be completed, he would suggest, that said Engines be used as supplying Engines to the Volunteer Companies, a census of the Wards obtained from the Taxbook would show the effective force of this portion of our population.<sup>25</sup>

The compensation of the fire companies likewise came into question in 1849. The pay of premiums to fire companies began with the ringing of the bells of St. Michael's. The first volunteer company to put water on the fire

<sup>22</sup> *Charleston Daily Courier*, June 23, 1859.

<sup>23</sup> Minute Book, June 18, 1849.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Minute Book, November 19, 1849. The City of Charleston kept separate tax books for free persons of color.

received twenty-five dollars, but the first city engine received only fifteen dollars. The first volunteer company to extend its hose, but not its services, received ten dollars, while the city engine doing the same only received five dollars.<sup>26</sup>

#### FIRE CHIEF NATHAN

By 1859, when Moses Henry Nathan became chief, there were eleven volunteer fire companies in the city of Charleston and ten ward engines with one hook and ladder truck. The bucket-filled engines had been gradually replaced with suction engines, which could draw directly from the water source. The engines owned by volunteer fire companies were copper with iron and brass working parts and were inscribed with the company name, motto, and incorporation date.

In the late antebellum era, the Fire Department was a source of great pride for the city. "Who cannot now recall the annual Mayor's Parade, the gay adornment of the old machines, the banners flanked by silken cords, then drag ropes manned by sixty strong?" a lecturer reminisced in Charleston after the Civil War. He waxed eloquent recalling the scene:

What preparations for that gala day; what burnishing of banners; what cleaning up of uniforms; what desire to make the best appearance on parade; what rivalry for the washing of St. Michael's bell. Me thinks I see the yellow coats of the Chief and his assistants now, with massive trumpets all; I think I see the dark red flannel shirts of the "Eagles" sturdy sons; the spotless white, with dark blue trimmings, of the gallant "Vigilants;" the somber gray, with facings red, of the "Phoenix," too; the fiery red of the "Aetna's" boys; the serviceable shirt of the "Palmetto" true and tried; the flannel edge with red of brave old "Charleston;" the pleasing green of "Marion's" men; dark blue coats of the "German," who always marched with steady, stately tread; the cutaway coats of the "Fire Company of Axemen;" the snuffy brown of the rising "Hope," and in later days, the red coats of the "Washingtons;" the jaunty jacket of the "Young American;" the honored gray of the "Stonewalls."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Minute Book, November 14, 1849.

<sup>27</sup> H. P. Archer, *Local Reminiscences, A Lecture delivered by Mr. H. P. Archer before the Mutual Aid Association No. 1, of Charleston, S.C. in the Hall of The Mechanics' Union at Charleston, S.C., June 6<sup>th</sup> 1889* (Charleston, S.C.: Daggett Printing Co., 1893), 11-12. St. Michael's vestry requested that the washing of the bell be stopped because water cracked the slats and stained the plaster. For a list of the colorful uniforms worn by the firemen at the annual parade, see *Charleston Mercury*, April 29, 1848. For a brief history of the volunteer fire department and Chief M. H. Nathan, see *21<sup>st</sup> Annual Convention of the South Carolina Firemen's Association and Golden Jubilee of Chief Behrens: held at Charleston, SC, June 24-25, 1926* (Charleston, S.C.: Presses of Southern Printing and Publishing Col., 1926), 56-63.

Some of these later named companies possessed a new technology that ignited controversy early in Nathan's stint as fire chief. In 1860 the Charleston Fire Company of Axemen petitioned the state legislature to amend their charter so that they might become a steam engine company. They had a contract for a new engine with Cameron and Company, whose machinist and draughtsman, J. F. Taylor, had built the first steam fire engine in Charleston in 1859. In its April 1860 trial, Taylor's engine discharged water up to 150 feet, which "was a beautiful sight for a fireman's eye."<sup>28</sup>

Many other firemen in town and those on the Board of Fire Masters vehemently opposed steam engines. Nathan traveled to the state capital at Columbia to oppose the charter change for the Axemen Company. He argued to the legislature that it would destroy the esprit de corps among the volunteer companies and increase the cost to taxpayers without any appreciable benefits. Until the city had an adequate supply of water and paved streets, he reasoned, steam engines should not be introduced. Private wells and cisterns were frequently used in firefighting, requiring the engines to change positions as water sources were drained. That and the condition of the streets required engines of light construction. At its July 18, 1860, meeting, the Board of Fire Masters passed a resolution stating that it was "inexpedient and impolitic to introduce at the present time the use of steam."<sup>29</sup>

The successful operation of the steam engine in 1861 at Fort Sumter and during the December fire did little to quiet the firemen's opposition. In January 1862 the board again rejected admitting steam engines into the department. The vote was seven for and eight against, with Nathan voting for admitting the steam engines. Hand engines required fifty to eighty men to operate, and steam engines only eight to ten. It was the shortage of firemen to operate the hand engines due to the war that caused Nathan to change his mind in favor of the use of the steamers.

A letter from the Board of Fire Masters to the mayor and city council in January 1862 stated that the "entire expense of the Fire Department including Pumps and Wells, Engine Houses [and] apparatus averaged not over \$20,000 per annum. That the average number of Fires [and] Alarms per year was about 80 and the losses sustained from Fires as far as could be ascertained were on an average not over \$40,000 p[er] year or say about \$500 or \$600 loss for each Fire." The report compared Charleston to New York, Cincinnati, and Providence; these cities had pumps and hydrants, however, for more effective firefighting. The annual operating expense for a steamer was from \$5,000 to \$7,000; for a hand engine, it was \$1,200. The board felt that a paid fire department or an entire organization of steamers would

<sup>28</sup> *Charleston Daily Courier*, April 20, 1860.

<sup>29</sup> *Minute Book*, July 18, 1860.

burden the taxpayers without sufficient return on the investment “until water can be furnished freely and our streets paved.”<sup>30</sup> City council felt otherwise, and the ordinance for the use of steam power in the Fire Department was ratified in March 1862.<sup>31</sup>

Nathan fought other battles as well in these early years of his tenure as chief. He wanted to curb the increase in false fire alarms. He wanted to establish a fire alarm telegraph system throughout the city and to investigate the causes of fires. He also was concerned about the scarcity of water in the fire wells due to new tidal drains. In his annual report of May 1860, he addressed the latter issue, writing:

The chief object of the Tidal drains was for drainage and not for fire purposes, but it was found, that by proper care and attention they could be used for the latter purpose. The drains are very useful to the Department, but they would require the utmost care and attention, which I regret to say they have not received. The accumulation of filth is very large, and I would respectfully suggest that council, or those [who] have the drains under their supervision, be earnestly requested to have them attended to properly, as in their present condition they certainly injure every Engine that uses them.<sup>32</sup>

The construction of tidal drains had destroyed several large fire wells, but the loss of wells could have been overcome, Nathan believed, had the drains been properly cleaned and kept in good working order. They were not. Some in Charleston even took the argument a step further: with 2,179 brick houses and 4,513 wooden ones in 1861, what the city really needed was a water works like other large municipalities.<sup>33</sup>

Nathan was more successful in establishing a fire alarm telegraph system in Charleston, the fifth in the nation. It was costly, but it eliminated the steeple men at St. Michael’s and the mounted police. Fires were located rapidly and accurately, and there were fewer false alarms. (This telegraph alarm system was destroyed during the war and not re-established until the 1870s.)

Nathan recommended to the board that city council assign someone the task of making full investigations of the causes of all fires. He stated that seven out of ten fires in all cities occurred in stocks of goods. If investigations

<sup>30</sup> Minute Book, January 6 and 10, 1862.

<sup>31</sup> Minute Book, January 10 and May 12, 1862.

<sup>32</sup> *Annual Report of the Chief of the Fire Department of the City of Charleston, S.C. ending 18<sup>th</sup> May, 1860* (Charleston, S.C.: Harper & Calvo, Printers, 1860), 7.

<sup>33</sup> Frederick A. Ford, *Census of Charleston, South Carolina, for the year 1861* (Charleston, S.C.: Evans & Cogswell, 1861); J. N. Cardozo, *Reminiscences of Charleston* (Charleston, S.C.: Joseph Walker, 1866), 29-30.

were conducted, the fear of detection might deter arsonists from attempting to fraudulently collect insurance for their unsold wares. He felt that insurance companies also needed to be careful not to give policies to unknown individuals who might be swindlers.<sup>34</sup>

Another problem besetting Nathan was political. As war loomed, many left the ranks of the volunteer fire companies to join the military. "When it was found necessary to protect our beloved State, and drive the invader from her soil, among the first volunteers who rushed to the Palmetto standard were our gallant firemen," Nathan later noted in his annual report in May 1866. In fact, by the end of the war, 409 firemen had volunteered for military service and seventy-eight had lost their lives.<sup>35</sup> He praised the firemen left at home and the elderly and exempt men who performed the duties of firemen. In addition, these men assisted the police and acted as a military guard against a possible invasion of the city and Fort Sumter, served at Morris Island and Battery Wagner, and cared for the wounded in the hospitals. Nathan wrote:

The duty of the soldier in the field was indeed severe, but none can doubt the many, many trials and severe privations endured by those at home, amidst the burning of houses, and the continued bursting of shell. These trials, on all occasions, were rendered more severe by our then enemies, for they were at particular pains to throw in their missiles of death at fires with more care and quickness than ordinary.<sup>36</sup>

Nathan worked diligently to keep his firemen out of the Confederate draft. After the January 1, 1861, meeting of the Board of Fire Masters, Mayor Charles Macbeth expressed concern "on account of the great number of Firemen joining the Military and desiring the Board to take measure to retain a sufficient number of men to protect the City in time of Fire." Shortly thereafter he met with the board to organize what was left of the Fire Department and requested that the chief provide firemen as necessary to perform special duties as armed patrol and military guard. An 1861 act of

<sup>34</sup> *Report of the Chief of the Fire Department of the City of Charleston, S.C. ending 1869* (Charleston, S.C.: Walker, Evans & Cogswell, 1869), 8-9; *Report of the Chief of the Fire Department of the City of Charleston, S.C. ending, 1868* (Charleston, S.C.: Walker, Evans & Cogswell, 1868), 8.

<sup>35</sup> For a list of members of the eleven fire companies who volunteered for service in the Confederate army, see *Report of the Chief of the Fire Department of the City of Charleston, S.C. ending May 21, 1866* (Charleston, S.C.: Joseph Walker, 1866), 39-45; see also *Annual Report of the Chief of the Fire Department, of the City of Charleston, S.C., ending May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1861* (Charleston, S.C.: Harper & Calvo, 1861), 5.

<sup>36</sup> *Report of the Chief of the Fire Department of the City of Charleston, S.C. ending May 21, 1866* (Charleston, S.C.: Joseph Walker, 1866), 6.

the General Assembly exempted Charleston firemen from military service, but the volunteer companies were reduced to only thirty active men.<sup>37</sup>

The mayor later requested that the fire companies organize as a regiment, the Fire Brigade, elect field officers, and drill at least twice a week so that the firemen could be called on in time of need to defend the city. Eight fire companies were unwilling to participate as a brigade, however. The companies were already drilling, and they wanted their own fire companies to serve as military companies. Along with the introduction of steam, the volunteer fire companies opposed establishing a paid municipal fire department or a paid military regiment.<sup>38</sup>

Nathan went to Columbia in May 1862 and again in October 1863 to oppose the conscription of the city's reduced force of firemen. A December 1862 roll of the Charleston Fire Department listed eleven volunteer companies with forty members each, ten city engines with managers and assistants, and one hook and ladder.<sup>39</sup> In October 1863 Nathan set out for Richmond to meet with Confederate officials, but he only made it as far as Charlotte. There he received a telegram from Major W. W. Perryman stating that the conscription matter had been resolved and he could return home. Upon arriving back in Charleston, he learned that the new Confederate reserve regiments in the city under General Roswell Ripley had been ordered to drill as firemen. Nathan opposed the use of the militia as firefighters, but he agreed to assign fifteen reserves to each of the city's fire companies.<sup>40</sup>

Nathan again set off to Richmond to meet with Secretary of War James A. Seddon when the firemen became liable for conscription under Confederate law in 1864. At the February 15, 1864, meeting of the Board of Fire Masters, he reported:

It ever has been my most ardent wish and desire to keep together the remnants of the department and to increase its efficiency for the past two years, the Legislature of this State standing in the high ground of State Sovereignty had very wisely exempted the members of the department from State and Confederate Conscription they however repealed the law at the last session . . . The management of the department is to be left to those who are incompetent to administer it . . . blind to the present situation and condition of This City . . . danger from Conflagration attending the siege and shelling of Charleston . . . at the commencement of our difficulties none

<sup>37</sup> Minute Book, January 1 and March 14, 1861.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> This roll lists the names of the officers, managers, assistants of the city engines, and the forty members of each volunteer company. Roll of the Charleston Fire Department, December 20, 1862, MS, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, S.C.

<sup>40</sup> Minute Book, May 12, 1862-February 13, 1864.

were quicker to Volunteer than our Charleston Firemen . . . we have done our duty to our State and City and if these who are left and are conscribed and old men who are willing but are unfit for the service are to be made to fill their places, and should the city be destroyed by conflagration from the enemies shells all we would have to say is that the Charleston Fire men had performed their duty and the blame rests on the heads of those higher in Authority.<sup>41</sup>

There was also the matter of actually fighting fires. During the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter on April 13, 1861, General P. G. T. Beauregard, in charge of military operations in Charleston, sent a boat out to the fort with Chief Nathan and a fire engine from the Palmetto Fire Company to put out a fire that had erupted there. When Fort Sumter surrendered on April 14, Chief Nathan went again to put out more fires with two engines that had been temporarily stationed on Sullivan's Island. Later that day, the Aetna Fire Company and the Charleston Fire Company of Axemen (with their new steam engine) arrived to offer further help extinguishing the flames at Fort Sumter, marking the first use of the steam engine in Charleston.<sup>42</sup>

Nathan's greatest challenge as fire chief came at half-past eight o'clock on the night of December 11, 1861, when the fire alarm rang in the city. The blaze broke out at William P. Russell's Sash and Blind Company at the foot of Hasell Street near the Cooper River. Flames were carried by heavy gusts of wind to the Cameron and Company foundry across the street. Sparks and flames spread rapidly from Cameron's foundry and then crossed street after street, passing through every neighborhood on the way to the Ashley River, and burned until there was nothing left to burn. The *Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier* reported, "The flames seemed to make one last desperate struggle for existence in enveloping the large mansion of Mr. W. Izard Bull at the foot of Tradd Street, and then yielded to its fate sending its dying hisses as though scorning the powers that so gallantly resisted his progress."<sup>43</sup>

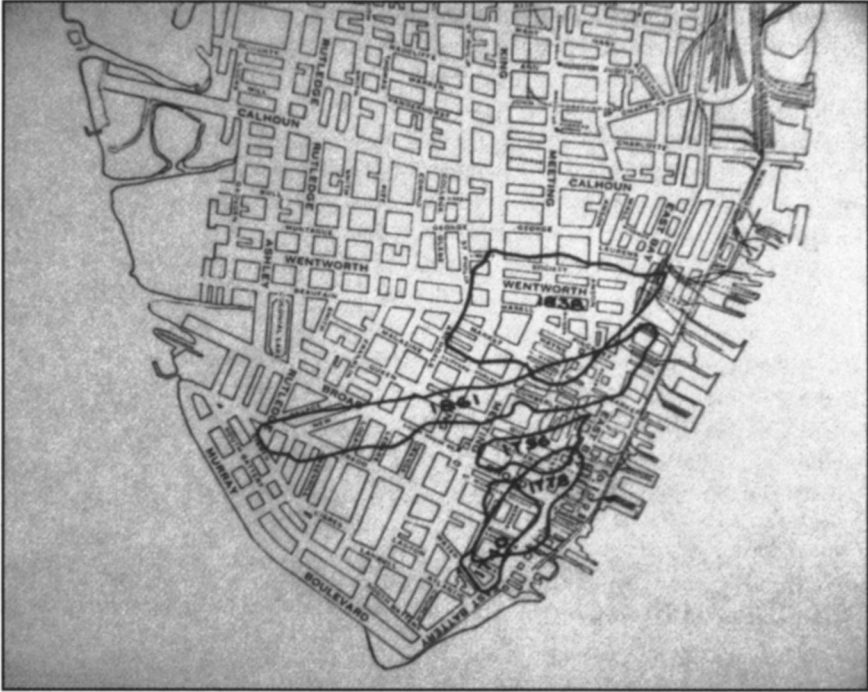
The fire companies were hampered by the lack of water and the strong wind. The *Charleston Mercury* stated:

<sup>41</sup> Minute Book, February 13, 1864.

<sup>42</sup> *The Battle of Fort Sumter and First Victory of the Southern Troops, April 13<sup>th</sup>* (Charleston, S.C.: Evans & Cogswell, 1861), 10, 24. City Fire Engine No. 3 was sent to Fort Sumter and remained there from November 1861 to November 1862. City of Charleston Board of Fire Masters, Return Book, 1851-1864. It was not available for service during the fire of 1861. City of Charleston Board of Fire Masters, Payroll of City Fire Engines, 1855-1869, Special Collections, Charleston County Library, Charleston, S.C.

<sup>43</sup> *Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier*, December 14, 1861.





**The fires of 1740, 1778, 1796, 1838, and 1861 superimposed on a map of Charleston drawn by Joseph Needle in 1946. Courtesy of Special Collections, College of Charleston Library, Charleston, S.C.**

---

The great want of the firemen was water; and when we remember that the wind was blowing a gale and the quick spread of the fire we wonder that more was not lost. The Chief and his Assistants, as well as the several companies, exhausted themselves in their efforts to control the flames; the result proved that the elements were too strong for them. But for the great services they rendered, they deserve the warm thanks of the whole community.<sup>44</sup>

That night, twenty-two engines and numerous companies responded: the Vigilant, the German, the Washington, the Palmetto, the Steam Fire Engine, the Hope, the Charleston, the Phoenix, the Aetna, the Marion, and the Eagle. Most of the able-bodied firemen were in Confederate military service, leaving a much-reduced force. The Confederate army under General Ripley sent its engine, and all of the city engines manned by slaves and free persons

<sup>44</sup> *Charleston Mercury*, December 19, 1861.

of color "were in the thickest of the conflagration and their choruses could be heard for squares, keeping time with the strokes of their Engine."<sup>45</sup>

In addition to the many businesses and private homes lost in the fire, five churches were destroyed: the Circular (First Independent) Church on Meeting Street, the Cumberland Street Methodist Church, St. Peter's Church on Logan Street, the Quaker Meeting House on King Street, and St. John's and St. Finbar's Cathedral on Broad Street. Because it was built of brownstone, the cathedral "was filled to overflowing with the silver, clothing, furniture and valuables of scores of people believing it to be fire proof."<sup>46</sup>

After the fire, aid came to Charleston from other cities and states. Mayor Macbeth issued a proclamation asking a committee of citizens to receive and distribute food, shelter, and clothing to the sufferers of the fire. Charitable societies and institutions also assisted in the relief effort. In May 1862 the Fire Relief Committee awarded six silver watches to James Hazzard, Samuel Dunlap, William Morrison, William Betterson, Silas Bunch, and Abbot Spencer, boys at the Charleston Orphan House, for their services to the relief committee.<sup>47</sup>

Charlestonians thought at the time that the fire was probably an act of sabotage, possibly set by slaves or free persons of color (despite their active participation in fighting the flames.) Union sympathizers were also suspected. Northern papers called it the Lord's punishment for the city that was the birthplace of secession and led the way in starting the war against the Union. Susan S. Keith, in a letter to her daughter of December 14, 1861, stated, "After a night of Terror [and] distress . . . The city [is] nearly destroyed [and] one or two fires have been set since. It is a doomed City—It was without a doubt the work of our enemies . . . No such fire has ever occurred in the American Continent. It is said . . . that the Blockaders sent up rockets. Charleston is no longer a desirable place of residence."<sup>48</sup> W. P. Russell, the owner of the sash and blind company on Hasell Street where the fire was discovered, declared in the *Charleston Courier* that it was "the work of an incendiary . . . the fire was set or was the result of carelessness on the part of a number of country Negroes who had been quartered under an old shed adjoining the establishment, in allowing their camp fire to get ahead of them."<sup>49</sup> Susan Rose Rutledge, in a letter to Mary Chestnut dated

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Harriette K. Leiding, *Charleston Historic and Romantic* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1931), 222-223.

<sup>47</sup> *Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier*, January 9, 1862; Minutes of the Board of Commissioners of the Orphan House, July 17, 1862, Special Collections, Charleston County Library, Charleston, S.C.

<sup>48</sup> Susan S. Keith to daughter, December 14, 1861, Heyward Ferguson Family Papers, Special Collections, College of Charleston Library, Charleston, S.C.

<sup>49</sup> *Charleston Courier*, December 14, 1861.

December 15, 1861, wrote, "Charleston looks like a mutilated body! The first impulse would be to turn away and hide your face! That fearful night—no human power could stand against the gale . . . The fire began in a negro house next to the blind factory—carelessness—and the wind rose with the flames until it got beyond control."<sup>50</sup> In a letter to her brother Dr. Frank L. Frost, Elizabeth Frost offered a different theory. She wrote, "The fire is thought to have been the result of carelessness—the owner of the Sash Factory I am told had received frequent warnings but to no purpose. A good many persons think it was helped by the negroes and some think by Yankees emissaries, but the fire took a very natural direction, following the course of the wind entirely—most of the negroes behaved admirably, our own servants and those of the neighborhood were untiring in their efforts to save everything, and to do all they could for us."<sup>51</sup> The *Charleston Mercury* cited "vague" reports that the fire "appeared in three places at the same time."<sup>52</sup> Nathan succinctly ruled this out in his brief account of the fire.

#### SIFTING THE ASHES

When exactly Chief Nathan wrote his account of the 1861 fire is open to speculation, but it appears to have been years later, perhaps after 1872. It was in this year that he had all of the annual reports he submitted during his charge, which had been published as pamphlets by the Board of Fire Masters, bound into a leather volume. The volume included annual reports for 1859, 1860, and 1861, all published in May of those years. There were no annual reports published in 1862, 1863, 1864, or 1865. Publication resumed in 1866, and Nathan carried on submitting and publishing annual reports through 1872. "Annual Reports of the Chief of the Fire Dept of Charleston, 1859-72" is stamped in gold on the spine of the volume and impressed on the front cover in gold is "M. H. Nathan." Bound in-between each pamphlet are blank, lined sheets. On three such leaves, in the part of the book between the 1861 and 1866 annual reports, Nathan jotted down his notes. He wrote in pencil, seemingly in a hurry, perhaps feeling chagrin that there would be gaps in the annual reports handed to the man who would replace him. This is what he wrote:

<sup>50</sup> C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chestnut's Civil War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981) 266-267.

<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Frost to Dr. Frank L. Frost, December 14, 1861, TS, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, S.C.

<sup>52</sup> *Charleston Mercury*, December 12, 1861.

[The] Great fire of 1861 commenced about 8 o'clock p.m. 11th of December 1861 at the workshop of E. P. Russel<sup>53</sup> [at the] foot of Hasell Street and lasted until the afternoon of the 12th. This fire was caused by the carelessness of the occupant allowing the debris from his upper floor to be carried to the lower floor near the furnace and not having a proper watchman on his premises. On several occasions previous the premises were on fire before and put out by the workmen of Cameron & Co. opposite.<sup>54</sup> The fire would have been checked but the Palmetto Co.<sup>55</sup> did not have hose enough to reach. At the time of the breaking out of the fire it was calm, but in 20 minutes after a perfect gale commenced and lasted until the next morning. There were some 1300 houses including outbuildings destroyed and the amount of loss estimated at \$5,000,000. A full account of the loss I had obtained, but all my manuscripts were destroyed by Col. Williams' regiment Confederate army who were quartered at my store on the corner of Meeting and Wentworth Streets, a most wanton destruction.

At this fire General Ripley<sup>56</sup> then in command ordered several houses blown up but no good was affected.<sup>57</sup> The last building burned was the church on Logan Street.<sup>58</sup> At this fire the Pioneer Steamer<sup>59</sup> just finished was on duty and did some good, but so severe was the gale that water was of no use. I attribute the extent of the fire to the neglect of the police then

<sup>53</sup> The steam sash and blind factory of W. P. Russell & Co. occupied the three-story wooden building on the north side of Hasell Street. *Charleston Mercury*, December 14, 1861.

<sup>54</sup> The machine shops and foundry of Cameron & Co. occupied eight buildings on the south side of Hasell Street. This foundry contained a large quantity of Confederate shell and cannon shot. *Charleston Mercury*, December 14, 1861.

<sup>55</sup> The Palmetto Fire Engine Company, one of Charleston's volunteer fire companies, was formed in 1840 and incorporated in 1841. The engine house was on Anson Street, south of Hasell Street.

<sup>56</sup> General Roswell Sabin Ripley (d. 1887) was placed in command of Charleston's harbor on December 10, 1861, by General Robert E. Lee. C. A. Bennett, "Roswell Sabin Ripley: Charleston's Gallant Defender," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 95 (1994): 225-242.

<sup>57</sup> Ripley ordered fourteen houses on the north side of Queen Street blown up to save Roper Hospital, the Catholic Orphan Asylum, and other public buildings from the flames. *Charleston Mercury*, December 12 and 16, 1861.

<sup>58</sup> St. Peter's Protestant Episcopal Church (fl. 1833-1861) was on the east side of Logan Street between Broad and Tradd Streets.

<sup>59</sup> The Fire Company of Axemen purchased the first steam engine in Charleston in 1859. It proved effective in extinguishing the fire at Fort Sumter and later at the Great Fire of 1861. The Fire Company of Axemen, originally formed in 1801, changed its name to the Pioneer Fire Engine Company in 1861. The engine house located on the south side of the Queen Street between King and Meeting Streets was destroyed in the fire of 1861. The new engine house was on Market Street between Church and Meeting Streets.

having charge [of the] tidal drains.<sup>60</sup> When they were needed in Meeting Street near Queen, there was no water in the same. The fire could have been checked at that time but for the want of water. It has been stated by some that there were several places set before stated and not by any incendiary.<sup>61</sup> A large and very valuable amount of fine wines, the private stock of many wealthy citizens was also destroyed. It would seem that the hand of Providence intended this misfortune, for had not the fire happened many lives would have been lost in the bombardment of the city by the cursed Yankees, for thousands of their shells fell harmlessly in the burnt district which otherwise would have fell into the houses but for the fire.

The fate of the diary can be tied to Nathan's life after the fire. He remained in Charleston for the rest of the war, supervising his men as they put out frequent fires under difficult conditions, such as those noted in the comments of one who spoke to a visitor to Charleston just after the war. "But few fires were set by shells," the fireman was quoted as saying. "There were a good many fires, but they were mostly set by mischief makers. The object was to get us firemen down in the shelling range. There was a spite against us, because we were exempt from military duty."<sup>62</sup>

With resources to fund firefighting scarce, in May 1864 Nathan proposed sending bales of cotton by a blockade runner to raise money for fire hoses. None of the companies had enough money to contribute to this venture, and it was abandoned.<sup>63</sup> Frustrated, Nathan left Charleston just before the Confederates abandoned the city and a fire and explosion erupted in the railroad yards on Chapel Street. From February 15 to May 23, 1865, he resided in Columbia where he likely witnessed the burning of that city. "I beg you a great favor to let me have some meat, grist, lard and potatoes," he wrote William Sanders from Columbia Methodist College. "We are almost at the point of starvation here. My health has been quite bad since my

<sup>60</sup> The tidal drains were designed for drainage, but could be used to check fires if the drains were properly cleaned. The *Charleston Mercury* stated that "without a sufficient supply of water—for it is dead low tide," the fire became "totally unmanageable." *Charleston Mercury*, December 12, 1861. The Board of Fire Masters notified city council that on the night of the fire there "was no water in the tidal drains." Minute Book, May 15, 1862.

<sup>61</sup> Emma Holmes wrote in her diary that the fire "evidently the work of an incendiary broke out in a shed next to [H. P.] Russell's extensive machine shop & soon spread to Cameron's foundry, where an immense amount of Confederate work was destroyed, in rifled cannon shot and shell." John R. Marszalek, ed., *The Diary of Miss Emma Holmes, 1861-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 107.

<sup>62</sup> Trowbridge, *A Picture of the Desolated States*, 514-515.

<sup>63</sup> Minute Book, Letter from Chief M. H. Nathan, May 12, 1864.

arrival.”<sup>64</sup> In Nathan’s absence from Charleston, Eugene Fourgeaud was named acting chief. Fourgeaud resigned on June 21, 1865, and Assistant Fire Chief S. G. Courteney served as chief through October 1865. On November 1, 1865, Nathan reassumed his duties as chief. The same year he entered into a business partnership with a Mr. Ottolengui. Both men were in debt after the war, and after a year the partnership was dissolved.<sup>65</sup>

After the 1861 and 1865 fires, three new volunteer companies were incorporated—the Young American Steam Fire Engine Company, the Stonewall Steam Fire Engine Company, and the Charleston Hook and Ladder, No. 1—bringing the city’s total to fourteen volunteer steam companies, four ward hand engines, and two hook and ladder companies. In his annual reports after the war, Nathan called his fire department the most efficient and economical in the country. For the first time the fire companies were assigned to different areas of the city, and Nathan felt that the districting of the city worked well. “It has been productive of great benefit, not only in economizing the use of hose, and the usual wear and tear of Engines, but in saving much property.” In 1869 city council agreed to pay the companies annually for their services: \$3,000 for steamers; \$1,800 for hand engines; and \$1,200 for hook and ladder trucks. The following year, however, council cut these appropriations in half. Nathan argued that the reduction would cause the companies to incur debt “to meet actual expenses; yet, after the payment of engineers and firemen, paying for oils, repairs, and other incidentals, absolutely nothing will be left for the purchase of hose, of which in a short time nearly every company will be in want.” He was still concerned about investigating the origins and causes of fires to prevent incendiarism, as well as the lack of an adequate water supply and the replacement of the alarm system.<sup>66</sup>

On November 30, 1868, Nathan received a tribute from his department, a silver tray and pitcher inscribed, “Presented to our Chief M. H. Nathan by the Fire Department of Charleston as a testimonial of our appreciation of his long and faithful services.”<sup>67</sup> Nathan stayed on, witnessing more and more changes. By 1870 he had seen seven African-American fire companies admitted into the department: the Ashley, the Niagara, the Union Star, the Comet, the Prudence, the Promptitude, and the United. With those additions, there were twenty-one companies: eleven steamers, eight hand engines,

<sup>64</sup> Moses Henry Nathan to William Sanders, March 24, 1865, P-466, Collection of the American Jewish Historical Society, Newton, Mass., and New York, N.Y.

<sup>65</sup> Nathan had mortgaged his Meeting Street business property and his residence on St. Philip Street to George J. and Richard F. Reynolds in 1860. Register of Mesne Conveyance, Charleston County, Charleston, S.C., Deed Book 014, 142-145.

<sup>66</sup> *Report of the Chief of the Fire Department of the City of Charleston, S.C. ending April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1870* (Charleston, S.C.: Walker, Evans, & Cogswell, 1870), 5-6.

<sup>67</sup> Private collection, Charleston, S.C.

and two hook and ladder trucks. Nathan stepped down as fire chief in 1873.<sup>68</sup>

At his retirement, the Board of Fire Masters honored Nathan again, this time with a resolution that marked not only his retirement but also a change in the whole system. In bidding farewell to Nathan, the fire masters expressed their regret that, after thirty-four years of selecting their own officers, city council would henceforth elect the chief and his assistants:

It must be a matter of congratulation to Mr. Nathan to feel as long as representatives of the Companies were permitted to nominate the person they desired as their Chief his capacity, experience, character and judgment induced his election to the important office for fifteen years past, and that his labors have terminated to the public when those who had desired to continued his valuable service, were deprived of the power to do so.<sup>69</sup>

Although retired as fire chief, Nathan remained in business, working as a carriage maker and an agent for McLean and Kendall of Wilmington, Delaware. He was described as an industrious, honest, and temperate man running a good business on limited means.<sup>70</sup> The 1873 *Charleston City Directory* lists him in business with his son Henry. In early 1875 Nathan traveled north. Whether his intent was to visit his daughter Corrine, a music teacher in New York City, or to transact business with a carriage firm there or both, the trip was ill-fated. Nathan took sick and died, apparently of nephritis or kidney failure, at the St. Denis Hotel in New York City on January 21, 1875, at the age of fifty-three.<sup>71</sup>

The Northeastern Railroad transported his remains to Charleston. On January 23, 1875, members of the Board of Fire Masters met the train at Florence, South Carolina. When the train arrived at the depot on Chapel Street in Charleston, one officer and four members from each of the fire companies were waiting in full uniform to escort Nathan's body to his residence on St. Philip Street. The next morning, all fire company halls were draped in mourning, and the Fire Department escorted its ex-chief to his final resting place, the cemetery of the Beth Elohim Synagogue on Coming Street.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>68</sup> *Report of the Chief of the Fire Department of the City of Charleston, S.C. ending April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1870* (Charleston, S.C.: Walker, Evans & Cogswell, 1870), 9.

<sup>69</sup> Minute Book, December 17, 1873.

<sup>70</sup> M. H. Nathan, Entries 400 and 1099, South Carolina, Volume 7 (Charleston), R. G. Dun and Company Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

<sup>71</sup> City of Charleston Board of Health, Death Certificates, Out of Town #75, 1875, Special Collections, Charleston County Library, Charleston, S.C.

<sup>72</sup> [Charleston] *News and Courier*, January 23, 1875.

Nathan's descendants remained in Charleston. In 1949, when the Charleston Jewish community celebrated the two hundredth anniversary of the organization of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, family members loaned Nathan's annual fire reports to the Charleston Museum to highlight the role of Nathan and other Jews in the history of the city.<sup>73</sup> Henry H. Nathan, the chief's great-grandson, donated the volume of annual reports to the Charleston Museum in 1953. The museum library's embossed stamp was present on the title page when, in 1969, it was loaned to Beth Elohim for an exhibit in its new archives room.<sup>74</sup> The chairman of the archives committee at Beth Elohim was Thomas J. Tobias, and the director of the Charleston Museum who authorized the loan was E. Milby Burton. Tobias died in 1970, and Burton in 1977. At some point the volume was removed from the exhibit and stored with the records of Beth Elohim. Many of the synagogue's archival materials were put on loan to the College of Charleston in 1994, but the volume was not part of that transfer. In 2001 the college received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to catalog these papers and others in the Jewish Heritage Collection. With its administrative building closed for repairs, all remaining Beth Elohim items were transferred to the college. It was then, in the course of cataloging these materials, that the account was found. This "rediscovery" has shed light on the great fire of 1861 and the man who first tried to prevent and then lead the fight against it. Perhaps Nathan would see these circumstances as fortuitous, again the hand of Providence.

<sup>73</sup> The volume of annual fire reports is mentioned in the caption of a photograph in the commemorative booklet published at the time. Its front board can be glimpsed lying in a cardboard box. *The Souvenir Book of the Bicentennial: The Story of the Celebration of the Bicentennial of the Charleston Jewish Community November 19 through November 26, 1950* (Charleston, S.C.: Bicentennial Committee, 1951), 31.

<sup>74</sup> The book first came to the Charleston Museum in 1925 as a loan from M. H. Nathan (1880-1936) of George Street, and it was withdrawn later that year. It was donated in 1953 by Henry H. Nathan (1913-1969) and on the end sheet at the front of the book is written "11/3/36, Henry H. Nathan, 43 Hasell St., Chas. S.C."