

EARLY GREENVILLE FIRE DEPARTMENTS

Charles Wilson

Fire and people do in this agree
They both good servants, both ill
masters be.

Fulke Greville

The origin of fire protection in the City of Greenville is lost in antiquity. Probably the first fire fighting was accomplished by bucket brigades, using water obtained from the village pump.

Several fire prevention measures were passed by the Town Council more than one hundred years ago. It is interesting to note that in 1845 an ordinance "against permitting soot to accumulate in chimnies [sic]" was passed. In January 1846 two gentlemen were hailed before council for violating this law. Both were fined \$5.00 and costs.

The problem of fireworks is not new. It also plagued our ancestors. In 1853 a law was passed that prohibited any "person or persons to sell, exchange, barter, give or in any other manner whatever dispose of in the Town of Greenville any fire crackers to any person whatever under a penalty of not more than \$50.00 for each offense." It was further provided that "any person who shall hereafter purchase or procure any fire crackers and use them in the Corporate Limits of the Town of Greenville, if a free white person shall on conviction thereof be fined a sum not to exceed \$50.00, and if a slave or free Negro to be whipped not exceeding thirty nine lashes."

Open fires were a hazard then, even as now. In 1860 a law was passed that prohibited "kindling fires in any of the lots, streets and squares of the town for hog killing purposes."

The first official reference to the fire department was made in 1851 in a presentment from a citizens committee to the Town Council, recommending "a change in the fire department." The nature of the desired change is not mentioned. Whatever the

problem, it was apparently taken care of because the matter was not pressed.

During the years 1851 to 1857 all seems well with the fire department. At least there was no complaints registered with the Wardens and Intendant. At the meeting of the Town Council on June 7, 1857: "Petitions of fire engine company and C. O. Elford, Esq.," were laid upon the table. However, Warden McKay offered the following resolution: "Resolved that the Clerk of the Council be required to call a meeting of the Citizens of Greenville on Saturday, June 13th, for the purpose of discussing the matter of raising money for the purchase of a new fire engine and providing the town with water." The source of water is not mentioned and neither is the fire engine until May 3, 1859. At that time "a petition was received from the Greenville Fire Engine Company for an appropriation to purchase a new fire engine. On motion of Warden Williams it was ordered that the Intendant be appointed to meet with a committee on the part of the fire company and concur with them on some definite plan in reference to the purchase of a new fire engine for the use of the company." One month later, June 7, 1859, "a petition was received from the Greenville Fire Engine Company. On motion of Warden Williams it was resolved that the Town Council appropriate the sum of \$300.00 towards the purchase of a new engine — provided the fire company raise the remaining sum of \$116.00, and after the engine shall have arrived, and in the event the present hose cannot be used the Town Council will make a suitable appropriation for that purpose."

Unfortunately, the type of engine is not mentioned. However, since horse-drawn steamers were not in general use prior to 1855, considering the price of the engine and the doubt expressed concerning the use of existing hose; in all probability the engine was hand drawn. It is also interesting to note that Alex McBeck was Intendant at the time of this purchase. We might well consider this gentleman, together with Warden Williams to be the fathers of our department.

It is interesting to speculate what event or events caused renewed interest in the fire service. On March 12, 1850, a special meeting of Council was called "to adopt some measure whereby to ferret out the perpetrators of the recent attempts to burn the houses of our citizens." The following resolution was adopted:

"whereas in view of the recent fires which have occurred in the Town of Greenville, and the more recent attempt on the carriage factory of Messrs. Gower, Cox, Markley & Company, together with the assault with firearms upon the watchman of the firm — Resolved that the Intendant of the Town Council of Greenville be authorized to issue a proclamation offering a reward of \$500.00 for the apprehension and proof sufficient to convict the person or persons who attempted to set on fire the carriage factory of Messrs. Gower, Cox, Markley & Company on the morning of March 11, instant." The culprits must have been brought to justice. In March 1860, Mr. T. C. Gower made application for the reward. Mr. T. C. Kilburn also claimed the money. Consideration of both petitions was postponed and we do not know which claim was honored.

The abundant water supply enjoyed by our city today, may cause doubts that such was not always the case. Prior to the installation of mains, the chief source of water for fire fighting purposes was Reedy River. Beyond the banks of the stream, large underground storage cisterns were utilized. When needed, suction hose was dropped into the cistern and water pumped to the fire. Cisterns were located at the intersection of Jackson (now S. Laurens St.) and W. Broad St., near the Mansion House on S. Main St. and at the Windsor Hotel at Main and Washington. There were, of course, many others but their exact location has been lost. In 1896 a serious difference of opinion arose between the City Council and the Paris Mountain Water Company. The City contended that the four-inch mains were not adequate for fire fighting purposes and refused to pay any more rent for fire hydrants until the matter was remedied. An amicable solution was reached when the water company agreed to increase size of mains.

From these most humble beginnings, the fire department made steady progress in both quantity and quality.

Old records show that on January 1st, 1894, the following companies were in service: Lee Fire Company, Neptune Fire Company, Alert Reel Team, Pioneer Hook and Ladder, and the Alert Fire Company. By 1899 four more companies were listed: Buncombe Street Company, Falcon Hook and Ladder Company, Palmetto, and Greenville Hose, No. 1. Periodic reports to City Council state that the fire department was in good condition.

In 1896 some dissension arose about the pay of the firemen and "Alderman Richardson moved to amend the oversight by paying each company \$20.00 provided they call for it."

Lack of communications proved to be a serious problem for many years. In the early days the strongest-lunged men in a neighborhood were designated as "fire-callers." The most renowned of these fire-callers was one Lattimore, known as "Martin from The Creek." Upon discovery of a fire it was reported to one of these gentlemen, he would shout the location of the fire. The news would be picked up and relayed into the fire companies, sentry fashion, by those nearer to the source of help. The old city bell would then be rung. In an old book of regulations the manner of ringing the bell is prescribed:

Ordinary fire alarms will be given by ringing the city hall bell rapidly a number of times and then slowly striking the number of the ward. On first alarms from wards Nos. one, two, three and four, all companies stationed in those wards will at once respond; and the West End company will not come out until notified. On first alarms from wards Nos. five and six, the West End company and the two central companies will respond; while the other company in the East End will not come out until notified. When the fire is extinguished, notice will be given by slowly ringing the city hall bell seven strokes; upon which notice all companies on their way to the fire will return to their respective houses. A general alarm will be a second alarm, given by ringing the bell rapidly for several minutes and then slowly striking the number of the ward. Upon hearing a general alarm, all call men will immediately go to the fire with all speed, as well as any company not already summoned.

The ringing of the old bell continued until the mid 1930's. Telephones were mentioned in connection with the fire department in 1896: "Alderman Richardson moved that the City Council pay J. L. E. Jones \$10.00 a year for the services of his phone for the information of the police and fire." The first fire telephone number was thirty-one, this number remained the alarm number until the advent of the dial system. "Old Thirty-One" reported some of the most spectacular fires in our city's history.

About the turn of the century, it was strongly recommended that the city install an automatic fire alarm system. This continued to be a recommendation every year until 1911 when Chief Ligon

reported that "more than half of the system had arrived and was in storage at the fire house." Due to a problem concerning the equipment and court action that was initiated by well-meaning but misguided citizens the system was not installed at this time. We remained without an automatic fire reporting system until 1947. For many years, Greenville enjoyed the dubious honor of being the largest city in the United States without such devices.

By 1900 Greenville was getting to be quite a city. The volunteer system of fire fighting was rapidly becoming outmoded, but the City Directory for 1901-02 gives a roster of the location of all volunteer companies, their equipment and officer personnel with J. O. Cauble, Fire Chief; E. R. Smith, First Assistant Chief; J. W. Duncan, 2nd-Ass't. Chief, and Dr. W. J. Bramlett, Secretary. Alert Reel Company No. 4 was stationed at 755 Pendleton Street. Ward One Reel Company No. 5 at 814 Buncombe Street. Greenville Hook and Ladder Company No. 1 at 114 W. McBee Avenue. Greenville Hose Company No. 1 at 118 McBee Avenue. Neptune Reel Company No. 3 was at 545 S. Main Street. Palmetto Hose Company No. 2 was quartered at 117 E. Washington Street.

It is not possible from existing records to name all the Chief Officers that served the volunteer fire department. From an old letter, we are able to state positively that Joseph Allen, Patrick Henry Reily, John C. Kirkpatrick, A. B. Williams, Bob Haynes, and J. O. Cauble served with distinction. There were others but they are lost to our report. It would be impossible to name all those that served as volunteers in the ranks. In 1914 the annual meeting of the Volunteer Firemen's Association was held. A list of those attending is to be found at the end of this paper. Who were these men? They were the leading citizens of the community, and they were the nobodies. They were the wealthy merchants, and they were the lowly clerks. They were mill hands, retired soldiers, butchers, grocers and street brawlers without visible means of support. They were a cross section of the city. They were also "nature's noblemen," with a sincere desire to serve their fellowman. They served well and faithfully and because of them Greenville is a better place.

The first paid Fire Department reported for duty on January 1, 1902. Chief of the new department was Riley Rowley who was assisted by Rowley Smith. Assigned to the Greenville Truck Company were Miller Goodlett as Foreman, G. C. Corn as Driver,

and Mack Parkins, Robert Ligon, and William Moseley as Firemen. Assigned to the Greenville Fire Hose Company were Rowley Smith as Foreman, B. F. Sherman as Driver, and Keifer Simpson, M. A. Ward, and Laurence Gray as Firemen. In addition to these two full-time units, two volunteer companies were retained until 1905.

Chief Rowley stated that "no drinking and no card playing would be allowed by him while the men were on duty." He made this emphatic by saying "that any man that takes a drink while on duty is fired." This seems reasonable since men were working twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Chief Rowley reported that the telephone company would have the fire phone installed within a few days. On January 3, 1902, the paid fire department made it's first run. The smoke stack fell at the Greenville Steam Laundry on College Street. No damage was done and the newspapers were high in their praise of the new system.

The department continued to grow and in 1909 Chief Rowley reported that he had fifteen men, seven horses, one two-horse truck and equipment, one steamer, three two-horse hose wagons, one hose reel and a large amount of small equipment, including fifty feet of small rope. One of the more spectacular fires fought during Chief Rowley's administration was in the Greenville Suspender Factory, in the Cahule Building on North Main Street.

In November of 1909 a Webb Hose Wagon was put in service, this being the first motorized equipment of the department. It was driven by M. R. Phillips, to whom goes the honor of being our first engineer. On one of the first runs of the motor truck it became stuck in the mud on North Main Street. After it had remained in the quagmire for some time, the firemen finally took the advice of bystanders, "got a horse," and rescued their vehicle.

Chief Rowley resigned in 1910 and was succeeded by R. J. Ligon. Chief Ligon immediately recommended the purchase of additional motor equipment. Progress in this direction was made and in 1913 the fire department had acquired a second motor truck. The number of horses was reduced to five. From newspaper accounts it appeared that the horse was still the most reliable transportation, in several instances the motor trucks were out of service with stripped gears, broken crank shafts, and just plain

stuck in the mud. Chief Ligon was also interested in purchasing himself a roadster to answer alarms. In December of 1913 he had a young salesman demonstrate a Stutz roadster with near disastrous results. We are told that as they passed the Ottaray Hotel the Chief's hat flew up in the air and didn't come down for nearly a block. The run from McBee Avenue headquarters to Stone Avenue was made in less than two minutes. Chief Ligon served the department until January 16, 1918.

J. G. Scott was our next Chief of Department. He served until 1921. The load at this time was proving too difficult for the horses to continue to give efficient service. In 1919 two Aherns-Fox motor-driven, piston-type pumpers were purchased. Delivery was made in August, 1919, and the remaining fire horses were dismissed. Thus ended the most thrilling chapter of the fire service. These magnificent animals would literally run until they dropped. We are fortunate to know the names of the last horses in service. Mack and Jerry were at Echols Street, Red Bird and Joe at West End and Prince was at Headquarters. Their names should most certainly not be omitted from our honor roll. With the advent of the motor trucks and the exit of the horses we bring to a close this early history of the fire department.

Epilogue: We no longer hear the soft whicker of Mack and Jerry nor the nervous stamp of Prince. The pungent odor of leather and the sweet smell of clean straw is absent. The oil lamps have ceased to cast weird shadows on the walls, the voice of "Martin From The Creek" has been stilled for many years. Yet, on nights when the wind rattles the windows and the sleet pelts in the street, when the rookie is told this is a "night for a good one," you feel that someone, unseen, but very concerned is present. The bell taps, feet hit the floor with a thump, the traditional cry of the firemen that has echoed through our station houses for almost a century reverberates from wall to wall: "LET'S GO!" "GET OUT!" "ROLL 'EM!" Then you know that you were not alone, they are all there: Mack, Jerry, Prince, Ligon, Rowley. They are there because they never really left. An honest fireman is never far from his heart.

If Prometheus was worthy of the wrath of Heaven for kindling the first fire upon earth, how ought all the gods to honor the men who make it their professional business to put it out.

ROSTER OF THE LAST VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT

Joel A. Cook	C. L. Ross
R. H. Kennedy	C. T. Swandale
John G. Greer	J. T. Blasingame
S. Mauldin	E. A. Smyth
R. J. Ligon	W. F. Martin
L. C. Ferguson	J. O. Cauble
Thomas Ross	W. F. Asbury
W. S. Turner	R. E. Fork
T. B. Butler	J. E. Henderson
W. H. Irvine	W. A. Hunt
J. R. Richardson	F. B. McBee
W. H. Houston	R. J. Rowley
John B. Marshall	L. P. Hillhouse
A. B. Williams	O. M. Goodlett
John Gaze	W. H. Pool
Williams Goldsmith	W. A. Seybt
Phillip Haas	J. Z. Phillips
A. R. Shumate	E. W. Wyatt
G. T. Willis	T. L. Revis
H. A. Dargan	James F. Mackey
Chas. Halsey	J. E. Holcombe
Alonza Iler	H. Endel
R. Y. Hellems	John Garneau
J. M. Steel	W. Mills Mooney