

THE HISTORY OF THE GREENVILLE CITY FIRE DEPARTMENT

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Little information is available on the very beginning of the Greenville Fire Department. From information found, we believe the first volunteer unit was organized around 1840. These early hand pumps were called engines and were all given names. The first engine was named Neptune.

The first newspaper account of a fire was reported in the "*Greenville Mountaineer*. On Sunday, May 21, 1843, the kitchen of Dr. Austin was found to be on fire. The fact that it was close to the main house placed it in danger, too. All the furniture was removed from the house, which was saved by the Fire Company.

On Saturday night, July 21, 1847, the dwelling house, kitchen and smoke house of Colonel David Hoke, sheriff of the district, were destroyed by fire. Most of the furniture and other articles in the main house were saved but the contents of the smoke house were all consumed. Colonel Hoke had the additional misfortune to lose \$2,000 in bank bills and some \$600 in notes. The bills and notes were in a small trunk along with about \$600 in gold and silver. Mrs. Hoke, on leaving the house with her small children, took the trunk and some valuable papers out with her. The trunk containing the money was taken out of her hands by her daughter, a child of 8 or 9 years of age. In making her way across the street to a neighbor's house, the child was suddenly missed. She was found in the crowd at the house watching the fire, but the trunk was gone. On Sunday evening about \$560 in gold and silver coins, and a small portion of the trunk were found among the embers in the cellar of the dwelling. How it came back in the fire remains a mystery, every other movable piece of furniture having been saved.

In November of 1848, the Town Council ordered three or four wells dug for the public and fire department's use.

A disastrous fire occurred on Tuesday evening, November 27, 1866. The McBee Hall and an adjoining store were destroyed by fire. The McBee Hall was a large professional building owned by the estate of Vardry McBee, deceased. The McBee Hall building and a store, located on the corner of Main Street and McBee Avenue, were valued at \$9,000.

The fire started about dusk when an employee of Mr. Steen's store went into the cellar to draw some red rock oil, which was stored there. Because the candle was in his hand or nearby, the oil ignited. Although every effort was made to extinguish it, the fire gained such headway and produced such a dense and stifling smoke that it soon drove everyone out of the building. For an hour the flames were confined to the cellar, but the means used to smother them were ineffective. The fire, by then, had caught hold of the next floor where the store was located and soon engulfed the entire building.

As reported in the *Greenville Mountaineer*:

Much praise is due to those parties who incurred such imminent risks and put forth such vigorous efforts to save the Enterprise and Post Office Building, located on the north of the scene of the conflagration, and the storehouse of Messrs. H. Beattie & Co., on the south. Both of these buildings were on fire at different times, and had the flames at either point become unmanageable, no human effort could have saved their adjoining squares. The exertion of these parties saved thousands upon thousands of dollars worth of property.

The McBee Hall fire proved to be the catalyst in the acquisition of new equipment for the Fire Department. In February of 1867 a new engine was received and made its first parade on Saturday, February 16, 1867. The new engine was considered far superior to the older engine. It was also decided that the firemen should have new uniforms, not just for show in parades, but also useful while fighting fires. The uniform selected was to be a red flannel shirt, a fire cap, and dark pantaloons, which were simple and economical. Each fireman was expected to purchase his own uniform. Some who were not able to come up with the money needed for this purchase were being assisted with donations collected from citizens.

Soon after the arrival of the new Palmetto Engine, an all-colored Fire Company was organized. The exact date is not known. This company used the older Neptune Engine and from this point on was known as the Neptune Fire Company. Both companies were located on the north side of the river, which was at this time the center of town.

In 1873 there were a lot of changes for the Fire Department. A new fire company was organized, and named the Robert E. Lee Fire Company. This all-white fire company was to use the new engine that was acquired in 1872 and the new hose reel just received. A new en-

gine house was completed in May of 1873 for the use of the Robert E. Lee Fire Company. This was the first engine house to be owned by the town of Greenville, and the final cost to the town after two cost overruns was \$65.

The forming of the Robert E. Lee Fire Company caused changes within the Palmetto and Neptune fire companies. All of the Palmetto members changed to the Robert E. Lee. The Neptune Company had over one hundred members, all colored. Many of the Neptune members went to the Palmetto. This meant that there was one all-white company and two colored companies in operation in the town of Greenville. The Neptune Company also moved across the river. This relocation and construction of a cistern on Pendleton Street at Augusta Road greatly improved fire service for the south side of town.

The Robert E. Lee Company was located at the corner of McBee and Laurens Streets and had one engine and one hose reel. The Palmetto Company, on the corner of Washington and Brown Streets, had one engine and one hose reel. The Neptune Company of South Main, across the river from where Falls Cottage now stands, had one engine and one hose reel. The engines and hose reels were all pulled by hand with the use of a handle and rope. The engine, being quite heavy, required a large number of men to pull it, which was one reason for such large fire companies. During this time a proposal was made and adopted that the market bell was to be used exclusively for the alarm of fire.

After studying the material available on the latter part of the 1800's, it appears that putting out fires became almost secondary to the social and recreational benefits of becoming a volunteer fireman. One of these benefits was competing in tournaments. These tournaments were all-day events, beginning with a parade, which was followed by races between the different companies and their equipment, and in the evening a banquet. Fire companies came from all around to participate and to win an award at one of these competitions. The Robert E. Lee Fire Company even formed a band and received a loan of \$150 from the Town Council in 1875 to purchase instruments.

On March 14, 1876, a representative of the Robert E. Lee Company appeared before Council to request that the Council appoint a Chief of the Fire Department and that J.C. Smith would be a satisfactory choice to all the companies. Until this time there was no one in overall control at a fire, each company working alone. The confusion as to who would do what makes you wonder how anything could have been accomplished.

In 1876 a fairly new invention was becoming a more common sight in cities around the country. This was the Steam Pumping Engine. These monsters could pump a tremendous amount of water. The hand pumps used many men just to pump the water and more men would be free to fight the fire with the use of a steam pumper.

Greenville City Council finally purchased a Lafrance Steam Engine in January 1878. The engine had 1,000 feet of hose and a one-inch nozzle which could throw a stream of water 169 feet. In March of 1878 the new hose carriage was received from Lafrance and put in service by the Robert E. Lee Company. The oldest hand pumper, the Neptune Engine, was retired.

The following is part of an article which appeared in the *Greenville Daily News* describing the only firemen's tournament held in Greenville:

On Thursday, June 23, 1881, the City of Greenville had its first firemen's tournament. The events of the day included a parade, tournament, followed by a banquet.

The streets were dotted in all directions by the picturesque uniforms of the members of the different organizations. With reasonable promptness the parade was formed, and marched off over the route, the procession being led by four mounted policemen and supplemented by an unlooked-for addition in the shape of a body of youngsters evidently having all the soul of full grown firemen, arrayed in red shirts and dragging the coal car of the Robert E. Lee Steamer. The steamers were decorated with evergreens and shone like mirrors, each being drawn by a pair of horses. The Charlotte team excited much admiration, the animals being magnificently powerful ones, well matched, and excellently handled by their driver.

The windows and balconies as well as the side-walks all along Main Street were crowded, most of those occupying the first two places of vantage being ladies, who seemed to enjoy the spectacle greatly. The procession was indeed a beautiful sight moving up Main Street, the gay uniforms of the men and the brilliant metal work of the respective "machines" rendering the picture an exceedingly animated and picturesque one. The march was a long one, and although the day was not hot or

dusty, the temperature being delightful, the sun being frequently hidden by clouds, the men were quite tired when they halted in Main Street near Washington, and evidently felt their walk and the weight of the reels and trucks with which they had started so lightly.

A special meeting of Council was called on November 14, 1881, for the purpose of determining whether a pair of horses should be purchased to pull the steam fire engine. Captain Joseph Allen, Chief of Fire Department, was asked to make some statements as to the advantages of the purchase. He stated that during the rainy season the muddy condition of the streets rendered it very difficult to get men to turn out to pull the engine, and that with horses to pull it, the number of men could be reduced to twenty-five. He recommended the employment of a paid engineer to take charge of the engine and horses and keep them always in good order and ready for action. The purchase was approved, this being the first time horses were used in the City of Greenville Fire Department. It was hard to believe that for over three years something as large and heavy could have been pulled by hand. It must have taken fifty or sixty men to pull it up some of the hills in the city.

On January 3, 1882, a resolution was passed to reorganize the Fire Department. This reorganization included the purchase of a pair of good horses, and each of the companies paid \$20 a month.

It was surprising to note that the horses bought to pull the steam engine were also being used by the street department in routine repair work. On April 4, 1882, the Fire Company was to advise the street committee when it wished to drill the horses so sufficient time to rest could be given them.

On Friday morning, July 20, 1883, a fire was discovered in the bar-room and saloon of Mr. Henry Knebel, located on the north-east corner of Main Street opposite the Mansion House. The alarm was sounded early but the old wooden building burned rapidly. A saloon and restaurant which were located in another old wooden building next to it was soon involved. Mr. John Frell, who occupied the bedroom on the second floor, appeared at the window and was rescued with a ladder. The next building was a confectionery run by Mrs. P. Fasher, who along with her family occupied the second floor. The family escaped before the flames reached them. A fourth store in the line was soon on fire. It was occupied by Mr. Jennings as a millinery. The upper floor was used as a law office of Messrs. Whitner & Symmes. The fire reached what was known as the Cleveland Block, which was made of brick,

stopping the progress north. A large frame wooden building owned by Mr. Julius C. Smith on the east side of the Public Square was also involved. The old Court House had its porch on fire, but firemen were able to save it from further damage. For a while it appeared the Mansion House might also be consumed, but through the aid of the Hook and Ladder Company keeping the roof wet, the building was spared. The fire completely destroyed five buildings with a large loss to the owners and occupants.

On August 20, 1883, R. W. Keenan was retained as bell ringer and Ned Sullivan was re-elected steam engine driver, a position he had held since the acquisition of the horses. It should be pointed out that Ned Sullivan was the only colored man in the otherwise all white Robert E. Lee Company.

Three of the first companies elected officers for the coming year. This is the way it looked in 1884:

The Lee Fire Company

Captain — W.F. Martin
 First Lieutenant — J.A. Cook
 Second Lieutenant — J.O. Haynes
 Secretary — E.D. Williams
 Treasurer — Robert Stewart
 Chief Engineer — A. Williman
 First Assistant — W.G. Smith
 Second Asst. — William Gregory
 Surgeon — Dr. W.E. Wright
 Chaplain — Dr. J.A. Mundy
 First Nozzelman — George Black
 Second Nozzelman — D. Speigle
 Third Nozzelman —
 W.E. Richardson
 Fourth Nozzelman — G.R. Millen
 Paid Driver — Ned Sullivan

The Palmetto Fire Company

Captain — B.F. Donaldson
 Vice President — Israel Thomas
 Secretary — Thomas Briar
 Treasurer — Robert Nesbit
 First Director — Clark Murphy
 Second Director — Prune Green

The Neptune Fire Company

President — Yancy Harrison
 Vice President — Jas. O. Allen
 Secretary — Samuel Adams
 First Director — John Hardy
 Treasurer — Elias Nesbit
 Second Director — Frank Maxwell

On April 8, 1884, an ordinance creating a Board of Fire Masters was adopted. An insurance agent was to be on the board, whose main purpose was to consider fire safety in the construction of new buildings, and make decisions on recommendations from the Committee on Fire Departments.

An important ordinance was passed on June 26, 1884. This ordinance prohibited the construction of wooden buildings within 250 feet

of Main Street between North Street and the river. The city of Greenville was growing so large it was becoming difficult to locate streets and buildings. It was decided to name streets, number buildings, install street signs, and provide number plates for the buildings. A contract was awarded to W.H. Collier to provide street signs for 16¢ each and numbers for 12¢ each. The numbers were to be purchased from the city by the property owners.

I would now like to describe the sequence of events which would follow the discovery of a fire at the beginning of 1888:

When a fire was discovered, the first thing to be done was to notify the bell ringer. This was accomplished by citizens shouting and firing a gun, passing the word one by one. If the fire occurred late at night, the person discovering the fire might have to go some distance to City Hall, where the bell was located. The bell ringer was required to sleep at City Hall, so there would always be someone to sound the alarm. The bell would ring steadily for about a minute, stopping for a few seconds, then ring slowly the number of the Ward where the fire was located. This was repeated over and over for about thirty minutes. The firemen, hearing the alarm, would put on their uniforms before heading out. If a fireman was at another location, he would run home first to put on his uniform. No self-respecting firefighter would show up at a fire without being properly attired. The uniform was the only means of identifying the firemen from the mob of people who would show up at the fire, the bell having notified not only the firemen but also the entire population of Greenville. As soon as enough firemen were at the engine house to pull the engine, they would head to the fire, pulling the engine with a handle and long rope. The next group arriving at the engine house would pull a reel which carried the hose. This was the way the two colored companies, the Palmetto and Neptune, would begin their run to the fire.

The Robert E. Lee Company had a steam pumper with horses to pull it. A paid driver and engineer, who were always at the engine house, would head for the engine. The instant the bell rang, the horses flew under their overhead suspended harness, frantically pawing and eagerly awaiting the drop of the harness. The driver made two quick connections on the special harness, the steam engine was off to the fire, with the engineer feeding coal to the boiler. The steam engine would be followed by the firemen, pulling by hand the wagon loaded with coal and the hose reel.

Once the engines reached the fire, large suction hoses would be

dropped into underground cisterns or wells. If by chance the cistern was dry, the engine would be moved to another. This did happen — on occasion. The hose reels would arrive, laying hose from the engine to the fire. Six to eight men would man the pump on the hand pumpers, changing crews as soon as late arriving firemen were able to make it to the fire. A nozzleman, who was elected for the year, would direct the stream of water. The steam pumper, having good pressure by the time it reached the fire, would also have lines going well. The Pioneer Hook and Ladder Company would have reached the scene by now, having left from the City Hall, where it, as well as the steamer, were kept. The fire would have almost destroyed the original structure by the time water was first thrown. The Captain of each company would be shouting orders to the firemen through a brass trumpet.

The main purpose now was to keep the entire City of Greenville from becoming a pile of ashes. By saturating nearby buildings with water, the progress of the fire might be stopped from spreading to other structures near the original building. While this was being accomplished, other firemen would chuck furniture and personal effects into the street from the building most likely to be consumed. While this might have saved items from the fire, theft and trampling in the mud by the crowd would take its toll. Once the progress of the fire was stopped, the firemen would direct their efforts toward the main fire. The fire was out, everyone would return home.

In March of 1890 a new development in fire fighting occurred. A fire was discovered in the pickers' room of the Camperdown Mill. It was supposed that the fire was started by an unlit match falling into cotton, which was lit by the friction of the machinery. The blaze was extinguished by the use of automatic sprinklers. The Camperdown Mill was equipped with a water tower, which fed water to the system. The damage was restricted to minor water damage. The sprinkler system had prevented a large fire.

At the May 6, 1890, Council meeting a disagreement between the Fire Department and other city departments was settled. The Lee Steamer horses had been used on weekdays for everything from collecting garbage to street repairs. The Board of Fire Masters asked City Council to forbid the use of the steamer horses for any other use than pulling the steamer.

By late 1890 a major change in Greenville was starting to take shape. This would have quite an impact on the quality of life in Greenville as well as the operation of the Fire Department. The Paris Moun-

tain Water System was coming to the city. Water mains were to feed water throughout the city from the Paris Mountain reservoir. Besides supplying water to the citizens of Greenville, the installation of fire hydrants was also part of the construction which had begun.

The construction of the water system was proceeding nicely, except for the hydrants. In April it was reported that hydrants being put in and the coupling of the hose used by the Fire Department did not fit. The American Pipe Company, which supplied the hydrants, promised to make them right.

On June 2, 1891, the water company turned on the water for the first time for fire purposes only. Now with hydrants and water available for the Fire Department, fire protection was greatly increased.

The use of hydrants caused some change in the two colored companies. It was no longer necessary to drag out the hand pumping engines, except in a few isolated areas where water mains had not yet been installed. The Palmetto and Neptune Companies could pull a hose reel to the fire, connect to the hydrant and throw a stream of water directly on the fire. The hydrants could provide water at as great or greater pressure than the hand pumped engines. The Lee Steamer was still used, often supplying water from the nearby cistern or increasing the pressure from the hydrant.

On June 23, 1891, the water system was tested to see if it met the requirements of the franchise. The method of testing was to be able to throw four streams of water simultaneously through 200 feet of two and one-half-inch hose with one inch nozzles to a height of 50 feet. The test was to take place on Pendleton Street at the hydrants ending at Anderson Street, being the highest point in the city. With all four streams going, the stream from the hydrant at the highest point threw a stream 72 feet, exceeding the height required by 22 feet. The test was most successful and by January 5, 1892, there were 120 fire hydrants throughout the city of Greenville.

On November 1, 1893, a special service was held at Buncombe Street Methodist Church. Dr. J. Thomas Pate preached a sermon to the firemen of the city. This was done about once a year by the different churches as a way to show their appreciation for the splendid job done by the Volunteer Fire Department.

A disagreement arose between the colored fire companies, the Neptune and Palmetto, City Council in December of 1897. A provision which made all firemen exempt from street tax was changed to read

that only thirty members per company would be exempt. The white companies had less than thirty men each, while the Palmetto and Neptune each had fifty members. The colored companies felt that this was a direct attack on them, and the great service they had provided the City for many years. The change in this provision was later rescinded.

Fires were becoming more numerous. The Station House Keeper threatened to strike for higher wages if the job of ringing the bell for half an hour every night were to continue. It was reported, however, that once he started to ring the bell, he seemed to become so infatuated with the blood-tingling sound that he almost lost consciousness and rang the bell until everyone in Greenville was awakened.

This concludes the history of the Greenville Volunteer Fire Department. The first paid Fire Department was started January 1, 1902. This had been a glorious time for Greenville, for it showed a closeness of citizens to protect themselves as best they could. Men from all walks of life had bravely given of themselves to help protect Greenville from the most feared threat of the time, the dreaded call of "fire!"

On January 1, 1902, the first paid Fire Department reported for duty at twelve o'clock. They were to be backed up when necessary by the two colored volunteer companies, the Palmetto and Neptune, which retained their equipment. An all-colored paid sub-station was planned later, when funds became available for construction of quarters to house them. All the paid firemen were quartered on West McBee, next to City Hall. For the first time a telephone was to be installed for reporting alarms. Installation of the phone to be completed within two weeks of the start of the Department. The bell at City Hall was also manned twenty-four hours a day, only to be rung if the volunteers were needed.

Chief Rowley reported to the *Greenville Daily News* that the department was ready for service; the men were in good trim and enthusiastic, and the apparatus was in good order. "Should a fire occur tonight the new department will be ready to respond to the alarm."

The first paid firemen are listed below:

Chief — Riley Rowley	
Assistant Chief — Rowley Smith	
Greenville Truck Company	Greenville Hose Company
Foreman — Mills Goodlett	Foreman — Rowley Smith
Driver — G.C. Corn	Driver — B.F. Sherman
Fireman — Mark Parkins	Fireman — Keifer Simpson
Robert Ligon	M.A. Ward
William Moseley	Laurence Gray

On January 3, 1902, the Greenville Paid Fire Department made its first run. The smoke stack at the Greenville Steam Laundry on College Street fell down, sending sparks flying and setting the roof on fire. The fire department received the first alarm by telephone. The damage was slight, but the big news was that the fire bell did not ring. The Chief, hose wagon, and hook and ladder were at the scene in a few minutes. There was no delay in answering the alarm, and the firemen were not wild with excitement. The fire was quickly extinguished and few people even knew a fire had occurred.

A new Fire House in West Greenville was opened in 1902. It was located on Green Avenue in the first block off Pendleton Street where the parking lot for Wick's Lumber is now located. There was a great deal of conflict as to who would man the station, but it was decided that the colored Neptune Company would operate their hose wagon from this location.

In February 1903, a bill was passed in Columbia which created a Board of Fire Commissioners for the City of Greenville. This board was to exercise fully and exclusively the powers necessary for the government, management, maintenance and direction of the Fire Department. The board had the power to provide equipment and supplies; also, it had the power of conviction over members of the department for violations of the rules and regulations or neglect of duty. This was to include reprimand, suspension, or fines not to exceed fifty dollars. Elected by Council, the board was to be one person from each ward. Each year the board would submit to Council an estimated account of funds needed for the coming year.

There were no major fires in 1904, but the Fire Department was kept busy on calls to minor house fires, chimney fires, and one railroad caboose.

But 1905 was a disastrous year for fires. Many large buildings were destroyed or gutted. In October a fine article written by Mayor G. Heyward Mahon describing the Fire Department in Greenville was published in *Fire and Water Engineering Magazine*.

On April 21, 1905, an ordinance was passed creating the Inspector of Buildings. This was to provide enforcement of safety regulations within the fire limits of the city.

Nineteen hundred and six was not nearly as destructive as the previous year. The department responded to fifty-two alarms; these fires they stretched 14,250 feet of hose, raised 393 feet of ladders, and

used 243 gallons of chemicals. The total damage by fire for 1906 was \$17,924.82.

On February 14, 1907, a fire which was described as the most destructive in Greenville totally destroyed the Conyers Building on Washington Street, except for the end portion occupied by Carolina Supply Company. The loss was estimated at \$70,000. When the Conyers Building was built, a fire wall was placed between the section occupied by Carolina Supply Company and the rest of the building. Also an older fire wall between the Conyers Building and a line of stores. This fact, along with a good job of directing water at these points, saved the entire block from destruction. The fire department did not have enough hose to provide the water needed, but the Water Company and Poe Mill furnished hoses to do the job. With so many businesses involved, this was quite a blow to the city.

On February 1, 1910, the Board of Fire Commissioners requested a bond issue of \$20,000 for city improvements, to be used for the purchase of a Gamewell Alarm System, a station in Ward 1, a combination automobile, chemical and hose wagon, and 2,000 feet of hose. This was postponed for further discussion.

At the end of August 1910, Chief Rowley reported to Council that the new motor combination chemical and hose car had been put into service. This new vehicle replaced the two horse combination hose and chemical wagon used at headquarters. The new vehicle was a Webb, powered by a Thomas-Fly engine, and had a four-speed manual transmission. The idea was so foreign to one fireman that he was able to get re-assigned to the West End Station where horses were still in use. This was the first motor-powered fire apparatus in the state of South Carolina. On one of the first runs, the new Webb became stuck in the mud on North Main Street. After it had been there for some time, the firemen finally took the advice of bystanders and got a horse to pull it out.

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