

Chronicling Cheraw's Fire Service 1835-1942

Introduction

This narrative and storyline are simply intended to reflect the development of the Cheraw Fire Department from the mid-1800s to the middle of the 20th century, nearly 110 years of fire service history...there's nearly 80 more years to be researched and captured for the history books. Unfortunately, much of the department's history had been lost to time, generational evolutions, and bygone relevance. Surprisingly, much is written about the town of Cheraw and its proud and splendid fire department, and it's this writer's desire to bring the stories home to be appreciated. However, gathering the department's stories requires time and effort, and to complete its history calls for more research and educated imaginings of the era in which fire protection was becoming a necessity.

The reader must keep in mind that the early settlers of South Carolina migrated from the coastal regions of our state to acquire inland properties for growing crops, harvesting timber from the rich forests, and establishing trade routes to carve out a new life for their families. Construction methods consisted mainly of wood which was readily available and easily acquired. However, fire...the "Red Devil"...was a frequent visitor to our forefathers, and the destruction and heartache caused by these unwanted fires were enormous. And, Cheraw has certainly experienced its share of destruction and the ultimate rebuilding required to craft the great community and quality of life enjoyed by its citizens today.

Early Beginnings

The Town of Cheraw was incorporated in 1820 due in part to the significant prosperity brought about by being a center of trade for corn, cotton, and tobacco. Prior to the Civil War, Cheraw boasted of having the largest bank in South Carolina outside of Charleston. Sadly, Cheraw's prosperity could not ward off the frequent calamities of fire that brought ruin to many families and businesses. The story of the Cheraw Fire Department begins sometime in the 1830s and continues its progressive evolution even today.

According to The Weekly Standard published in Raleigh on December 15, 1835, a destructive fire occurred in the town of Cheraw. The article states in part that

“We learn from the Cheraw Gazette Extra...that a destructive fire broke out in that town between 12 and 1 o’clock of that day, which destroyed property estimated between \$200,000 and \$300,000—not much more than a fourth of which was insured. More than half of the buildings occupied as stores in town were burnt. A heavy calamity has fallen upon Cheraw.”

From the material this writer has been able to gather, the organizing of a citizen volunteer fire department or brigade for the Town of Cheraw began in the decade of the 1830s. One cannot help but speculate if the fire noted above may have been the stimulating factor that caused the community to begin a conversation about fire protection. The first mention of fire protection for the town comes from the Farmers’ Gazette and Cheraw Advertiser, published on **June 6, 1842**.

“Cheraw Fire Engine Company

No. 1

A meeting of the Cheraw Fire Engine Company will be held at the Engine House, Saturday 2nd July next at 1 o’clock. The citizens are requested to attend with their fire buckets.

By order of Capt. Harlee

June 23, 1842

T. A. Bryan, Sec.”

The Buffalo Courier (N.Y.) made mention in their **December 30, 1847** edition that *“James Bock, a Revolutionary soldier, aged about 100 years was burned to death the other day by his house taking fire at Cheraw, S. C.”*

A number of years later, the Town of Cheraw was mentioned in a very brief item published in the New York Daily Tribune on **May 21, 1852**. *“A large fire occurred in Cheraw this morning on Front Street. It extended from the house of D. Mallery to J. C. David’s, destroying eight or nine stores.”* From the article, no reference is made concerning fire protection nor its role in extinguishing the fires. However, based on what we know about other towns and communities the size of Cheraw at the time, most likely fire protection had progressed from the bucket brigades, as used a quarter century earlier, to more sophisticated equipment or apparatus. This premise is sound as evidenced by an article published in The Charleston Daily News on **September 1, 1868**. *“The following acts and joint resolutions have been passed by both houses and signed by the Governor.*

3. *An act to incorporate the Cheraw Hook & Ladder Company as part of the Fire Department of the Town of Cheraw. Signed August 17, 1968.*

The Daily Phoenix, a Columbia newspaper, published in the **December 13, 1871** edition the legislative proceedings just ending the day before where the Cheraw Fire Department had legislation passed. It reads:

*“Legislative Proceedings
Tuesday, December 12, 1871
Senate*

The Senate met at 12 M., President Ransier in the Chair. The following bills were read a third time and passed: to incorporate the Mountaineer Fire Engine Company, of Walhalla; to incorporate the Cheraw Fire Engine Company as part of the fire department of Cheraw.”

So, it is obvious that in addition to any other equipment the town may have possessed at the time, Cheraw Fire Department did operate a “Hook and Ladder” apparatus...unlike aerial devices today, the rig was most likely a buckboard type wagon pulled by hand or horse carrying an assortment of ladders, tarps, hooks and chains, pike poles, buckets and axes.

Interestingly, this writer included in the above proceedings of the incorporation of the Mountaineer Fire Engine Company of Walhalla because that engine is proudly displayed in the Walhalla Fire Department today, and still works. It is a hand-drawn, hand-pumped engine which was purchased from the Charleston Fire Department in 1871 after it had been loaned to Columbia following the Civil War when Sherman destroyed that city’s fire apparatus.

The Anderson Intelligencer, reported in the **February 29, 1872**, edition of the newspaper the exact wording of the above action by the General Assembly.

*“AN ACT to incorporate the Cheraw Fire Engine
Company as a part of the fire department of
The Town of Cheraw.*

Section 1. Be it resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of South Carolina, now met and sitting in General Assembly and by the authority of the same:

That Theodore F. Malloy, Thomas W. Bouchie, James A. McCreight and M. L. Reid, and their successors in office, be, and they are hereby constituted a body corporate and politic, under the name and style of the "Cheraw Fire Engine Company," with a capital stock not exceeding the sum of five thousand dollars, with the right to sue and be sued, to plead and be impleaded, in any court of competent jurisdiction, to have and to use a common seal, and the same to alter at will and pleasure, and with all other rights, privileges and immunities that are now secured by law to like corporate bodies.

Section 2. This act shall be deemed a public act, and shall remain in force for the term of fourteen years.

Approved February 15, 1872"

According to the Sanborn Map and Publishing Company of New York collection in **June of 1884**, the population of Cheraw was about 1,000, and there was no water system yet available other than four deep public wells located strategically throughout the town.

On June 23, 1897, the Sumter newspaper, Watchman and Southron, reported the following:

"Big Fire In Cheraw

The Town's Industries Suffer A Severe Blow

Cheraw manufacturing district is on fire and a total loss to the Cheraw Machine Works, the Cheraw Knitting Mills and Finlayson's Hosiery Mills is taking place."

No mention of the firefighting operations was found in the article.

The Lancaster Ledger published an article in their **October 3, 1900**, edition which headlined the following:

"Fire Near Cheraw

The gin house on Mr. John F. McNair's place about a mile from town burned down last night...it is a great loss to many. Several small farmers lost all their crop that was gathered. This makes the second fire in the county last week. It is thought to have been the work of an incendiary."

In the **April 17, 1905**, edition of the Birmingham Age-Herald, an article made reference to an incident but had few details.

“Fire Did Little Damage

Fire which broke out shortly before 1 o’clock this morning and for a time threatened the business portion of the town, was confined to five wooden buildings, the loss on which was comparatively small and partially covered by insurance.”

This fire was also picked up by The Herald News in Newberry on **April 18, 1905**. *“A destructive fire raged in the Town of Cheraw on Saturday night, burning to the ground several large stores in the business section.”* Interesting how two newspapers reported opposing views of the fire!

In **1909**, The Bamberg Herald noted a story on **April 13th** which reported a serious fire in Cheraw.

“Destructive Fire At Cheraw

One of the biggest fires Cheraw has had in years, broke out in William Godfrey Company’s extensive lumber plant this morning about 2 o’clock. A successful fight was made by the citizens to keep the fire from spreading to the spiritine plant, and the negro quarters in the neighborhood by playing streams of water, by carrying away stacks of lumber and shingles, and by lighting a counter fire to meet the advancing flames. The origin of the fire is unknown. This was one of the largest mills in the country, about a block in length, and one which furnished most of the lumber for the new Union Station in Washington, D.C.”

On **March 17, 1910**, the Cheraw Chronicle reported on a fire that had real potential of damaging the downtown area.

“Early Morning Fire

About 9:30 Tuesday morning the fire alarm rang out on the air and immediately Cheraw’s firefighters were awake to the situation and away to fight the fire. It was found to be only a small blaze, caused by a defective flue, on the top of the office of the ‘Pee Dee News’ Office. Fortunate indeed was it that the fire was discovered as soon as it was otherwise it might have resulted in a bad fire, as it was very little damage done.”

Then only a few days later, the Cheraw alarm sounded to alert its firemen. The Cheraw Chronicle reported the following account.

“Another Fire In Cheraw

Sunday morning about 8 o’clock the fire alarm rang out again in Cheraw and it was found that the fire was out in the direction of Kinland...the store building and residence were reduced to ashes.”

The Cheraw Chronicle printed few details on a fire which occurred in early **February of 1911.**

“Cheraw Visited By Another Fire

Sunday morning about 6 o’clock the store of Mr. J. L. Fleischman on Market Street, was found to be on fire. The alarm was given, but by time the people began to arrive the fire had gained such headway that there was no chance to put it out or to save anything from the building. Fortunately, the walls of the building were good and strong, and the fire was confined to that one building. And it is said by those first on the ground that the fire could have easily have been put out had there been a few buckets of water available.”

The Bamberg Herald printed an article about a cotton seed fire on **October 26, 1911.**

“Cotton Seed Fire At Cheraw

This morning at 12:30 o’clock, as the night shift went on at the Cheraw Oil Mill, some of the retiring workmen went to an adjoining house to sleep and found that the seed house was on fire. In spite of all that could be done it burned down with all it contents. The origin is supposed to have been spontaneous combustion.”

As the town’s government grew and became more responsible to its citizens, the council approved a requirement to obtain building permits prior to performing any construction within the town limits. The Cheraw Chronicle reported in **1912:**

“Ordinance

No. 81

Requiring application stating proposed location obtaining a license or permit.”

The Cheraw Chronicle made mention in the **February 12, 1914**, edition of some sort of fund raiser being sponsored by the volunteer fire department referred to as the "Diamond Ring Popularity Contest.

"Standing of Contestants In The Volunteer Firemen's Diamond Ring Popularity Contest...First Place Miss Wincey Catoe (with 691 votes) and second place Miss Mary Tew (with 683 votes)."

The Pageland Journal wrote an article in their **September 30, 1914** printing that *"The home of Mr. S. T. A. McManus was destroyed by fire Saturday night. This house was just beyond the city limits and could not be reached by the fire laddies consequently all that could be done was to save as much of the contents as possible and then watch the building burn down. The family were up town taking in the show when the fire was discovered."*

Some may remember my article about the tragic accident Mr. Reece C. Hough had when he discovered a late-night fire downtown on **October 10, 1914**. He observed flames coming from a store across the street from his barber shop which prompted him to run to the water tank where the fire bell was attached with thoughts of alerting the town's volunteer firemen. As he pulled the rope to the bell, the frame on which the bell was affixed came apart and caused the bell to fall the 112 feet onto Mr. Hough. He was killed instantly. Mr. Hough, age 27, was married and had three children and is now buried in a Cheraw cemetery. His headstone reads *"Killed By The Falling Of The Fire Bell."*

Again, the Cheraw Chronicle was found to be drumming up support for a July 4th Celebration. Their **April 1, 1915** edition stated the following:

"The Chronicle wants a Fourth of July celebration this year. It would not shudder if the fire department turned out in red shirts and redder helmets."

From the Charlotte News, dated **April 13, 1916**, we read some exciting news for the town of Cheraw.

*"Cheraw Men To See Local Fire Department
A committee of Cheraw, S. C., officials are in Charlotte today to witness demonstrations and tests by the LaFrance cars and steamer of the Charlotte Fire*

Department, with a view to purchasing an auto truck with pumping equipment for the South Carolina town. The committee is composed of City Clerk Tillman and Chief Thomas of Cheraw Fire Department. Mr. Weiant (LaFrance Sales Representative) spent yesterday in Augusta with the Cheraw representatives, inspecting the equipment furnished by the LaFrance people to the Georgia City."

The Chesterfield Advertiser wrote in the **June 22, 1916** paper the account of a fire that destroyed yet another business in town.

"Fire At Cheraw

At about 1 o'clock Friday morning the building and contents of Cheraw Wholesale Grocery Company was completely destroyed by fire. The origin is not known. It occurred during a rainstorm and some suppose it was struck by lightning."

The Cheraw Chronicle was proud to make an important announcement on **July 6, 1916**.

"Auto Fire Truck Has Arrived

Cheraw's new auto fire truck has arrived and is being given a try out under direction of factory experts. The truck is a beauty."

The following is a report printed by The Abbeville Press and Banner, on **November 12, 1920**.

"Fire Destroys Much Cotton

The Atlantic Coast Line platform and about 250 bales of cotton and the warehouse of Mr. J. J. McBride were totally destroyed by fire of unknown origin here early this morning. When discovered the flames had gained such headway on the platform that the local fire department was unable to cope with them."

Sumter's paper, The Watchman and Southeron, published on **January 1, 1921**, describes a sad close-call in Cheraw. It seems *"at 3 o'clock Sunday night the handsome residence of Dr. I. S. Funderburk was burned. This was one of the oldest residences in Cheraw. The firemen could save nothing and did what they could to save the neighboring properties. Dr. Funderburk was alone in the house, his family having gone to spend the holidays with relatives elsewhere. When he awoke he could not get out except by breaking out a window with a chair and jumping."*

A very attention-grabbing article appeared in the **October 20, 1921** edition of the Cheraw Chronicle about the speculated cause of a fire near Cheraw.

“Fire Near Cheraw Tuesday Night

About 2 o’clock on Tuesday night fire destroyed the home of Mr. G. W. Davis whose place is located about two miles from Cheraw beyond the cotton mill. The origin of the fire was possibly from matches and mice and started in the sitting room.”

MATCHES AND MICE....please!

An interesting article which appeared in The Greenville News on **June 3, 1942**, describes a unique solution to an old problem.

“Gas Rationing Aids Cheraw’s Firemen

Cheraw firemen, noting a steady decline in the number of automobiles which have followed their truck to fires for years, are not exactly sorry this gasoline rationing program became effective. The custom of the citizens generally had become such a nuisance that the firemen were forced to use an old truck as a decoy to lead the spectators to another part of town while the newest equipment went to put out the blaze. The old truck was taken off the decoy work today.”

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June 3, 2020