

History of Fire and the Kingstree Fire Department 1867-1930

The story of Kingstree and the ultimate evolution of fire protection in the town goes back to the 1732 when about forty Scots-Irish folks settled the township which later became the County Seat of the Williamsburg District seat of justice. The village of Kingstree was incorporated in 1856, and no mention of any sort of fire protection has been found during this period of time. However, we know from other villages, towns, and cities of that day, fires were common-place occurrences due in part to the construction methods and lack of building or fire codes. Homes and businesses were made of wood; chimneys and heating appliances were poorly fabricated; and structures were closely built to one another, thus creating extreme exposures during a fire.

The author, Nancy Backes, said *“Americans had for many years helplessly watched their little wooden towns burn and be rebuilt and burn again.”* And, Kingstree was certainly no different, and out of necessity, these frequent fires brought attention to the need to better defend its citizens and their properties from the ravages of unwanted fires.

This writer will attempt to portray the early and rich history of the Kingstree Fire Department that is available in order to expand on the struggles, leadership, major challenges, and progression of its long record of service. The history provided in the following pages are taken verbatim from various newspaper articles and commentaries with an occasional observation by this researcher. So, let's begin.

1867...Both the Charleston Daily News and The Charleston Mercury reported on **January 10, 1867**, that on the night of January 7th, around 8 o'clock, a fire occurred in the Kingstree Jail killing twenty-two of its

inmates which included three women. According to the paper, *“the jail had been visited the previous day by the Sheriff, Mr. S. P. Matthews, in the company with the Lieutenant commanding that post, and everything had been found in complete order.”*

It seems a significant delay in opening the cell doors was noted, and by time the doors were opened, *“the smoke rushed out in such torrents that it was impossible to enter. Soldiers placed a ladder to a window, and passing up an axe, called to the negroes to break down the bars and escape; one of them took the axe, but exclaiming, ‘it is too late and fell backwards in the smoke.’”*

The article went on to say, *“the origin of the fire is completely unknown. It originated on the second story. The jail was a fine four-story building, admirably adapted to the purpose, but totally unprovided with water, ladders, or other means of escape or prevention from such an occurrence.”*

The Charleston Mercury and the Daily News both reported on **January 18th** *“the Sheriff and jailer of Williamsburg District were arrested by order of General Scott, Military Commandant, pro tem, in South Carolina. This arrest, we believe, is for alleged criminal carelessness and neglect of duty.”*

1873...The Wilmington Morning Star printed in the **January 30, 1873**, edition *“an account of the great Kingstree fire says the fire started a 4 o’clock Monday morning. The loss may be estimated at from forty to fifty thousand dollars. It is supposed to be the work of an incendiary.”*

In the Anderson paper, The Intelligencer, printed on **April 13, 1873**, an article appeared which was used to place pressure on the Anderson Town Council to invest in a fire department. The writer noted that Newberry, Chester, Greenville, and Kingstree *“have paid the penalty of*

neglecting proper security against fire” and referred to these towns as being in a “long list of unfortunates in this respect.”

1876...*“A fire at Kingstree destroyed the boarding house, dwelling house, store and two other buildings belonging to James Harper, valued at \$14,000. No insurance. Believed to be incendiarism,”* according to The Charlotte Observer dated **November 17, 1876.**

1880...The Newberry Herald announced on **October 6, 1880** that *“A fire occurred in Kingstree the 2nd; one hundred bales of cotton, the railroad depot and the telegraph office were burned.”*

1883...A fire broke out on the second floor of the Williamsburg County Court House, but due to its heavy construction and 30 inch thick walls, the fire was unable to consume the entire building.

1901...In the **April 11, 1901** edition of The County Record, a reported wrote that *“the meeting looking to the organization of the fire department in Kingstree called for last Friday, was largely attended and the organization was completed, under the name of the Kingstree Hook and Ladder Company, No. 1. The following officers were elected: W. R. Funk, Chief; C. D. Jacobs, Asst. Chief; E. L. Smith, Foreman; C. E. St. Amand, Sec. and Treas.; W. V. Brockington, Surgeon.”*

NOTE: Based on the above article, this writer believes the Kingstree Fire Department was organized in mid-April of 1901. Because it was organized under the name of Kingstree Hook & Ladder Co., No. 1, the town apparently started off with a “buckboard type” wagon having a complement of ladders, tarps, hooks & chains, soda-acid extinguishers, buckets, axes and pike poles. The apparatus may have been hand-drawn or pulled by a horse or mule.

1902...A Sumter newspaper, The Watchman & Southeron reported in their **July 16, 1902** edition that *“Two Fires In Kingstree”* and made reference to the *“heroic efforts of the bucket brigade, as the town has no fire department.”*

NOTE: Apparently the town fire department was still in the process of getting its act together and was only operating with buckets and other rudimentary tools.

1907...Again, The County Record published on **March 21, 1907**, is full of information about fires and the fire department. *“Mr. S. M. McClary’s house near town was destroyed by fire. His loss was estimated at \$2,000 and he carried no insurance. The fire is supposed to have originated from a defective flue.”*

Then, an article says, *“the Kingstree Fire Department met last evening and reorganized, electing the following officers: Chief, Monte Jacobs; Foreman of Nozzle, W. E. James; Foreman of Hook & Ladder Dept., Tom McCutchen; Foreman of Pumping Dept., F. W. Fairy. A resolution was passed to refund the “foot tax” of every member of the department and to pay them \$1.00 each for every fire.”*

1908...The Sanborn Maps of South Carolina reveal that Kingstree had a Chief and 30 firemen (10 white & 20 black), all partially paid. The department operated with one hand engine w/ 600 ft. of 2 ½” hose. An alarm bell was situated on top of the engine house located on Mill Street; the town had one night policemen; and water for fire suppression was supplied by three cisterns holding 30,000 gallons of water each.

1909...The County Record dated **January 7, 1909**, reported about The Smith Greater Shows...*“a high class”* carnival come to town. It said it was *“a clean, wholesome show.”* And, *“the carnival exhibited under the*

auspices of the Kingstree Fire Company, whose percentage of the net profits amounted to \$159.34...quite a substantial help to the fire laddies.”

Then on **May 6, 1909**, The County Record reported the following headline: *“Early Morning Blaze...Cottage on Academy Street Destroyed.”* The article continued, *“on last Tuesday morning about 4 o’clock an alarm of fire was sounded and a large crowd collected to see the dread demon devour the home of Mr. O. H. Patrick on Academy Street. An account of something being wrong with the pump, it was sometime before any water could be begotten, and when it came it was too late to do any good except to keep the fire off the nearby buildings. The fire started in the kitchen, it was impossible to get out. It is not know how the fire originated, unless from rats and matches.”* **This writer can only say, RATS AND MATCHES....PLEASE!!!**

The article continues, *“anyone who was at the fire could readily see how badly Kingstree needs an up-to-date fire department, with an available amount of water sufficient to fight the demon, and it is to be hoped that the city fathers will look into the matter in the near future and give the citizens of Kingstree the protection to which they are entitled.”*

1911...The local newspaper, The County Record, printed in the **August 17, 1911** edition a statement of proposal for a system of water works and sewage system.

Also, The County Record dated **November 16, 1911**, reports that the fire department reorganizes. *“The Kingstree Fire Department met and reorganized last night with a large and enthusiastic attendance. Matters of importance were discussed and several changes inaugurated which will go immediately into effect. The principal change was to the effect that a company of negroes be formed, with a negro foreman,*

who are to take complete charge of the "Pet", get it to the fire and get water."

NOTE: Reference is made of the "Pet". Back in the day, fire departments named their apparatus, and this writer is of the opinion that the town had a pumping apparatus which was named "Pet". Remember two years earlier the department could not get water on a fire in a timely fashion, and this may be the reason for a renewed emphasis on getting water on the fire quickly.

On **December 7, 1911**, The County Record described *"an alarm of fire was sounded about 2 o'clock Monday afternoon and but for the prompt response of the Kingstree Volunteer Fire Department there might have been considerable loss of property. The residence of Chief of Police L. D. Burgess, in the northeast part of town, was ablaze on the shingle roof, and with the high wind blowing, nothing but the prompt and efficient action could have quelled the flames."*

1912...On January 11, 1912, The County Record stated *"we have been requested by many persons to let the public know through The Record the amount of the contractor's bid for the water works and sewage system."* Also, The Town of Kingstree is advertising for bids for a guard house, town hall, and fire engine room.

1913...According to the Sanborn Maps of South Carolina, Kingstree had a Fire Chief, Assistant Chief and 18 men; two hose reels with 400 ft. of 2 ½" hose on each with 400 ft. in reserve; one hook & ladder wagon carrying two-3 gallon chemical extinguishers; two hand-drawn chemical carts w/ 125 ft. of hose; one hand engine; fire drills were conducted monthly; and the town had installed 46 hydrants connected to 3 ¾ miles of water mains.

1914...The County Record dated **December 3, 1914**, reported on a fire that broke out in a back room of Riley Drug Store. *“Fire started from a spark that dropped through the chimney into a flue hole in the wall where birds had made a nest. Dr. D. T. Riley saw smoke and doused flames with a bucket of water before firemen arrived on scene. Damage was slight.”*

1915...An interesting article appeared in The County Record dated **December 9, 1915**, and stated *“the Kingstree Fire Department recently added to it fire fighting equipment, a fine, well-trained horse. The animal is a 1,400 pound bay, formerly the property of the Sumter Fire Department, and will be used for drawing the hose wagon. The Sumter Fire Department, having installed motor apparatus, had no further use for the horse and offered it for sale. A stall had been provided at the town hall building, and the horse will be kept therein, convenient to the truck.”*

In the same edition, the paper reported *“about 3:30 Sunday afternoon the house on Church Street occupied by Nell Tharpe and family took fire from a defective flue. The fire department responded promptly to the alarm and succeeded in extinguishing the flames before the house was half consumed.”*

1916...Kingstree’s firemen were becoming more proficient in the skills of firefighting as evidenced in the **June 15, 1916** article of The County Record entitled *“Our Fire Laddies”, “Kingstree Fire Department Preparing for Convention”...“under their faithful and efficient Chief, Mr. M. H. Jacobs, the members of the local fire department are practicing nearly every afternoon at racing and making hose connections preparatory to attending the 12th annual convention of the State Firemen’s Association at Orangeburg, June 20-22.”*

The article continues, *“the following young men regularly take part in the practice and will attend the convention, where they will compete for the \$250 prize offered for the grand hose wagon race to be held at 2:30 Wednesday afternoon: E. E. Rodgers, Ed Vause, J. Woodrow Gamble, T. Alex Blakely, Harry Britton, H. E. Parham, and T. E. Arrowsmith. The boys will practice this afternoon 6:30 on Academy Street, making their hose connections at the corner of Brooks Street. The public is invited to witness these performances.”*

1917...Again, in The County Record dated **May 10, 1917**, it was reported that *“the following members of the Kingstree Fire Department will go to Spartanburg next week to participate in the annual State Tournament: Woodrow Gamble, Elmer Rodgers, Dewey Van Keuren, Ed Vause, Harry Britton, T. C. Jacobs, W. J. Britton, and T. E. Arrowsmith. This team is practicing daily and expects to win honors at the next week as they did at Orangeburg last year.”*

1919...The County Record dated **July 24, 1919**, an advertisement was found which said, *“any one having in his possession a rubber coat or hat belonging to the Kingstree Fire Department will please turn same over to Mr. W. H. Welch, before Monday night, July 28th...L. R. McIntosh, Chief.”*

1920...The **March 18, 1920** edition of the County Record reports that *“the town council has placed an order for a fire fighting machine that is second to none when it comes to efficiency and design. It is a motor pump outfit, equipped with ladders, hose and other fire fighting apparatus. When the town water is scarce, or if a fire should break out at a time when the town pump could not be put into immediate operation, this new (Seagrave) motor truck-pump combination may be taken to the river, connected with the river, the pump started, and with a pressure something like 400 pound to the square inch, will furnish water as far as the hose will reach at a rate of 325 gallons to the*

minute. Charleston, Sumter, Orangeburg and other cities are equipped with similar apparatus, though on a larger scale. The machine purchased for the Kingstree Fire Department is said to be priced at \$9,250, and is capable of coping with any fire that might happen within the limits of the town.” The new motor truck was shipped to the town on September 16, 1920.

Note: The Seagrave pumper was later sold to Scranton, S. C. on April 28, 1948 and later to a private owner on Edisto Island, S. C. Currently the truck being restored by Ray Bennett of Adams Run, S. C. who became its caregiver in 2011.

1930...The Town of Kingstree purchased a 750 gpm pumper from the American LaFrance Fire Apparatus Company which was shipped to the town on **June 26, 1930**. The town still has this engine on display at their headquarters station and remains hopeful to restore it one day to its original glory.

This writer chooses to suspend further research of the Kingstree Fire Department at this point because further current history is more easily chronicled from 1930 forward. It has been an interesting project to uncover some of this department’s stories and legacy which had probably lost through time or else forgotten by generations long past. Hopefully this work will be shared with many whose interest and love of the fire service will kindle a desire to keep our legacy alive.

Researched & Written By:
Carter H. Jones
Special Projects Coordinator
S. C. State Firefighters’ Association
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