

# **Early History Of The Rock Hill Fire Department**

**1870-1945**

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The story of Rock Hill and the ultimate evolution of fire protection in that community goes back to the late 1700's. Located in the piedmont of South Carolina, the area which eventually developed into Rock Hill was initially settled by the Catawba Indians. As the backcountry or inland areas of the state began to open up to colonial frontiersmen, white settlers, most of whom were Scots-Irish, came up from the coastal regions and down from Pennsylvania.

In the late 1700's, a number of the newcomers established their homes in what became known as Ebenezer, a small village which flourished around the Ebenezer Presbyterian Church that was established in 1785. The settlers even started the first school in the area known as the Ebenezer Academy. By the mid-1800's plans were being crafted to construct the Charlotte and South Carolina Railroad which would run through the Ebenezer community. However, the residents there vehemently objected to this project because it likely would disturb their way of life. Consequently, railroad officials worked a deal to move the tracks just a few miles east of the village in the vicinity of what is now Rock Hill.

Cotton became the major industry in the region which allowed the railroad to further expand opportunities for commerce and growth. The founding families of the new community of Rock Hill attempted to incorporate the town in 1855, but the General Assembly failed to take up the matter. So, again in 1868 a second attempt was made to incorporate and failed once more. Finally, in 1869 the General Assembly approved its incorporation, and Rock Hill became an official town in 1870.

Soon businesses sprang up along with houses, churches, schools, and other commercial enterprises. Unfortunately, Rock Hill was like so many other communities, villages, towns and cities of the day which also experienced the frequent and dreadful visits from “the fire fiend.” The author, Nancy Backes, said “Americans had for many years helplessly watched their little wooden towns burn and be rebuilt and burn again.” Rock Hill was certainly no different and, out of necessity, these fires brought attention to the need to better safeguard its citizens from the ravages of unwanted fires.

Most small communities, villages and towns of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries improvised very primitive methods of controlling and extinguishing fires before they were able to afford more sophisticated advances in technology. For example, buckets, well water, wet blankets, rakes and shovels, and pine tops were the tools most often used in fighting fires. The alarm of fire, or other emergency, usually came in the form of shouting in the roadways/streets, firing pistols, shotguns, or rifles into the air, or ringing of a church bell if one existed in the community. Of course, as communities began to grow and resources permitted, various types of apparatus and equipment were purchased which proved more effective in fighting fires.

This writer will attempt to amplify the rich history of the fire department that is available in order to expand on the struggles, leadership, major challenges, and progression of the Rock Hill Fire Department. The history provided in the following pages are taken verbatim from various newspaper articles and commentaries with an occasional observation of this researcher. So, let’s begin....

The earliest mention of fire protection in Rock Hill can be found in the Yorkville Enquirer published on **March 3, 1870** which briefly tells of action taken by the South Carolina Senate a few days earlier (February 22<sup>nd</sup>). *“In The Senate...to incorporate the Rock Hill Hook and Ladder*

*Company.*” This action took place just two months after the town of Rock Hill was officially incorporated, and Rock Hill archives indicate the company consisted of thirty-five members.

It is this writer’s opinion that Rock Hill had some form of fire protection for a number of years prior to this action of incorporation, ie. bucket brigade comprised of citizen volunteers. The incorporation of a “hook and Ladder company” tells this writer that the town also may have possessed a hand-drawn, farm-type wagon that carried an assortment of ladders, buckets, pike poles, salvage tarps, hooks and ropes for removing exposures. Interestingly, in the same article it is noted that the sister town of Chester had its fire department incorporated on the same day...*”a bill to incorporate the Stonewall Fire Engine Company of Chester.”* Again, it is very probable that Rock Hill possessed an “unofficial” fire brigade or organization as far back as 1855 during the time attempts were made to incorporate.

Obviously, fire protection in Rock Hill became more adept and competent over the next several years as evidenced by an article from the Yorkville Enquirer dated **April 8, 1875**. *“The Rock Hill Fire Company will attend the celebration of the Mecklenburg Centennial in a body.”* The fire service has a long-standing tradition of participating in functions where there is formality, ceremony, parades, pageantry, and displays, all of which foster pride in an organization and comradery between members. So, it is evident to this writer that the Rock Hill firemen were already eager to showcase their department.

The Abbeville Press and Banner of **May 26, 1876** reports on *“THE CHARLOTTE CENTENNIAL”* and the role Rock Hill played in the celebration. *“The long-looked-for Centennial of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence was celebrated on Tuesday and Wednesday last at Charlotte, with a spirit which did honor to the Old North State.”* The commentary talks about the celebration having

*“imposing crowds, brilliant array of the military and fire companies”*, and mention is made to the *“Pioneer Fire Company of Rock Hill.”* However, this is the only comment this writer has found in written history to that particular fire company and may have been an error in reporting. There are frequent references about the *“Yellow Jackets Fire Engine Company,”* a black company established to assist the other company of white firemen at all fires.

Rock Hill and its firemen continued to exhibit pride in their department and to be involved in the affairs of the town. The Yorkville Enquirer posted a story in the **April 12, 1877** edition of the paper where the fire department participated in a large political happening. *“Governor Hampton passed through Chester Friday morning on a special train. The engine and car containing the noble old hero were beautifully decorated.”* Research reveals that Governor Wade Hampton had been in Washington for a few days in which he met with President Rutherford B. Hayes regarding reconstruction matters. But, the article continues, *“The Chester Rifle Club, and the Rock Hill Firemen escorted Governor Hampton to Columbia.”* That occasion had to have been a big deal to the town of Rock Hill as well as its volunteer firemen.

The Yorkville Enquirer talks about a fire in Rock Hill in the **June 13, 1878** paper, but does not provide any details. *“The light of the fire at Rock Hill was plainly visible in Yorkville. At a house about six miles north of this place, the light was strong enough to cast a shadow.”* Again, archives by Rock Hill researchers suggest this light was from a disastrous fire which destroyed most of the business district as well as the fire house. We are told that funds amounting to \$200.00 was raised by selling subscriptions, and the town assembly gave \$275.00 in October of that year to help construct a new fire station.

The new fire station was built on the corner of Main and Trade Streets next to the railroad depot. And, along with a new station came the first

fire pump, a hand-drawn, hand-pumped engine. Apparently, the fire department took notice of a practice from larger departments which required mandatory training for its members, or else a \$ .50 fine was imposed on unexcused absences. This was known as the “Defaulters’ List” and even inflicted fines for not responding to fires, cussing officers, failure to attend parades and even funerals of designed individuals. The archives reveal that the volunteers were issued uniforms which consisted of blue trousers with red stripes, a rubber raincoat, high top boots and helmet. Interestingly, the fire company rules mandated that they participate in a parade at least every three months in order to remain sharp and professional looking for the town’s people.

Years passed apparently without a major fire in the town limits, but The Fairfield News and Herald reported in the **October 6, 1886** edition that *“A fire in Rock Hill on Tuesday morning last consumed the livery stable of Mr. Ratterree, near the cotton factory building. It was once thought that this handsome building would be consumed, but by the noble efforts of the fire department of that town it was saved. Mr. Ratterree had several horses burnt up, besides a lot of roughness and other feed. His loss is about \$3,000, insurance \$2,000.”*

Archive researchers found where, on **February 17, 1887**, *“a disastrous fire destroyed the stores on the south side of Main Street. The fire department lost most of its hose while fighting the fire and was later commended by the town council for saving the rest of the town from total destruction.”*

So often there is humor found at someone else’s expense, and an article found in the **March 2, 1887** printing of The Yorkville Inquirer confirms this assertion. *“On Friday afternoon the alarm of fire was given, and Rock Hill’s well disciplined fire department, followed by a number of citizens, was soon making its way in the direction of the*

*office of the W. U. Telegraph Company, from which a volume of smoke was issuing. The alarm was caused by the explosion of a kerosene oil lamp. One or two buckets of water soon extinguished the fire. Except for the loss of the lamp, the only other damage done was frightening the manager out of two years growth.”*

Good news for Rock Hill and its fire department! The Yorkville Enquirer announced on **March 30, 1887** that *“The town authorities are contemplating the purchase of a steam fire engine, and the sinking of water cisterns.”* Obviously, the town had no water system to supply a powerful fire engine, so the idea was put forth to install a number of water cisterns strategically around the town. It was typical for towns during this era to construct cisterns underground made of brick and coated with a concrete material that could hold up to 25,000 gallons of water. The steam engine could place its hard suction hose in the cistern nearest a fire and draft a steady water supply to fight a fire. Cisterns were commonly kept full of water and were supplied by rainwater from gutters and other drainage methods.

The Yorkville Enquirer reports on **June 22, 1887** that *“The annual meeting of the Rock Hill Fire Company was held on Friday night. Mr. J. F. Reid was elected President, and Mr. J. H. Miller, Secretary and Treasurer. Twelve new names were added to the roll of membership. The appointing of the director, engineer and foreman was postponed. Since the steamer has been ordered, great interest is being taken in organizing a good fire department.”*

On **July 13, 1887**, The Yorkville Enquirer again reports on yet another meeting about the fire department. *“A meeting of the Rock Hill Hook and Ladder Company was held on Wednesday night. It was decided to reorganize the company and change its name to the Rock Hill Steam Fire Company. Mr. A. H. White was elected president, and Mr. J. F. Reid foreman. Mr. J. H. Miller, the former secretary, was retained. The*

*remaining officers will be appointed at a subsequent meeting. The company decided to name the new steamer 'Marion Jones,' in honor of the sweet little daughter of Capt. Allen Jones, whose recent death has been announced in your columns." This action was taken most likely because a new steam engine had been ordered and was scheduled for delivery in the near future. Also, note that the membership decided to name the new steamer for a young girl who had passed away. The practice of naming apparatus for individuals was a common custom, and in other towns it has been observed that apparatus often carried the names of women or young girls in their respective communities.*

With great anticipation, the town finally received delivery of its first steam fire engine. The Yorkville Enquirer described the occasion on **July 27, 1887**. *"The steam fire engine has arrived and been placed in the new engine house. It is a little beauty. After satisfactory test it will be turned over to the fire department by the town council."*

A few days later, the steam engine was ready for service as revealed in The Yorkville Enquirer on **August 3, 1887**. *"On last Tuesday afternoon, the new Silsby steam engine was put through a thorough test. The cisterns not being completed, the engine was taken to the pond of Messrs. Friedheim & Bro., where a large number of our citizens, including several ladies, had assembled to see the engine tested. It is a beautiful machine, with Russia iron and nickel plated finish and ornamentation, and arranged so as to be drawn either by men or horses. Its capacity is 450 gallons per minute, and it can be made to throw four different steams at one time. In a very few minutes after the fire was lighted, four strong, solid and effective streams of water were thrown in all directions, after which 1,000 feet of hose was attached with an inch nozzle, which threw a stream of water at least 200 feet. The citizens who witnessed the test were satisfied that it is a splendid engine, and that the money expended for it was well invested."*



For those readers who are not familiar with the name “Silsby” used to describe the steam engine...a word of explanation. Silsby is the name of the manufacturer which built the new steam fire engine. It was constructed at their plant in Seneca Falls, New York, which was founded in 1856, and became the world’s largest fire engine manufacturer having built well over 1,000 machines.

Oddly, six months after Rock Hill’s steam engine was delivered, The Yorkville paper revealed on **January 11, 1888** that *“An Act was passed to authorize and empower the Town Council of Rock Hill to issue bonds to the amount of four thousand dollars for the purchase of a steam fire engine and for the improvement of the fire department of the town.”*

Positive comments about the fire department are found in the **October 24, 1888** edition of The Yorkville Enquirer. *“A Silsby steamer, with sufficient hose and an abundance of water, manned by the young men of the town, and a hook and ladder truck, in charge of the colored people, constitute the fire extinguishing facilities. Both companies keep themselves in excellent training, and the insurance companies have removed the provisions of the ‘three-quarter clause.’”*

In just a couple of months the new steamer was put to the test when a fire of significance came knocking. The Yorkville Enquirer on **January 2, 1889** reported that *“On Thursday night last, at 8 o’clock, the alarm of fire was given, and the fire was located in the residence of Mr. Alexander Von Wittke, on Black Street. The Yellow Jacket Fire Company was the first to reach the scene, but the fire had made too much headway, and the firemen at once turned their attention to saving the stable of Dr. Jno. W. Fewell. In a few minutes the Rock Hill Steam Fire Company had a stream of water playing on the fire through 1,000 feet of hose. This was the first opportunity the Steam Fire Company had to use their engine at a fire, and the boys are delighted with the working of their pet.”*

The Yorkville Enquirer does a great job of reporting on Rock Hill's fire department and events of interest. On **November 13, 1889**, The Yorkville Enquirer says *"At 12 o'clock yesterday, the alarm of fire was given and it was soon found that one of the dry kilns of the construction company was on fire. The Rock Hill Steam Fire Company was soon on the spot and in less than six minutes from the time of the alarm they had two streams of water playing on the pile of lumber in the kiln. The firemen worked manfully, and some lumber was saved."*

Again, Rock Hill's archives mention that the department's horses were stabled in Kinbrell's stable which was located in an area across from where the First Baptist Church now stands. Sometime later on the horses were moved to the fire station, and about this time council purchased "drop harnesses" for the horses in order to cut valuable time off their responses. Additionally, evidence has been found where the hook and ladder company voted to provide their old equipment to the Yellow Jacket Fire Company for use.

A big fire occurred in Rock Hill in the fall of 1891 as reported on **October 28, 1891** in The Yorkville Enquirer. *"On Saturday afternoon last, at about 4 o'clock, the fire bell sounded, and in a very few minutes the Rock Hill Steam Engine and hose reel were seen going rapidly up Main Street as though in the direction of the fire. It was soon known to everybody that the residence of Mr. J. J. Hagins, between Main and White streets, was on fire. From the rapid development of the flames, the fire must have been well underway before the alarm was given. Though a couple of strong streams of water were turned on the fire within seven minutes from the time the engine left the house, the dwelling was too far gone to be saved. Nothing was left standing save a little of the framing and weather boarding, besides the chimneys. Owing to the close proximity of other buildings, the fire department had its hands full in keeping the fire from spreading. It is the opinion of some that the house caught from sparks from a smoke stack in the*

*shops of The Holler & Anderson Buggy Company, which join the lot of Mr. Hagins. A good deal of furniture was saved, but, as usual, it is all badly damaged. The building and furniture were insured."*

The article continues, *"While Rock Hill has many improvements, which larger places do not enjoy, yet there is one thing she stands sadly in need of, and that is water works. It is hoped that the movement started here sometime ago will not fall through, and that it will result in the establishing of a first class system of water supply. This would, without question, be the very greatest addition possible to the many material improvements she now possesses. A very few widely separated cisterns are all the means of supplying water in case of fire, except the private wells, which would soon be emptied."*

*"A BIG FIRE AT YORKVILLE"* reads the headlines of The Newberry Herald and News on **November 23, 1892**. *"At 8 o'clock this morning (the 21<sup>st</sup>) fire broke out in the law office of C. E. Spencer, in rear of the court house." As the article details, the offices of the county commissioners, a large dry goods store, the opera house, and the court house were "soon in flames." The editor states that it is hoped that the lower story of the court house will not have to be rebuilt. "The Rock Hill and Chester Fire Departments responded promptly to the call for help, and although the fire was well under control when they reached here, their efforts saved the court house from being a total loss. At one time, with a high southeast wind, it looked like the loss would be fearful."*

This writer will pen nearly the entire article posted in The Yorkville Enquirer the same day because it goes into detail about the logistics of requesting mutual aid from other departments when extra help is needed from neighboring communities. Today, our communications are instantaneous and clearly transmitted by modern technologies, but back in the day, it was not so easy. Read on....*"An incident of the fire last Monday that can never be forgotten, is the generous help so freely*

*extended from Rock Hill and Chester. When every other resource had been expended, and the situation began to grow desperate, Intendant McDow telegraphed to Rock Hill and Chester (usually to the town's mayor or other city official) for aid, and at the same time Superintendent Tripp of the Three C's & L, were asked for special trains to bring the firemen, engines and hose from Rock Hill and Chester."*

*The article continues, "The Rock Hill telegram was sent a few minutes to 11 o'clock, and Superintendent Tripp, having already given permission, a freight engine standing at Yorkville, was sent immediately afterward. The engine made the run to Rock Hill—fifteen miles—in twenty-one minutes. In the meantime the fire alarm had been sounded in the town, and all the boys were on hand with their engine, hose reel and ladders. Some shifting was necessary before a suitable car could be secured, and this, together with the work of loading the fire apparatus, consumed twenty minutes. The run back to Yorkville was made in fifteen minutes, and steam having been gotten up in the meantime, the boys made the distance from the depot—nearly a half mile—got their engine in position more than a hundred yards from the burning court house, and had two streams playing on the flames within ten minutes after the train stopped."*

Next, the editor described the process of requesting and getting assistance from Chester. *"The dispatch sent to Chester was received by Train Dispatcher Nichols at 10:20 o'clock. Mr. Nichols immediately telegraphed the news up town with the information that he would have a train ready for Yorkville as soon as the fire department could get to the depot. The alarm was sounded, the men called out, a consultation was held, and it was decided that the water supply at Yorkville was hardly sufficient for the steamer, and they would just take the hand engine in charge of the colored firemen. This was done, and in charge of B. M. Spratt, chief of the Chester department, John W. Dunovant and others, the colored company, about thirty-five strong, was hurried off as*

*soon as possible, reaching here at ten minutes after 12 o'clock, and having made the run from Chester in something less than one hour."*

*"It was just 12 o'clock. The danger was not quite over. The court house burned to the floor of the second story, men with buckets and blankets still swarmed along the top of the Bratton building, patiently waiting for the terrible heat to subside. The locomotive whistle announced the arrival of the Three C's train. The crowd began to shout 'Rock Hill's coming!' and between seven and ten minutes later two streams of water were playing on the court house from the Rock Hill steamer. Chester's hand engine appeared on the scene at about the same time, but unable to secure any water, took but little part in the fight. The Rock Hill boys soon had the entire command of the situation, and only ceased their efforts after all the water in the only two cisterns available was exhausted."*

The account of the fire concludes with a statement from someone in Rock Hill who said, *"Yorkville has the sympathy of Rock Hill in the loss sustained by Monday's fire. We take what we think is excusable pride in the fact that in thirty-four minutes after the train carrying the engine and fire company left Rock Hill, we had two streams of water playing upon the court house in Yorkville. It is a matter of deep regret that the aid which our people so cheerfully and promptly rendered, could not have reached the scene of the fire in time to be of real service in controlling the rage of the flames."*

Even The Manning Times picked up on this story and repeated that *"in a response to a call for help the Rock Hill Fire Department came over at 11 o'clock on a special train and assisted materially in getting the conflagration under control."*

A few days later in the **November 30, 1892** edition of The Yorkville Enquirer appears a strange lead-in to a story about the Rock Hill

department. It says, *“You Yorkville readers will, we doubt not, be interested to learn that Rock Hill’s Fire Department has been reorganized and will be capable of much more effective service in fighting the flames than ever before. By the new arrangement, which will go into effect by the first of next month, the department will consist of fourteen firemen and an engineer, and these will receive a regular salary.”* The archives found where a regular fireman would receive \$25.00 per month salary, and an engineer \$60.0 per month...failure to attend training would result in the forfeit of pay. Records also indicate a 500 lb. fire bell was installed over the fire department on a tower and two hose reels were purchased to allow for storage of the hose and to make for a quicker and easier response to alarms of fire.

Once again, this writer wishes to share the following story in its entirety as published in the **March 15, 1893** issue of The Yorkville Enquirer because it reveals a glimpse of firefighting over a century ago. *“While in Rock Hill last Saturday, a representative of THE ENQUIRER had a talk with Mr. S. T. Frew, engineer of the Rock Hill fire department, as to the general satisfaction derived from the fire outfit of that town. Mr. Frew is quite an enthusiast on the subject of fire engines and fire protection generally, knows a great deal about the various makes of engines, and understands his own thoroughly. He showed the representative of THE ENQUIRER his engine, ‘The Marion Jones,’ described its operation, discussed the question of water supply and hose, and gave a great deal of practical information generally.”*

The interview with Engineer Frew begins, *“Our engine, said Mr. Frew, is a No. 5 Silsby with a capacity of 400 gallons of water a minute. We have gotten up steam and started our water in less than seven minutes, and with the stream I am satisfied that we could tear down almost any frame building in the town. The engine is perfectly reliable, and with reasonable care, it never gets out of order. It has never yet failed us when needed. At the last fire I failed to get to the engine in time, and*

*someone who was not familiar with it pumped in too much water and choked it up. The trouble was remedied without difficulty, however, and we were ready to throw a stream before the flames showed up where we could get at them.”*

Mr. Frew continues with a description of the importance of water supplies. *“The biggest trouble we have is that we haven’t got a sufficient supply of water. There are only three cisterns in town, and although we can protect most of the town from these, there are several positions which are not protected. The water supply to be obtained from wells is worth very little on account of insufficiency. We can draw water from a depth of 25, or even 30 feet, but it takes only a very few minutes to pump the water out of any well in town.”*

The well-versed engineer concludes, *“Our engine has already paid for itself a half dozen times over, and we would not give it up for anything. I’ll remark also that this is the experience of other towns that have tried them, and when you are offered a second-hand engine you may look on the offer with suspicion. I don’t know of a town anywhere which has as much fire protection as it needs, and when they sell, it is usually to buy a better outfit. I’ll also observe that it is a remarkable gravity pressure that will force water with anything like the power of a good steamer. In most towns, even where there is a system of waterworks, that engines are still depended on for protection against fire.”*

*“A fire here now is not attended with anything like the excitement and confusion which used to be so common. The boys all understand the power of the engine so thoroughly as to know just what it can do, and when the flames have already gotten extra-ordinary headway, if there is an available supply of water at hand, instead of getting excited, we just deliberately go to work and put them out. Yes, you can say that excepting our insufficient water supply, our fire facilities are everything that we could wish for.”*

This writer researched the Sanborn Maps of South Carolina to uncover any additional information about Rock Hill's survey which was completed in **April 1894**. For those who are unfamiliar with Sanborn Maps, a brief explanation is in order. The Sanborn Map Company was a publisher of detailed maps of U. S. cities and towns in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The company provided services much like ISO (Insurance Services Office) does today in establishing a fire department's rating, ie. Class 1 to Class 10. These old maps were originally created to allow fire insurance companies to evaluate their total liability. The maps serve as a valuable resource for us historians in looking back in time at the buildings, water supplies, utilities, and certainly fire protection.

The 1894 inspection of Rock Hill confirms the town operated a Silsby steam fire engine and one hose reel with a 1,000 feet of 2 ½" hose. Additionally, the fire department had a hook and ladder truck, again, probably a wagon with ladders and an assortment of tools. The fire engine house was located near Main and Railroad Avenue. Also, the map only shows two cisterns...a 25,000 gallon cistern at the corner of Main and Railroad Avenue, and a 20,000 gallon cistern at the corner of Main and Caldwell Avenue. The population of Rock Hill in 1894 was nearly 3,000 people.

The Yorkville Enquirer reported on a daring action on the part of the town's auditor when the library caught on fire. This report was published on **January 30, 1895**. *"The Rock Hill Library fire last Thursday night developed something of a hero in Auditor Waters. His records were in danger and he managed to save them at considerable risk to himself. During the day, Auditor Waters had been occupying a room in the building as an office in which to take the returns of the tax payers. When he closed up at night he left his books in the building. The alarm of fire, of course, brought him out in a hurry, and when he realized that his big book and his duplicate returns were in danger, he was in great*



*distress. The smoke was boiling out of the building as from a furnace, and it looked as if the records were hopelessly lost. He signified his purpose to save the papers; but was advised not to make an attempt. Bystanders assured him, however, that if he should realize that he was about to be overcome and would holler they would come to the rescue. He rushed in and got a portion of his records. Then he tried it again and got some more. At the third attempt he got the balance. Unable to see for the blinding and stifling smoke, he had to grope his way; but he took the chances, as desperate as they were, and as the reward of his daring, succeeded in saving every paper."*

Over the next several months, the town continued to make slow but continual progress with the fire department. The Yorkville Enquirer posted the next article in the **April 3, 1896** edition of the paper. *"The Rock Hill Fire Company has just received a new nozzle for their hose. This one allows the use of a straight, full stream, and also by means of what is known as the ball attachment, furnishes a circular sheet or spray of water. The last will enable the firemen to approach close to the burning surface, and enter a building filled with smoke as he is thoroughly protected by the spray."*

The Lancaster Ledger printed a lengthy story about a major fire in the **April 6, 1898** paper which occurred two days earlier with the headlines, *"\$200,000 FIRE IN ROCK HILL,"* and *"TWENTY SIX STORES AND OFFICES WERE DESTROYED."* The article continues, *"Where once the majority of the business buildings of the city stood is now a mass of smoldering ruins. The fire which burned them was the largest the town has had since about 1888. The fire originated in the old London building, occupied by the New York Racket store, and the alarm was given at 15 minutes before 1 o'clock. The fire department and citizens responded promptly, but before water could be thrown the London building was a mass of flames from front to back."*

The article continues...*"as it was the department kept water flowing pretty well, and considering the small supply of the tanks (cisterns) did fine work. In fact, there was more than one act of heroism performed by the 'laddies' (old term for firemen) last night, as there generally is at a big fire. During the progress of the fire there was a tremendous explosion in one of the buildings, which did a great deal of damage. Several spectators and workers were painfully injured."* Interestingly, the story talks about an incident with the fire horses...*"Mr. Fred D. Marshal, manager of the telephone exchange, was run over by one of the engine horses at the beginning of the fire and very painfully injured."* *"At 4 o'clock the Charlotte fire department, which had been wired for, arrived, but by that time the fire had been gotten into control."*

Fire prevention was on the mind of Rock Hill's firemen when the Yorkville Enquirer printed this article of advice in the **May 18, 1898** paper. *"SELF HELP IN CASE OF FIRE."* *"As a house is never attacked by fire at the top and bottom at once, if there is a safe and ready exit at both top and bottom, very little danger to life is to be feared. It is important that all exits should be so known as to be easily found, by day or night, by every inmate of the house. If the clothes you have on catch fire, a blanket, rug or some such woolen article should be quickly and tightly wrapped around you. Air is thus excluded, and the fire goes out."*

Another look at the Sanborn Maps of South Carolina published in **August 1900** reveals a bit more progress in the town relating to fire protection. According to the survey, the fire department operated with one Silsby rotary steamer and 16 men (white) and one hook and ladder company with 30 men (colored). The survey says the steamer and hook and ladder were "all drawn by hand!!" The department also operated with two hose carts and had 500 ft. of new 2 ½" hose, 500 ft. of 2 ½" rubber hose-new, and 500 ft. of old 2 ½" hose. The water works were

now under construction at a cost of \$40,000. It was designed to have six miles of 4" to 8" pipe with 40 double hydrants. The fire bell was located behind the Fire Company building on Railroad Avenue.

In the **September 12, 1900** edition of The Lancaster Ledger, reports on a large *"FIRE IN ROCK HILL."* *"Quite a big blaze—one which looked exceedingly dangerous to the whole southern side of a business block—occurred here at 3 o'clock this afternoon. The plant of the Frew Machinery Company, consisting of foundry and wood shop, burned to the ground in a few minutes. The fire department responded promptly and did splendid work in saving the business block, which caught fire several times, with wind coming directly to it."*

The Yorkville Enquirer comments on a fire which occurred on **March 6, 1901** in the city. *"Ken's Livery stable on Hampton Street was destroyed by fire this morning. The buildings, one horse, a considerable amount of feed and buggy fixtures were burned. It was due to the splendid work of the fire department and the efficiency of Rock Hill's new waterworks that the fire did not spread. Rock Hill has had quite a run of fires this year. In fact, there has been four good sized ones during the past two weeks."*

A brief write-up in The Yorkville Enquirer dated **January 24, 1903** reports on the death of an officer of the department. *"Messrs. H. M. Davis and Lloyd Phillips, of Rock Hill Steam Company came to Charlotte yesterday to select from Florist Bush, a special design for the Rock Hill Fire Department to be used at the funeral of Major A. H. White who died Monday. Major White was president of the fire department of Rock Hill."*

Again, this writer references the Sanborn Maps of South Carolina to uncover any progress within the fire department in their **May 1905** inspection of the town. The report says that at this point all apparatus

are still drawn by hand. However, it's noted that the town is getting two horses. It does not mention a hook and ladder truck as previous inspections noted, but the department utilizes the steam engine and two hose carts. The streets are not paved but in good condition; the town has electric street lights and two night policemen. The fire alarm given by bell at engine house and operated by hand. The water works system has been installed giving the department about 40 hydrants from which to obtain water for fighting fire.

The Lancaster Ledger captured "*FIRE AT ROCK HILL*" in a brief article dated **July 20, 1904**. "*Fire this morning in the store of G. W. Jordan, near Victoria Cotton Mills, caused considerable excitement, as it was generally thought that the mills were burning. The fire started from the outside.*"

Another fire in Rock Hill was reported by the Yorkville Enquirer in the **June 14, 1907** issue of the paper. "*Thursday morning at about 11 o'clock, the handsome residence of Mr. J. M. Cherry, in Oakland Avenue, was discovered to be on fire. The fire was in the paper between the storm sheeting and the weather boarding, and made it hard to locate, the whole building seeming to be ready to burst into flames and yet no particular blaze in sight to work on. The firemen responded promptly and the fire was after a hard fight subdued. Every bit of the furniture was carried out; but, of course, was damaged, the whole house was flooded with water and the walls and carpets very badly damaged.*"

Interestingly, The Edgefield Advertiser in the **February 26, 1908** paper reported on a major fire in Lancaster. "*BIG FIRE IN LANCASTER*" were the headlines. "*Fire which broke out in the livery stable of the Gregory-Hood Live Stock Company at 8 o'clock Saturday night wiped out a large portion of the town and threatened to burn the whole place, there being no water supply here with which to check the conflagration. The Rock*

*Hill Fire Department was wired for and held itself in readiness to come but there was no use without a water supply."*

*"ANOTHER FIRE IN ROCK HILL" the headline reads in the **July 25, 1908** edition of The Lancaster News. "Rock Hill has had a number of fires this week, as many as these occurring there Monday. Still another Wednesday, in which Mr. J. L. Bird, formerly of Kershaw, was a loser."*

Once again, The Yorkville Enquirer gave an account of a curious fire on **December 7, 1909**. *"Fire at about 12 o'clock Friday night destroyed the barn of Mr. W. J. Caveny, in the rear of his residence on Hampton Street. The loss was complete, everything in the building being destroyed except the live stock and a buggy. The property was valued at \$500, with but \$150 insurance. The city lost a set of harnesses and some feed. The cause of the fire is unknown, but it was probably a rat and a match, which is a bad combination."* At this point, your writer must step in with an observation...A RAT AND A MATCH...please! It is amazing just how many accounts of fires across the state in those early days credit rats and matches with the cause of fires. To be clear, fire investigations in those days were not what they are today, but putting the blame on poor rats is not a very likely cause in my opinion.

The **March 1910** survey by the Sanborn Map Company reveals a great deal more about improvements/declines in fire protection for the town. The commentary found says the town has one fire company of 12 members who are all paid a small salary and are exempt from taxes. All firemen work within 300 yards of the fire house. The team of firemen occasionally are used on the "sprinkling" cart on Main Street from Post Office to Railroad. The department has possession of one combination hose truck and chemical engine with 800 feet of 2 ½" hose, a 40 gallon chemical tank, two 15 ft. ladders, and 150 feet of chemical engine hose. The department operated in reserve two hose carts with 1,000 ft. of 2 ½" hose...all hose in good condition. The Silsby

rotary steamer is not in condition to use...tubes burnt out. The Hook and Ladder truck is not used but has a 35 ft. extension ladder and two 15 ft. ladders. The town's water pressure gauge is located at the fire house, and there are now 53 double hydrants in the town limits. The fire alarm is given by a bell on a tower at the fire house and alarms received by telephone. The town is to have a Gamewell Electric Fire Alarm system. And, the streets are not paved.

The Newberry Weekly Herald noted on **May 24, 1910** that *“Rock Hill has fire department equipment of \$3,250, divided as follows: steam engine, \$1,000; chemical engine, \$300; hook & ladder, \$150; and hose wagons (probably carts), \$1,800.”*

*“FIRE IN ROCK HILL”* is the headline in the **March 1, 1912** publishing of The Yorkville Enquirer. *“Fire broke out in the Farmers' warehouse, Rock Hill, yesterday morning, and about 125 bales of cotton were damaged. Four automobiles that had been stored the previous day, were also destroyed. The loss was fully covered by insurance. The warehouse belongs to Mr. John T. Roddey.”*

The Yorkville Enquirer announces a big event coming to Rock Hill in the **May 31, 1912** run of the paper. *“PROGRAMME FIREMEN'S CONVENTION.”* *“The program for the S. C. Firemen's convention to be held in Rock Hill on June 25, 26, 27, has just been issued and shows that the local department, assisted by the Chamber of Commerce, has made arrangements to royally entertain the firemen during their stay in the city.”*

Again, city archives told that Chief Flowers requested the city purchase their first motorized apparatus on **July 2, 1913**, and six months later the machine was delivered from the American LaFrance Company of Elmira, New York. We are told that another engine was purchased in **1918** and

still one more in **1924**. And, in **1938**, a modern motorized ladder truck was purchased.

On **March 5, 1914** The Pickens Sentinel reported on a *“FIRE IN ROCK HILL HOSPITAL.” “Fire broke out in the old hospital building a few nights ago on East Clay Street and practically destroyed the main building. The building was unoccupied, but the annexes adjoining were (occupied). When discovered the main building was a mass of flames and got such a start of the firemen until it is a practical loss.”*

The Fort Mill Times dated **September 17, 1914** headlined *“ROCK HILL FIRM BURNED OUT.” “Fire Thursday morning gutted the Hutchinson Building on Main Street, occupied by the Johnson-Rowe Drug Company, entailing a loss of between \$15,000 and \$20,000.”*

The Pickens Sentinel on **August 16, 1917** gives an account of Charleston’s Fire Chief, Louis Behrens, coming to Rock Hill to talk about fire prevention. The reader should know that Chief Behrens was the primary founder of The South Carolina State Firefighters’ Association back in 1905. He was elected President of the Association that year and served in that capacity 27 years until his death in 1932. He was truly a visionary leader of that day. Now, back to the story....

*“In the Chamber of Commerce Hall, Louis Behrens, Chief of the Charleston Fire Department, delivered an interesting address on fire prevention. Chief Behrens in speaking in the various cities of the state, the meetings being held under the auspices of the State Insurance Department. The object of the meetings is to acquaint the people with the necessity of taking every possible means for the prevention of fires and to stress the fact that a large majority of the fire losses could be avoided were proper precautions taken.”*

Again, The Fort Mill Times gave an account of a *"COTTON FIRE IN ROCK HILL"* in the **October 16, 1919** edition of their paper. *"Sunday night the central compartment of the John T. Roodey warehouse, just north of the Southern railway station in Rock Hill, was discovered on fire and but for the timely arrival of the fire department, it was believed that the entire building and its contents would have been destroyed. The central compartment of the warehouse is rented by Mr. Roodey as a State wareroom, with John A. Black as custodian. Mr. Black stated that there were between 600 and 700 bales of cotton in the building, some of it belonging to the Victoria cotton mill and some to the farmers of Rock Hill section. The loss was estimated at about \$100,000, which was fully covered by insurance."* This story was also picked up by The Bamberg Herald as well as The Abbeville Press and Banner.

The Fort Mill Times gave an account of a fire in Rock Hill in the **October 23, 1919** paper. *"About 1:30 o'clock Wednesday afternoon the fire department was called to a fire in the Arcade mill village, Rock Hill house number 30, occupied by R. E. Armstrong and family, was destroyed. The firemen succeeded in getting two streams of water on the building, but too late to save it."*

On Thursday, **October 20, 1921**, The Gaffney Ledger reported *"THREE HUNDRED BALES ARE BURNED IN ROCK HILL."* The article goes on to say that *"Fire this morning destroyed a compartment in the cotton warehouse of T. L. Johnson, in which there were 300 bales of cotton, doing damage of from \$10,000 to \$25,000. The fire was discovered about 6:30 o'clock and the flames were then raging all through the interior of the compartment and had burst through the sides. Three lines of hose were laid, and water poured in from both sides. Fire walls kept the flames from spreading. The cause of the fire will probably never be ascertained. A freight car had been loaded with cotton...and was to be shipped this morning. They had already caught on fire when the firemen reached the scene and was also burned."*



The Gaffney Ledger tells of a good time in Rock Hill in the **January 29, 1924** edition of the paper. *"FIREMEN HOLD BANQUET."* *"Rock Hill firemen held their annual banquet in the assembly hall of the Chamber of Commerce, their wives, along with the city officials and their wives being special guests. Following an elaborate menu, one of the best served in years in the chamber hall, there were a number of talks by firemen and officials."*

One of the most insightful depictions I have found of firefighting in Rock Hill is found in an article posted in The Gaffney Ledger dated **April 12, 1924**. The paper's headline read, *"HORSE DRAWN FIRE WAGON IS REPLACED."* *"Bought approximately 18 years ago, pressed into active service for over eight years, the horse drawn combination fire wagon owned by the Rock Hill fire department has been sold for \$300 more than was paid for it when it was purchased 'brand new.' At least the financial arrangements agreed to when the new LaFance fire pumper was purchased recently allowed such a difference in the purchase price of the motor equipment. The wagon cost \$1,850 when it was bought from the Seagrave company 18 years ago, according to T. O. Flowers, who has acted as the efficient chief of the department since its first establishment. A consideration of \$1,750 was allowed by the LaFrance company when the purchase of a new motor pumper was made and the chemical tank on the wagon previously sold for a cash sum of \$400, it is shown."*

The article continues with some marvelous imagery of days gone by. *"The financial arrangement was announced today, when authorities prepare to remove the wagon to make room for the new pumper which is expected to arrive shortly. Many persons have inspected the old wagon since it was made known that it would be discarded and talk around firesides brings back with vivid recollection when the sound of the gong and the rapid clatter of horses hoofs brought residents to the windows by day and by night as the wagon drawn by 'Jack and George'*

*thundered by. The last run made by the wagon, according to Frank Hamilton, who then drove the wagon and now drives the modern truck purchased in 1914 by the city of Rock Hill, was at 8:20 on the morning of January 27, 1914 when the cotton warehouse of T. L. Johnson on West Main street reported by telephone in a blaze, the fire was smothered with but little damage, the report indicates.”*

*“Jack and George,’ two of the bravest and most intelligent horses ever trained to hurry a wagon to a fire, were soon afterward sold to the McCormick Undertaking establishment, then of this city and now in Columbia, and all trace has been lost of them, according to Fire Chief Flowers. They were purchased early in 1900 when those interested in maintaining a voluntary fire department in Rock Hill, headed by Chief Flowers, raised money to buy them and then succeeded after much effort in getting the city to give them lodging. The plot on which now stands the modern fire department and city hall was at this time bought by the city for the sum of \$1,350, (It is worth many times this price now.)”*

*“The passing of the last horse drawn equipment from this city marks, in the opinion of leaders here, a new epoch in the phenomenal growth of Rock Hill. While the wagon has not been in actual service during the past 10 years, it has been held as reserve equipment and was placed side by side with the motor truck. While it remained there could not but be a memory of the past lingering there and a realization that this thriving city had not wholly departed from the less modern and efficient way of accomplishing things.”*

*“With the installation of the new pumper, Rock Hill’s fire department will rank second to no city of its population. This in itself is a distinct recognition of the development which has been under way during the past score years. Fire Chief Flowers has given his best efforts to keeping*

*the department up to the standard of efficiency and is to be congratulated on his success."*

The Greenville News says *"ROCK HILL FIRES DO MUCH DAMAGE"* in the **April 27, 1924** paper. *"Fire of undetermined origin late last night destroyed both the plant of the Standard Milling Company's here and the home of Mrs. S. N. Sowell. While the cause of the milling plant could not today be determined it is believed by firemen that sparks from that fire fell on the roof of the Sowell home and the wind fanned them into a blaze on the roof. The home is approximately five blocks from the grist mill. The alarm from the milling plant was received at 11:48 and the alarm from the Park Avenue home a few moments later. Dividing his force into two companies, both blazes were fought...firemen were forced to confine their efforts towards preventing the flames from spreading."*

*"EAGLE CAUGHT AT ROCK HILL,"* read the headlines in the Florence Morning News on **September 24, 1924**. *"ADOPTED AS MASCOT BY CITY FIRE DEPARTMENT."* *"Captured after it had been wounded near the city, a mountain eagle has been presented to the city of Rock Hill. The bird has been adopted by the Rock Hill Fire Department as a mascot and has attracted wide interest, here."*

Archives from the city reveal that Rock Hill received an ISO rating of a Class 2 which was a major accomplishment back in the day.

Another fire where mutual aid is need was reported in The Greenville News on **May 8, 1927**. *"CHESTER SENT HELP TO ROCK HILL."* *"When Mayor S. Churchill Carter was telephoned early Saturday morning from Rock Hill requesting help in the big fire there, he quickly dispatched Chester's large LaFrance fire truck with Chief J. Tracy Walsh in charge."*

Sumter's newspaper, The Watchman and Southron, gave another account of mutual aid to a neighboring town in the **July 31, 1929** paper. "CHESTER CITY HALL DESTROYED BY FIRE." "Fire that destroyed the municipal building yesterday afternoon was believed today to have originated beneath the stage of the Chester theater, but its origin remained a mystery. Loss to the city was placed at from \$150,000 to \$200,000 with insurance less than a tenth of that amount. The blaze was discovered about 2:45 and gained headway rapidly. It threatened for a time to spread to other buildings of the business district, but was brought under control before other buildings caught. The Rock Hill fire department sent a truck to aid in fighting the blaze."

In the **September 14, 1930** printing of The Greenville News, the headlines read, "ROCK HILL CHIEF CITED IN MAGAZINE." The story picks up with "*A picture of Fire Chief T. O. Flowers appears in the September issue of 'The American City', a leading magazine published in New York and devoted to city building. Chief Flowers, as is other fire chiefs whose pictures are also shown, is referred to as one of the men who are rendering good service to their country. Mr. Flowers has been chief of the Rock Hill fire department for the past 27 years.*"

The Index-Journal of Greenwood printed a story in the **March 26, 1932** paper with the headline of "*FIRE DESTROYS DAIRY AT WINTHROP COLLEGE.*" The article continues, "*Fanned by high winds, flames at the Winthrop College Dairy farm just outside the city limits had burned four buildings and were threatening four more at noon today as the Rock Hill fire department battled to stop the conflagration. The animals, however, were feeding in pastures.*"

The Greenville News gives a report of the Rock Hill Fire Department in the **February 16, 1933** paper. "*Rock Hill's fire loss last year was \$43,682.86 as compared to \$31,470.52 in 1931, according to the report given out by Fire Chief T. O. Flowers.*" It's interesting to note that the

Chief places the value of apparatus and equipment at only \$28,470.00. In his report *“the Chief advocates a complete overhauling of the fire alarm system declaring that in its present condition it is too overloaded to carry the necessary fire boxes.”*

A sad story is found in the **March 19, 1939** copy of The Greenville News. *“FRANK HAMILTON, ROCK HILL FIREMAN, ANSWERS LAST CALL DRIVING TRUCK.” “Frank H. Hamilton, 53, for more than 30 years a member of the Rock Hill fire department, today answered his last alarm. He died suddenly of a heart attack about noon while driving a truck to a fire. Answering a second alarm, a telephone report of a fire which proved of little consequence—Mr. Hamilton was taking the department’s old pumper up Hawthorne Lane. He was seen to be driving with his head down as though protecting his eyes from the wind. He slumped over the steering wheel and his hands dropped away from the wheel. The two men with him brought the truck to a halt. The veteran fire department engineer was taken to St. Philip’s hospital but was pronounced dead on arrival. Funeral services will be conducted at 4 o’clock tomorrow afternoon at St. John’s Methodist Church. Interment will be in Laurelwood Cemetery.”*

The Index-Journal, a Greenwood newspaper, talks about *“FALSE FIRE ALARMS”* in Rock Hill on **September 6, 1940**. *“Rock Hill has been having a bit of trouble with false fire alarms lately. Greenwood’s fire department has a chapter or two on the same subject. The Rock Hill department head warns that the fine is one hundred dollars, when caught.”*

The Index-Journal of Greenwood shared a brief story in the **April 1, 1941** paper about what could have been a very serious fire. *“Fire damaged the roof of Hopewell Presbyterian Church, near here, Sunday. The blaze occurred during services and the congregation joined the Rock Hill Fire Department in extinguishing it.”*

*“TWO-DAY SCHOOL FOR FIREMEN SET HERE NEXT MONTH”* are the headlines from The Greenville News on **December 27, 1942**. *“Plans are progressing for the regional fire defense training school to be conducted in Greenville January 18-20, it was announced yesterday. Sponsored by the state defense council and the state department of education, similar schools are also being held in Orangeburg, Florence and Rock Hill. Assistant Chief Marvin Kay of Greenville and Chief G. H. Fischer of Orangeburg will conduct the schools, purpose of which will be to train auxiliary firemen and civilian defense workers. Auxiliary firemen are to go to schools nearest their homes, officials stated. They will attend classes at whatever school they chose.”*

As part of the civilian defense initiative during the time of World War II, **1939 to 1945**, communities were challenged to always remain alert for possible enemy attacks. As part of that program, many fire departments had to become creative in maintaining their work force because countless numbers of firemen were drafted or signed up to fight in the war effort. Rock Hill was no different. In the time period of the war, Rock Hill addressed their “manpower” issues by training female volunteers to respond and fight fires alongside any of their remaining counterparts. From the Winthrop University Archives is a photograph of a crew of six female firemen riding the old 1924 engine with one following on a motorcycle outside the former fire station. The caption reads, *“On the home front, life seemed normal along the street during the war years. But there were noticeable changes in the way things operated, such as the fact that the Rock Hill Fire Department during the 1940s was composed of female volunteers.”*

The Greenville News reported **February 12, 1945** about a couple of firemen going off to war. *“Alvin C. Collins and Thurman V. Long, both formerly employed at the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company, have been named to the Rock Hill Fire Department. They will replace A.*

*L. Grant and S.(Sam) C. Youngblood, Jr. who have been called to the armed service.”* On a personal note, this writer remembers fondly Sam Youngblood who returned to the fire department after the war ended and was later assigned to the fire prevention bureau as Fire Marshal. This was a time when I worked for the State Fire Marshal’s Office and had many occasions to spend with Sam conducting training at the hospital and nursing home. Sam was a straight-forward individual who was honest in every respect and loved the fire department. Which brings this writer to some concluding remarks.

While working for the Office of State Fire Marshal in the mid-1970s, this writer had the opportunity to spend many memorable times with the firefighters of the Rock Hill Fire Department while working assignments in the area. In fact, the late Chief, Crawford Howell, granted me permission to spend nights at the Cherry Road fire station and run calls as well as fight fire with the crew. Of course, back then we rode on the “tail board,” and what a thrill that was! I caught some noteworthy calls during my sojourns with the department, the most challenging of all was a fire in one of the main buildings at Clinton College.

It is with deep satisfaction that this writer now puts his pen down from further research of the Rock Hill Fire Department. It has been an interesting project to uncover some of this department’s stories and legacy which had probably been lost through time or else forgotten by generations long past. Now, the rest of the history of the Rock Hill Fire Department from 1945 to the present is up to others to complete... that’s 74 years of stories to put to pen. It is this writer’s hope that someone will take up the challenge and catch up this department’s rich heritage, and keep our legacy alive.

Note: Special thanks to Chief Mike Blackmon, Jan Showkeir and Captain Mack Thomas for their input and assistance with this project.

