

The Early History of the St. Matthews Fire Department 1889-2002

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The St. Matthews area was first settled around 1732 by families comprised of Swiss, German and English who came to America seeking land to raise their families and crops which developed into a popular trading post. The location became known as Amelia Township, but the "township concept" never really flourished until St. Matthews was more generally settled in 1841 and became the Calhoun County seat in 1908. St. Matthews was named after the St. Matthews Parish of the Anglican Church. The area in and around St. Matthews was known for its cotton plantations. Interestingly, St. Matthews was granted a Post Office on November 28, 1835. Calhoun County is located in a rural area in what is known as the "upland area" and borders the Congaree River and, on the south end, Lake Marion and the Santee River.

From the town's very earliest beginnings there is no mention of fire protection or how the community dealt with "The Fire Fiend". However, based on the experiences of other villages, towns, and cities in South Carolina, one can rest assured there were numerous fires, and citizen volunteers turned out to do what they could to control the spread of fire and protect their properties.

Most likely the town's citizens were made aware of a fire or other emergency by someone firing a pistol or rifle into the air. And, as churches sprang up, the constant ringing of the bells notified townsfolk to turn out for help. Fire equipment was surely very limited and simple. Citizen volunteers made use of tools at hand, such as rakes, shovels, ropes, canvas tarps, pine tops, buckets of water, and wet blankets. And, if a fire was found to be spreading beyond the capabilities of those early volunteers, attention was then focused on saving the contents of the property on fire as well as structures which may become exposed to spreading flames.

The Orangeburg Times, dated **June 4, 1880**, advertised the sale of a hook and ladder truck...*"Strongly built, well equipped, and in perfect order. Terms easy. Apply to S. A. Reeves, W. L. Glaze, J. L. Heidtman."* This writer just has to wonder what town may have purchased this pre-owned apparatus. During this period of growth and progress in our villages and towns, the threat of fire created a fear in the minds of every citizen. So, as we explore newspaper articles which appeared during those early days of St. Matthews' development, it is quite evident that the town's residents were frequently reminded that fire unbridled, without the ability to control and suppress, is indeed the greatest threat to any community.

The earliest written reference to fire that is available to this writer was found in the **December 28, 1882** edition of The Times and Democrat. The article reported on a number of serious injuries by fire. *"In the first part of last week two serious accidents from fire occurred in Lower St. Matthews. A little daughter of J. H. Felder, Esq., while throwing some straw on a fire at school, had her dress take fire and was seriously burnt before the flames could be extinguished by the teacher and children. She was immediately carried home and cared for. A daughter of Mr. Ab. Snell also had her dress caught on fire while standing in front of the fireplace, and was badly burnt. We also learn that a little child of Mr. Donald Joiner, of the Fork, was severely burnt during the past week."*

The Times and Democrat made mention in their **April 10, 1884** edition of the paper that *"Wednesday of last week was the stormiest day we have had in this vicinity this year. The wind was blowing like a tornado throughout the day. Trees, fences, etc., were blown down in every direction, and forest fires raged in the woods in different sections of the County. Messrs. Fuller Prickett, W. F. Ott, Stack Spiegner, of the St. Matthews section, lost all of their outbuildings...This was the worst forest fire Orangeburg County has had in years. It burned for miles, destroying large quantities of timber, rails, trees, etc. From nearly every section of the County we hear of its ravages, but we are glad that it is no worse than it is."*

The Times and Democrat ran a story about a fire in St. Matthews on **December 9, 1886**. *"Mrs. F. E. Keller's gin house in Middle St. Matthews was entirely destroyed by fire last week. She lost a number of bales of cotton and all the machinery. We did not learn how the fire originated."*

On **June 8, 1887** The Times and Democrat published news of a fire that occurred on Sunday night, May 29, *“The corn house and stables of Mr. Samuel Kemmerlin, in Middle St. Matthews, was destroyed by fire. He lost all his provisions and a mule and a cow, which were in the stable. The cause of the fire is unknown. We extend our sympathies to Mr. Kemmerlin, as his loss is quite heavy, and will inconvenience him no little this season of the year.”*

This writer’s research reveals the first mention of forming a system of fire protection for the Town of St. Matthews was actually in 1889 as evidenced by the following article found in The Times and Democrat published on **October 30, 1889**. The write-up states that *“The ladies of the St. Matthews Fireman’s Aid Society held their first annual fair on the evenings of the 23rd and 24th inst. They are to be congratulated on their success. The hall was crowded from the time of opening until the close, and a considerable sum was realized. St. Matthews has no fire department, and the ladies composing the society have taken the initiative step towards having one. Great credit is due to its president, Mrs. Phillip Rich, and the members for their noble work.”*

Then nine months later, The Times and Democrat published an announcement in the **July 2, 1890** paper about a fund raiser for the fire company. *“A grand moonlight picnic will be given at Amaker’s Lawn, St. Matthews, tomorrow evening under the auspices of the Star Hook and Ladder Company of that town. Everybody is invited to be present and assist in adding to the pleasure and enjoyment of the occasion. We hope the company will make a handsome sum.*

At this point it may be useful for the reader to understand just what a “hook & ladder” wagon/truck was back in the days of the town’s efforts to curb the many fires which plagued its citizens. In the case of St. Matthews, this wagon was likely hand-drawn, and not horse-drawn, because in most cases small towns simply could not invest in the expense of having horses. Additionally, this wagon/truck usually carried an assortment of ladders, axes, pike poles, soda/acid extinguishers, salvage tarps, buckets, blankets, rakes, shovels, lanterns, and ropes affixed with grappling hooks. The ladder company and its firemen were utilized before towns installed water systems with hydrants which, of course, narrowed their focus to attempting to extinguish a fire before it could spread with buckets of water or wet blankets; removing contents from burning structures; pulling down damaged buildings or chimneys to create a fire break.

The **August 20, 1890** edition of The Times and Democrat wrote, *“About four o’clock Friday morning the barn and stable of Jas. Drayton who lives on the outskirts of the town of St. Matthews, were destroyed by fire. With no help other than that of his family, he was powerless to stay the ravages of the destroying element, and both houses were totally consumed, together with everything in them which included a horse and mule.”*

The Times and Democrat posted a notice in their **March 14, 1894** printing that *“Governor Tillman has offered a reward for the fiend or fiends who set fire to Mrs. Wannamaker’s residence near St. Matthews one night last week, and we hope the guilty parties will be speedily caught.”* The article continues with *“The origin of the fire is unknown, but, being discovered in a portion of the house where fire is never used and at that hour of the night, strengthens the supposition that it was incendiary.”*

According to the Sanborn Maps of South Carolina, dated **May 1894**, the population of St. Matthews was about 1,500 people. A notation makes reference to the town as having one hook & ladder company which apparently was known as the “Star Hook & Ladder Company”, as noted in the article published in 1890.

The second week of February 1899 saw a major ice and snow storm hit much of South Carolina. The Manning Times, dated **February 15, 1899**, published that *“Much will be written this week about the beautiful snow, which by the way was the heaviest perhaps that this country has seen since the war. The ground here was covered to a depth of six or seven inches.”* And, according to The Lexington Dispatch printed on the same day, *“The snow caught many families without food. All trains have been delayed on account of the snow. The depth of the snow fall is variously estimated at from six to twelve inches. Snow commenced falling Saturday morning and continued to fall except at short intervals until Monday morning.”* And, it is during this snow storm (**February 19, 1899**) that city records indicate a big fire occurred in St. Matthews. It is said that some sixteen buildings in the center of town burned. The “townsfolk” formed a bucket brigade to no avail, but only was extinguished by *“the foot or more of snow that fell during that time did.”*

And, in **November of 1899**, the Sanborn Maps reveal that the population of St. Matthews had declined a bit to nearly 1,200 residents, and the town continued to operate with one hook & ladder company.

On **December 27, 1899**, The Times and Democrat published notice of a fire. *“Mr. S. E. Owens, of Middle St. Matthews, had the misfortune on the 5 instant to have his barn and stable burned down, together with five hundred bushels of corn, fifteen hundred pounds of fodder, a large quantity of hay, seventy bushels of rice, twelve bushels of peas and a wagon. This was a new one. Mr. Owen’s loss is about six hundred dollars, which is pretty heavy these hard times.”*

The Times and Democrat on **February 28, 1900** reported *“Yesterday afternoon about 3 o’clock the dwelling house of Mr. A. J. Houser was destroyed by fire. The fire was first noticed by Mr. James Herlong, who was passing, and gave the alarm. The fire originated in the dining room and is believed to have been the act of an incendiary.”*

“Serious Fire in St. Matthews” is reported in The Bamberg Herald on **November 21, 1901**. *“Today about 10 o’clock a fire was discovered in the stable loft of Mr. M. Joricky, the wind blowing quite fresh at the time, and soon the warehouse of Mr. G. W. Arthur was aflame as well as other sheds and servants’ quarters belonging to Mr. Joricky. At this juncture it was hoped the fire would be checked, but not so, for in less than one hour the dwelling of Mr. Joricky and the store room and two warehouses of Mr. Arthur were in ashes. The vacant store adjoining the dispensary caught fire, but was put out. At one time the bank, dispensary, the Hill hotel and the store of Mr. A. Adlestein appeared to be doomed and were only saved by the strenuous efforts of the brave citizens, white and black, who fought the fire demon so valiantly that they were saved.*

The article continued, *“The business and improvement league committee some time since made a report favoring the bonding of the town to erect waterworks, but the proposition was opposed by a few, but this fire, near the very centre of the business portion of the town, proves both the wisdom and necessity of waterworks and that at any reasonable cost. The fire at one time bid fair to destroy the entire east side of the town, and but for the valiant work of her citizens would doubtless have done so.”*

The Bamberg Herald reports on **March 13, 1902** that *“The St. Matthews saving bank and dispensary were robbed Tuesday night. The burglars used nitroglycerin. The extent of the robbery is not known, as the officials could not get into the inside vault. Mechanics were secured from Columbia to open it.”*

On **August 20, 1902**, The Lancaster Ledger reported that *“Between 12 and 2 o’clock last night this place was visited by a terrific electrical storm, accompanied by the heaviest downpour of rain within a year or more. About 2 o’clock the Southern depot was discovered to be on fire, evidently set by the subtle electric fluid. Agent Coney rushed in and secured the books and as many valuable papers as possible, returning for express matter, but was repulsed by the flames. Several barrels of kerosene oil and a drum of gasoline were in the warehouse and lent fury to the flames. An empty box car on a side track was burned.”*

The Newberry Weekly Herald noted on **February 16, 1904** that *“Lula Richardson of St. Matthews caught fire from coals around the pot while doing her weekly washing, and was horribly burned, dying within twenty-four hours.”*

Again, this writer researched the Sanborn Maps of South Carolina and found in **June of 1904** that the population had dwindled by 200 people giving the town only 1,000 people. During this survey there is no mention of any fire protection in the town.

The Evening Index, a Greenwood newspaper, reported on **November 16, 1905** that *“About 3 o’clock Thursday morning the cotton platform at the Southern depot at St. Matthews was discovered on fire. The platform was a spacious one, containing more than 2,000 square feet, and was covered by cotton belonging to various cotton buyers of that place. Of the 550 bales of cotton on the platform, 185 were saved by the heroic efforts of those who reached the fire first.”*

The Times and Democrat noted in their **June 28, 1906** edition that both the town of North and St. Matthews suffered severe fire losses. *“Both of these growing and progressive towns have been hard hit by the fire fiend in the last ten days, and, while both of them have suffered severely, we congratulate them that it is no worse than it is. The towns have live, energetic business men, who will see to it that the burned structures within their borders will soon be rebuilt even better and more substantial than they were before the fire destroyed them. St. Matthews*

and North have the sympathy of all in the misfortunes that have overtaken them, and we hope soon to see the waste places occupied by new and handsome structures.”

On **July 4, 1906**, The Anderson Intelligencer made mention of the fire that occurred a week earlier. *“Lightning struck the Cain Hotel at St. Matthews and set it on fire, causing a conflagration in the town. The total loss is about \$40,000.”*

The State newspaper of Columbia reported on **December 21, 1907** that *“St. Matthews, the hustling little city in the newly made Calhoun county, has already fallen in line with up-to-date improvements. Yesterday morning Foreman P. L. Davis of the Columbia fire department (Columbia Hook and Ladder Co., No. 1) returned from St. Matthews, where he had gone to instruct two of the newly formed hose wagon companies in the art of fire fighting. The following letter explains the work that was done and speaks in high terms of Mr. Davis’ efficiency along with the line of fire fighting.”* The letter is addressed to Mr. W. J. May, Chief of the Columbia Fire Department. *“Dear Sir: Mr. P. L. Davis spent today with us and gave us full instructions in fighting fire. He gave us the most careful attention and went into everything in detail. He explained how to organize, how to use the reels and hose, etc. We appreciate his visit very much and feel sure that he has given us instructions that will be of much benefit and value to us. We appreciate very much his kindness. Very truly, J. S. Wannamaker, Intendant.*

Note: From the above letter, reference is made to the town having two newly formed hose wagon companies and explained that the firemen were trained in the use of the reels and hose. Evidently the town had purchased two hand-drawn hose reels rather than actually having hose wagons. These hose reels were hand-drawn and carried about 400-500 ft. of carefully rolled hose for easy deployment. Usually the reels were mounted with two playpipes/nozzles as well as a utility box for an assortment of fittings and wrenches.

The Bamberg Herald posted on **March 19, 1908** that *“About 5 o’clock this morning the alarm of fire was given and for the first time the fire laddies had a real opportunity to test the new waterworks (installed in 1907), and be it said to their everlasting credit they cut short what might have been one of the most destructive fires which ever occurred in St. Matthews. The fire originated in the store of Mr. W. A. Price in the Mach building and was completely destroyed so far as stock and*

inside work goes. He carries some insurance, but not half sufficient to cover the loss. Adjoining the store of Mr. Price was the office of Dr. A. R. Able which, while sustaining no fire damage, was deluged with water, destroying books, papers and instruments. Dr. Able was amply secured. Next in the building is the store occupied by Mr. N. B. Foures and while his stock is almost ruined by water he sustained no fire damage. Mr. Foures carried no insurance.” And, according to The Times and Democrat, “It is believed that robbers set the building on fire in order to cover their nefarious work.”

The Times and Democrat reported on **January 30, 1909** that *“While burning brush in a newly cleared field of Mr. A. K. Smoak on Monday morning, the clothes of Sue Elmo were caught on fire, and before assistance could be rendered fully three-fourths of her body was covered in flames. She died shortly afterwards. Mr. Smoak’s plantation had been her home for twenty odd years.”*

On **April 8, 1909**, The Times and Democrat published a brief notation about a fire which occurred *“At about two o’clock Monday morning the barn and buggy sheds of Mr. John Gaskin, of the “Blue” neighborhood, containing much corn, fodder and general farm products, were destroyed by fire. The horses and mules were saved by hard work. Mr. Gaskin is an industrious farmer of moderate circumstances, and his loss falls heavy on him. He has no enemies and cannot account for the fire. He carried no insurance.*

In the **August 1909** printing of the Sanborn Maps of South Carolina, St. Matthews had 1,200 residents. The fire department operated with volunteer firemen comprised of 20 whites and 10 African-Americans, two independent hose reels with 500 ft. of hose on each, one “village type” hook & ladder company, 255 ft. of hose in reserve (all hose is 2 ½” in good condition), and the alarm was sounded by siren whistle. The town had water facilities which consisted of a combination gravity & pumping system from a 6” well by Air Lift to 125,000 reservoir pumped by 2 Platt Iron Works engines, 500 gal. per min. each to 75,000 gal. water tank elev’d 100 ft. above the business section to 16 dbl. hydrants through 3,000 ft. Of pipe. The average pressure was 55 lbs. and the fire pressure to 125 lbs. The system was installed in 1907. The streets were not paved, and the town had some electric lights.

The State newspaper, on **September 6, 1909**, gave an in-depth account of the status of St. Matthews and its progress. *“St. Matthews has all the modern conveniences of a real city, with the exception of a sewerage system. First class cement walks on all the principal streets of the town were laid several years ago, at a cost of something like \$8,000. The St. Matthews waterworks and electric light systems were installed about three years ago at an expense of about \$40,000. The plant could not be duplicated now, however, for less than about \$55,000. The town is thoroughly drained, more than \$10,000 having been expended from time to time for this purpose. The town has splendid protection from fire damage. There are two white reel companies and one colored hook and ladder company. The city reservoir which stands mounted 150 feet high holds 75,000 gallons of water, which gives heavy pressure. In addition to this, a duplicate reservoir stationed at the deep well holds 125,000 gallons, giving a total of 200,000 gallons of ready supply for any emergency.”*

On **June 16, 1910**, The Times and Democrat published a report that *“At a recent meeting of the town council of St. Matthews it was decided to send a representative of each fire company to the Annual Tournament in Sumter. St. Matthews has been hard hit by fire losses recently but now with a fine water work system, and trained firemen, they do not fear the fire bell as of old.”*

According to an article published on **July 23, 1910** in The Times and Democrat, *“The town council of St. Matthews has greatly improved west Bridge street by the construction of a first class concrete drain through the business section of the town. The street is now being coated with sand and clay composition.”*

The Times and Democrat, published on **October 1, 1910**, noted that *“The storehouse and entire stock of goods of J. W. Holman, St. Matthews, were completely destroyed by fire Wednesday morning at 2 o'clock. The fire was not discovered until such headway had been made that it could not be put out. The fire department was immediately upon the scene, and their quick work extinguished the flames, which if not arrested, would have wiped out the business section of the town. Mr. Holman had no insurance. His loss is about \$500. The building was owned by G. W. Fairey.”*

Sometime around 1910 or so, town records, and maybe even some local folklore, have floated around that the department had two horses named, “Smokey” and

“Old Sue.” Also, it is said that the department adopted a dog as their mascot and simply named him “Dog.” Neither of these stories have been corroborated in writing, but they sound plausible and are probably accurate.

According to the **March 7, 1911** edition of The Times and Democrat, *“The commissioners of public works of St. Matthews have just placed over the principal thoroughfare of the town an arch of beautiful lights, which adds to the attractiveness of the town. Several points of the town, it is stated, will be similarly lighted, and these, in addition to the splendid electric light system, makes St. Matthews perhaps the best lighted town of its class in the State.”*

The Bamberg Herald reported on **October 19, 1911** that *“A serious wreck of Southern freight train No. 72 occurred here at 12:10 this morning. A tremendous cloudburst had just taken place, the high water loosening the underpinning of the trestle about 50 yards north of the depot station. The northbound passenger had passed over a short time before. As the freight going south struck the trestlework, the timbers began to crack and bend. Engineer B. H. Weathersbee pulled open the throttle and landed his engine, but seven cars crashed into the excavation 40 feet below. Surgeons J. S. Wimberly, of Branchville, and T. H. Dreher, of St. Matthews, physicians of the Southern Railroad, and Dr. A. R. Able, of St. Matthews, attended the injured and relieved their sufferings.”*

The **December 2, 1911** printing of The Times and Democrat noted that *“Fire broke out in the Baptist parsonage at St. Matthews soon after noon Monday and considerable damage was done to the roof. The flooding from the fire hose also played havoc on the inside from an aesthetic standpoint. The furniture and fixtures belonging to Dr. John A. and Mrs. Sophia Brunson were all dragged to the street in safety, but terribly disfigured in transit. The fire is supposed to have originated either from a defective flue or from a spark to the roof.”*

The Times and Democrat published an article on **November 29, 1913** which describes an alleged couple of arson fires in the area. *“The barn of Mr. J. L. Carroll was burned to the ground Sunday night on his place about a mile and a half from town. The fire was first noticed from St. Matthews about 10 o’clock.”* The article states that Mr. Carroll’s *“dwelling was burned just a week before.”* *“The general opinion is that the fire was of incendiary origin, as there is no other logical reason that can be conceived of why this building should have been burned. It was just*

one week before this blaze that the handsome residence of Mr. Carroll was burned to the ground and the opinion is being expressed that probably both this fire and the burning of the barn was caused by an incendiary."

On **January 23, 1914**, The Times and Democrat wrote, *"On Tuesday afternoon at about four o'clock Policeman Wallace Jones discovered a fire in the rear of the premises of Mr. D. D. Buyck and he secured help and endeavored to put it out, but the blaze was too much for the assistance at hand, so when the flames got dangerously near to a barn on Mr. Buyck's place Mr. Jones, realizing the seriousness of the situation, fired his pistol and gave the fire alarm and very soon the department and others were on the scene and it was only the work of a few minutes to subdue what might have resulted in a serious fire."*

The Times and Democrat told of a mass meeting in St. Matthews on **January 27, 1914**, to reorganized the fire department. *"A mass meeting which was called by the town council at their meeting last week was held Tuesday night...The action of the meeting was to request the town council to elect the chief of the fire department. It had been stated that the object of the calling together of the citizens was to affect a reorganization of the fire department of the town. It was decided that the companies do not need a reorganization but it was suggested that a cooperative spirit among the town council, the fire companies and the citizens of the community is all that is necessary to enable the fire department to keep and maintain the standard of efficiency."*

The Times and Democrat reported on **November 26, 1914** that *"Mr. John McLauchlin had the misfortune to lose his two-story packhouse which caught fire Monday afternoon about 5 o'clock. The building stood on the other side of West End cemetery. The origin of the fire is not known. The entire building and contents were lost."*

The article continued, *"The following is a list of the members of company No. 1 of the fire department: C. B. Felder, D. J. Gaskin, J. E. Sandres, Sam Pearlstine, Walter Able, O. C. Robinson, W. P. Prickett, James Banks, E. D. Hyrne, and W. H. Gaskin. The following are members of No. 2: Ralph Axson, John McLauchlin, Jr., F. M. Prickett, C. H. Rickenbaker, Osmand Hildebrand, E. J. Hildebrand, Russell Buyck, Moseley Jones, C. P. Zeigler, C. H. Wise, B. H. Hungerpillar, and Harry McLauchlin."*

On **May 8, 1915**, The Anderson Intelligencer reported on a tornado outbreak that hit Manning as well as in Marlboro County. Numbers of people were killed. But, it also struck with less damage in and around St. Matthews. *“Calhoun county reports some damage from the storm, a barn at St. Matthews having been set on fire by lightning and burned.”*

The Item, a Sumter newspaper, printed a notice of interest to the St. Matthews' firemen in the **July 10, 1915** printing of the paper. *“F. H. McMaster, Insurance Commissioner, has sent a letter to the mayors and fire chiefs in 30 towns and cities of the State notifying them of the proposed visit of Louis Behrens, Chief of the Charleston fire department. The officials are urged to cooperate with Chief Behrens in the instructing the firemen of the State in better fire fighting methods. Chief Behrens, in a letter to Mr. McMaster, stated that he will visit the following towns and cities: Anderson, Greenville, Spartanburg, Rock Hill, Orangeburg, Georgetown, Marion, Darlington, Beaufort, Bishopville, Hartsville, Kingstree, Aiken, Camden, Abbeville, Bennettsville, St. Matthews, Walterboro, Bamberg, Laurens, Winnsboro, Union and Laurens.”*

On **October 24, 1915**, The Columbia Record featured the town of St. Matthews in a big write-up, and mentioned their fire department. *“St. Matthews, the metropolis of Calhoun County, is its ration of rapid progression has been astounding. No other town anyway near it size in South Carolina has made such strides toward everything that goes up to make up a city, and its citizens are proud of its prosperity and growth. The past ten years has been one of uninterrupted progress. The village of 700 inhabitants in 1905 St. Matthews nearly reached the 2,000 mark, and, with the gain in population, industry has marched hand in hand. The town has all modern conveniences, much concrete sidewalk, fire companies, telephones, telegraph, express companies and six passenger trains a day.”*

The Manning Times reported on **December 8, 1915** that *“Mr. W. P. Wannamaker lost several bales of cotton by fire last Saturday in St. Matthews.”*

The Bamberg Herald noted on **January 15, 1916** that *“Last night about midnight, while the electrical storm was at its height and the rain was pouring heaviest, lightning struck and set on fire the barn of T. A. Amaker, resulting in a total loss. Mr. Whetstone had just gone home and just at the moment the lightning struck,*

happened to be looking in the direction of the barn. He saw the stroke and in a few moments saw the flames burst from the building. He dashed upon the scene, opened the doors and ran the mules and hogs out. The fire companies did good work in saving all nearby buildings."

The Columbia Record, dated **February 21, 1917**, posted that *"The fire department has added a hose wagon and two horses to its equipment. They are temporarily stationed at Gressette Live Stock Company's stables on Railroad Avenue. A house on Mack street will furnish them quarters in the near future. Heretofore, the department only had hand reels and hook and ladder. While other equipments were always speedy in going to a fire, the horses and ladder means still quicker action. The horses have been trained for this work, hence they are not novices in the business."*

On **May 16, 1917**, The Manning Times posted on the distribution of Firemen's Fund monies to be distributed to fire departments in the State. *"Two score South Carolina towns will receive amounts from the firemen's insurance and inspection fund to be distributed by the State department of insurance. The total amount to be paid to the trustees of the fund will be \$11,4982.83."* It was discovered that St. Matthews was to receive \$2.10, Easley-\$99.28, Chester-\$14.14, and Belton-\$46.89.

The County Record of Kingstree reported on **December 20, 1917** that *"St. Matthews had a water famine last week, caused by the bursting of the mains."*

An advertisement appeared in The State newspaper on **April 25, 1920** seeking fire horses. *"The town of St. Matthews, S. C., wants to buy two trained fire horses. Old horses not wanted. Price must be right. Submit particulars and price to W. R. Symmes, Treasurer, St. Matthews, S. C."*

According to the Sanborn Maps dated **July 1920**, St. Matthews had one paid man and two horses on duty at all times; 1 hose wagon; 700 ft. of 2 ½" hose on wagon, 700 ft. of 2 ½" hose in reserve; alarm by bell. A water tank elevated on 100 ft. steel tower with a capacity of 75,000 gallons and about 3 miles of 4"-8" pipe with 34 hydrants. The water system was installed in 1907. The streets were still not paved, but the town did have some electric public lighting. The population was about 2,000.

*“Fire Horses Lose Job”, reads the caption in the **August 14, 1920** edition of The State. “The fire truck purchased some time by the town arrived and was unloaded Wednesday. It carries a chemical engine, hand extinguishers and sufficient hose for any emergency, besides being equipped with the latest fire ladders. It is a beautiful machine carrying the name of the St. Matthews fire department on the hood and highly decorated with nickel ornaments. The horse system will be dispensed with. The citizens who have seen it admire its beauty and are congratulating Chief W. P. Pricket and the town council for this advanced step. It will be in charge of Olin Dantzler, who now has charge of the horse system.” This writer found where Chief Pricket may have also operated the St. Matthews Hotel for several years around 1917.*

To expand the above story, there appears an advertisement in The State paper on **August 15, 1920** which reads, *“FIRE HORSES AND WAGON FOR SALE”. “The town of St. Matthews, S. C., has two well trained horses with wagon, hose carts and hook and ladder for sale at cheap figure for quick buyer. Reason for sale is that a motor truck has been installed. Each article recognized by the insurance commission. Write or wire J. L. Carroll, Mayor or W. R. Symmes, Treasurer.”*

The Dispatch-news from Lexington posted on **October 19, 1921** that *“Yesterday afternoon fire destroyed the entire ginnery of J. W. Murph of the Wesley chapel section, together with 70 bales of cotton, about 20 tons of seed and many other articles of value on the premises. So rapid was the contagion that Mr. Murph was compelled to unhitch and drive his mules from the wagon standing under the sheds in order to prevent their being burned.”*

The Bamberg Herald, on **July 20, 1922**, wrote that *“Calhoun had its second big cotton loss this afternoon when lightning set fire to and destroyed the cotton warehouse at Fort Motte. It is said that the last was the 12th time Mr. Chaplin had been visited by lightning in five years, and he is reported to have requested an investigation by the federal government of his environment to ascertain if there is latent cause. An old mine is said to have existed there once and he suspects the existence of minerals, which may prove the attraction.”*

The Times and Democrat noted on **July 14, 1923** that *“Wednesday night about midnight the residence of Mrs. Reynolds T. Martin and her mother, Mrs. Thomas,*

was destroyed by fire. The cause of the fire is a matter of curious speculation. Mrs. Martin had not long before retired. No fire had been about the part of the house, which at first ignited. The fire department was immediately upon the scene, but the best that could be done was to save the adjoining residences and a part of the home furnishings."

Sumter's newspaper, The Watchman and Southron, noted in their **November 13, 1926** edition that *"A store owned by D. W Haigler and occupied by M. M. Metz at Cameron, ten miles south of Orangeburg, with its stock of goods was destroyed by fire tonight. The Orangeburg fire department sent a pumper and a squad of firemen in response to a report that the town was being destroyed, but could be of no assistance on account of the absence of water. The St. Matthews fire department was also called upon for aid, but no equipment was sent, it is said."*

On **April 16, 1927**, The Times and Democrat reported that *Henry Lee, living on the 'Tribune' plantation was severely burned Thursday night from which he died Tuesday night. Lee was driving his auto when for some reason the machine failed to go. He got out and made search for the cause, finally peeping into the gas tank by the aid of a lighted match, when the tank exploded, from which his clothing ignited, with the above results."*

The Columbia Record shares an interesting letter to Santa Claus on **December 14, 1928**. *"Dear Santa Claus: I am a little boy four years old and I will be five years old September and I want a dump truck, a little fire truck, some candy and nuts. Joe Caughman."*

On **June 28, 1934**, The State newspaper reported that *"About noon today fire completely destroyed two seed houses and one gin outfit belonging to Albert S. Smoke. The loss is estimated at \$5,000. This is probably the biggest fire St. Matthews has ever experienced. The Orangeburg fire department was called and responded quickly, helping to keep the fire from spreading."*

On **January 4, 1935** The Columbia Record reported that *"1820 Home At St. Matthews Burns In Fire."* *"The colonial home of W. H. Hicklin two miles from here was burned last night. None of the family was home at the time of the fire except one daughter, Mrs. Alex Hicklin. The building, one of the finest in this section and*

more than 109 years old, was partly covered by insurance. Nearly all of the furniture was saved."

According to the Sanborn Maps of South Carolina dated **October 1935**, the fire department was a majority volunteer with one chief who was partly paid, two paid drivers and 10 men (paid on call) who operated out of one brick station. The town purchased an American-LaFrance triple combination 650 gallon pumper with on 60 gallon booster tank, 1,500 ft. of 2 ½" hose, 600 ft. of 1" hose, two 2 ½ gallon soda/acid extinguishers, one 30 ft. extension ladder and one 15 ft. roof ladder. The department also had 1,000 ft. of 2 ½" hose in reserve and one hand hose reel with 300 ft. of 2 ½" hose. The alarm was received by telephone and sounded by a bell. The water system was now about 3 miles of 4", 6", and 8" pipes with 34 hydrants. There were about 3 miles of water lines.

The Columbia Record, dated **December 18, 1937**, states that *"Fire, which started early Friday morning in the boiler room of St. Matthews high school, damaged considerably this boiler room and auditorium before it was extinguished by the local fire department. Officials said the exact amount of damage was not known, but it was covered by insurance."*

On **March 7, 1941**, The Times and Democrat reported that a *"Warehouse belonging to Albert Smoak at St. Matthews being destroyed by fire early Wednesday morning and cotton stored in the building damaged or burned."*

According to an article published in The Times and Democrat on **June 12, 1947**, *"The St. Matthews Fire Department will obtain \$237, as contrasted to the \$179 it received last year. The revenue, which is derived from a one-percent tax on fire insurance sold in municipalities, has just been distributed to 91 qualified fire departments in South Carolina."*

The Columbia Record reports on **March 21, 1951** that *"The Town of St. Matthews plans the erection of a new fire station on East Railroad avenue. The town has secured a lot located between the Pearistine Hardware company and the Texaco Service Station. The lot which measures 54 feet wide and 93 feet long, was purchased from Lawrence M. Able."*

The Times and Democrat, dated on **October 5, 1951**, that *“The St. Matthews Fire Department on Tuesday night enjoyed a barbecue dinner. All but three of the twenty volunteer firemen were present at the meeting. Chief J. F. McLaughlin and co-chief, W. D. Whetstone in charge. Chief Fisher and Assistant Chief T. W. Johnson, and David Gillam, secretary of the Fire Department, from Orangeburg. Guest speaker was Chief Fisher who expressed appreciation and admiration for the fine work done by the St. Matthews Volunteer Fire Department. Plans are being made for the observance of Fire Prevention Week.”*

The article continues by naming the members of the department. *“St. Matthews enjoys a fire insurance rate which compares favorably with that of much larger municipalities, made by the fine work of the volunteer firemen. These are J. F. McLaughlin, Chief, W. D. Whetstone, Jr., Co-Chief, Ralph Axson, Sr., Milton Early, Waring DeMars, Marion Staley, Julian Riley, Wm. Seekinger, Fletcher Riley, Iverson Riley, Hydrick Wienges, R. J. Sikes, D. R. McGhee, Jesse Adams, Ruibin Pinckney, Peter Sumter, Jake Snyder.”*

On **October 23, 1953**, The State newspaper reported that *“The proposed location of the new St. Matthews fire station and town hall is being opposed by some citizens on the ground that the location, on East Railroad Avenue, is on what they consider a main traffic artery (U. S. Highway 601). City council members point out, however, that Highway 601 is not a main city street and that traffic can easily be detoured to West Railroad Avenue. They cite the central location of the proposed site as an advantage. If the plan materializes, the cotton platform on Liberty Street and the old fire house will be sold at auction December 7.”*

In the **February 5, 1958** edition of The Times and Democrat, an article was written about four tenant houses on fire. *“Four tenant houses were destroyed here early Sunday night in a spectacular fire resulting from unknown causes. There were no injuries, according to the St. Matthews Fire Dept., but very few furnishings were saved. Anyone wishing to donate clothes or household goods to the fire victims may leave them at the St. Matthews Fire Dept.”*

The Times and Democrat posted notice of a fire in their **May 15, 1958** edition of the paper. *“A blaze which resulted from a pan of hot grease left on a stove caused several thousand dollars of damage to the home of Paul Parler here about 10:30 a.m. Wednesday. According to Dixon Whetstone, Jr., fire chief, the kitchen of the*

Parler home was a total ruin. The breakfast room suffered some fire damage and the rest of the house was damaged by smoke."

The State paper printed a brief story at a fire in their **November 21, 1961** paper. *"Meanwhile, over in another county, the St. Matthews Fire Department was plagued by a fire that just wouldn't go out. Firemen went several times to the same house that kept burning, and finally were able to extinguish the blaze. Apparently water just isn't what it used to be."*

The Times and Democrat wrote on **December 14, 1962** about a fire in St. Matthews. *"A predawn fire which is believed to have started in a new furnace installed Wednesday completely destroyed the home of state Rep. T. M. (Babe) Nelson and Mrs. Nelson Thursday. Finding the telephone line burned out, they left the house to call the St. Matthews Fire Department at the home of a neighbor and on their return were unable to reenter the building. When the firemen arrived, they were helpless. Water in fire hydrants were frozen to throw steam on the blaze. Fortunately, Buster Nelson said, valuable antique furniture, china and silverware were removed from the home before the blaze spread too far."* The State paper also said that *"The St. Matthews Fire Department, arriving on the scene at 6 a.m....the 15 to 20 men were hampered by subfreezing temperatures which necessitated building fires around one hydrant before water could be pumped. Onlookers reported icicles hanging from the firemen's arms."*

According to The State newspaper on **February 8, 1971**, *"Walter Dixon Whetstone jr., 51, chief of the St. Matthews Fire Department, died Sunday in Auston, Tex. Funeral plans will be announced by Dukes-Harley Funeral Home in Orangeburg. Mr. Whetstone, a native of Columbia, was a son of Mrs. Estelle Smith Whetstone and the late Walter Dixon Whetstone. He was the owner and operator of City Dry Cleaners."*

The State also reported on the death of E. D. Whetstone in the **September 24, 1971** edition of the paper. *"Earle Dreher Whetstone, 75, of St. Matthews, died Thursday night in the Orangeburg Regional Hospital following an extended illness. He served as sheriff of Calhoun County for several years and later served as superintendent of the St. Matthews Water Works."* And, according to town records, Mr. Whetstone also served for a period of time as the fire chief.

The Columbia Record reported on a fire in St. Matthews in their **September 1, 1977** issue of the paper. *“Fire swept through the 72-year old Calhoun Feed and Seed Co. building in downtown St. Matthews about noon yesterday, gutting the structure and destroying more than \$35,000 in farm hardware, feed and seed. Two trucks from the St. Matthews Fire Department, aided by a truck from the Orangeburg Fire Department, fought the fire for about two hours, trying to keep it*

The Greenville News reported on **August 29, 1978** that *“The skeletal remains found in a Calhoun County mobile home that burned over the weekend have been identified as those of the trailer’s 43 year old owner, Bernice Armstrong, according to Coroner Hoyt Shuler. The blaze was discovered shortly before midnight Saturday by Mrs. Armstrong’s son as he returned home, authorities said. St. Matthews Fire Chief Isaac Pendarvis said the fire department had received a report of the fire but had not sent a truck because Mrs. Armstrong had failed to pay her yearly fee for fire protection. Under a town council policy, out-of-town residents living within five miles of the town limits may receive protection only if they pay the \$30 annual fee, Pendarvis said. Pendarvis added that ‘there wouldn’t have been any way’ to save the woman’s life even if firetrucks had responded promptly, since the mobile home was engulfed in flames when Mrs. Armstrong’s son discovered the blaze.”*

Funeral arrangements for former St. Matthews Fire Chief, J. F. McLaughlin, were announced in The Times and Democrat on **August 9, 1979**. *“J. F. McLaughlin, 75, of 201 West Bridge Street, St. Matthews, died Wednesday at Orangeburg Regional Hospital. Mr. McLaughlin was born in St. Matthews, a son of the late Dr. Thomas J. and Rosa Buyck McLaughlin. He was a member of the St. Matthews Presbyterian Church and a retired mechanic.”*

The death notice for former Fire Chief Isaac “Sonny” Pendarvis, Sr. was announced on **July 13, 1983** in The Times and Democrat. *“Isaac ‘Sonny’ Pendarvis Sr., 46, of 509 Pou St., St. Matthews, died Tuesday at Orangeburg Regional Hospital. Honorary pallbearers will be members of the Calhoun County Rescue Squad and the St. Matthews Fire Department. Mr. Pendarvis was born in Calhoun County, a son of Mrs. Winifred Edwards Pendarvis and the late Boyce Durant Pendarvis. He was a member of the First Baptist Church in St. Matthews. He was employed as the city superintendent, fire chief and rescue squad leader in St. Matthews.”*

The Times and Democrat noted on **July 19, 1985** that *“Norman Knight, chief of the St. Matthews Fire Department, was Thursday night appointed Calhoun County’s new emergency preparedness director. Knight is the county’s main fire dispatcher.”* Knight joined the fire department in 1979.

For a brief period of time, Larry Seckinger served as Fire Chief for the town of St. Matthews. According to a **May 4, 1990** article in The Times and Democrat, the St. Matthews Town Council *“approved the appointment of St. Matthews Fire Chief Larry Seckinger to the Calhoun County Fire Commission.”*”

A lengthy article published in The Times and Democrat on **November 23, 1992** tells about the new countywide volunteer fire system in Calhoun County. *“Since 1991, when Calhoun County Council approved fire service district lines, local residents there have enjoyed a countywide volunteer fire protection system, dependent, not on contracts and donations as in the past, but on legally established fees collected by the county government. Norman Knight, county fire services coordinator, said ‘I can’t say enough about how blessed we are to have County Council’s support for fire services. You don’t have to look far to find other places having a hard time.’ Knight also is the St. Matthews fire chief and the county’s director of emergency preparedness.”*

The Times and Democrat reported on **January 18, 2002** that *“A good audit report for fiscal year 2000-2001 brightened the January meeting of the St. Matthews Town Council. Also during the meeting, St. Matthews Fire Chief Windy Heckle presented a proposal to the council to purchase a much-needed replacement fire truck by obtaining a demonstration model for \$138,852. The council unanimously approved the proposal. Council agreed to purchase the fire truck utilizing funds from the town’s savings account since the current interest rate is so low.”* (This writer had the pleasure to have worked for Spartan Fire Apparatus/Pierce Mfg. at the time, and was honored to have sold this pumper to the town.)

It is with deep satisfaction that this writer now puts his pen down from further research of the St. Matthews Fire Department. It has been an interesting project to uncover some of the department’s stories and legacy which had probably been lost through time or else forgotten by generations long past. This research is certainly not complete and likely found to have some inaccuracies of dates,

names, etc. However, the gaps and rest of the history to the present day is up to others to complete and put to pen. It is this writer's hope that someone will take up the challenge and capture the department's rich heritage and keep its legacy alive. History never stops...it is created with each passing day. Remember, we learn from history, but that means knowing your history!

Note: Special thanks to Chief Greg Sandlin and others who contributed to this research.

Former Fire Chiefs (in order as determined)

W. P. Prickett...first fire chief

E. D. Whetstone

J. F. McLauchlin

Walter Dixon Whetstone, Jr.

Issac Pendarvis

Norman Knight

Larry Seckinger

Walter "Wendy" Heckle

Greg Sandlin