

## Early History of Walterboro Fire Department

History records the Town of Walterboro was established in 1817 and was later incorporated in 1826. While little written information exists regarding fire protection in those early days, a glimpse into the past would likely reveal the town experienced frequent fires due in part to the wooden construction methods of the period. This assumption is based on stories from other villages and towns in the area which share similar accounts about fire. Small towns in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century utilized very primitive means to extinguish fires, ie., buckets of water, axes, shoves, blankets and various other limited techniques. The alarm of fire was likely sounded by crude but very effective measures... firing three shots in the air by pistol, shotgun, or rifles which signaled an emergency, or the constant ringing of a church bell located in the vicinity of the town.

Fire protection was totally dependent on citizen volunteers responding to an alarm of fire. Not unlike today, fires could be contained and property saved if caught in its beginning stages. However, more often than not, volunteers recognized their limitations and got to work trying to remove the contents of a structure as much as attempting extinguishment. When structures were built close together fires spread rapidly from house to house, business to business. Often a fire break was attempted by tearing down walls, out-buildings, fences, or other wooden structures in an effort to limit the fire's spread.

In his book, *"A Legacy That Lives On"*, Carter Jones, Historian for the S. C. State Firefighters' Association, states *"prior to the organization of a fire department, it has been said fire was the greatest enemy for a community. From South Carolina's earliest beginnings, devastating fires have taken its toll in injury, death, and ruin of property."* Jones goes on to say, *"out of necessity, these fires brought attention to the need for*

*creative firefighting methods and ordinances required to prevent and safeguard our citizens from unwanted fire.”*

As Walterboro grew in population, fire protection had to have become a significant consideration by the town’s citizens and leaders. Research confirms that an *“official”* fire department was finally organized in **1869** shortly after the end of the civil war. While there is no record of the type of fire department established, with certainty it can be said the town spent money on the purchase of more useful instruments and tools to fight fire.

Interestingly, not all fires were accidental. The Charleston Daily News published on **September 4, 1869**, chronicles a sad story which states *“our Colleton correspondent reports that three murders have taken place in a short time, and that there have been three incendiary fires in Walterboro in one week.”*

The earliest and most accurate documentation and description of a fire department was in 1898. The town operated with one hand-drawn, hand-pumped engine and one hand-drawn *“hook & ladder”* wagon. Both the engine and the ladder wagon required a large number of men to pull these machines to the fire’s location. And, once on the scene, supplying the engine with water required significant numbers of able-bodied men to keep the pump going. Often times women, young people and older citizens were pressed into action by hauling buckets of water obtained from wells to supply the engine, and, depending on the type of apparatus purchased by the Town, it could possibly have drafted or drawn water from one of the numerous wells around town.

As the town grew in population, it’s leaders obviously encouraged it’s volunteer firemen to be the best they could be as evidenced by an article found in the **February 18, 1909**, edition of The Bamberg Herald. Under the headline of *“Fire in Walterboro”*, the writer states

*“Walterboro was visited by another fire yesterday morning about 2:30. The store of Grace & Warren was completely destroyed. It is not known how the fire originated, but it is supposed that it was caused by rats, although it is somewhat suspicious that this is the second store burned in the last three weeks at about the same hour of the night. The local fire department again did splendid work.”*

According to an inspection made by the Sanborn Map Company in **1912** of Walterboro, the town had a population of about 2,400 citizens. The fire department was located at the corner of Wichman & Market Street and operated with two hand-drawn hose reels and one *“hook & ladder”* wagon. There were two companies of firemen operated by sixteen men each. The department was led by a Chief and an Assistant Chief. No horses had yet to be purchased to pull the apparatus. The town’s streets were not paved, but there were some gas-powered street lights. A water system had been installed four years earlier and consisted of 1.5 miles of water mains which supplied 21 hydrants. The system utilized a 70 ft. elevated water tank powered by on 90 gpm pump from one deep well.

Walterboro’s story about its much-loved fire department and the advancement of fire protection is similar throughout South Carolina and the rest of the country. According to Jones, *“during the 1800s and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the composition of the fire department was much as it is today. The overwhelming majority of firemen were volunteers.”*

Over time, the Walterboro Fire Department embraced changes in technologies and sought to offer more training and benefits to its volunteer members. The fire department joined the newly formed S. C. State Firemen’s Association sometime around **1925**. The Walterboro department was one of only sixty-six member departments in **1926** and listed Mr. P. J. Lucas as Fire Chief that year.

Few archive records have been found that could provide the names of the officers or the many firemen who have served the department since its inception in 1869. However, we know those pioneers of our town's fire service were competent, strong, brave and willing to serve this community unselfishly.

Today, the Walterboro Fire Department continues its long tradition of service and unrivaled dedication to our citizens. In talking with Carter Jones, he said with much enthusiasm, "and, just look at the department today!"