

Early History Of The Abbeville Fire Department 1852-1925

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The story of Abbeville and the eventual evolution of fire protection in this community goes back to the late 1700 and early 1800's. Located in the upstate of South Carolina, some 85 miles west of Columbia and 45 miles south of Greenville, the area around Abbeville was settled in 1758 by a group of French Huguenots, Scotch and Irish immigrants in search of a place where they could worship and live freely. Those who settled in South Carolina, and in due course in the inland areas of the state, were very versatile and well-educated people. They were well-received by their new communities, and many became farmers, merchants, and craftsmen. A French Protestant once said, "We have found what we were looking for..." in South Carolina.

With the help of the Huguenots and other colonial settlers from the coast, a small community began to grow into a village and then a flourishing town. The first church to be built in the community was a Methodist Church in 1828. The town of Abbeville was officially incorporated as a municipality on December 20, 1832, although some documents say 1840. This small town was the location of a meeting which launched the state's secession from the Union on November 22, 1860 and played a key role during the Civil War until the Confederacy was dissolved at the Burt-Stark Mansion, near Abbeville's historic Court Square, in the spring of 1865.

Little wooden houses, stores, other commercial enterprises, a school, and churches soon sprang up as the population grew in numbers. Unfortunately, Abbeville was most doubtless 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 devouring element," or "the fire king."

The author Nancy Backes, said, “Americans had for many years helplessly watched their little wooden towns burn and be rebuilt and burn again.” Recorded history reveals that Abbeville was certainly no different, and, out of necessity, these fires brought attention to the need to better safeguard the citizens and properties from the ravages of unwanted fire.

Most small communities, villages and towns of the 18th and 19th centuries improvised very primitive methods of controlling and extinguishing fires before their citizens were able to afford more sophisticated advances in fire protection. 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 “FIRE, FIRE, FIRE” in the roadways and streets, firing pistols, shotguns, or rifles into the air, or ringing of a church bell if one existed. Of course, as the population grew and resources permitted, various types of hand-drawn apparatus and equipment were purchased which proved more effective in fighting fires. And, towns began to adopt basic and uncomplicated building and fire codes designed to minimize and confine the spread of fire, ie. fire walls, brick chimneys, fire limits, etc.

This writer will attempt to capture the rich history of the fire department that is available in order to expand on the struggles, leadership, major challenges, and progression of the Abbeville 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...

This writer could not find any mention of fire protection in the town of Abbeville until 1852 when the idea of purchasing a fire engine was bounced around after a damaging fire. However, it is my belief, based on the history of other sister communities in and around Abbeville, that

the town most likely had a sizeable group of citizen volunteers who could be counted on to turn out at the alarm of fire to do what they could to subdue a fire. If they found themselves unable to extinguish a fire, they assumed the role of a salvage company risking life and limb to remove the contents from a burning structure. Of course, in their haste to remove more delicate pieces of furniture, china, linens, and paintings, the contents were more often than not damaged or wrecked beyond repair.

On **June 8, 1852**, The Sumter Banner told of a serious fire in Abbeville. *"We are informed by the Abbeville Banner that a fire broke out in the village of Abbeville, last week, which resulted in considerable damage. It is stated that Mr. Jones and Mr. Lawson suffered a loss of fifteen hundred dollars each. The Banner takes the occasion to make some remarks which we will here quote, and call the attention of the citizens of Sumterville to the same, 'that this occurrence our citizens have seen the necessity of some preparation for emergencies of the kind and on illustration of the use of an engine. Being so liable to fire from the materials of which our houses are constructed, it is strange, passing strange, that we are so indifferent as to the matter.' Property owners of Sumterville we earnestly call your attention to these remarks, and trust that you may take steps to prepare for a like occurrence here. The citizens of Abbeville like the village of Sumterville are utterly unprepared to meet the devouring element. We could designate several points at which if a fire should brake (break) out, with a favorable wind, the village would be totally destroyed."*

The article continues with further thoughts from Abbeville about purchasing an engine. *"Let a census of property holdesr be taken, an estimate of the amount of each involved made, and a proportionate tax imposed. This can be accomplished by a unanimous meeting of our citizens; let the Town Council be authorized to take the census and make the estimate, levy the tax and take charge of the whole work."*

The Charleston Daily Courier, dated **July 24, 1858**, reported that *“A fire broke out at Abbeville, on Monday (the 17th), at about ten o’clock, A.M., in the hotel owned by Dr. Samuel Marshall, and occupied by Mr. P. S. Rutledge. From the hotel the flames extended to the store of Messrs. R. H. Wardlaw & Son, and thence to the store of Mr. J. A. Allen, there being but a narrow alley between them; from thence to the hotel of Mrs. Allen, occupied by Mr. J. Ramey, consuming the entire wooden block, from the South corner of Brick Range to the South corner of Mrs. Allen’s lot, not leaving a building except the stables on the lot of Mrs. A. The hotel known as the Posey row, against the block of buildings extending from Gray & Robertson’s to Branch & Allen’s drug store, was saved by an intervening brick wall. The store and dwelling of Mr. White, but a few paces from the corner of Mr. Allen’s building, was saved with difficulty, and with them the town from Dendy’s corner down.”*

Again, The Charleston Daily Courier posted a brief statement about the above fire in their **July 30, 1858** paper which addresses *“Messrs. Editors: We perceive, by looking over your last Saturday’s paper, that you put us down as sufferers, by the late fire in this place, to the amount of \$8,000. This is a mistake. We only had to remove our stock, and judged the damage to be about \$800 at least, but on looking over our stock, we find that our loss will hardly be one-half of that amount. You will confer a favor by correcting this mistake in your next issue. Respectfully yours, M. Israel & Brussell.”*

The Daily Phoenix, a Columbia paper, in the **January 23, 1872** edition of the paper quotes from the Abbeville Medium paper that tells of a big fire which occurred the 19th in Abbeville. The description of the fire is frightening and begins with, *“It is our duty to chronicle, this week, the most terrible calamity that has ever befallen the village of Abbeville. The shrill cry of ‘fire, fire,’ aroused the peacefully sleeping inhabitants of Abbeville, on yesterday morning at about half-past 1 o’clock, and for three mortal hours the ‘fire king’ madly raged and ruled. The streets*

were thronged with a noisy, bustling, excited crowd, and what, with mad flames, leaping up to kiss the skies, flying women, and earnest workers, the occasion was 'grand, gloomy and peculiar.'"

The article continues, "The fire is said to have started in Mrs. Bowie's kitchen, and to have been unmanageable before discovery. This house is situated just back of the row of buildings known as Knox's range, and built of lumber, was a fit subject for the inauguration of so terrific a conflagration. Knox's whole row of buildings were destroyed, the Court House, Marshall House, and the row of old shanties next to the Marshall House."

Now, the story really gets ugly when the reporter said, "Such conduct as we witnessed of a great many persons present was a disgrace to manhood. While the flames were licking up everything, gaping prodigies of manhood filled the streets, and never lifted a hand to help the brave. While those held back and were disgraced, others rushed forward and became 'covered all over with glory.' Doctors, lawyers and preachers all took a hand in fighting the great 'fire king.' A great deal of stealing was done during the progress of the fire, and as much lost by roguery nearly as was lost by fire. No order existed whatever among the people, and it is strange that anything at all was saved."

The Charleston Daily News dated **January 22, 1872**, comments on the just described fire in Abbeville and the nonexistence of a fire engine. *"This a great calamity, especially for an inland village like Abbeville, and, to add to the disaster, there seems to have been but a very limited amount of insurance upon most of the property destroyed. As to a fire department, there was nothing of the kind—not even an ordinary hand engine. If there is anything that can stimulate the citizens of our country villages to exertions in this direction, a disaster of this kind ought to be sufficient."*

The Fairfield Herald on **January 24, 1872** also reported on the recent fire. *“Information reached us yesterday morning, of a most destructive fire, which occurred in the town of Abbeville on Thursday night.”*

Archives of the City reveals that *“A meeting was held in Lawson’s Hall on **February 1, 1872** to address the need and establish an effective fire fighting organization. The meeting was well attended. The Rev. Edward R. Miles chaired the meeting. A constitution was adopted and the newly formed organization took the name ‘Hook and Ladder Company of Abbeville.’ William H. Parker was elected captain, John Enright 1st foreman, J. Townes 2nd foreman, Thomas C. Seal 3rd foreman and W. W. Vance as secretary.*

The Greenville News confirms that a fire company is at long last going to be funded, and reports on **February 21, 1872** that *“The Town Council of Abbeville, at their meeting on the 7th inst. Voted \$500 to assist in furnishing a fire company.”* City records confirm that a committee was appointed to raise funds for the purchase of equipment in addition to the amount the council was willing to contribute. Monthly meetings were decided on, and by mid-June, the organization was fully organized and equipped. We are told that a number of ladders and 36 rubber buckets with bright lettering of Hook and Ladder Company had been obtained.

On **November 21, 1872**, The Anderson Intelligencer announced a *“DESTRUCTIVE FIRE IN ABBEVILLE—LOSS FIFTY THOUSAND DOLLARS.”* The article continues with a detailed description of the event. *“We sincerely regret to hear of another serious fire in our neighboring town of Abbeville, which is the second conflagration of importance occurring in that place during the present year. The fire broke out on Sunday morning before day, it swept a goodly portion of the business houses before the flames were subdued.”*

A correspondent with the Abbeville Medium provided the following account: *“At one o’clock on Sunday morning the usual quiet of the town of Abbeville was broken by the hideous shouts of Fire! Fire! and directly all the bells in town began ringing at a fearful rate. The fire originated, it is supposed, in Mr. Andrew Hill’s kitchen, which is located in Granite Range, the western part of the square.”* The article continues by sharing the properties damaged or destroyed...Barnwell & Company’s store was first to catch and was destroyed; A. M. Hill & Company had some stock saved; J. D. Chalmer’s furniture store was destroyed; and Lee & Parker Drug store had their drugs and medicines saved. *“The most disastrous part of the fire, to the County generally, was the entire destruction of all books, papers, accounts, bonds, etc. in both the Sheriff’s and Clerk’s offices. At the fire before (which occurred in January), in which the Court House was destroyed, although these offices were burned, all their papers were saved. A great deal of trouble is anticipated on account of their destruction.”*

Next the report describes the hard work of the town’s people, and note the mention of firemen who obviously did not turn out to fight the flames. *“The fire was stopped at the new Lawson building, at about five o’clock, by the very energetic and untiring efforts of the people. But the firemen—‘Oh, where were they?’ They couldn’t be had or found, but their ladders and buckets were found and proved a great benefit in extinguishing the fire. Abbeville seems doomed, as this is the second very destructive fire which has occurred in the past year, and has, I think, been one of the causes of her apparent tardiness in the market.”*

“The business interest of our town have been paralyzed; a portion of our best and most beautiful range of buildings destroyed; the legal documents of our county are in ashes. It will be years before the injuries occasioned by the fire will be overcome.”

The Charleston Daily News comments on the big fire and need for fire protection in their **November 20, 1872** paper. *“It seems that Abbeville, between robbery, wrong and fire, is destined to be destroyed....in order that so great misfortune and misery may never again visit us, let there be a fire company fully organized and equipped.”*

The Columbia paper, The Daily Phoenix, noted on **November 24, 1872**, that *“The destruction of the records of the Clerk’s, Sheriff’s and County Commissioners’ offices at the Abbeville fire, induced the impression that the Court House was destroyed. It seems the new Court House was not yet completed, and the County officials above stated were occupying rooms in Marshall’s building, which was burnt. The total loss will be fully \$50,000.”*

On **November 27, 1872**, The Newberry Herald made an interesting observation. *“During the past two weeks, the chapter of disasters have been extensively frightful...the Boston conflagration, Chicago, Brooklyn, N. Y., St. Louis, and other cities have felt the effects of the fire fiend. Abbeville, in this State, has suffered in proportion to its size equally as much.”*

The Charleston Daily News reports on **January 3, 1873** that *“The handsome residence of Mr. T. C. Seal at Abbeville caught fire a few nights ago; the damage, however, was but slight.”*

The Edgefield Advertiser printed on **February 6, 1873** the account of a fire initially reported by the Abbeville Press and Banner a few days earlier. *“Again it is our said duty to chronicle another destructive fire, being the third in a space of a little over twelve months, which has consigned to ashes another of our finest business ranges. On the 19th, January, 1872, the Marshall House and the Court House, with the intervening buildings, were swept off by the flames of the destroyer; on the 17th, November last, the Granite Range shared the same fate; and*

now again, on last Monday evening, the 27th inst, Cothran & Wilson's new range, on Washington street, with the exception of the fine store occupied by Trowbridge & Co., which had arisen phoenix-like from the ruins of the first fire, was consigned to dust and ashes."

The report continued, "A little before 8 o'clock in the evening, the alarm was given. The flames had been discovered in rear of the store of Messrs. Marse & Miller, being the second store from the Eastern end of the building, and when first seen, were confined to a barrel of kerosene and the floor adjacent; the back door of the store being open." Now, pay attention to the method of fighting the fire by the town's citizens and firemen. "A line was formed, extending to the spring, and up and down went the buckets in rapid succession, and, for hours, until the battle was ended and the victory won, whites and blacks vied with each other. The fire was clearly the work of incendiary, prompted doubtless by the love of plunder."

An editorial in the Advertiser noted that "The picturesque village of Abbeville has again been ravaged by fire. Just a year ago the northeast side of the public square was laid in ashes, and in November last Granite Range, one of the finest blocks of business houses in the State, was burned to the ground. The third fire broke out on Monday night, and has destroyed six fine stores." The editor continues, "It is hard for any people to keep up their courage in the face of so many reverses, but the citizens of Abbeville come of good stock, and no siege of troubles can long overcome them. They have the hearty sympathy of their fellow-citizens; the more so, because the conflagration in Abbeville, like that in Kingstree, is the work of the incendiary. A short shrift and a long rope is what an incendiary deserves. Only some swift and terrible punishment will stop the barn-burning, the house-burning and the town-burning which are now so common in this State."

On the same day of the above fire, The Anderson Intelligencer reports *“There seems to be no doubt that the recent fire in Abbeville was the work of an incendiary, and we are glad to learn that there is a prospect of securing the perpetrators of the fiendish act. A number of persons have been arrested for stealing goods during the progress of the fire. Messrs. Cothran & Wilson valued their buildings at \$15,000.”*

After the disastrous fire in January, the General Assembly of the state took action to help and offered advice with lost records as reported in The Abbeville Press and Banner on **April 30, 1873**. *“AN ACT TO REMEDY AND SUPPLY THE LOSS OF PUBLIC RECORDS, AND TO PERPETUATE TESTIMONY IN REGARDS TO DEEDS, MORTGAGES, SETTLEMENTS, AND OTHER PAPERS, LOST BY FIRE AT ABBEVILLE.”* The Act continues, *“That any party to a record, plaintiff defendant, assignee, or any person having an interest in any judgement, decree or agricultural lien, the record of which has been destroyed by fire at Abbeville, on the 19th of January and 17th of November 1872, shall have the right to supply the same in the following manner.”* And, the ACT provides how to obtain relief and appropriate documents for those lost by the fires.

Again, City archives give a sad commentary on the status of a fire department. *“Unfortunately, the organization (fire department) through the years became more of a social organization than a fire fighting company. Little actual fire fighting training was engaged in, and the company had only minimal success in controlling the fires to which it was called over the years.”*

On **February 21, 1877**, The Newberry Weekly Herald tells the story that *“Mr. T. C. Perrin lost his fine residence in Abbeville by fire the 13th instant. Mr. Perrin had insured his house regularly for twenty years, but just a few days before allowed his policy to expire. Loss, \$40,000.”* A sad mistake for sure...a lesson for all of us!

On **January 30, 1881**, The Greenville News reported that *“The store of Cunningham & Templeton at Abbeville took fire on Friday night, but the flames were extinguished with a loss of \$500 or \$600.”*

The Abbeville Press and Banner on **January 3, 1883** headlined the news with *“BURNING OF BAKER’S CARRIAGE SHOP”* and followed this story. *“Last Wednesday night about eleven o’clock a blaze of fire was discovered making its way through the roof of the carriage and wagon shop on Main street. The cry of fire and the ringing of bells soon brought a large crowd to the scene. The building was entirely of wood and two stories high”*. The article continues by saying that the stock and contents were removed from the lower story.

The article gets more interesting as we learn more, *“When the alarm was given the young people...were participating in the pleasures of a party at Judge McGowan’s. All came down to the fire—the ladies stood under the ‘Big Oak Tree’ while their escorts worked hard to prevent the spread of the flames.”* The article continues with quite a description of those fighting the fire. *“Never in the history of fires did a better dressed set of firemen appear at a burning building, nor did firemen ever work with more daring energy. The gentlemen from the party were there in spike-tail coats and other fine and fashionable party attire. They seemed to forget their clothing, and pulled down walls, carried water from the wells, and up ladders, as if they were members of a regular hook and ladder company.”*

This writer often refers to a great resource found in the Sanborn Maps of South Carolina to glean from its findings details pertaining to fire protection, population, water works, and a general description of a town’s operations. 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 19th and 20th

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 **May 1884** inspection of the town of Abbeville by the Sanborn Map Company shows that there was a population of about 1,500 residents. Interestingly, there is no mention of the town having any sort of fire protection or water works other than public wells.

The Abbeville Messenger on **August 17, 1886** reported on an important meeting. *“On last Friday a meeting of the citizens of the town was called to take into consideration the advisability of getting a town clock and a fire engine. After discussion the matter of the town clock was indefinitely postponed, and the following committee was appointed to get up information concerning the fire engine and report at a meeting to be called some time in September: L. W. White, A. B. Wardlaw, T. P. Cothran, T. C. Seal, Jones F. Miller.”*

The article continued with some trepidation in its content. *“Very little enthusiasm was manifested in these matters, and it is to be regretted for a fire engine with cisterns of water on the square would afford great protection to the valuable property of the town. We are in hopes the committee will gain all the desired information and be able to make a favorable report. Our citizens should take an interest in these matters and show that all public spirit is not dead in the old town.”*

The **July 1889** inspection also did not again find any mention of a fire department or water works, but the population grew about 100 more residents for a population of about 1,600.

The Abbeville Press and Banner printed in the **April 6, 1892** paper that *“Abbeville should have a fire company and water works. These alone, after the first year would pay for themselves in the reduction of insurance rates. We hope our council will think on these matters.”*

On **December 19, 1894**, The Abbeville Press and Banner told that *“The dwelling house of Mr. E. Roche, on the crown of the hill about two miles northwest of the town of Abbeville was destroyed by fire one night last week.”*

The Abbeville Press and Banner published on **February 26, 1896** that *“Abbeville’s young men came to the front and organized a hook and ladder company with 23 members and only one of the number a real estate owner. Three lusty cheers for our young men. Of course, now that this important matter has taken place, our citizens, Business League and Council are expected to do their part. Let all put their shoulder to this wheel and roll on this grand movement until Abbeville will have a first class fire department, fully equipped and ready for all emergencies. The following officers were elected to serve the present year: W. F. Perrin, Chief; C. D. Brown, Assistant Chief; Jas. A. Hill, Secy & Treas. These are all good men, willing, able and ready at all times to do their whole duty.”* Wow! This writer thought the matter was taken care of back in 1872!!

The Abbeville Press and Banner has some encouraging news for their town in the **March 3, 1897** printing of the paper. *“The following is a list of the officers and members of the Abbeville Fire Company, organized Friday night: President-F, W Glen, Vice President-E. O. Ingram, Secretary & Treasurer-J. G. Aiken, Foreman Reel Company-W. J. Bryson, Asst. Foreman-W. G. Moses, Foreman Reel Company No. 2-W. F. Perrin, Asst. Foreman-F. G. White, Firemen- Luther H. Nickles, George Gambrel, O. H. Cobb, J. S. Bowie, J. B. Lyles, Jr., B L. Thomson, M. B. Reese, Thomas Thomson, Jr., Albert Henry, J. H. Perrin, R. M. Jones, T. Miller, R.*

L. Dargan, Townes Robertson, Jr., A. G. Cochran, Walter Swearingen, J. Allen Smith, Jr., Gordon T. White. The above list shows a set of good reliable men, who, being under perfect discipline and proper management, are calculated to be of great service to the city. All able-bodied young men should enlist in this grand movement."

On **March 17, 1897**, The Watchman and Southron of Sumter shared a post about *"Mr. Eugene Ingram has been elected Assistant Chief of the Abbeville Fire Department which was re-organized last week. Mr. Ingram was an enthusiastic member of the Sumter department before he removed to Abbeville and is fully acquainted with the duties of the position to which he has been elected. He will do his share toward making the Abbeville Fire Department efficient and a credit to the place."*

The Abbeville Press and Banner on **July 14, 1897** is certainly playing the advocate for the fire department and the town's citizens in this article. *"Abbeville needs an 'alarm bell' for the fire department, which at the hand of the night watchman can strike the hours of the night. A house is also needed for the storing of the reel carts, hose, and all articles belonging to this department. As things now stand, three stores would have to be broken into, or those carrying the keys hunted up before the apparatus could be gotten out in case of fire. By such a waste of time an ordinary cottage would be entirely consumed. We have a splendid outfit and a company of good men, and all that is now needed to make them efficient for duty is a small outlay on the part of our town council, otherwise no blame can truly be attached to the company in case of their tardy attendance at a fire."*

In the same paper of **July 14, 1897** is found an informative article about the *"STAND PIPE AND ARTESIAN WELL."* *"Believing a few facts about the artesian well, stand pipe, and water works of Abbeville will interest the readers of the Press and Banner, we note the following: The stand*

pipe built upon the highest point in Abbeville is 16 feet in diameter and 100 feet high, having a capacity of 150,000 gallons. The suction well, or reservoir near the branch is 8x12 and 10 feet deep, having a capacity of 7,200 gallons. The large pump at the well has a capacity of 150,000 gallons in 24 hours, in which time the stand pipe can readily be filled, which will force water through all the pipes of the city and from the hydrants through the hose water can be thrown over the highest buildings in the city. The artesian well is about 800 feet deep with a full supply of most excellent water, being clear as crystal, and delightfully cool. This is only a short imperfect pen picture of this important city plant. To fully appreciate it in all its interesting details you should see it for yourself."

In the **May 26, 1897** edition of The Abbeville Press and Banner, a story appeared which said, *"Some of our citizens were awakened about four o'clock last Monday by the noise of three pistol shots immediately followed by the cry of fire, fire, when 'twas found that a box of ashes had been placed to near the wood pile in the yard of Mr. J. W. Sign. Fortunately it was discovered in time to prevent a serious loss. Moral—never take up ashes in a wooden box."*

In the same paper, a brief notice was printed about *"Messrs. Ingram and Moses, of city, have just returned from Charlotte, N. C., where they went by special invitation to participate in a grand fire parade between the two states, North and South Carolina."*

Again, in the same paper, a happy notice is given. *"At last Abbeville is to have a fire department. It will be none too soon. Your correspondent has for some time (in fact, for many months, used his efforts in this direction). Our city fathers through their committee appointed to take charge of this part of the city's business, have closed a contract with The Renveance Rubber Company of Chelsea, Mass., through their agent, Mr. J. A. Lambert of Atlanta, Ga., for the following necessary appliances*

for the use of the Abbeville Fire Department: 1,000 feet of hose, 2 hand reels, 2 truss ladders, 4 tubular lanterns, 4 pair rubber boots, 1 spray pipe, 1 Callohan nozzle, 1 seamese connection, 1 Waldron nozzle, and spanner complete.”

The article continues, *“We might say every thing necessary to equip the firemen of our city and every article first class. This apparatus will be made at once and will be on hand in a very short while. Never have our city council spent the funds of the town in a better way. We congratulate them and Abbeville.”*

On **July 14, 1897**, The Abbeville Press and Banner commented that *“It is reported that the employees at the G., C. & N shops will organize a first class fire company at an early day, fully equipped and ready for business.”* Yet another fire company? What?

The Abbeville Press and Banner posted an interesting article on **July 16, 1897** which asked a question: *“What about the Abbeville Fire Company? The hose reels, ladders, etc. have arrived, and we will be expecting a big fire parade ere long.”*

Research completed by the City archivers tell that *“In **April 1898** the city had purchased a large fire bell and installed it just in front of the public well to help in summoning the men of the Hook and Ladder Company to fires. The bell could easily be heard throughout much of the town.”*

The Abbeville Press and Banner reported on what could have been a significant fire in the **January 4, 1999** paper. *“At the Abbeville Inn on last Monday morning at an early hour Mr. Melson was awakened by a dense smoke, and on looking around found a mattress on one of the beds in an adjoining room on fire and in full blaze. He seized the*

burning mattress and threw it out of the window. But for his timely aid Abbeville might have had another fire.”

On **September 20, 1899**, The Abbeville Press and Banner described another disastrous fire with the headline *“THREE WOODEN STORES AND TWO DWELLING HOUSES ON MAIN STREET GO UP IN SMOKE.”* The article continues, *“Last Wednesday morning, September 13, 1899, Policemen Fisher, who is faithful in discharge of his duties as night watchman, passed along the sidewalk in front of Mr. Wilder’s block at one o’clock on his way to wake Mr. W. N. Graydon who intended to take the 1:40 train to Atlanta. At that time he saw no signs of fire. Twenty minutes later he heard a woman’s voice crying “FIRE.” Seeing the reflection of the fire, Mr. Fisher at once gave the alarm by ringing the fire-bell.”*

“The fire companies assembled promptly, and soon members were actively at work fighting the fire. The West End Company from the Railroad Shops and the Hose Company from the Cotton Mill also responded promptly and assisted the Abbeville Fire Company and the Hook and Ladder Company, all under the command of the Fire Chief C. D. Brown. Very little was saved from the burning buildings. Abbeville has few attractions, which are better attended than the fires that we have, and a large per cent of those who hear the alarm come to the blaze. Abbeville is well prepared to fight fire, but when the blaze gets well underway in a tinder box, the efforts of the firemen, no matter how well directed, are powerless to stay the destroying element.”

The Abbeville Press and Banner headlined *“PROMPT AND EFFICIENT WORK OF THE FIRE DEPARTMENT”* on **May 16, 1900**. The story continues, *“One of the operatives houses was discovered to be on fire last Friday evening about seven o’clock. The fire companies were remarkably prompt. The fire bell had not been sounded for a minute until fire apparatus was running towards the blaze. The house was a*

wooden one, and although it was fully three quarters of a mile from the engine house, when the alarm was given, a large part of the building was saved. Praises of the firemen were heard on all sides, and the universal expression, as far as we heard, was that a paid fire department could not have done better."

"Mr. C. D. Brown is the popular and efficient Chief of the fire department, and a more competent officer, or a better citizen that C. D. Brown could not be found anywhere. The fire department and the water works are the things of which the people have reason to be proud. The water works is worth all the taxes that we pay. The fire department is tip top, first class, and all right, without any cost at all. Even if the town is finished, or to make a violent assumption, and suppose that it is plum dead, and only waiting for the undertaker, yet it is true that no town has better water works or better or more efficient firemen."

According to the **1901** survey from the Sanborn Maps of South Carolina, Abbeville had a population of 3,600 people. It indicates there were 100 white and 50 colored firemen who operated a hook and ladder truck, three hose carts, and 2,000 feet of 2 ½" hose. All the apparatus were drawn by hand. Additionally, the water works had been installed with water being pumped from two deep wells to a 120,000 gallon stand pipe. The town had eight miles of 4" to 8" mains, and 49 double hydrants which were *"flushed once per week."*

An advertisement appeared in the **May 22, 1901** edition of The Abbeville Press and Banner which attracted a lot of attention from the town's firemen. *"INTERSTATE FIRMEN'S TOURNAMENT IN NEWBERRY, S. C."* The article continues about a Southern Railway special for June 5th and 6th. *"Announces reduced rates to Newberry, S. C., and return from all points within the State of South Carolina, including Augusta,*

Ga.—lower rates for firemen and brass bands in uniform. Firemen's apparatus to be transported free."

The Abbeville Press and Banner praises the firemen in their **September 11, 1901** paper which headlined, "*DESTRUCTIVE FIRE...THE FURNITURE AND UNDERTAKING ESTABLISHMENT OF McDILL AND LYON IS DAMAGED.*" "*Last Friday night, at about 9:30 o'clock, one of the Rochester kerosene lamps exploded in the undertaking and furniture store of Mr. J. Hayne McDill. A coffin was being prepared for the burial of Boggs Kennedy who had died that day. The fire alarm was given, and in seven minutes the fire company had two strong streams of water playing upon the flames. In from four to six minutes the water had done its work. Abbeville is to be congratulated for the promptness and efficiency of her fire companies. No small town could have better fire protection. Promptness is the rule. The firemen did their duty, quickly, bravely and well.*"

The Abbeville Press and Banner announced to its readers on **February 26, 1902** that "*On last Monday night the gold mill, about eight miles south of Abbeville, was destroyed by fire. The loss is estimated at \$4,000.*"

Again, this writer checked the latest from the Sanborn Map collection dated **1906** to determine what progress Abbeville may have achieved since their inspection in 1901. It was found the population had risen to nearly 4,800 residents. Additionally, the fire department consisted of fifteen white firemen (including the foreman of the colored company) and fifty colored firemen. The department operated with one hose wagon, three hose reels, a hook and ladder truck (all still drawn by hand), and 1,500 feet of 2 ½" fire hose. The town has 9 miles of 4" to 8" mains with 55 hydrants. And, according to city records, the fire department's first full-time fireman (driver) was actually hired in 1902.

The Abbeville Press and Banner gave a sad commentary in the **March 23, 1910** paper about a terrible fire at Harbison College. *“On last Thursday morning about three o’clock the alarm of fire was sounded in the city of Abbeville, when it was discovered that the main remaining building at Harbison College near Abbeville was in flames.”* The article documented that there were some 30 or 40 boys in the building, *“three of whom were burned to ashes.”* According to authorities on the scene, *“The fire was undoubtedly incendiary by the fact that kerosene was also poured on the back door of the President’s house and it too set on fire.”* Interestingly, the city of Abbeville condemned the burning of the college and offered a reward of \$100 for the apprehension and conviction of the guilty party. The town council also appealed to the Governor for the state to kick in a reward as well.

According to the Sanborn Maps in **1912** the population of Abbeville was about 5,000 people. The fire department consisted of one company of seventeen volunteers, one paid driver, and three men slept in the station at night. The department ran with one hose wagon, three hose reels carrying 500 feet of 2 ½” hose, and two trained horses (named Mutt and Jeff). Additionally, the streets were unpaved but there were electric lights in town. The city limit is a circle with a radius of 1 ¼ miles about the court house. There were 9 ½ miles of 4” to 8” mains with sixty hydrants.

The Abbeville Press and Banner dated **June 26, 1912** headlined with *“WILL TRY FOR FIREMEN’S TOURNEY”* and tells about the mayor’s efforts to attract a gathering of firemen to the town. *“Mayor C. C. Gambrell, accompanied by Messrs. J. V. Elgin and Ray McKenzie, of the fire department left yesterday for Rock Hill, where the State Firemen’s Tournament is now in progress. The Abbeville department will not send a team to compete at Rock Hill, but Messrs. McKenzie and Elgin will*

learn all that they can in order that our boys may get in shape for the next tournament, which it is hoped will be in Abbeville.”

Good news for Abbeville! The Abbeville Press and Banner shared on **July 17, 1912** that *“Mayor Gambrell reported that he had been successful in his endeavor to secure the next meeting of the Firemen’s Tournament for Abbeville and explained the benefits to be derived from the gathering.”*

In the same paper, it is noted that *“The matter of the selection of a chief of the fire department was left to the committee on fire department. In view of the fact that the next State Tournament is to be held here and much work will be necessary before Abbeville can make the showing which she should on her own, this position is going to be one of considerable importance, and council thought the committee should make a thorough canvass of the situation before acting.”*

Sumter’s newspaper, The Watchman and Southron, announced in the **June 28, 1913** run of the paper that *“Chief Louis Behrens of Charleston, President of the S. C. State Firemen’s Association, called the ninth annual meeting of the Association to order in the Court House here this morning (the 24th) at 10:30. The meeting was opened with prayer by the Rev. Louis Bristow. Mayor Gambrell then made his address of welcome turning the keys of the city over to the firemen. 63 delegates were present along with 15 chiefs and 12 assistant chiefs.”* And, on June 25th, *“Some six or seven thousand people flocked to the Abbeville firemen’s race course today to see the running of the events which carry with them the title of supremacy in South Carolina.”*

The article continues with a description of the big parade. *“The firemen’s parade formed at 9:30 at the lower end of the public square and proceeded up Main Street to the race track. An automobile carrying Mayor C. C. Gambrell, President Louis Behrens and the*

Governor. Then followed the other officers of the Association, followed by the hose wagons and racing teams.”

An announcement was printed in The Abbeville Press and Banner on **May 5, 1915** in which it was stated *“The Firemen’s Tournament will be held in Greenwood on May 18th, 19th, and 20th. A very pleasant program has been arranged, of which one of the most attractive features will be an old fashioned basket picnic.”*

The Abbeville Press and Banner reported to its subscribers on **May 19, 1915** an update on the town’s firemen. *“The practices every afternoon by the fire company have been the center of attraction for our people and good crowds have always been present to follow the fortune of the fire laddies. They went to Greenwood this week to take part in the tournament with the good wishes of all our people.”*

An old photo taken in front of the Post Office (built in 1912) shows a 1915 American LaFrance pumper, said to have been delivered that same year. It is a triple-combination pumper with about a 250 gpm pumping capacity.

On **September 20, 1916**, The Abbeville Press and Banner provided some advice to the citizens from the Fire Chief. *“SPECIAL NOTICE TO PUBLIC.” “As the winter months are coming on and fires will be built in fireplaces and heaters after standing idle during the summer, it will be well to keep a keen eye for fires that may arise from defective flues, etc.”* The article continues, *“Every one discovering a fire, whether large or small, will please phone to the telephone office and instead of asking for the fire department, tell the operators just what or whose house is afire. In so doing, they will give a better alarm and will get you better aid more quickly than if you simply ask for the department. We get this phone and alarm service free and both the operators and firemen can best serve you if you will just tell CENTRAL---- and then Mutt and Jeff*

will soon have the big white wagon loaded with the boys on their way to help you. J. V. Elgin, Chief Fire Department."

Again, the Abbeville Press and Banner informed the public about a fire in their **November 8, 1916** printing of the paper. *"There was quite a little bit of excitement Monday at one o'clock when the fire company was called on to put out the fire up in Mrs. Taggart's back yard. An old out house was burned, but the boys soon put an end to the blaze. No other damage was done."*

Interestingly, city records indicate that the fire department's faithful horses, Mutt and Jeff, were sold in **November 1918** as part of the deal with American LaFrance Company when the first motorized truck was purchased. We are told that *"The trading of the two horses proved to be a difficult pill for the children of the city to accept."* Like many small towns in South Carolina, the fire horses were also used during the day to pull the garbage wagon around town, and when an alarm of fire was sounded, the horses *"were unhitched to pull the fire department during the day."*

An embarrassing incident occurred at the theater and was reported on **April 29, 1919** in The Abbeville Press and Banner. *"Mr. Kay, of the Opera House, suffered quite a loss last Saturday night when two reels of film were destroyed by fire. The machines, both new and recently installed, escaped damage other than that caused by water. The house fire protection was used to extinguish the flames."*

The Abbeville Press and Banner provided some bad news regarding the fire department's new fire engine on **June 3, 1919**. *"The new pump for Abbeville's new fire engine has not arrived, but it is expected this week. As soon as same arrives, the engine will be given another test."* Apparently, the new engine did not pass the customary pump test

before being placed into service, and a new pump was ordered from the factory.

Again, a researcher for the city archives tell of an embarrassing set of circumstances surrounding a fire which occurred in **June of 1920**. It seems that the store of I. C. Brown and the Grace Methodist Church were destroyed by fire and immersed the fire department in a heated controversy. The controversy surrounded the poor response performance and inefficiency of the fire department in fighting the fire. A committee was appointed by city council to investigate the charges. Apparently, the telephone operator had taken the call which took over fifteen minutes to raise someone at the fire department despite her constant calling of the number. Other witnesses, including Mayor J. Moore Mars, testified that it had taken approximately one hour to get water from the fire hydrant once the fire department arrived on the scene. The delay, according to the investigation, had been caused by the hexagon nut having been rounded off where the special wrench would not work. The fire truck did not have either a pipe or stilson wrench on board. Finally, a pipe wrench was secured from a near-by home. *“All witnesses soundly criticized the department’s performance and held it largely responsible for the extent of the damages. J. E. Haralson, city chief, resigned prior to the release of the committee’s findings. A. M. Barnes was quickly named to succeed him.”*

A bad accident at the fire department was captured in print by The Abbeville Press and Banner on **May 2, 1921**. *“Mr. E. M. Bonds, Jr., Chief of the Abbeville Fire Department, was the victim of a painful accident Saturday when he was severely burned with muriatic acid (most likely sulfuric acid). The department uses this acid to charge the chemical engines and it comes to them in five gallon bottles. Mr. Bonds was moving a bottle across the floor at the department, turning it from corner to corner, when the stopper became dislodged and the fluid was ‘spattered’ over his face burning him severely. Mr. Bonds is now in the*

County Hospital.” Early chemical engines during this era usually were built with tanks of water which had to be mixed with bicarbonate of soda which, when sulfuric acid was added, activated a chemical reaction and pressurized the water tank allowing firemen to spray water nearly 80 feet to a fire. Care had to be taken while preparing the chemical tank because of the danger from the acid.

The Abbeville Press and Banner reports on the resignation of the above Mr. Bonds in their **September 19, 1921** printing of the paper. *“Grover S. Wilson of this county has been selected to succeed E. M. Bonds, Jr. as Chief Truck Driver of the Abbeville Fire Department. Mr. Wilson, the new fire department man, comes with excellent recommendations.”* This writer believes the reporter means that Mr. Wilson was selected as Chief of the department rather than “Chief Truck Driver.”

The **1922** survey of the town by the Sanborn Map Company revealed the fire department operated with one paid driver and twelve volunteers who utilized one auto, triple combination pumping engine with a 350 gallon pumping capacity, a chemical engine and hose car with a forty gallon tank and 900 feet of 2 ½” hose , two 3 gallon chemical extinguishers, one 20 ft. extension ladder and 1,000 feet of hose in reserve. In addition, it is noted that the principal streets are paved (concrete); there are public lights in town; and the city provides a light on each porch. The police department has five patrolmen. The water works have 80 hydrants in town along with a 150,000 gallon standpipe, 103 feet high located on the highest land in the town.

The Abbeville Press and Banner, printed on **March 17, 1922**, praised the fire department. *“The residence of Harry B. Wilson caught fire about ten o’clock yesterday morning. The blaze started on the shingled roof and evidently was caused by a spark. The fire department answered immediately and the fact that we did not have a serious fire was due to the quick work of the Abbeville Fire Department. The roof of the two*

story building was ablaze by the time water connection was made and a strong breeze was blowing toward the heart of the city. All members of the department answered the fire call.”

The Abbeville Press and Banner of **July 5, 1922** covered a brief story about fire department training. *“Practice drills of the Abbeville Fire Department will be held every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon between the hours of 6 and 7 o’clock and all volunteer firemen are requested to be present and take part. Delegates are soon to be selected to represent the Abbeville department at the State meeting of the Firemen’s Insurance Association (State Firemen’s Association), and it is desired that Abbeville make a good showing at the State meeting.”*

The Gaffney Ledger on **May 5, 1925** headlined *“ABBEVILLE FIRE DESTROYS \$20,000 PROPERTY VALUE.”* *“A fire which started from a defective flue in the building of the South Main Street store of the T. W. Martin Company at noon today completely destroyed the store and a large four-story frame building, a warehouse and three residences. The fire was discovered before it gained much headway and the truck was on the scene in a few minutes, but were unable to cope with the blaze on account of the small water main in this district. One fireman, overcome with heat was carried to the hospital. The fire aggravated by a high wind, swept through an entire block within a very short time. This represents the largest property loss by fire that Abbeville has experienced in the past decade.”*

It is with deep satisfaction that this writer now puts his pen down from further research of the Abbeville 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. Now, the rest of the history of the Abbeville Fire Department from 1925 to the present is up to others to complete... that’s 95 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. History never stops...it is created with each passing day!

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S. C. State Firefighters' Association
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