

Random Bits of Raleigh Fire Department History, 1860-1900

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Names of volunteer fire companies that protected the Capital City:

. Protection No. 1
Protection No. 2
Merchants Co.
Mechanics No. 2
Bucket Co.
Bucket and Ladder Co.
Hook and Ladder Co.
Rescue Steam Fire Engine Co.
Rescue Hose Co.
Capital Hose Co.
Independent Hose Co.
Eureka Hose Co.
Phoenix Hose Co.
Phoenix Chemical Co.
L.A. Mahler Steam Fire Engine Co.
Victor Co.

The first city building used to store fire apparatus, the 1840 Market House, was destroyed by fire in 1868.

The replacement Market House, called Metropolitan Hall, was a three-story building that was one-block in length. It had two engine rooms on the first floor that each measured 30 by 40 feet. Hand-drawn fire apparatus was stored in these rooms until 1890 or so.

Raleigh's first steam fire engine, delivered in 1870, was hand-pulled for nine years, until the city provided a pair of horses to the Rescue Company. The steamer weighed 6,000 pounds.

The failure of a hand engine to perform at a fire in 1871 resulted in the Mechanics Fire Company No. 2 returning the engine to the city and requesting, in a letter printed in a newspaper, to be discharged from service.

The Mayor had the Chief of the Fire Department arrested at a fire in 1874. There was a conflict of authority, with the Mayor wanting one thing, and the Chief wanting another.

Raleigh's first hose reels, likely hand-drawn, were delivered in 1877. They were likely used by the Rescue Company (accompanying their steamer) and the Victor Company (accompanying their hand pump). Two service ladder trucks were also used over the decades, a hand-drawn truck delivered in 1872, and a horse-drawn truck delivered in 1890.

The Phoenix Chemical Company engine house had trip lights. When the doors were opened, a gas lamp ignited.

The first fire department horses, provided to the Rescue Company in 1879, were placed under the control of the Street Department in 1881. They were maintained by the Street Department, and were used for such tasks as pulling the street sprinklers.

Chief W. J. Weir, elected in May 1881, resigned in December of that year, after it had been reported that he and another had pulled the Rescue steamer out of the station and left it outside. On another occasion, he and another broke a lock on the station door. The influence of liquor was implied in both incidents.

The entire campus of St. Augustine's Normal School burned in 1883. Only the portion of one building remained. The steamer, the chemical engine, and a bucket and ladder truck responded, but the fire had made great headway.

The city had its first fire hydrants in 1887, and its first fire alarm boxes in 1888. Because a private company operated the water system, the city paid a fee for the hydrant water.

Chief Edward B. Engelhard was one of three fire chiefs who spearheaded the formation of the North Carolina State Fireman's Association in 1888. The first annual convention was held in Raleigh in 1889.

The city built a pair of engine houses on rented lots on West Morgan Street, for the Capital Hose and Hook and Ladder Companies. They were constructed around 1890. Six years later, the city purchased the lots, razed the structures, and built a headquarters fire station on the same spot.

The last hand-drawn apparatus was retired in 1892, when the Bucket and Ladder Company was disbanded.

When downtown Durham burned in October 1897, the steamer, a hose wagon, and some 25 firefighters boarded a train for the tobacco town. The fire had just been brought under control when the Raleigh men arrived, so they toured the city and were entertained by the Chief and other firemen.

The Victor Company engine house burned in 1897. They lost a horse-drawn hose reel, two horses, and most of the building.

The replacement Victor Company engine house opened at 135 East Hargett Street. The two-story structure was used until 1951, becoming Station 3 in 1912.

A&M College, later named NCSU, was outside the city limits for many years. It had its own water system and student fire brigades. The Watauga Building, which burned in 1901, was its first big fire.

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