

Sources For Researching Your Fire Department's History

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Here's a grab bag of information and personal notes about sources for researching your fire department's history. These are loose notes and not entirely cooked. Work in progress. Let's call the thing a scratchpad for now...

Introduction

Where should you look when researching the history of your fire department? This was a question that I recently posed to myself, and after conducting a couple recent rounds of such research. My answer is this blog posting. As noted above, it's a work in progress.

Books

- Conceptually, there are a couple steps here. First, does a book exist about (or with information about) your department? Second, where to find a copy?
- Thus, search wherever there are books. Meaning:
 - Station library
 - Department library
 - Personal collections
 - Local libraries
 - State libraries or archives.
 - National libraries or archives.
 - [Worldcat](#), which is a search engine of library catalogs.
 - Used book sellers or sites.
 - New book sellers or sites.
 - Google books
- Then what? For books with just a few (or many) pages of fire department history, make photocopies of each page and store them in your files. Also make a copy of the book's title page and maybe the list of sources or references in the back. They may lead you to other sources.
- Should you believe everything that's written in a particular book? Of course not. Treat each fact as unverified until you find a second (or more) source. Meaning, subject to scrutiny every person name, place name, date, detail, and such.

City Directories

- What are a city directories, you ask? Here's a [web site](#) that introduces them.
- How has Mike used them? For such purposes as...
 - Recording each year's directory's information about the fire department, thus documenting year-by-year changes. In Raleigh, the directories of early decades included each station and it's officers.
 - Finding names of retired and former firefighters. City directories list occupations, with firefighters typically listed as "city fireman."
 - Finding or confirming street addresses of fire stations.
 - Finding or confirming street addresses of buildings that experienced fires. And if the exact number wasn't known, use the included street index, which lists each building in each block.
 - Learning about related services, such as the ambulances that operated in Raleigh over the decades, through the "yellow pages" included in each directory.
- Physical copies are typically found at local libraries.
- Digital versions of many cities and many decades (but not complete for both) are available via [DigitalINC](#).
 - Each is text-searchable, using either the web viewer or after downloaded, your PDF viewing program.
 - Tip: Click Download and save PDF version to local computer. Rinse and repeat for all years, for a particular city. Takes a little while, but you'll have them.

City/Town Annual Reports

- Did your municipal produce such things back in the day, or way back? In Raleigh, there were annual reports published in bound formats from the 1880s through the 1910s. The fire department information therein is gold./li>
- Raleigh also published such sundry reports in later decades, here and there.

City/Town Budgets

- Annual budget documents are great sources for department information, particularly if text summaries are included that describe developments and accomplishments of the prior budget yet.
- Check for Capital Improvement Planning documents, which will detail major purchases such as facilities and apparatus.

City/Town Minutes

- Don't believe any municipalities have digitized their minutes from back in the day. Some are on microfilm, however. City of Raleigh minutes, for example, going back decades. Check your local history library. More likely, you'll have to visit the town hall or city clerk, and look through physical records.

[Google Newspaper Archive](#) - See newspapers below.

Early Black Firefighters of North Carolina

- Does your department have origins including one or more black fire companies?
- [See Legeros web site](#), which is an annotated archive of Chuck Milligan's web site.

Fire Department Fire Record Ledgers

- In Raleigh, from the late 1910s to the early 1980s, every fire call was recorded in a ledger book.
- Each sheet was some 20 or 24 inches long, and each ledger spread across two sheets. Think a giant Excel spreadsheet.
- Fields included:
 - Date
 - Time alarm received
 - How alarm was received (telephone, verbal, box, etc.)
 - Address
 - Type of occupany
 - Owner
 - Occupant
 - Where fire was located
 - Details on suppression (including gallons of water, number of hose streams, feet of ladders).
 - Value of property and contents
 - Loss on property and contents
- These ledgers had the greater detail in the earlier decades, and became simpler as the decaded passed.
- These appeared to be standardized forms, perhaps created by the state department of insurance for data collection.
- Guessing these were used in other cities and towns.
- In Raleigh, the units or companies that responded were often recorded, which added to the value of the records.
- Until about 1950, the number of hose streams was recorded. This made for easy skimming, for finding major fires. Just look for "three" or "four" or more in that column.

Fire Department Log Books

- In the best of times, company (or chief) officers recorded the minuate of daily activity, as well as milestones. Such as "placed new engine in service" or "relocated to Station 2 as station restoration started."
- When daily staffing's recorded, you can skim for the appearance or disappearance of particular names, if you're trying to figure out when a particular member started or stopped.
- For major fires and incidents, you'll want to collect copies of log book entries from multiple companies. This can result in some serious leg work! At least mobile phones have high-resolution cameras, which negates the need for hand transcription.
 - Side note about Raleigh. The fire department changed to computerized log books a few years ago. The physical log books were collected by the newly created Raleigh Fire Museum, and moved to a single location. They've been organized by company and date and are a great tool for this researcher.

- Want to do this in your own department? Plan for a couple iterations. First, when most of your department's log books are easily found. Then, the dribs and drabs, as people discover caches of hidden log books. Then the onesies and twosies that appear in successive years.
- In the worst times, entries will be sparse and with few details. Them's the breaks.
- Check for chief officer log books, which will likely have higher-level details of daily or weekly activity.
- Check for "other purpose" log books, from dispatcher records to fleet maintenance.

Fire Department Records in General

- Obviously, any and all department records are worth considering. Of particular value would be, say:
 - Lists of chiefs and years of service
 - Personnel rosters over the years and decades
 - Fleet rosters over the years and decades
 - Apparatus and facility specifications and bid documents
 - Monthly, quarterly, or annual reports.

Hose & Nozzle back issues

- Newsletter (early) and magazine (later) published from 1949 to the early 1980s.
- [See Legeros web site](#), for more information.
- Legeros has numerous copies in his private collection. He's created an issue index, and hopes to someday create an article index. He also has cover scans of selected issues.

Internet Searches

- Web pages
- Images - Search for historical images. You may be surprised!
- eBay - Recommend regular searches using your department's name. You may happen upon occasionally posted artifacts or historical photos for sale.

Local Libraries

- This is one of your primary sources.
- In particular, seek your city or county's local history library.
- Inquire about vertical files (see below), become familiar with microfilm, see what electronic databases are available, and, of course, search the card catalog.
- Also, check local college or university libraries. You may be surprised at what they're holding in their collections.

Local Libraries - Vertical Files

- These are file folders with clippings, brochures, notes, and other information that a particular library has collected.

National Board of Fire Underwriters Reports

- Detailed reports on larger cities in North Carolina.
- [See Legeros blog post](#), for more information and links to reports from Durham, Fayetteville, Greensboro, Raleigh, and Winston-Salem. (Reports were likely created for other cities as well.)

[National Fire Heritage Center](#)

- They're located in Emmitsburg, MD.
- Give them a shout, and see if they have materials or records related to your department.

News & Observer Index, 1926-1992

- As one of the state's "major papers" they're worth searching for major events and incidents anywhere in the state.
- Via [State Library of North Carolina](#)
 - Tip: Click and view the original image of an index card, for greatest accuracy. The "text converted" version can have occasional transcription error

News & Observer Photos, 1940s to 1990s

- The North Carolina State Archives possesses the negatives for News & Observer (and Raleigh Times) photos from the 1940s to the 1990s.
- You can order physical or digital reprints for as little as \$4 per image.
- How easy is finding said photos? Well, if you have a dated clipping with the image, that presents the strongest likelihood of retrieval.
- [Here's the web site](#) for the state archives A/V unit, with contact information.
- Need to expand this as a separate posting. Photo research is it's own lengthy topic!

Newspapers

- Clippings
 - These can be found anywhere and everything. Personal scrapbooks. Department scrapbooks. Local library files.
 - Be forewarned, people are notorious for clipping stories without noting the date of the article.
- Physical copies
 - Visit the local newspaper office. They may have physical archives that you can search.
 - Visit your local library, for the same reason.
- Microfilm copies in libraries
 - Also check the state library and state archives, as they also have these in their holdings.
- Digital versions, local
 - Check your local paper's web site.
 - The News & Observer, for example, has archives dating back to 1991. Searching is free, and you'll see the first paragraph. Have to pay after that.
- Digital versions, national
 - [Google newspaper archives](#).
 - Free site, but with scattered archives of North Carolina newspapers.
 - They have a robust Star-News archives of recent decades (Wilmington).
 - You'll also likely find "wire stories" of notable fires and events, as printed in out-of-state papers.
 - <http://www.newspapers.com>
 - Paid site.
 - Searching is free, which can help narrow your search.

[North Carolina Collection - University of North Carolina](#)

- This is a special collection at Wilson Library on campus in Chapel Hill.
- They have both textual and non-textual (photos) materials worth searching for.

North Carolina Colored Firemen's Association

- Does your department have origins as including one or more black fire companies?
- [See Legeros web site](#) for information.

North Carolina Secretary of State Corporation Records

- Is your department a private non-profit corporation? Or was a related corporation create, such as a professional firefighters association or ladies auxiliary?
- [Search the corporate records](#) for milestone dates (incorporation, name changes, etc.) and information (names of incorporators, etc.).

[North Carolina State Archives Catalog \(MARS\)](#)

- The state archives is located on Jones Street. The Search Room is open Tuesday through Saturday.
- They also have a non-textual materials division, e.g. photographs (and more).
- Search their catalog for both types of materials.

[North Carolina State Fireman's Association](#)

- They have member rosters in their files, and going back for decades. That's a great resource for names of past firefighters.

North Carolina State Fireman's Association - Conventions

- Did your department's city host the convention? Or travel to participate?
- [See Legeros web site](#) for newspaper clippings from the early decades, list of all convention locations, and more.

North Carolina State Fireman's Association - Statistician Reports

- In the 1910s and late 1930s/early 1940s, these were included in the annual conference proceedings, and including a wealth of tabular information about member fire departments. Legeros has made copies and [posted on his web site](#).
- Reports exist from the 1900s through the 1980s. For later decades, only name, Fire Chief, and Secretary are listed. Contact NCSFA office.

North Carolina State Fireman's Association - Tournament Scores

- Did your department participate in the annual tournaments? They were held from 1889 to 1941.
- [See Legeros web site](#) for newspaper clippings, scores, and more.

Office of the State Fire Marshal

- Legeros has future plans to inquire of the OSFM, regarding availability of historical materials for research purposes.
- The state library has some OSFM and earlier Department of Insurance materials. See below for their catalog link.

Oral Histories

- Anyone and everyone associated with your fire department.
- But with one big fat disclaimer. Personal memories are insanely fallable. People will swear on a stack of pancakes that something happened in 1978. They were there, they remember it like yesterday. As will a corroborator or maybe more than one. Verify their claims with paper records where possible. When you present the newspaper clipping or fire report that says it happened in 1981, they'll shrug and say "wow."

Our State Magazine

- Published from 1933 to present. Originally named The State.
- [Digital archives](#) now available.
- Searching "fire department" returns 794 results.

Professional Associations

- IAFF local chapters
- County fire associations
- State fire associations
- Regional fire associations
- Inquire about member rosters, meeting minutes, or general archives.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps

- [Via North Carolina Maps](#), digital versions of maps produced through 1922. Full color.
- [Via NCLIVE](#), via local library access (such as your Wake County library card). Digital versions of maps, all years. Black and white.
- Unfamiliar with Sanborn Maps. They are the bomb! Geographic maps with extreme detail, and focused on fire protection and fire risks.
- Search [my blog](#) for "Sanborn" for sundry postings. Or see [these example maps](#) showing Raleigh Fire Department history.

School Newspapers

- Does your department protect a nearby college or university? If they have a student newspaper, inquire if archives are available.
- If you're really lucky, they have digital archives, such as the North Carolina State University's [Technician digital archives](#), 1920s to 1990s.

[State Library of North Carolina Catalog](#)

- The state library is located on Jones Street, and it's open during business hours during the week. Search their catalog for "fire" or "fire

department."

Tax Records

- Real property records are my go-to source for facility information. The year a fire station was built, the square foot, the acre of the parcel, etc.
- That said, this information isn't always accurate. Buildings that are decades older may have incorrect construction years.
- For municipal fire department buildings, searching records can be a little tricky. Some cities and towns enter their fire stations with street name only, and no building numbers. So searching by street name plus building number won't work. Instead, you'll have to visit the GIS map interface, and click on the particular parcel. Then click the GIS option/icon for property "card".
- Find these records by visiting your county's web site. Believe in North Carolina, these are exclusively handled by each county. (Versus in other states, where such records can be municipal.)

Telephone Books

- Find these at local history libraries.
- Particularly useful for street addresses of fire stations.

Television Stations

- Film footage via physical search. e.g., visiting the station and seeing if they have film or videotape that you can copy. Haven't done this before, so report back with your results. It's on my list.
- Web search, for older stories.

Vital Records, e.g. death certificates

- These are an essential source for learning if a member died on- or off-duty. Or the particulars about a deceased member. Also good when compiling information about past Fire Chiefs, particularly if they died while serving in office.
- Death certificates are great sources for information such as full name, birth date, cause of death, funeral location, and burial location. [See some examples](#), from my fallen firefighters records.
- Digital versions through such services as Ancestry.com (available for free, on site at Wake County library locations. Maybe also at libraries in other counties.)
- Microfilm versions through late 1970s or 1980s at select libraries, such as the Wake County local history library.

Name: (real name preferred)
E-mail: (optional)
Web Site: (optional)

Remember personal info?
Yes
No

Comment:

/ [Textile](#)

Comment moderation is enabled on this site. This means that your comment will not be visible on this site until it has been approved by an editor.

To prevent spam we require you to answer this silly question

What are the FIRST TWO LETTERS of the word 'fire'?

[\(Register your username / Log in\)](#)

Notify: Yes, send me email when someone replies.

Hide email: Yes, hide my email address.

Small print: All html tags except and <i> will be removed from your comment. You can make links by just typing the url or mail-address.