

Kannapolis Fire Department History

12/04/09 1830 W - + 14 - 9

While passing through Cabarrus County in October, the Blogger Family stopped in Kannapolis to do a little research. See, the [Kannapolis Fire Department](#) is a particularly interesting animal, as it started as a plant-sponsored entity that protected a mill and the mill village. Decades later, a pair of sanitary districts were formed and which added services including fire protection to the areas outside the mill. Finally in the 1980s, a municipal department was born that merged the sanitary district departments, brought the village department members aboard as volunteers, and hired the first full-time member, a Fire Chief.

Below are the fruits of the research, which include details subsequently found in Sanborn Maps and correspondence with retired Kannapolis Fire Chief Larry Phillips. He was there from the beginning, as the department's first chief. The below text has been copied and expanded from the [history page of the KFD web site](#). Further additions and corrections are welcome.

Kannapolis Fire Department History

By Kannapolis Fire Department and Mike Legeros

After founding Kannapolis as the home of his textile mill in 1906, J. W. Cannon began to develop a village around the mill. The mill village became a place for the workers of Cannon Mills to live in company-owned homes and shop in the stores that opened in Mr. Cannon's adjoining business district.

In 1916, Cannon Mills organized the first volunteer fire department under the direction of Fire Chief Sam Nash. The department was named Kannapolis Fire Department. Since motor fire apparatus were not readily available to the average community, the department was equipped with two large hose reels. These consisted of a large reel mounted on two five-foot wheels and with a long tow bar projecting from the front. Five men used the tow bar to pull the reel to the scene of a fire.

The town had four fire hydrants, which were pressurized in the event of a fire and powered by the Cannon Mill's waterworks. After arriving at the fire, the Kannapolis firemen would quickly unroll the hose from the reel, connect to one of the hydrants, and begin fighting the fire. If a hydrant was not available, bucket brigades and hand pumps were used.

Sanborn Maps dated January 1926 show one of the hose reels was stored outside the jail building, which was located behind buildings on the north side in the 100 block of South Main Street. That reel was equipped with 600 feet of 2 1/2-inch hose.

Because there were so many hose reel teams across the state, reel team competitions became a popular event at the annual North Carolina firemen's convention. The local team won many of the contests. In 1933, the Kannapolis reel team set what were called "world's records" of 15 4/5 seconds in the reel race and 15 3/5 seconds in the grab race. These records were never broken and still stand.

With the onset of World War I, the fire department was disbanded and for several years no organized fire protection was available in the growing village.

In 1928 the Kannapolis Fire Department was reorganized. J. C. Taylor, one of the principals of Ritchie-Taylor Funeral Home, served as fire chief. Most members of the department came from the local merchants association and from the mill.

Chief Taylor continued to serve as fire chief of the volunteer department after leaving the funeral home business to become a partner in a local dry cleaning company. He served until 1962. Following Taylor's retirement, Roy Deyton, safety director for Cannon Mills, became chief of the all-volunteer department.

Sanborn Maps dated May 1932 show the fire department hose reel was stored in a twelve-stall stable building located beside the police station and jail building, and all of which were located behind buildings on the north side of the 100 block of South Main Street.

The Kannapolis Fire Department became motorized in 1934 with the purchase of a used American LaFrance fire engine, capable of pumping 300 gallons-per-minute.

After acquiring the engine, Mr. Charles A. Cannon offered to provide a location to keep the truck. Cannon Mills built a lean-to on the side of its garage facility at Plant 1. Sanborn Maps dated 1943 show the fire station as a one-story building located past the end of North Walnut Street,

and beside the auto repair shop building. The mill also provided a paid driver for the apparatus and in following years constructed a new fire station at the "Fire Gate." The two-bay fire station was located on Main Street.

In 1942, the Kannapolis Fire Department purchased a new fire engine, capable of pumping 500 gallons-per-minute. Nicknamed the "Mack," the engine became a familiar site in the village and was used until the late 1970s. It has made parade appearances in recent years. Other new pumpers were purchased by the mill in 1951 and 1965.

Cannon Mills provided many services, including fire protection, to the area around Kannapolis at little or no cost to the residents. Most of the volunteers from the early 1940s through the mid-1980s worked in the mill and were allowed to respond to calls while working their regular shifts and without penalty to their wages.

As the community continued to grow around the mill village, pressing water and sewer needs led to the creation of the Royal Oaks Sanitary District in the southeastern edge of the city 1957 and the Kannapolis Sanitary District surrounding the village in 1963. The quasi-governmental sanitary districts provided not only water and sewer services, but also fire protection to the area surrounding the mill village. Each sanitary district had a volunteer fire department led by a volunteer fire chief who was appointed by the Sanitary District Board of Commissioners, an elected body.

The Kannapolis Sanitary District Fire Department was originally led by a Fire Chief, Asst. Chief, and Deputy Chief, with the leadership ranks changed in 1981 to a Fire Chief and two Asst. Chiefs. KSDFD operated from two stations. Station 1 on Floyd Street housed Engine 1 and Engine 2, and Station 2 on Richard Avenue housed Engine 3.

Each engine company had a Captain, Lieutenant, and a maximum of 13 firefighters. The rosters were full during the early days, but turnover increased in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the average number of firefighters dropped. By 1987, the department averaged around 32 to 35 members. In addition their three engines they added a GMC half-ton step van as an equipment truck in 1987. The Kannapolis Sanitary District was a little over 8 square miles.

Royal Oaks Sanitary District Fire Department operated one engine company from a station on Florida Avenue. They added a second engine in late 1986, and had a second engine in reserve at the time, a 1952 Ford/American LaFrance that they converted to a equipment truck. By 1987, the department had about 20 members. The Royal Oaks primary response district was very small, less than one square mile. They also responded with the other departments as automatic mutual aid.

Changes in the ownership of Cannon Mills in 1983 served as a catalyst for the incorporation of the City of Kannapolis. On December 4, 1984, the largest unincorporated community in North Carolina officially became a municipality. The new City Council appointed Councilman Sam Stroup to chair a Fire Department Coordinating Committee. It was responsible for coordinating the efforts and budget requests of the six volunteer fire departments operating within the established city limits. Three of the departments, the Kannapolis Sanitary District, the Royal Oaks Sanitary District, and the village of Kannapolis, had their entire response areas within the city. The volunteer Winecoff, Mt. Mitchell, and Enochville fire departments had small portions of their districts inside the city as well.

Two-and-a-half years later, the voters within the two sanitary districts approved the merging of their districts with the City of Kannapolis government. The effective date of the merger was July 1, 1987. At that time, the City of Kannapolis obtained ownership of the water and sewer systems as well as the fire departments and the City of Kannapolis Fire Department was officially formed.

On July 29, 1987, Larry C. Phillips assumed the responsibilities as the City's first fire chief and the only full-time employee of the department. He set about merging the three departments into one, using the expertise of some 65 volunteers to provide fire protection. Two years later, Danny E. Scott was hired as the department's first full-time assistant fire chief.

The village fire department was owned and operated by the mill. With the formation of the municipal Kannapolis Fire Department, they ceased operations outside the plant in October 1987. The mill did not contribute any equipment to the city department, but all of their personnel were allowed to become members of the new department. Most became members, about 23 firefighters. The majority of the new members would remain aboard and complete 20 or more years of service.

The village fire department was renamed Fieldcrest-Cannon Fire Brigade. They operated inside the mill, and did not respond outside the plant. They assisted KFD with all calls inside the mill, however. When Pillowtex Corporation bought Fieldcrest-Cannon in 1994, the name of the brigade was changed to Pillowtex-Cannon Fire Service. At no time did the fire brigade respond outside mill property. Some of the KFD volunteers who were mill employees also served on the fire brigade. In 1997, the plant was sold and subsequently closed.

Volunteers continued to be the backbone of the Kannapolis Fire Department, performing all the vital functions of a career department. Volunteers drove the fire engines, operated the pumps, fought the fires, conducted fire safety programs and were required to train to the same

standards that career firefighters must meet. When Fire Chief Larry Phillips retired on January 1, 2007, the Kannapolis Fire Department had 54 full-time employees, about 20 part-time members, and over 20 volunteers.

Timeline

- 1906 - Kannapolis founded as home for Cannon Mills.
- 1916 - Kannapolis (village) formed. Funded by Cannon Mills. Protects plant and village. Apparatus is hand hose reels.
- 1923 - KFD (village) reformed.
- 1934 - KFD (village) receives first motor apparatus, used American LaFrance pumper.
- 1934 - KFD (village) has fire station built by mill, a lean-to adjoining the garage facility at Plant 1. The mill provides a paid driver. In the follow years, the mill builds a new fire station at the "fire gate." This two-bay building is later addressed on Main Street.
- 1942 - KFD (village) receives new Mack pumper.
- 1951 - KFD (village) receives new pumper.
- 1957 - Royal Oaks Sanitary District FD organized. Protects areas outside village. One station on Florida Avenue.
- 1963 - Kannapolis Sanitary District FD organized. Protects areas outside village. Two stations on Floyd Street and Richard Avenue.
- 1965 - KFD (village) receives new pumper.
- 1984 - Kannapolis incorporated as city.
- 1987 - Kannapolis (city) formed as merger of KSDFD and ROSDFD. Three stations to start, using the existing sanitary district stations. Fire Chief Larry Phillips hired as first full-time employee. KFD (village) becomes Fieldcrest-Cannon FD, continues plant protection.
- 1989 - KFD hires second full-time employee, Asst. Chief.
- 1997 - Fieldcrest-Cannon FD becomes Pillowtex-Cannon FD.
- 1999 - Winecoff FD merges with KFD, becomes Kannapolis Station 4.
- 2003 - Pillowtex-Cannon FD discontinued, when plant closes.
- 2008 - Kannapolis Station 5 opened.

Mike, while searching for something else, I came across this snippet of history from Welcome FD in Davidson County. This came from Welcome FD's history section of their website:

Jake Beck ran a machine shop in Welcome, and one day, saw mill operator Mr. Henry Williams, came into the shop and started talking with Jake about a old fire truck for sale from the Cannon Towel Company, in Kannapolis, North Carolina. At this time Mr. Beck wanted to talk to several businessmen in the community to ask what their views were on purchasing the fire truck. He was given the ok to go and look at the truck and the next day it was driven into his shop.

On January 12, 1950, the people of the Welcome community met at Welcome School. Chief Norman Owens of the Lexington City Fire Department was guest speaker. Chief Owens spoke on the realization of having a Fire Department in Welcome, and what an asset it would be to have a department. The community voted to purchase the fire truck from Jake Beck for \$400.00, a 1916 chain driven American La France Fire Truck.

bfd1151 - 11/16/15 - 16:25

Awesome find!

Wonder where the 1916 ALF originated? At Cannon Mills, or at earlier department?

Looking at Sanborn maps, they had a Mack/ALF by 1943. Earlier maps in 1932 and 1926 list only hose reels, and fixed hose supplies around the plant. Either the 1916 ALF was bought used, and pre-dated the Mack by a number of years. Or it was a much-earlier purchase that was sold by the 1920s or 1930s. HmMMMM.

Legeros - 11/16/15 - 19:23

I'm stumped on this ALF as well. It is nowhere in Peckham's ALF registry on the SPAAMFAA website so I'm guessing Cannon purchased it used? Kind of raises more questions than answers.

bfd1151 - 11/17/15 - 07:25

Wish I knew more about Peckham's registry. Does it represent 99% of the company's output during that period? Or a lower percentage? Thinking it's lower, maybe just slightly lower. I've looked for early ALFs before that haven't been listed.

Legeros - 11/17/15 - 07:51

From the introduction written by John Peckham, it was compiled from 10 factory lists and files, plus other outside sources and/or individuals. But, not all of the records agree with each other since they were written at different times with different requirements. It sounds like a time consuming process and I'm sure some records were lost, unreadable, not recorded for one reason or another, etc. I would guess his registry is at least 90-95% complete.

bfd1151 - 11/17/15 - 08:44

Mike, I believe the ALF pumper is the one you reference as being purchased around 1934. I may be getting stories mixed up but it seems that the truck would not drive and had to be towed to the fire and then the pump would be used.

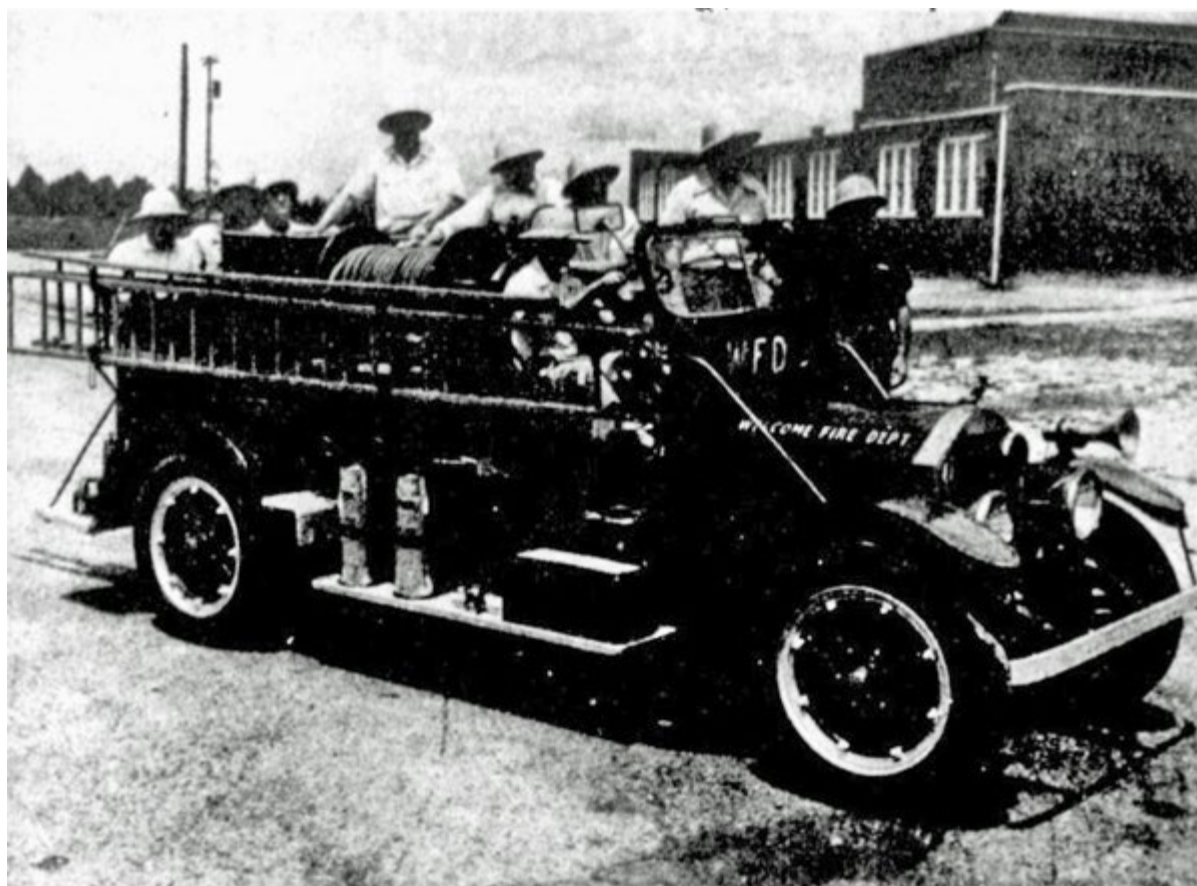
Josh Clay - 11/19/15 - 18:50

Google newspaper copy of 1950 story, about the former Cannon Mills truck and the new Welcome Fire Department, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=kM0bAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=plAEAAAAIIBAJ&pg=3910%2C475599>

Legeros - 11/19/15 - 21:08

And here's a picture of the truck (!), via another Google Newspapers story. Same was the first rural fire truck purchased in Davidson County, it notes:

<https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=bXkcAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=AVIEAAAAIIBAJ&pg=7106%2C3080189>



Legeros - 11/19/15 - 21:13

Name: (real name
preferred)

Remember personal info?

Yes