

Cistern Unearthed, 1976

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In January 1976, work was underway on Fayetteville Street to realign a sewer pipe in preparation for construction of the pedestrian mall. At the intersection of Fayetteville and Davie streets, workers uncovered a 19th century cistern originally used for firefighting. The January 27 issue of the *News & Observer* reported that the "large brick cavity" measured "about 16 feet deep, eight to 10 feet wide and 24 feet long" and was "divided into four separate compartments connected to the bottom with archways." The construction of the cistern was brick, with granite cover material.

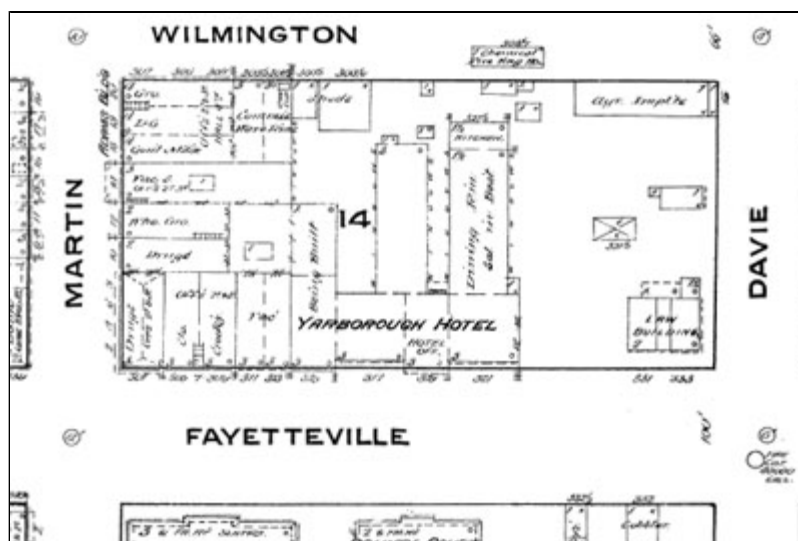
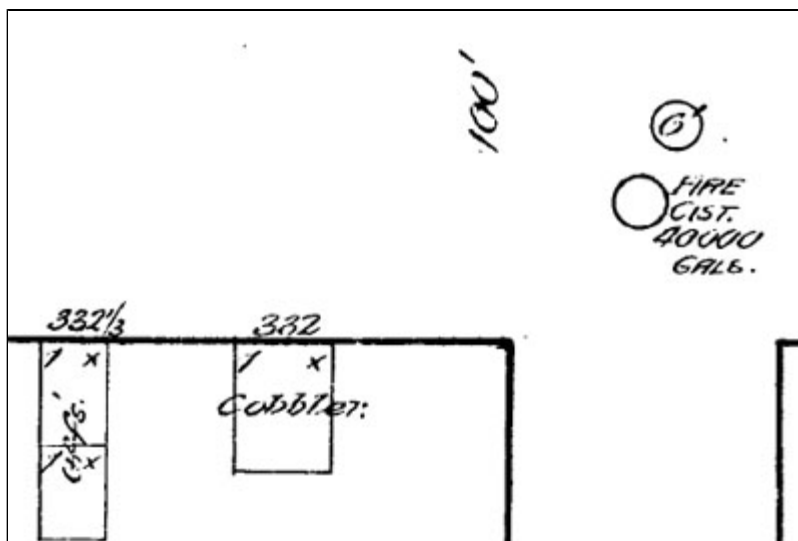
The cistern's contents-- sludge and water-- were pumped out, and the thing was filled with sand. Workers had found other surprises, such as trolley tracks under another section of Fayetteville Street. The city's trolleys operated from the 1880s until the 1930s. More recently, trolley tracks were uncovered under Hillsborough Street, as this [Goodnight Raleigh blog entry notes](#).

Wake County historian Elizabeth Reid Murray-- who was named Elizabeth Davis at the time-- photographed the cistern. These scans of slides appear courtesy of the Elizabeth Reid Murray Collection at Olivia Raney Local History Library. She also wrote an article for the March 2, 1976, issue of the *Raleigh Times*, confirming the cistern's presence and telling about its history. [Click to enlarge:](#)



*Courtesy Elizabeth Reid Murray Collection,
Olivia Raney Local History Library, Raleigh*

Here's a Sanborn Map from 1884 showing the cistern location. Second image is a wider view:



What's the history of the cisterns? After the city's last great conflagration in December 1851, city officials implemented several improvements to the city's fire protection infrastructure. They hired the first salaried fire chief. They reorganized the volunteer fire companies. They approved construction of the first engine house. They ordered the building of cisterns, which were underground tanks for fire protection. They were filled by gutters that collected and routed rain water.

The first cisterns had capacities of 3,000 to 7,000 gallons. These were sufficient for the city's hand engines. With the delivery of the first steam engine in 1870, and its higher-capacity pump, larger-capacity cisterns were likely needed. Considerably larger cisterns were built.

In 1887, the first fire hydrants were installed in Raleigh, and the cisterns were no longer the primary source for "fire water." They were still kept filled, as a precaution against a failure with the water system. And they were used in 1913, when the News & Observer building burned, and water-pressure problems sent the reserve steamer into action. That very cistern above was utilized.

During World War II, they were filled again as a civil defense measure, in case an enemy attack-- really-- disabled the water system. The cisterns were accessed through a small hole in the pavement at that time, recalled James Briggs, who ran Briggs Hardware, in the aforementioned *News & Observer* article.

Here's an 1885 annual report excerpt, listing the cistern locations and their capacities. Click to enlarge:

WATER SUPPLY FROM PUBLIC CISTERNS FOR FIRE PURPOSES.

Number.	Fire Division.	LOCATION.		By Whom Built.	Capacity, in No. of Gallons.	Number of Openings.	CONDITION OF WATER, MAY 1900.	
		Ward.	Streets.				Feet.	Inches.
1	Fifth.	Third	Intersec. of Fayetteville & Davie, ..	City,	40,000	2	14	10
2	Fifth.	Third	Fayetteville bet. Martin & Hargett, ..	City,	7,000	1	1	5
3	Fifth.	Third	Fayetteville bet. Martin & Hargett, ..	City,	7,000	1	2	1
4	Fifth.	Third	Fayetteville bet. Hargett & Morgan, ..	City,	7,000	1	4	0
5	Fifth.	Third	Intersec. Hargett & Wilmington, ..	City,	10,000	1	4	10
6	Fourth	Fifth	Intersec. Hillsboro & Harrington, ..	City, Thos. H. Coats, Supt	30,000	2	12	7
7	Third	Fourth	Intersec. Lenoir & Salisbury,	City, Thos. H. Coats, Supt	30,000	2	10	1
8	Third	Fifth	Intersec. Davie & Dawson,	City, W. N. Andrews, Supt	40,000	2	10	1
9	Seco'd	Seco'd	Intersec. Davie & Person,	City, John King, Supt ...	30,000	2	7	4
10	First.	First	Intersec. Newbern Av. & Bloodworth	City, Thos. H. Coats, Supt	30,000	2	10
11	First.	First	Intersec. Blount & North,	City, Thos. H. Coats, Supt	30,000	2	8	10
12	Fifth.	Third	Capitol Square, East side,	State authorities,	50,000	1	10
13	Fifth.	Third	Capitol Square, West side,	State authorities,	50,000	1	10

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

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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.