

Raleigh Fire Department in 1920

07/18/10 1546 W - + 9 - 6

How about some context for the prior posting? Let's picture the Raleigh Fire Department in 1920. But since it's Sunday and this blogger is feeling a little lazy, we'll do the thing in FAQ format. We can turn the thing into a formal narrative at another time.

Q: Demographics of the city?

A: Population of 24,418, and square miles totaling 6.96. Here's a [map of the city limits](#).

Q: Fire stations?

A: Three, on West Morgan Street, on South Salisbury Street, and on East Hargett Street. Stations 1, 2, 3, respectively.

Q: Companies?

A: Four. The hose companies number three, and they operate a 1918 American LaFrance Type 45 triple combination pumper, a 1914 American LaFrance Type 12 triple combination pumper, and a 1912 American LaFrance Type 5 combination chemical and hose car. The truck company operates a 1916 American LaFrance Type 17 tractor-drawn aerial ladder. The rigs are painted white with blue trim. Or maybe they've been painted red by now. It happens early in this decade.

Q: How many personnel are at each station?

A: The total personnel in 1920 was about 30. Give or take one or two men. Subtract the Fire Chief and Asst. Fire Chief, and we'll say 28 line personnel. They're still four years away from a two-platoon system, so maybe everyone works every day. Maybe seven per company? Factor in days off and vacations, and the staffing is probably around five or six people.

Q: Describe the station life.

A: First and foremost, some or many many members live at the fire station. That's what the City Directories from the period suggestion. Need more research on this, but it sounds like personnel could live at the fire stations in the 1910s and 1920s. By the late 1930s, the boarders were probably few and far between. Information about meals at the stations isn't very well known, either. It is remembered that in the late 1930s, Station 1 on W. Morgan Street had no eating utensils, and presumably no kitchen. Firefighters picked up their meals at a nearby boarding house.

Q: What was the call volume?

A: Based on prior and later years, the fire department likely answered around 200 calls that year. Less than an average of one a day.

Q: How did they fight fire?

A: In 1920, the fire department had only been motorized for seven years. Only two of their three hose companies were equipped with pumps on the apparatus, and they may have only been used for booster pumping. That is, those times when hydrant pressure-- the staple of suppression since 1888-- was insufficient. Such as when water was needed a great distance from a hydrant. Or the pressure on the system was low. Or the fire was located on the upper floors of a tall building, and a higher pressure was needed. (The tallest buildings in the city at this time were probably four or five stories tall. Need to verify that.) For larger fires downtown, hose was carried to the top of adjoining buildings, and streams directed from those locations.

Q: What hose was carried on the trucks?

A: Based on 1916 data, each carried 1,200 feet of 2 1/2-inch hose. The two pumpers were also equipped with 46 gallon chemical tanks, with 300 feet of smaller diameter hose. The chemical tanks could be used as one-time extinguishers, for small fires or quick attacks on larger fires. After each use, the tanks required recharging. The third hose company, which operated a combination chemical and hose wagon, also was equipped with a chemical tank, though perhaps of smaller capacity.

Q: How about ladders?

A: The aerial apparatus was a 75-foot, two-section, spring-raised, wooden ladder. It also carried 177 feet of ground ladders, as well as "life net, buckets, door openers, pike poles, and all necessary implements for fighting fires and saving lives." The pumpers each carried a 24-foot extension ladder, a 12-foot roof ladder, and other small equipment.

Q: What was the reserve apparatus?

A: The 1905 American LaFrance steamer was kept in reserve, and towed by the combination chemical and hose cars.

Q: Did they have personal protective equipment?

A: There may have some helmets around, though no pictures have been found showing them worn at fires. Of course, previous few firefighting photos have survived from that period, period! [In this photo](#) from the 1928 fire at the Yarborough House, there's a helmet sitting upside down in the bed of the service truck. It's hard to tell in the above lower-resolution version, however. As for coats, the firefighters may have had rubber coats, which the volunteers had at prior times. Again, insufficient information, and too few photos that document that period. They may have been worn their dress uniforms at fires, such as those shown in [this picture from 1920](#).

Q: How were the companies dispatched?

A: Each fire station had a gong that was connected to the electric-telegraphic fire alarm system. The city had probably 60 fire boxes. Four years prior, the boxes numbered 52. Pulling a box caused an electric signal to be sent simultaneously to all three fire stations. The box number was tapped out, and the fire apparatus responded to the box location. There were probably telephones in each fire station, or at least in Fire Station 1. Some fires were likely reported by phone. Each alarm box was also equipped with a telegraph key, inside the box. The telegraph key could be used to send coded signals to the stations, such as [those listed on this page](#). Don't know if or how often such signals were used in 1920, or even in prior years and decades.

Q: How many fire calls were false alarms?

A: Data from four years earlier provides some idea. In 1916, the department answered 139 alarms:

- 68 with smoke issuing
- 41 were unnecessary
- 30 were false

The response for the companies for those 139 alarms:

- Hose 1 - 112
- Hose 2 - 87
- Hose 3 - 73
- Truck 1 - 47

Probably causes of fires in 1916:

- Ashes in barrels 3
- Building fires in yards 2
- Burning paint with blow torch 2
- Chimneys burning out 7
- Cigarette 2
- Defective Flues 3
- Electric irons 2
- Electric wiring 3
- Gas pipes lighted by workmen 1
- Grease on hot stoves 2
- Hot pokes in wood box 1
- Incendiary 5
- Lamps exploding 1
- Oil stove too close to wall 1
- Other causes 26
- Rats and matches 3
- Smoking in bed 1
- Sparks from chimneys 22
- Sparks from locomotives 10
- Unknown 5

Q: What does "rats and matches" mean?

A: Fires were reportedly started by rats taking matches, then entering walls or other small spaces, and the matches ignited as the rat dragged them across rough surfaces.

Q: Did the fire department answer "first aid" calls?

A: Perhaps. In 1916, a newspaper feature on the fire department noted that six members constituted a First Aid Crew, and they were trained to "protect the lives of people that happen to the misfortune of being suffocated by smoke, gas, drowning, or electric shock."

Q: Were false alarms a problem?

A: Yes. This note was published in the January 10, 1920, edition of The Raleigh Times:

"Reward Offered For Those Who Ring False Alarms

"The City Commission has determined to try to put a stop to the large number of false fire alarms that are turned in in this city if they can do so by an aggressive campaign against the offenders and with this and in view of Mayor Eldridge has been authorized by the Commission to offer a reward of \$50 for the detection and conviction of any one guilty of this offense.

"Publication of the offer of reward will be made in the next few days and the mayor asks all good citizens to aid in any way possible in helping in the campaign. For one thing, an appreciable number of false alarms are supposedly turned in by thoughtless children. Parents may aid by cautioning children of the danger and of the trouble they are likely to get themselves and their parents into by this form of amusement. The mayor does not expect, however, that any appeal will reach the more mature offenders except vigorous enforcement of the law, hence the campaign.

"The penalty is a minimum fine of \$100. The campaign is decided on for one reason, because it is costly to run the fire trucks out, but mainly because of the unnecessary danger involved in racing the trucks through the streets to answer false alarms. They necessarily have to go at a high rate of speed and the danger is ever present. It cannot be avoided in case of fire but false alarms should not be permitted to almost double the number of times the trucks have to go out."

Q: What were the major fires in 1920?

A: The Administration Building at the State Prison on March 15; the Seaboard Air Line Railway roundhouse on August 25; the Laundry Building at the State Hospital on September 25. [Read about those fires.](#)

Q: How far away was mutual aid?

A: The Durham Fire Department could be called, and was called in 1928, when the Yarborough House burned on Fayetteville Street. A pumper also responded from Smithfield.

Q: Who was the fire chief?

A: Hubert H. Horton was Acting Fire Chief, appointed on August 1, 1919, after the resignation of Chief Farmer. He was appointed Chief of Department on October 1, 1921. His Asst. Chief was William E. Holland, also a later Chief of Department.

Q: What else would you tell us about the Raleigh Fire Department in 1920?

A: Let me think on it.

How does Raleigh currently rate in size (sq miles) to other metro areas?

Bobby - 07/19/10 - 06:34

Here's a comparative chart, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Uni..

Legeros - 07/19/10 - 07:10

What is interesting about that list is that the largest city in sq miles is also one of the smallest in population. Neato.

Bobby - 07/19/10 - 23:12

Name: (real name

Remember personal info?