

Early History of Falls Fire Department

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Here's an early history of the Falls Fire Department, which merged last weekend with the Wake Forest Fire Department. A version of this history was read during the ceremony by Asst. Chief Marcus Wells.

Background

The Falls community developed around the falls of the Neuse River in northern Wake County. The Falls of Neuse Community Club was incorporated with the state on November 19, 1954. Land for a community center at the presently addressed 11908 Falls of Neuse Road was donated in November 1954 by Erwin Cotton Mills. The lot size was 0.29 acres.¹

Rural fire protection in the county started during that decade, with unincorporated communities around Raleigh and Wake Forest protected by newly forming fire departments such as Six Forks, Stony Hill, and Western Boulevard.

By the late 1960s, the Falls community relied upon fire protection from Stony Hill, Wake Forest, Rolesville, Wake-New Hope, Six Forks, and Bay Leaf fire departments. Each of those fire stations, however, was a fair distance from the community.

In 1969, the Falls Community Club, and with the advisement of then county commissioner Hal Trentman, took on the organization of the fire department as their project.

Incorporated

The Falls Volunteer Fire Department was incorporated with the state on July 7, 1970. Listed on the Articles of Incorporation were five directors:

- Melvin C. Jackson
- Bruce L. Fonville
- William H. Blackmon
- William D. Jackson
- Linwood E. Barham

The incorporators were listed as

- Melvin C. Jackson
- Linwood E. Barham
- William D. Jackson

First Apparatus

They purchased their first piece of fire apparatus was a converted Army 2 1/2-ton, three-axle truck with a 1,400 gallon water tank. The truck was purchased for \$500 from the Durham Highway Fire Department. The money was raised through fundraisers, donations, and charging district patrons \$10 to join the Falls Fire District Inc.

The second piece of fire apparatus purchased was a 1956 Ford/American pumper with a front mounted Barton pump. It was equipped with a 500 GPM pump and carried 500 gallons of water. It was bought from Six Forks Fire Department for \$2,500.² The Ladies Auxiliary paid for most of the purchase, with money made from barbecues and craft shows.

Training and Equipment

The first Fire Chief was the late Sam Perry and the department had 24 members at the start. They received permission from the Falls Community Club to build two apparatus to be attached to the community center building. Most of the work was done by members of the department and was finished by contracted builders. Two years later, two more bays were added.

Firefighting equipment was purchased as money became available, while neighboring fire departments donated hose, nozzles, and more. Training was provided by Captain Jimmy Warren of the Raleigh Fire Department. He came out once a week and taught basic firefighting to the

members. At the time, only one member had any prior firefighting experience.

In the early years of the department, several members would attend a yearly week-long class at Wilson Technical Community College to get their training.

Water and Taxes

Since the nearest fire hydrants were 8 to 10 miles away, it became apparent that more water was needed in case there was a large fire. The department purchased a used oil truck from one of the local oil distributors. This unit was used as a second tanker. All three vehicles were parked in the two bays, until the other two bays were added.

On October 5, 1970 (see below), the Wake County Commissioners recognized Falls Volunteer Fire Department Inc. as a county department. A referendum was [later?] held and the residents of the Falls Fire District were asked to vote on receiving a 10 cent on the \$100 dollar valuation of taxed property to support the fire department. The referendum passed by a vote of 42 for and two against. The first full year of tax revenues was \$3,060.

Wake County provided each rural fire department \$125 per month at the time, and also matched funds for communication equipment. The county's rural fire departments (18 plus Falls) were dispatched by the Raleigh Fire Department, from a communications center at Station 1.

Fire District

On October 5, 1970, County Civil Defense Director John C. Throne asked county commissioners to recognize the new Falls Fire Department district and approve its boundaries. They were presumably approved on that date.

The approval would allow the department to start operation, and which would result in lower fire insurance rates for residents. The fire department had 21 men at the time. The Board of Directors was led by Linwood Barham.

The 11-square mile district roughly bordered a six-mile stretch of Falls of Neuse Road, south to the present Ravenscroft School, east on Durant Road (then named Neuse Road) to the railroad tracks, west to Six Forks Road, and north to Highway 98. The district also included a northern section of Litchford Road.

The Falls Fire Department was assigned the Wake County fire station number 21.

More Apparatus

In 1974, the department bought its first new fire truck chassis. They mounted the 1,200-gallon tank from the oil tanker onto the 1973 Chevrolet chassis. The tank was also modified for a quick dump system. In 1977, with increased tax revenues, fundraisers, donations, and a loan from FHA, the department purchased its first completely new truck, a 1978 FMC/Bean pumper with a 750 GPM pump and a 750 gallon tank.

Other early and later apparatus:

- 1984 Chevrolet Custom Deluxe 30 brush truck, 250 gallons.
- 1984 Chevrolet Suburban, purchased used.
- 1987 Ford 8000/E-One pumper tanker, 1250 GPM pump, 1000 gallons.
- 1989 Ford 8000/E-One pumper tanker, 1250 GPM pump, 1000 gallons.
- 1994 E-One Sentry pumper tanker, 1250 GPM, 1000 gallons.

Falls Lake

In 1978, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers started construction of a dam at the river falls. Before that time, flooding of the Neuse River caused extensive damage to public and private properties down river. The Falls Lake project was created as a flood-control solution. The dam that holds the lake was completed in 1981. Among the changes created by the lake was the demolition of the Six Forks Road bridge. Today, Falls Lake is a 12,410 acre reservoir that extends into Durham and Granville counties.

First Responder

In the early 1980s, fire departments in Wake County began offering First Responder services. In 1984, the Falls Fire Department initiated the program. The decision was made due to the length response times of EMS units responding from Raleigh (Wake County EMS), Six Forks (Six Forks EMS), and Wake Forest (Northern Wake EMS).

Linwood E. Barham, a charter member, taught the First Responder class twice weekly. The first females also joined the fire department as a result of the First Responder program.

Paid Members and Duty Crews

In the 1980s, the call volume was increasing and the need for daytime personnel was growing. The department was also looking into buying land across the street from the community center for a new fire station. Since the department was not receiving enough revenues from the fire district tax base to do both, they decided to hire paid day personnel instead of buying land.

The first all-volunteer duty crew was started in 2002. They were paid beginning in 2008, and received 25 dollars a night.

River Rats

The department's nickname "River Rats" was used by Falls Community members when they played baseball against Stony Hill Community members, the "Possums". The community members took the name from a group of local young men in the community that called themselves "The River Rats."

¹Erwin Mills operated in a three-story granite building that's still standing. The structure was built in 1890 and expanded in 1895. The following year, it was converted from a paper mill to a textile mill. The names changed over the years until finally Erwin Mills. The textile operations, mainly warehousing, discontinued in 1959. The building was renovated for condominiums, which were completed in 1996.

²Both pieces of apparatus were the first fire engines for the Durham Highway and Six Forks fire departments, respectively.

Sources:

- Falls Fire Department.
- Mike Legeros records.
- New Rural Fire Department Planned for Wake County - News & Observer, October 1, 1970.
- North Carolina Secretary of State Corporation Records.

I work for a fire hose company in Ohio that has warehouses throughout the United States. I have recently began to read various blogs about rural and volunteer fire departments, especially about funding, grants and training. Your blog about the history of your fire department is interesting and very good. I am going to check our archives and see if we have ever sent any fire hose to your fire department. Thanks for all that you do.

Keith Eriksen ([Email](#)) ([Web Site](#)) - 04/09/12 - 18:00

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