

Big City Black Fire Companies in North Carolina

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On Saturday, the Durham *Herald-Sun* [published this story](#) about the city's first career black firefighters. Eight were hired in 1958 and staffed an all-black engine company at Station 4. They were preceded by Winston-Salem's all-black Engine 4, and followed by Greensboro's all-black Engine 4 and Truck 4. In the Capitol City, Engine 2 operated with six of the city's first seven black firefighters.

Here's a chart comparing the big-city black fire companies in North Carolina. (Were there others in other cities, comprised of all- or partially all-black career firefighters in the 1950s through 1970s? Readers will have to help, as my statewide documentation is always incomplete in places.)

Note that there's a long lineage of all-black *volunteer* fire companies our state. In Raleigh, for example, they served the city from the late 1860s to the early 1910s. See this history of [Early Black Firefighters of North Carolina](#) to learn more.

City	Companies	Members	Start	Stop	Notes
Winston-Salem	Engine 4	8 black 7 white	1951	1967?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eight black firefighters hired in March 1951. • Raphael O'Hara Black, Willie James Carter, Lester Edward Ervin Jr., John Henry Ford, Robert Lindsay Grier, John Franklin Meredith Jr., George Waddell Penn, and John Roy Thomas. • Reported for duty on March 1, 1951 to Station 4 on Dunleith Avenue. • Received \$192 a month during their six weeks of training. • Company consisted of eight black firefighters and seven white officers. • Operated as integrated fire company, but with segregated living quarters. • City laws required separate sleeping quarters and kitchen. Cost \$10,000 to renovate fire station. • Company was limited to fighting fires in African-American neighborhoods until June 2, 1951, when they were called to assist at the Wood Finishing Products Company Plant #652 on Waughtown Road. • Engine 4 became an all-black company by 1957. • Entire fire department integrated by November 1967.
Durham	Engine 4	10 black	1958	1969?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eight black firefighters hired in October 1958. • George Washington King, Walter Thomas, Elgin Johnson, Velton Thompson, Robert Medlyn, John O. Lyon, Nathaniel Thompson, Sylvester Hall, Thomas Harris and Linwood Howard. • Staffed a newly built Station 4 at Fayetteville and Pekoe Streets. • Station opened October 1, 1958, and served predominately black Hayti neighborhoods. • Used "hand me down" equipment, including an older engine. • Entire department integrated by 1969, and the now ten members of Engine 4 were working at fire stations throughout Durham.
Greensboro	Engine 4 Truck 4	28 black	1961	1966?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Twenty-eight black firefighters hired in 1961. • Largest academy of new firefighters in city's history. • Staffed a newly built Station 4 at 401 Gorrell Street. • Staffed a new ladder company, Truck 4. • Entire department integrated in or after 1966.

					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On April 12, 1966, the city's Human Relations Commission presented a plan to City Council to integrate all fire stations.
Raleigh	Engine 2	6 black 4 white	1963	1965	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seven black firefighters hired between February 1963 and March 1964. Larry Gene Williams, Welton Jones, Ervin Louis Stephens, James Leon Giles, James Greene Jr., Norwood Matthew Peacock, and Richmond Davis Jr. Six were moved to Station 2 at Memorial Auditorium between Mar. 1963 and Apr. 1964. Stephens was assigned to Station 1. They staffed Engine 2, along with a white officer and driver. Operated as integrated fire company, but with segregated living quarters. Five of six members were transferred to other stations in August 1965, thus integrating entire department.

Sources include:

- http://www.journalnow.com/news/local/article_389a2da8-7d6e-11e2-b23c-001a4bcf6878.html
- <http://www.heraldsun.com/news/x318370087/First-black-firefighters-bonded-for-life>
- <http://www.campusecho.com/campus/campus-news/firefighters-fought-racism-hatred-1.3000201#.Utx6y7Qo6MI>
- [African American Heritage in the Raleigh Fire Department](#) (PDF), research notes by Legeros, 2011-2014.
- [Early Black Firefighters in North Carolina, Annotated.](#)
- Greensboro Fire Department history books, 1990, 2001.
- Winston-Salem Fire Department history book, 2000.
- Legeros research.

Mike my grandfather H.M.Shields was one of the white fire fighters who vol to work at E-4. He always spoke highly of those men and how they were as good as any other fire fighters.

Clay Simmons - 01/19/14 - 22:45

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