

UPDATED: Brevard Line of Duty Death, August 25, 1909

May 2 - Afternoon

Lo and behold, a little digital sleuthing finds the *Sylvan Valley News* from August 27, 1909, via the [DigitalNC](#) web site. (They don't even have a complete run for that month. What are the odds?) [Here's the page](#) (PDF) about the accident. It occurred on a Wednesday morning, about 7:00 a.m. The chemical engine was "rushing down the hill" north of the courthouse, to a fire at "Jim Axum's house." Just as the hose was being put into play, an explosion occurred, which instantly killed Aiken.

He was behind the apparatus, unwinding the hose, when the end of the engine's cylinder blew off. He was thrown ten or twenty feet. He was found dead, with a broken neck and other injuries. Others were injured, including Chief Gallowey, who was knocked down and run over the apparatus. The cause was suspected as the tank became pressurized or over-pressurized by gas, as it descended the hill to the fire.

Good lesson on the accuracy of recorded history. Even the most seeming accurate accounts should be second-sourced, to confirm what might've been misremembered or misinterpreted by others. Next question, were chemical engine accidents common? Rare? Exceptionally rare? To be investigated.

May 2 - Morning

One of the legacy names being added to the North Carolina Fallen Firefighters Memorial at Saturday's annual ceremony in Raleigh is a member of the Brevard Fire Department who died on duty on August 25, 1909.

James P. "Jim" Aiken was the town's only black fireman, and was serving as Acting Fire Chief when he was killed while responding to a fire. He was forty-eight years old.



[This web page biography](#) of Jim Aiken describes the incident as follows:

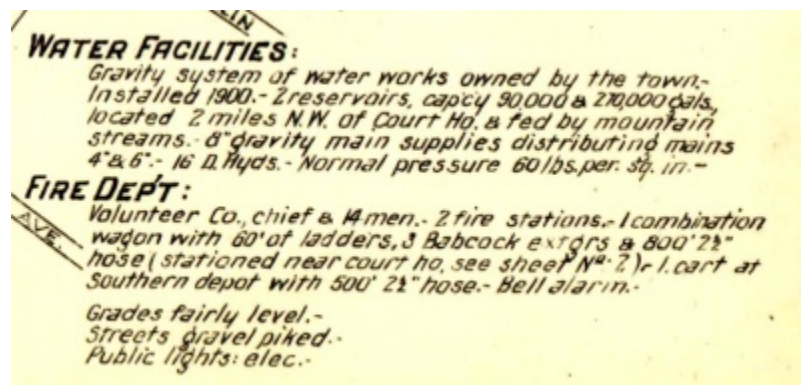
"Jim was driving the town's two wheeled steam fire wagon to the fire, when it turned over going too fast around a curve. It exploded killing Aiken instantly. Jim Aiken was so popular that none of the Black churches were big enough for his funeral. The white First Baptist Church of Brevard offered its building for Aiken's funeral. So many people of all races attended that the crowd overflowed the church and filled the nearby streets. All the stores and government buildings in Brevard closed for Jim Aiken's funeral."

Two-wheeled "steam fire wagon" you say? That seems highly unlikely, given the sheer mass required for such an apparatus. More likely, one of two things was true: (a.) the town had a four-wheel steam engine, or (b.) they had a two-wheel wagon for hose, which were supplied by hydrants.

Since Mike's list of [steam engines in North Carolina](#) doesn't include Brevard, the second option seems more likely. But let's look into verification.

Looking at a [Sanborn Fire Insurance map](#) dated June 1911, the town's fire department is described as:

"Volunteer company, chief, and fourteen men. Two fire stations. One combination [chemical engine and hose] wagon with 60-feet of ladders, three Babcock extinguishers, and 800 feet of 2 1/2-inch hose (stationed near Courthouse), and one cart at Southern depot with 500-feet 2 1/2-inch hose. Bell alarm."



That's helpful, to a degree. Two years after the accident, the department didn't have a steam engine, but did have a pair of hose wagons. Was either of these the two-wheel wagon that Jim Aiken was driving at the time of his death? Presumably a repaired version?¹

The detail about an explosion suggests perhaps one or more of the chemical extinguishers on the combination chemical engine/hose wagon exploded. However, such a vehicle seems more like a four-wheeled than two-wheeled conveyance. The second cart, a simple hose wagon, could've have easily been a two-wheeled apparatus.

Perhaps our readers to the west can shed some light, or cite other historical accounts that further expand or clarify the story. Also, memo to self, add this account to my hosted copy of [Early Black Firefighters of North Carolina](#).

¹Did Brevard in fact possess a steamer, that was destroyed in 1909? That was a four-wheel version, misremembered as a two-wheel version? And references of which haven't yet been found by Mr. Historian? It could happen.

<http://www.legeros.com/ralwake/photos/weblog/pivot/entry.php?id=5980>

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