

1808 — GREENSBORO FIRE DEPARTMENT — 1984

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Greensboro, North Carolina was chartered in 1808. The first fire protection for the town was authorized by the General Assembly in 1828. Understandably, there was some political unrest during this time in our history concerning the type of protection and how it was to be enforced. In 1833, agreement was reached by a group of newly appointed City Commissioners. Formal fire protection became law for Greensboro.

Each household was ordered to have two ladders on its premises, "one which shall reach from the ground to the eaves of the house, the other to rest on top of the house, to reach from the comb to the eaves." Failure to comply, automatically brought a fine of five dollars to the Greensboro home owner. William R.D. Lindsay and Police Officer Logan were appointed to inspect the town to see that ladders were in place and that all rubbish and nuisances were cleared from back yards.

In January, 1849, Greensboro suffered its first fire of major consequence. This fire very nearly destroyed the entire business community of the town. J.B. Lossing, an author and historian recorded these observations:

"Very few villages in the interior of the State appeared more like a northern town than Greensboro. The houses are generally good and the stores give evidence of active trade. Within an hour after my arrival, the town was thrown into commotion by the bursting out of flames from a large frame dwelling a short distance from the courthouse. There being no fire engine in the City, the flames spread rapidly and at one time menaced the safety of the whole town. A keg of powder was used without effect to demolish a tailor shop standing in the way of the conflagration towards a large tavern. The flames passed on until confronted by one of those broad chimneys on the outside of the house, so universally prevalent in the South, when it was subdued, after four buildings were destroyed. I never saw a population more thoroughly frightened; and when I returned to my lodgings, far away from the fire, every bed was packed ready for flight."

Not surprisingly, soon after this event, Greensboro officials bought a handbrake or pumping engine and put in two cistern which provided their new fire engine with a water supply. One cistern was located in what is now the 300 block of South Elm Street and the other was located behind what was the Davie Street City School.

The first fire company that manned this new engine was a totally volunteer organization. The volunteers, indicating the level of local interest, was composed mostly of prominent citizens of the community.

In 1871 an attempt was made to further improve the town's firefighting capabilities with the addition of a hook and ladder company. The Department was unsuccessful. In 1872 fire destroyed a large portion of the town once again. This fire leveled the County Courthouse, W.C. Porter's Drug Store, Farmer's Bank, Southern Hotel and two rows of framed law offices.

The second major fire resulted in the organization of a second volunteer fire company. This second company was equipped with a "chemical apparatus, a double chemical engine equipped with two thirty-five gallon chemical tanks." The original fire company was in charge of this new equipment but most of the original organizers were gone. These improvements were initially met with considerable enthusiasm. Soon interest waned and in 1884 there were only five men in the chemical engine company. This five man company was not only expected to fight fires but also had to hand pull their new engine on mostly unpaved streets. Horses had not yet been provided for the company. Eventually a team of horses was rented from a local livery stable to pull the engines and later on the town bought a team for the men.

It was at about this time that Harper J. Elam, a young entrepreneur, moved from Charlotte to Greensboro. Charlotte had developed a good reputation for having a well organized fire company and good apparatus. Mr. Elam quickly determined that the young Greensboro was virtually defenseless. He convinced



Lewis and Sons Wagon and Buggy Works on Lewis Street.

the citizens that the situation was inviting a third disastrous fire. Interest resumed and Greensboro formed a type of volunteer organization that was to endure until the Fire Department went to a paid effort in 1926.

Dr. Ed Lindsey was elected president of this new volunteer organization and Judge David Schenck was made its secretary. Under their leadership, the company had a large and strong membership. The men were extremely committed to protecting their community. However, they still lacked adequate tools and money.

At this same time, a group of prohibitionists were very strong in Greensboro. The City elections were drawing close. The prohibitionists had made a strong bid for the support of the firefighters by promising that if their "dry" platform allowed a majority in the City Council, they would purchase the group a steam fire engine. The campaign was a very heated one. When the votes were in and counted, it was found that the "wets" had won. Upon taking charge of the government, the "wets" proceeded to steal a plank from the dry's platform. A steam fire engine was purchased at once. This engine, known as the "General Greene," was put into service in 1886.

At the time the "General Greene" was put in service, there was no City water system. The engine was connected to the cisterns maintained by the City and hose was strung to carry the water pumped to the fire. This practice worked reasonably well, but handicapped fire fighting efforts because there were only two cisterns to which they could connect. While plans were being made for new cisterns at different points over the City, a Baltimore Syndicate organized the Greensboro Water Company and put in the city water system.

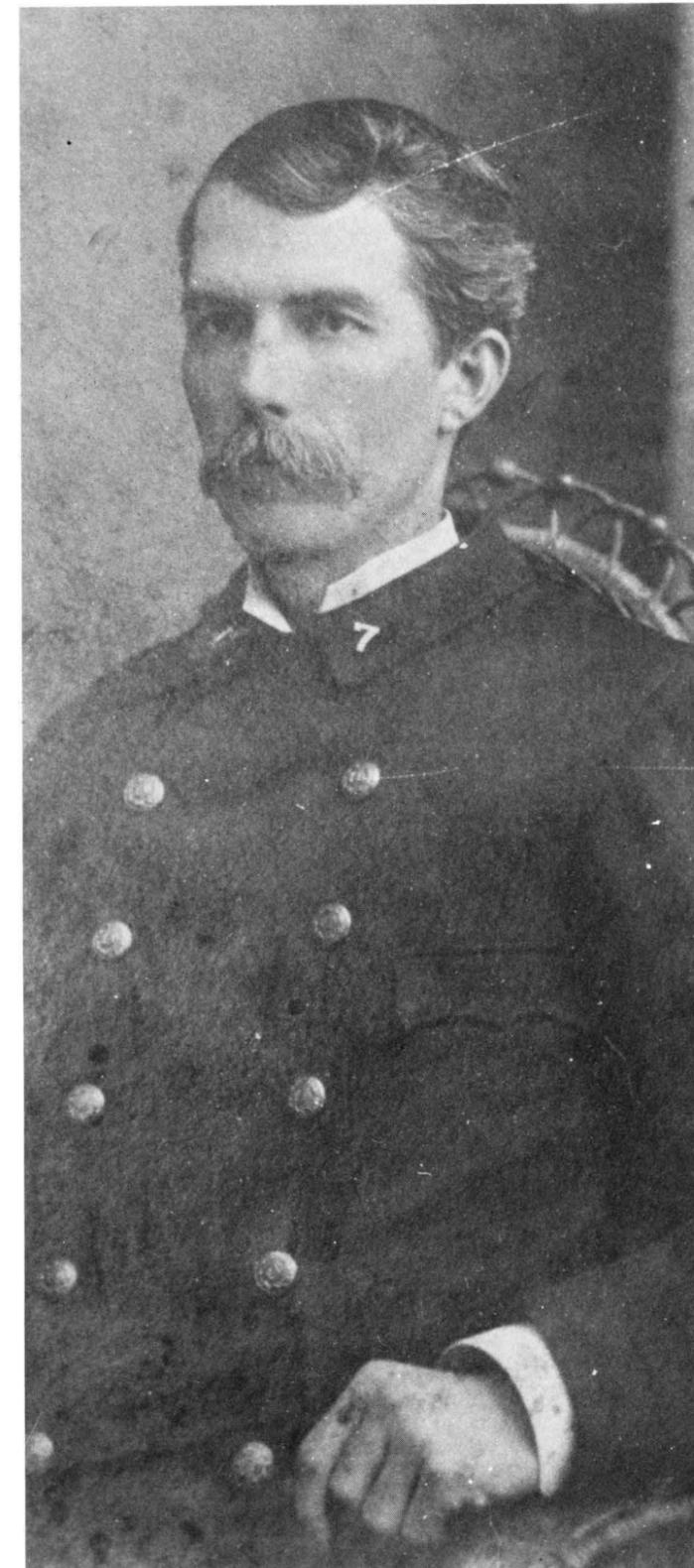
Judge David Schenck was appointed chairman of a committee in 1888 to build a house for the "General Greene." A station adjoining the old City Hall was erected at 108 West Gaston Street, now West Friendly Avenue. Once the new station opened, horses were purchased. Because Greensboro was growing so rapidly, these efforts, which at first seemed advanced, proved to be minimal once again.

The demand for more equipment bore fruit in 1890. The first hook and ladder company, housed at 209 South Davie Street was formed. This ladder truck was pulled by hand and had a tiller for guidance. One year later, the Eagle Hose Company No. 7 was located adjacent to Hook and Ladder Company No. 1. The Southside Hose Company No. 4 was organized in 1894 and was situated at the corner of Bragg and Asheboro Streets. This building, though now abandoned, still stands at its original location. The West End Hose Company No. 5 was organized in 1897, and occupied a building at the corner of Spring and Mendenhall Streets. The last of the volunteer companies formed was the Excelsior Hose Company No. 2. It was composed entirely of Black citizens and was located at the corner of Gaston and Elm Streets.

A second steam engine was purchased in 1904. This horse drawn LaFrance pump steam fire engine was built in Elmira, New York. It was capable of throwing two 1½ inch hose streams while the "General Greene" could only throw one such stream. This newer steam engine, which weighed four tons, could pump 700 gallons of water per minute at a pressure of 120 PSI. It could raise steam from cold water in three minutes and had attachments to keep steam in its boiler 24 hours a day without fire in its own boiler. Coals were shoveled from the station boiler just before leaving the station. The "General Greene," also made by T.S. LaFrance Company, was patented in December of 1871 and is still maintained in a museum in Hialeah, Florida.

Fire Departments have been traditionally and understandably proud of their equipment. Before the turn of the century fire departments were equally as proud of their teams of horses. The town of Greensboro was no exception. One horse in particular seems to have stood the test of time and is still remembered. "Prince" was the most photographed and talked about horse of the times. It was reported in the Raleigh Post in 1901 that the horse was given liquor after each fire call. The money was contributed by men that hung around the station. It was stated that he drank the very best rye that was available . . . one pint at a time!

On July 13, 1899, Greensboro saw its last major fire of the 19th Century when flames broke out in the Benbow House Hotel. Estimated at a cost of \$40,000.00



Harper J. Elam

when it was built in 1871, the hotel had been opened with ceremonies presided over by the governor of New York and former North Carolina Governor Zeb Vance.

When the fire was first spotted, someone on a nearby locomotive blew its whistle loudly to signal that firefighters were needed. Volunteers from a hose company arrived first and seemed prepared for quick control of the situation. By this time, some of the local citizens had begun to gather at the scene. When they saw the "General Greene" rushing down the street some of the men "reared back with their thumbs in the button holes of their vests" and commented proudly about the modern machine. Murphy's Law seemed to be most prevalent that day, for no sooner had the firefighters prepared the engine, when a vital part, the airdome, blew out and left the machine totally useless. The boosters of the crowd soon began fretting that the entire town, including the County Courthouse, might burn. But C.W. Lee, a train dispatcher, came to the rescue by using a piece of leather and a length of timber to repair the airdome. The engine was back in service. Because of Lee, the town was saved, but the multi-story hotel was ruined, and its loss doubtlessly changed the future appearance of downtown Greensboro.

Motored vehicles gradually began replacing horse drawn vehicles in 1913. These growing pains caused the City government to extend its boundaries in 1924. Fire protection services were also affected. Recommendations were issued by the National Board of Fire Underwriters, predecessors to Insurance Services Offices, to keep up with this growth. As a result, the City Council authorized the sum of approximately \$300,000 to be spent on Fire Department improvements. These improvements included the building and equipping of Station 7 at the corner of Church Street and Bessemer Avenue, Station 8 on West Lee Street, the renovation of Station 4 and 5, and also provided for the construction of "Central Station" at 318 North Greene Street.

The formal opening of Greensboro's new "Central Fire Station" took place on May 15, 1926. The citizens of Greensboro turned out in masses to inspect the magnificent new home for the four central fire companies. When the final details had been completed and the doors thrown open to the public, Greensboro felt assured that no city could surpass this station.

Representatives of the Gamewell System of Newton Falls, Massachusetts spent several weeks in Greensboro installing the Gamewell alarm system. It was an elaborate alarm and recording system and one of the major features of the new station. The original system consisted of two circuits with forty-three alarm

boxes in various parts of the City. With the implementation of this new system, the ringing of the old bell in the City Hall as a fire alarm passed into history.

About this same time, plans were in the making for an "all paid" department. This became a reality on June 1, 1926. The Department was composed of eight companies which encompassed 47 men, with Frank D. Shaw as the Chief. It was also during this time that a young 20 year old, Calvin W. "Moon" Wyrick joined the department. The first year speaks well for the new paid department. For in that year, a reduction of \$200,000 in fire losses won first place for cities of our size in the United States.

Frank D. Shaw was Chief of the Greensboro Fire Department until his death on July 13, 1946. Very little about the man himself can be found. An article from a 1926 State Firemen's Association Program did illustrate the man's character and feelings towards his profession. When asked to compare the work of a firefighter with other professions, Chief Shaw replied, "It is not uncommon to hear of a doctor who has given himself so completely to his job and made such sacrifices that his own life has been cut short. In any line of endeavor, the element of sacrifice is present, making constant demands upon those who would be faithful to their work. Firefighting is no exception. The firefighter who is truly conscientious must be prepared to undergo hardship, even lay down his life for the principles he has sworn to uphold. The firefighter is not greatly different from the soldier. His enemy is just as real as ever faced a soldier on the field of battle and the lengths that must be gone to cope with that enemy are just as great.

But there is hardly the glory in the life of a firefighter that there is in the life of a soldier. It is true that glory is but an empty thing, satisfying while it endures, but quick to fade and die. Nevertheless, while the soldier is for a while an idol, his exploits written of, and read, the firefighter though his sacrifice, his courage, his ability and value be as great, must do his work unsung. He dies and few may know it. His is largely a career carried on in obscurity.

But for a real firefighter, wholly conscientious and faithful to his duty, such a fact is not disheartening. He knows within himself that what he does is good, and the satisfaction of work well done is sufficient to carry him along."

In the next several years, the greatest single catastrophe ever to confront the Greensboro Fire Deptment was to take place. This event still looms ever present in the minds of some Greensboro residents. On a Thursday evening, April 2, 1936, a tornado descended upon the City from the southwest. It made its initial stab near the quarters of Engine Company No. 8 on West Lee Street. Sweeping

with all the known fury of Mother Nature in her most destructive mood, the funnel seared along West Lee Street in an easterly direction cutting a path of death and destruction never before witnessed by our City. From a moment after 7:15 p.m. on through the night and well into the following day, all available firefighters labored to fight fires in the demolished buildings. They also rescued victims who were trapped under the debris. When the skies cleared, Greensboro had lost 13 citizens, 144 were injured and 289 buildings were damaged. Fifty-six of these were destroyed.

Until January 1, 1941, firefighters worked four days in a row and were off one day. They were allowed to go home for meals and on occasion, a volunteer would relieve a paid man in the evening so he could go home to his family. In January of 1941, 28 men were hired to start a two platoon system. One platoon of men would work 10 hours from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. while the other shift would work from 6:00 p.m. until 8:00 a.m. These two platoons would switch working hours every six days. Eventually these two platoons evolved to "A" and "B" shifts which worked 24 hours on duty and 24 hours off duty.

On the evening of August 21, 1946, the citizens of Greensboro learned that a new Chief had been appointed. Calvin W. Wyrick the young rookie in 1926 was now a veteran of 20 years with the Department. He had served as a Captain in charge of Engine Company No. 1 and had earlier worked with that company as firefighter, driver and Lieutenant. His record was known to all firefighters to be outstanding.

Former City Manager Henry A. Yancey, said upon his appointment of Chief Wyrick, "Captain Wyrick brings to this job not only youth and vigor, but 20 years of experience and is eminently qualified for the position. He might be fittingly termed the boy veteran. He will be in complete charge with no strings upon him and will have every opportunity to use his knowledge and ability for the Department and the City."

In 1946 an incident occurred in Greensboro which brought the City national attention when accounts of the story appeared in *Reader's Digest* magazine. In July of that year a painter was at work on a 360 foot radio tower at WBIG, when an accident plunged him through a maze of crossbars and lodged him 310 feet above the ground. An alarm was sounded and Captain Roma C. Fortune and Firefighter Charles H. Henderson were dispatched to the scene. In spite of the great height and difficulty in lowering the injured painter, these two firefighters made a successful rescue that day. Their heroic action earned them the Coronet Award.

C.W. Wyrick as Chief of the Department, encouraged many changes and improvements during the next two decades. The first of these was that all his men should undergo and pass Standard and Advanced First Aid Courses. This led to Public Education in first aid practices by the department personnel.

In January of 1949, the City of Greensboro and the Fire Department served as hosts to over 400 city officials and firefighters from cities and towns throughout three states for a demonstration of five new apparatus. These new trucks and the plans for two new fire stations were the result of a 1947 bond issue which gave the department \$300,000 for improvements. The two new stations that this money allowed the department to build were Station 3 on Yanceyville Street and Station 6 on Westover Terrace. Once these stations were completed it gave Greensboro a total of 7 stations, 10 companies and 98 personnel.

The Fire Prevention Bureau of the department did not become a formal division until August 16, 1950, when Captain Fred V. Trulove was put in command of four full time inspectors. These men were E.B. Smith, E.S. Lee, W.L. Watson and Captain G.C. Wuchae who handled records and correspondence. During their first year, the Fire Prevention Bureau cited and corrected 2,282 violations!

The year 1950 brought another major change for the department. Captain E.E. McDowell was named the first Training Officer of the Greensboro Fire Department. He received this new assignment after completing a three month course of study at the New York City Fire College. This was also the first time a member of the department was sent out of state to school. He brought back advanced techniques of firefighting and implemented the first formal officer training course ever conducted. In his first year of service the department totaled 25,244 hours of training. On June 21, 1954, then Assistant Chief McDowell died of a heart attack while playing softball, at the age of 35. The successor to his posi-



Bystanders observe "Benbow House" hotel fire

tion was George C. Wuchae. Robert L. Powell, Jr. was promoted to Captain as Wuchae's assistant.

In 1951 two-way radios were installed in all vehicles of the department. The Assistant Chief received a car to replace the pick-up truck he had used to respond to calls.

More changes came to the department in 1952. Experimentation with 1½ inch hose to replace 2½ inch hose as handlines began. Recording of all station activities in log books began on February 22nd. The 65th Convention of the North Carolina State Firemen's Association was held in Greensboro with over 1,500 firefighters from 242 cities in attendance. A variety of activities highlighted the convention, including a parade of old and new equipment and marching bands. Two of these activities held special interest for our city. The first of these was the election of Chief "Moon" Wyrick as the new President of the Association and the second was the unveiling of the department's new \$8,000 power unit.

Two major fires in 1953 caused the City to suffer its first annual fire loss of over a half million dollars. Kinney Shoe Store at 230 South Elm Street caught fire on March 5, and experienced a loss of \$142,000. On July 18, 1953, an explosion at Graino Mill caused a severe fire which needed 8 companies to bring it under control. Final losses at the mill came to over \$90,000.

More changes came in 1954. On January 20th, a former Assistant Chief, Paul B. Shaw, was the first recipient of the Greensboro Supplementary Retirement Fund. The first Captain's examination was given for those members of the department with ten years of service. The first ten week training program was begun for newly organized auxiliary firefighters with 14 becoming certified on October 26. This group of men was organized to augment the activities of regular firefighters and were required to work at least one night per week. Also during 1954 the Greensboro Life Saving and Rescue Squad, a volunteer organization held a National Convention in Greensboro. This group of volunteers had been in operation for about nine years. It was composed of men from the Fire Department, Red Cross, ambulance drivers and other interested persons.

In May, 1956, two major fires accounted for over \$350,000 in losses. The first of these occurred on May 14, when the Starmount Country Clubhouse was virtually destroyed by a 3:00 a.m. fire. It took approximately three hours to bring the largest fire seen in many years under control by three engine companies and a service truck. Extinguishment efforts were greatly hampered by the slate roof on the clubhouse, which contained intense heat within the building, and by an inadequate water supply. Five days later the Greensboro Motor Company truck garage burst into flames when a repairman ignited gasoline inside the garage with an acetylene torch. Thirty firefighters responded to the 2:15 p.m. blaze on three engine companies and a ladder truck to 205 South Forbis Street where the



Prince served the Eagle Hose Company for 13 years.

garage was located. Although several vehicles were destroyed by the fire, no one was injured and an \$11,000 fire engine belonging to the Pinecroft-Sedgefield Fire Department was saved. The loss to the garage and its contents were estimated at over \$100,000.

Truck maintenance and training was performed at Central Station until 1956. It was at this time that the small two stall garage built in 1926 was no longer large enough to accommodate the newer trucks. The garage was closed and the space was converted into a kitchen and classroom. The old kitchen was made into office space for the Fire Prevention Bureau. The Bureau had grown from the original four inspectors to eight plus one secretary.

In October of 1956, the new \$200,000 Training and Maintenance Center was opened to a probationary class of 18 recruits under the direction of Training Officer R. L. Powell, Jr. The opening of this new facility brought even more changes to the Department. The lone mechanic, Assistant Chief H.G. Ballinger was given two assistants. The addition of the new recruit class also had a great impact on the weekly work hours of firefighters. It reduced the hours from 84 to 72 hours. These new men also gave the firefighting personnel, "Kelly Days," named after the Mayor of Chicago who originated the holiday in 1930. The addition also increased the Department to 120 men including 10 companies and 25 pieces of apparatus.

The City of Greensboro completed a major annexation in 1957 of 28 square miles. The City was now 49.5 square miles and had a population of over 119,000. With the addition of these new properties, the Fire Department made plans for three new stations. One of these new stations was for the relocation of Station 7 to Wendover and Gatewood Avenue. The other two stations were to be Station 10 on High Point Road and Station 9 on Friendly Avenue. Some residents of these areas were concerned that fire stations would give their communities an undesirable appearance. A short time later most of the adverse opinions were put to rest when the department unveiled newly designed stations to fit in residential communities. In 1958 Stations 7, 9 and 10 opened for business. All of the stations were built at a cost of approximately \$80,000 each and in 1960 the City added Station 11 on South Elm Street.

Sunday morning, June 28, 1959, began peacefully for most residents of the Gate City. It was only the first week of summer, but the new season had arrived with unusual warmth. The sun warmed the air quickly and eventually the mercury would reach 96 degrees.

A 12 year old boy walked in the Sabbath quiet to the lumber yards of New Home Building Supply on South Mendenhall Street. He began playing with matches near a sawdust pile, unaware of the destruction his actions would cause.

At 10:30 a.m. an alarm went out and firefighters responded. The sun was, by then, higher and hotter and winds fanned the flames to the point of being uncontrollable.

The blaze inhaled huge piles of lumber, roofing materials and plywood and soon after the initial alarm, three of the five buildings on the lot were ashes. Eventually 150 firefighters and 50 volunteers were battling the fire with over 8,000 feet of hose that had been laid. By midday the fire still roared and firefighters, with sun at their backs and flames in their faces, began falling. By the time the blaze was under control, around 5:00 p.m., 40 firefighters and volunteers had been treated for heat prostration or smoke inhalation. Five doctors had set up a first aid station near the scene, but 18 firefighters eventually had to be taken to hospitals. Final estimates placed the damage at a cost of over \$96,000.

It was decided in 1961, that the fire protection services in Greensboro needed to be reorganized and expanded once again. With this expansion came the relocation of Station 4 to 401 Gorrell Street and the integration of the Greensboro Fire Department with the hiring of 28 black personnel to man this new station. To date, this is the largest training class ever undertaken during the history of the department. In addition to Engine 4 being located at the new station, newly formed Truck Company 4 was also housed there. With the opening of this new station, the City was divided into three districts. Battalion I included all of the City west of Elm Street and Battalion II which included all of the City east of Elm. Both these districts were exclusive of the Fire District which was answered by the units at Central Station. At this time the Department was composed of 193 men, 2 secretaries and 37 vehicles at 10 stations.

In 1964, Station 5 was relocated to Friendly Avenue and Truck 5 was added to the complement of emergency vehicles. In 1965, the City gained a new fire insurance rating of a Class 3. Fire Communications was consolidated with the Police Department's into the City's new Communication Operations. The stations then could be notified of alarms by telephone, public address, radio or box alarms.

The firefighters work week was shortened in 1967 from 72 to 66 hours and a new job classification was formed. The new classification carried a rank of "Firefighter II." All men with 5 years of service were eligible for the examination process which qualified them for the new position. The exam consisted of three parts; a written exam, an oral interview and a performance evaluation.

Nearly everyone who was in Greensboro in the 60's remembers the McClure's Steak House at 900 Summit Avenue. Many remember Halloween night, October 31, 1968, when fire destroyed it and three other nearby businesses.

It was suspected that the fire was caused by malfunctioning controls on an electric heat pump. In addition to leveling the steak house, the blaze consumed Straughn's Book Store, Bridges Furniture Store and the Glidden Paint Center. The loss was estimated at \$500,000.

Five and one half years later on February 12, 1974, fire again claimed property on the same block. It nearly destroyed Maxwell Furniture and caused smoke and heat damage to McClure's and Vestal's Florist. Damage was estimated at \$350,000. Again, an electrical system appeared to be the culprit.

Perhaps one of the more dangerous fires in Greensboro's history broke out in the early hours of May 20, 1967. Flames consumed the central portion of the Worth Chemical Company warehouse at 503 South Spring Street when several dangerous chemicals exploded. When the fire was extinguished, firefighters faced the dilemma of the warehouse's red label area where drums of explosive material were stored. Adding to the problems was the fact that a chemical known as sodium hydrosulfite was stored within the fire area and next to flammable liquids. The hydrosulfite kept reacting with water and prevented extinguishment. The solution was found. The explosives were removed by a large crane and hauled away on dump trucks.

On July 1, 1969, Chief C.W. Wyrick retired from the Department with 47 years of service. He was Chief for 22 of these years. His successor was G.C. "Buck" Wuchae. Chief Wuchae brought a new look to the Greensboro Fire Department. This new look included closed cabs on firefighting apparatus, no neck ties in the summer time, and "in-station" or work uniforms for the personnel. Also on February 10, 1970, the three platoon system we currently enjoy became a reality, which reduced work hours from 66 to 56 hours per week.

Tragedy struck both the City of Greensboro and the Greensboro Fire Department on December 31, 1969. Firefighter II Jesse C. Gray became the first "in direct line of duty" fatality ever suffered by the department when he "stepped from his position on the rear of the pumper (Engine Company 2) and the truck was backed up causing him to be thrown under the rear wheels." Ever since this event took place, every recruit firefighter who has ever graduated has learned from the price that Firefighter Gray paid and leaves his position only after being ordered to do so. On February 20, 1970, a memorial was dedicated to Gray when Station 8 on Chapman Street was opened.

The 37th call of October 14, 1970, brought Greensboro the most spectacular night blaze ever remembered. All it took to spark the event was a cigarette negligently left on a bale of cotton at the Greensboro Bonded Warehouse. All off-duty and on-duty firefighters eventually responded to the blaze at which twenty-four explosions took place in the first hour. Firefighters could not halt the rapidly spreading flames. The brick and wood structure at 216 North Cedar Street was a \$1,700,000 loss.

In 1973, the department was restructured to three battalions with the completion of Station 12 on Pisgah Church Road and Station 14 on Summit Avenue.

On February 5, 1976, the departmental organization was again restructured after the completion of Station 15 in 1975 to accommodate Battalion Commanders and District Chief assignments. The department at this time was composed of 13 stations and 20 fire companies. Stations 5, 7 and 8 were also named

battalion headquarters and this was done to balance protective coverage of rapidly growing outlying areas and provide the best use of manpower.

Greensboro's firefighters have answered calls over the years that have had consequences that were far more sobering than the loss of property. Such was the case on August 13, 1973, when seconds after 1:50 a.m., flames suddenly engulfed an attractive brick house at 3204 Dreiser Place. An explosion was heard by neighbors and the Fire Department was called. Fifteen firefighters battled the stubborn blaze for an hour. A search of the debris revealed what was feared; all three occupants of the home were dead. The three apparently died of smoke and heat and although the cause was never determined, the blaze was considered accidental.

A fire in the O'Henry Hotel on January 15, 1976, probably helped change the face of Greensboro more than any other major blaze since the burning of the Benbow House Hotel in 1899. Firefighters battled severe smoke conditions and cold in order to extinguish a blaze that was confined to Room 501 and the outer hallway. An elderly transient worker who was staying in the room died during the fire, but over 30 persons were rescued from the structure. The manager of the hotel was arrested on a disorderly conduct charge after he argued with police officers on the scene. After he was released on bond, he left town and did not return. The O'Henry, which had been declining for years, also never returned as a functioning part of the downtown. By the end of the decade, it was torn down. The space it occupied became a part of the premises of the new Southern Life Insurance Complex.

In 1977, more change came to the Greensboro Fire Department. Vast improvements in the quality of service for the citizens of the Gate City were planned. On July 1st, Chief R.L. Powell, Jr., became the fourth Chief of the Fire Department since it became totally paid in 1926. Chief Powell, who had designed the training program for the Department, stated he would continue present programs and begin plans for the pre-planning of major target hazards, an invalid identification program, improvements in fire coverage, and implementation of Quick Response Vehicles.

In November of the same year, the Department received the first Class 2 fire insurance rating ever received by a city in North Carolina. Greensboro was one of only a handful in the United States with an equal rating. At present, there are no Class 1 departments in North Carolina. What this meant was reduced fire insurance ratings for both commercial and governmental building operators.

During the past few years, most of the changes that have occurred in the department are apparent to all of us who are here now. In July of 1979, Station 16 was opened. With the addition of this station, 95% of the City is within a four minute response time of the fire department. In 1980, Central Station was closed along with Station 3 and the two companies were consolidated at the newly constructed Station One on North Church Street. Also in the past few years, we all have evolved from the term fireman to the term firefighter with the addition of seven women to our ranks.

Fire Department leadership acknowledged that the best defensive factors against the ravages of fire were fire prevention, fire education and an efficient fire suppression force. The department had long been recognized as having a well trained fire suppression force and a proficient fire inspection unit. Innovative fire education programs needed to be developed inclusive of the resources required to deliver programs.

Program development grew quickly in 1978-1979. By 1980, Greensboro Fire Department Community Service Programs had grown to thirteen and were being delivered to every quadrant of the City. The department is now reaching over 40,000 people per year with one or more programs.

It is believed that the Community Service and Fire Education programs have played a significant part in controlling fire loss in the City of Greensboro. As a result, Greensboro enjoys the lowest per capita fire loss of comparable size cities in North Carolina. It can be noted that cost of delivering programs has been negligible. The key has been participation of personnel from neighborhood fire stations delivering quality programs in their principal area of response.

Looking forward to the future, we see a growing departmental emphasis on response to hazardous waste and toxic chemical spills. Our training has increas-

ed accordingly. We foresee the development of even more specialized training and equipment as our chemical responses become equal in number to fire responses.

The major emphasis of this written history of the department has been the evolution of the department. Some of the names and a few of the more memorable fires have been included in order to document them in one historical piece. It is most important, though, for all of us to remember that our primary goals have not changed since our inception. The prevention of fire and the preservation of life and property are still our major objectives and will never change.

Such is also the case of the people who perform the job. They too, have preserved the same attributes, compassion and courage, that was evidenced by our predecessors. Never in our history were these qualities put to the test more than on March 2, 1981.

While combating a fire in an abandoned church at 3732 Spring Garden Street, Firefighter II Glenn R. Johnson was electrocuted when the aerial ladder he was on hit a high voltage wire that was believed to have been disconnected by the power company. Immediately, the ladder was lowered to the ground. Johnson's heart had stopped beating. Firefighters Charlie A. Jones and R. Michael Henley were among the first to reach Johnson and began resuscitation efforts. Through the use of cardio-pulmonary resuscitation, Henley and Jones were able to sustain the life of Glenn Johnson until more advanced care could be provided and within weeks, Johnson was back doing the job he so loves to perform.

It was said that the test pilots of the 1950s and 60s had an undefined quality called "The Right Stuff." This quality enabled them to push the laws of gravity and human physical endurance to the limit. For all intents and purposes, this quality has never been scientifically understood. We in our Department have a synonym for "The Right Stuff" — "Firefighter."



Kinney Shoe Store