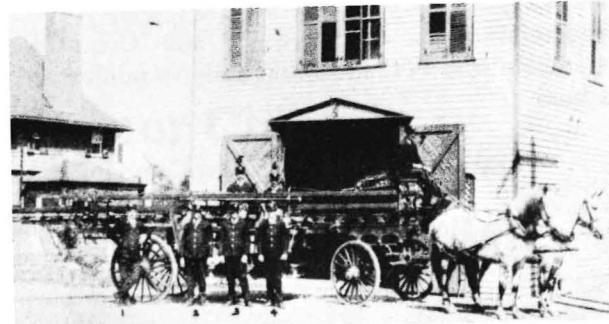


HISTORY OF WILMINGTON FIRE DEPARTMENT

Like most towns in America, Wilmington's first firefighters were groups of volunteers who organized for their own protection, and who served without pay. The first group, called the Wilmington Hook and Ladder Company, organized in 1846 but was not chartered until 1867. Their equipment consisted of leather buckets on long ropes, iron hooks attached to long wooden handles, axes, ladders and wooden carts in which the equipment was manually hauled through the streets. Their clubhouse was at 313 Dock Street.

The second volunteer fire company, the Howard Relief Company, named in honor of Mr. William C. Howard, Magistrate, was organized by a group of German and Irish citizens living in Wilmington. From their

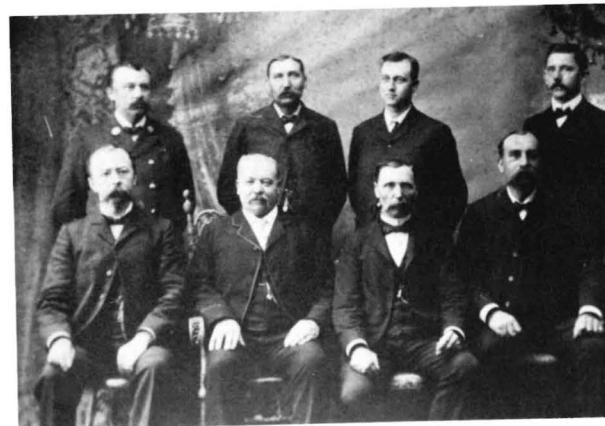


Hook & Ladder Truck Co. #1, 1905.

clubhouse at 14 South 4th Street, this company responded almost daily to fires as well as functioning as a social organization.

As time passed and the city grew, several additional fire companies were organized. All were volunteer organizations supported by membership dues and subscriptions from local businessmen.

By 1867 four other fire companies were in operation. They were Fire Engine Company No. 1 located on Third



Howard Relief Co. Seated: J. Gieschen, M. Rathjen, J. Duls, C. VonCampen. Standing: C. Schnibben, H. Duls, H. Bonitz, W. Futch.

Street across from City Hall; the Fire King Company No. 2, located at Front and Nun Streets; Vigilant Fire Company No. 3 on Second Street between Market and Dock and the Brooklyn Fire Engine Company No. 4 located on Fourth Street between Bladen and Brunswick Streets.

Fire fighting equipment had gradually improved from buckets and ladders, and the Howard Relief Company in 1868 seems to have been the first to purchase a steam fire engine. Its steam and power was generated by coal which was fed into the firebox at the rear of the engine.

About 1878 the city government began making appropriations for fire companies, and in 1879 when the first telephone system was installed in Wilmington, a telephonic fire alarm system was installed. Wilmington was proud to be one of the few communities in the country to have such a system.

In the late evening of April 10, 1880, a tragic fire started at the corner of Front and Dock Streets in which three buildings burned down and several people were injured. In those days only volunteer departments existed and when a fire occurred, bystanders joined with volunteer firemen in fighting the blaze. A young German, Captain William Ellerbrook, who was a Heide Company tug boat captain, hurried from his boat which was moored a block away, and joined scores of others in an effort to save the contents of the building. Wherever Captain Ellerbrook went, his faithful Collie Dog "BOSS" was always at his side. Before joining the firefighters, Ellerbrook had asked a bystander to hold the dog by the collar. As the fire raged more furiously, those who were fighting the conflagration pulled back a short distance. It was assumed that everyone had left the building. Suddenly a shout and a scream were heard coming from the building. The faithful animal heard the screams and, recognizing his master's voice, the animal broke away and dashed into the burning building.

Captain H.T. Lemmerman, uncle of Captain Ellerbrook, (both of Hamburg, Germany) who resided on Princess Street at the time, missed his nephew at breakfast the next morning and went looking for him. Neighbors told of how he had assisted with the firefighting the night before. When the embers had cooled, permitting entrance to the structure, a tragic sight was revealed. Ellerbrook had been trapped face downward by a heavy timber. The dog had reached his master and in a desperate attempt to drag him to safety, had seized his coat in his jaws. The animal pulled so desperately that a portion of the coat was torn away and was found gripped in his jaws. The dog had died at the side of his master for whom he had sacrificed his life. The dog's body was placed in a box and buried in the casket with his master. A monument was later erected to the memory of Captain Ellerbrook, and on the reverse side is an outline of a dog lying as if asleep. Underneath the figure is the inscription, "Faithful Unto Death." The monument stands in Oakdale Cemetery.

In 1885, the Fire Department was comprised of five companies. Their names are interesting. These were the Cape Fear Steam Fire Engine Company #3 at 110 Ann Street, the Little Columbia Fire Company at 413 Nun Street, Hook and Ladder Company #1 at 313 Dock Street, the Little Giant Steam Fire Company at 322 Princess Street, (this was the original Headquarters Station), and the Howard Relief Steam Fire Company #1 at 14 South Fourth Street. The farthest distance between any two stations, at that time, was only five blocks.

Sometime between 1883 and 1886, Headquarters Station was moved from Fourth and Princess to Fourth and Dock Streets. A huge bronze bell cast in 1886 hung in a wooden tower behind the Headquarters building at Fourth and Dock. This Headquarters building was also of wood, and is said to have originally been a church.

The front of the station faced Fourth Street and was the pumper company. Facing Dock Street was the hook and ladder company.

In 1886 the city experienced a devastating waterfront fire which started at the foot of Chestnut Street and burned for several days before being brought under control. The fire originated aboard the Wilmington to Fayetteville line Steamer, which drifted into the wharf and spread flames ashore. Fire swept north along the east bank of the Cape Fear River until wharves, warehouses, and other waterfront buildings were a complete loss. Sparks spread the fire to Sixth and Swann, destroying another complete block of businesses. Estimated damage at that time was \$850,000. Today, property in the area of the fire is worth several million dollars.

At that fire a 19 year old youth named Charles Schnibben, who had arrived in Wilmington just five years before from Germany, began his firefighting career. He joined the volunteers a short time after the waterfront lay in ashes, little realizing that he would one day be the leader and commander of the fire department.

But before the paid department was instituted, qualities of leadership became evident in this young German, and he was selected as assistant chief of the volunteers in 1895, with a salary of \$10.00 per month. Two years later, having shown such genius and dexterity in fire fighting, he was named chief of the volunteers, and on December 1, 1897 when the regular full-time paid department was inaugurated, he was asked by the mayor to continue as chief of the department. The chief and the department were both 30 years old!

The department consisted of thirty men (eighteen blacks and twelve whites), three steam fire engines, three hose reels, and one hook and ladder truck. The three fire stations were located at 14 South Fourth Street, Fourth and Princess Street and 313 Dock Street. Chief Schnibben's home stood next door, on the corner of Fourth and Dock Streets.

Sometime around the early 1900s, the old wooden tower and Headquarters building on Fourth Street near Dock were torn down and replaced with a brick training tower and a brick Headquarters building. The huge bell that had sounded the alarm and served volunteer and

Wilmington was the first American city to install a fire engine in a gasoline propelled fireboat. In 1907 the city constructed an improvised fireboat by placing the boiler and pump of a steam fire engine in a wooden craft which was propelled by a two-cylinder Globe gasoline engine, giving it a speed of 8 miles per hour. Known as the "Atlantic," this vessel remained in service until it was replaced in 1914 by another wooden hull craft called "Atlantic II." Through the years, Wilmington's fireboat has been an attraction to visiting firemen from other departments in the State.

An interesting article in the June 5, 1907 edition of *The Wilmington Messenger* reported new salaries for fire personnel as \$900 per year for the assistant chief, \$60 per month for foremen, \$57.50 per month for assistant foremen, \$60 per month for engineers, \$50 per

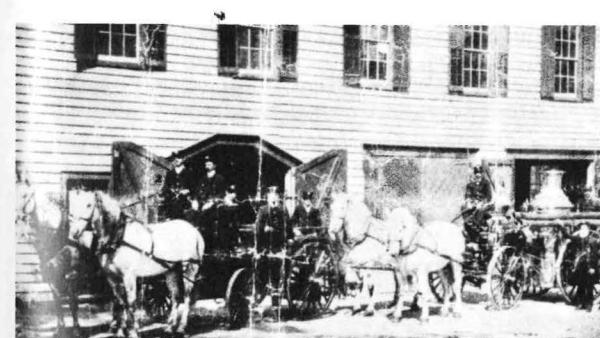


Young Charles Schnibben in uniform of Howard Relief Company.

month for firemen with less than one year of service, and \$55 per month for firemen with over one year of service. In the same report \$600 was appropriated to purchase a pair of horses, and \$8000 for the construction of a firehouse at Fourth and Campbell was deferred until later.

In March 1919 a new triple combination pumper costing \$10,500 was placed into service. The last horses were disposed of on June 1, 1919. The horses were given to the City Sanitation Department to pick up trash. However, the horses were so well trained to listen for the fire alarms they would take off down the street when they heard the fire bell ringing, leaving sanitation workers stranded with the trash!

By 1930, the department had a force of trained men and four stations located at Fourth and Campbell Streets, Fourth and Dock Streets, Fifth and Castle Streets and the fireboat station off Water Street. The equipment consisted of four triple combination pumbers, each 750 gallon capacity, one aerial hook and ladder truck, two service trucks, the fireboat and the chief's car. The department was conducting fire inspections every Wednesday in the downtown district, and weekly training drills on the department's famous drill tower. Built in 1927, the tower was the first in North Carolina, one of the best in the nation and considered to



Fire Engine Co. #1, 4th and Princess Sts.

professional firemen alike was moved to 5th and Castle Streets where it continued to sound the alarm until 1918 when the last of the horse-drawn fire equipment was disposed of.

In 1912 the first motorized equipment was purchased, consisting of two combination trucks. In 1914 a motor-drawn aerial was added and in 1917 a motorized 500 gpm engine stirred awe and envy as visitors came from far and wide to see this "modern" equipment.

be a "perfect model" by the National Board of Underwriters. The erection of the tower gave Wilmington the chance to become host to the newly established North Carolina Fire College and Drill School in 1928.

In addition to Chief Schnibben as commander-in-chief of the department, other officers serving at that time were Assistant Chiefs W.P. Munroe and J.F. Zellers in charge of Headquarters Station, Captain J.L. Croom as Drill Master, Lieutenant J.A. Burris was Chief of the Mechanical Department, Captain W.B. Carroll and Lieutenant J.F. Hart in charge of Fourth and Campbell station, Captain C.F. Zellers and Lieutenant L.R. Liles at the Fifth and Castle Street station, and Captain D.G. Smith and Lieutenant L.R. Frost were masters of the fireboat.

Chief Schnibben served as chief until June 16, 1933 when he was killed in a car wreck at Fourth and Dawson while enroute to a fire. His body, which laid in state at City Hall, was carried to the church and cemetery on a pumper. During his 37 years as chief, he had helped bring the department to a peak of efficiency that stamped him as one of the outstanding firemen of the south.

At Chief Schnibben's death, John F. Zellers was appointed Chief of the Department. Chief Zellers, who had been with the department since 1905, had served as Assistant Chief for five years, and became First Assistant Chief in January, 1932, upon the death of Captain W.P. Munroe, who was also fatally injured in the crash of a piece of fire equipment enroute to a fire.

Chief John Zellers served as Chief of the Department until June 30, 1937, when he retired at the age of 62. During his long service, he served 19 years on "day and night duty." He proudly recalled that in 32 years as a firefighter, he had lost less than four months duty due to illness or other causes. The Wilmington department ranked among the best in North Carolina during Chief Zeller's tenure of service.

Assistant Chief J.L. Croom, who was one of the oldest members of the department in point of service, was appointed Chief of the Department on July 1, 1937. Having joined the fire service in 1907 when the department's equipment consisted of five pieces of horse-drawn apparatus and a fireboat, he took over the direction of one of the most efficient and best equipped departments in cities the size of Wilmington when he was appointed Chief.

Chief Croom was perhaps best known for his expertise as a firefighting instructor and drill master. While serving as a lieutenant under Chief Charles Schnibben, Croom was sent in 1927 to the New York fire school to

become one of the best trained firemen in North Carolina. He was made the department's official instructor in 1928 and was instrumental in the organization of the North Carolina Fire College and Drill School, under the sponsorship of the N.C. State Firemen's Association and he played an active part in the school's annual sessions at which hundreds received instruction.

In 1939, Chief Croom patented a special gauge he had invented which detected the amount of pressure and length of hose needed to fight a fire. The patent for the "Croom Gauge" was later sold to the American LaFrance Company, and is still used on modern fire pumbers. Chief Croom was also credited with establishing the first fire prevention bureau in the state and was one of the early innovators of training programs for firemen.

In the early evening hours of January 21, 1949, an alarm was received of fire at the Orton Hotel in the 100 block of Front Street. When firemen arrived, the glow of fire was seen on each floor as the blaze traveled up the elevator shaft to involve the whole building. Flames spread to the Royal Theatre and Cinderella Bootery, and other shops. The building was evacuated and it was believed that all occupants were out. However, the bodies of two men were later found. During the fire fighting, Firemen Fritz Sellers, Jimmy Newton and Fred Killette were trying to retrieve a cash register for the proprietor when a wall fell, slightly injuring Newton. Pieces of the flaming wall fell on the coat of one of the other men, but he shed the coat and ran out. The coat was never found.

On the morning of March 9, 1953, one of the most devastating fires in the city's history struck with fury, and burned until it seemed that the entire waterfront would be completely wiped out by the flame-scattering explosions that started fires at least twelve hundred feet away from the main fire areas. The fire originated in the western end of the Wilmington Terminal Nitrate Warehouse, located between Harnett and Brunswick Streets, but rapidly spread to the adjoining warehouse. Three firefighting companies responded to the original alarm, including two pumbers and the fireboat. More men and equipment were quickly called in. Attempts to confine the fire were hampered by explosions or eruptions that sprayed molten nitrate over large areas, causing the walls to collapse. As the fire reached the east end of the nitrate warehouse, two violent explosions occurred, injuring from twelve to fifteen men.

A description of the second and most devastating explosion follows, as written by Chief Ludie Croom:



Headquarters Early 1900's.

"The first sign of anything out of the ordinary was the ground trembling, followed by a low rumble. Then an atomic-like cloud of white smoke erupted from the building, boiling skyward at least 1,000 feet, exploding and scattering molten nitrate of soda, timbers, etc. Almost instantly after the white cloud erupted, a loud explosion occurred, followed by an intense white flame that enveloped the ground area for at least one hundred feet northeastward from the building. The force of the explosion knocked persons to the ground who were standing at least 500 feet from the building, and the heat wave which followed seared the exposed skin of everyone within 250 feet."

Efforts were then concentrated on the adjoining tobacco warehouse, but a strong north wind spread the fire rapidly to the Wilmington Terminal Tobacco warehouse and adjoining Seaboard Air Line Railroad Warehouses where various commodities were stored. Hose streams had no effect whatsoever in halting the spread of the flames.

Wilmington's fireboat was of valuable worth during this conflagration, as were the Coast Guard boat and other boats in the basin, when the land crews and pumbers had to retreat from the area due to excessive heat and fire. Although dozens of men were either burned or injured by this time, they valiantly continued to man hose lines, trying to protect the remaining property on the waterfront. The main fire was brought under control after approximately 24 hours of battle, but spot fires, clean-up operations and investigations continued for days.

An interesting sidelight to this disaster was the swarm of "millions of bees" that descended on the remains of the sugar warehouse that had been destroyed by the fire. Attracted by the syrupy residue caused by tons of melted sugar, the bees swarmed over the area for several days, severely hampering clean-up operations by the exhausted firemen.

In February, 1954, Chief Croom reluctantly retired after receiving a leg injury which resulted in amputation. He was the oldest fire chief in North Carolina at the time of his retirement. In his 47 years of service, he contributed a great deal to the improvement and advancement of firefighting, both in the department and throughout the state.

James A. West was appointed Chief on February 1, 1957, upon Chief Croom's retirement. West joined the fire department in February, 1921, and was assigned as driver of the department's first motorized pumber four months later. He progressed consistently up through the ranks, and served as a member of a drill team which went all over the state demonstrating training techniques.

Several significant changes came to the department during Chief West's four year tenure as chief, including the hiring of the department's first female secretary, Mrs. Helen Cheek; the reduction of firefighters' work week from seven days a week to six, and changing the shifts worked to 24 hours on duty and 24 hours off.

Perhaps the most significant event that took place during these years was the razing of the headquarters building at 14 N. Fourth Street and the construction of a modern central station that was a source of pride to the fire personnel as well as to all the citizens of Wilmington.

During the construction period which began in November, 1954, headquarters operations moved to temporary quarters in a building at Second and Market. The old training tower was also torn down at this time to be replaced at a site near Greenfield Lake several years later.

Headquarters personnel proudly moved into the new



Waterfront Fire, 1953.

facility in April, 1956, and a formal dedication was held on May 23, 1956. Fire chiefs and other officials from throughout the entire state, as well as local dignitaries, attended a luncheon prepared by firemen and toured the facility. One of the most modern fire stations in the South, the five-bay building contained the latest in fire alarm equipment, space for three pumber companies, one aerial company, one foam truck and one auxiliary truck, as well as a complete maintenance garage and the executive offices for the department.

With the opening of the new headquarters building, the station at Fifth and Castle was closed. The huge bronze bell, which had sounded alarms until 1918 was moved from Fifth and Castle to its final resting place in front of the headquarters building in 1959 to remain a tribute to firefighters of days gone by.

In August, 1956, a disastrous fire took the life of a young fireman when a flaming wall fell on him at a fire which swept four businesses in the 2000 block of South Front Street. Hundreds of spectators gasped in horror as the flaming wall of the L.L. Mills Food Store fell on a hose crew. All escaped except Bill Willis. Firemen and spectators dashed into the smoke and flames to pull Willis out from under the wall. He was carried out to the street where a bystander who was a nurse cared for him until the ambulance came. Willis later died at the hospital.

Chief West retired in November, 1960, after nearly 40 years with the department. Upon his retirement David E. Millinor was appointed Chief. At this time, there were stations at 17th and Dock Streets, Third and Willard Streets, 4th and Campbell Streets, Headquarters at 4th and Dock and the fireboat station at the foot of Grace Street.

Under Chief Millinor's able leadership, and with the help of Assistant Chiefs W.W. Glisson and E.A. Jones, the department made significant strides toward modernization. A more comprehensive training program was initiated with Captain Lloyd Wolfe as Training Officer and Lieutenant J.W. Casteen as his assistant. The department's fire prevention inspection program was also expanded under the direction of Capt. Robert D. Shipp. Public relations was stressed in all activities of the department and a professional atmosphere was evident among the ranks.

In 1962, three major fires occurred which caused significant changes in the downtown district. In March, the Market Tire and Appliance Store at 3rd and Chestnut was destroyed by fire and was not rebuilt. On April 25, 1962, Colonial Apartments at 3rd and Market Streets burned, necessitating evacuation of its residents in the early morning hours. The fire, which started in the basement, burned for several hours before discovery and had traveled up through openings used for water and sewer pipes to each floor and to the attic when firemen arrived. The building, which stood adjacent to the

Y.M.C.A., was demolished. On July 13, 1962, Stelens Dress Shop at 224 N. Front Street burned, causing extensive damage to the building and some damage to adjacent shops.

In 1963, two important new pieces of equipment were acquired. A 100 foot aerial ladder truck received wide publicity throughout the area and was proudly demonstrated by fire personnel whenever the opportunity arose. Needless to say, many hours of training were conducted utilizing this valuable equipment. In addition, the fireboat, Atlantic III, was replaced by a 65 foot long steel hull vessel which had been a U.S. Public Health Service vessel. After the installation of three diesel engines and a variety of firefighting equipment, plus a bright coat of white paint, it became the city's fourth fireboat, named Atlantic IV. Capable of pumping 2500 gpm, its first duty was washing down the decks of the USS North Carolina before her dedication ceremonies.



#6 Station, 3rd and Willard

During the next several years, due to extension of the city limits through annexation, two new fire stations were built and others were closed. Personnel from the fireboat station which had been closed earlier were assigned to headquarters. A new station at Empie Park was opened in 1966, and the company of men from the 17th and Dock station was transferred there plus ten additional men, giving this station more men and equipment than the entire department had when it first became a professional organization in 1897! In 1973, a new station was opened on Princess Place Drive near Barclay Hills, and the station at 4th and Campbell was closed.

In April of 1968 and again in February, 1971, events occurred which made a tremendous impact on the lives and memories of not only firemen and policemen, but on the entire community. In April, 1968, following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, the city experienced five days of civil unrest involving fire-bombings, lootings, numerous arrests and curfews, resulting in the National Guard being called in for assistance. The fire department responded to eleven fires and 20 false alarms in five days.

Again in February, 1971, during eight days of civil unrest, the department responded to 100 alarms including 40 false alarms, 26 fire-bombings and 34 actual fires. Throughout these terrible days, firemen's efforts were hampered by sniper fire and brick-throwing. Swartz Furniture Company in the 700 block of N. 4th Street, Lum's Restaurant at 3905 Oleander Drive,



Demonstration of new aerial, 1965

Mike's Grocery at 6th and Ann, and New Hanover High School Fieldhouse were all destroyed by fire as well as numerous other buildings which experienced fire damage. National Guard detachments were assigned to each fire unit to provide protection for the firemen as they responded to alarms.

Another incident believed to be connected with the civil unrest occurred on May 18, 1971, when Heminway Hall, headquarters of the New Hanover Board of Education, was destroyed by fire. The fire not only burned up thousands of dollars worth of equipment and property, but valuable documents of the schools dating back to 1897 and the school records of thousands of children were destroyed.

Chief Millinor retired from the department in March, 1973, after 33 years of service. A gold watch was presented to him by the men of the department in appreciation for his faithful service.

Assistant Chief Robert D. Shipp was appointed Chief of the Department on March 15, 1973, after rising through the ranks since his employment in 1946. He was promoted to lieutenant in 1956 and assigned as inspector in the Fire Prevention Bureau. In 1959 he assumed leadership of the Fire Prevention Bureau with the rank of captain, and was later promoted to Assistant Chief in 1964.

Chief Shipp's vital interest in fire prevention continued after he was appointed chief of the department in 1973. Because of his firm belief that the best defense against fire is prevention, he implemented a comprehensive fire education program for school children by employing the first female inspector for the Fire Prevention Bureau, Patsy T. Davis, whose primary responsibility was teaching fire safety to children in schools and day

care centers throughout the city. In the 1974-75 school year, and each subsequent year an average of 50 classes per month were conducted in fifth grade classes in addition to junior and senior high home economics classes, day care centers and various adult groups. Wilmington's fire education programs and materials have been copied by many departments throughout the state and continues to be a model program under the innovative performance of Phylliss R. Peterson.

In addition to expanded fire prevention programs, the department acquired its first emergency medical rescue transport vehicle in 1974 after having used a make-shift unit for several years to provide emergency aid. Over 50 of the men within the department voluntarily took EMT training to become certified as Emergency Medical Technicians and those who were not assigned to the transport vehicle rendered first-responder aid on fire pumper to stabilize the victims until a transport vehicle arrived. The nearest fire engine responded to emergencies involving life-threatening situations.

The firefighters' workweek was shortened in 1974 from 66 hours to 56 hours per week, with personnel working three 24 hour days in a nine day period. Four new firefighter positions were approved in order to implement this change.

Another devastating fire that changed the face of the downtown district occurred in June, 1974, when Sutton-Council Furniture Store in the 300 block of North Front Street burned. The fire started in a storage room filled with mattresses, but also containing a refrigerator and a drum of fuel oil. Due to the extensive damage sustained, the business later rebuilt on South College Road.

Under Chief Shipp, a four-minute response time to all alarms was a daily goal, and men and equipment were assigned with this standard in mind. A midi-size QRV pumper with a two-man crew was put into service in 1975 to respond to small fires instead of the conventional 1000 gallon pumper, which proved to be both an economical move and helped to maintain the four minute response time in the western section of the city.

A milestone was reached in the history of the department in February, 1978, that few cities ever experience, when Wilmington was awarded a Class 2 fire insurance rating. As one of only a few cities in the country to achieve such a rating, the occasion created a deep sense of pride and achievement in the entire department as well as the City Administration.

The department's second EMS transport vehicle was acquired in 1979 and assigned to the Empie Park Station. The territory was then divided between the two units, providing quicker response and better coverage for all areas of the city. At that time approximately 80% of the department's members were certified EMTs.

In April, 1980, another vast change took place in the Wilmington Fire Department when all dispatching for police, fire and public works was consolidated into one dispatch center in the police building. This necessitated the removal of not only dispatch equipment from the fire headquarters, but four persons who had served as Fire Dispatchers for many years were transferred to the Police Dispatch Center. Months later when the 911 system was installed for the entire county and housed in the New Hanover County Sheriff's Office, other dispatch changes were made to assure quick responses to all emergencies.

A spectacular fire destroyed the Maxwell Furniture Store at 524 College Road in the early morning hours of September 21, 1981. Firemen reported that the store was "full of fire" when they arrived on the scene and the heat at the front of the store was so intense fire equipment had to retreat to a safer position. Arson was suspected

and after days of extensive investigations, an arrest was made in the case.

Chief Robert Shipp retired on his 65th birthday, February 23, 1982, but remained as "Acting Chief" until March 12, 1982, when Assistant Chief Lloyd H. Wolfe was appointed Chief.

Under Chief Lloyd Wolfe's wise leadership, the department has continued to progress, both in efficiency and in service to the community. With Assistant Chief H.L. "Poopy" Sandlin as Chief of Firefighting Division and Assistant Chief Charles E. Bland as Chief of Support Division, an emphasis in management and supervisory training for officers became uppermost in planning for all programs. A revised promotional procedure for all ranks was put into effect, utilizing the assessment center approach for selection of officers.

On February 15, 1983, a tragic fire occurred at Solomon Towers, a high-rise apartment building for the elderly, which shocked the community and severely tested the capabilities of the Fire Department and all other emergency organizations in the area. When the first responding units arrived at approximately 10:46 p.m., fire was evident in the upper southwest corner of the building. Second and third alarms were issued, bringing in all available manpower and equipment. Some off-duty men were called in and several others reported without being called. Command posts were set up for both firefighting and rescue triage operations.



Solomon Towers Fire, 1983

While evacuation procedures were being carried out, others began fire attack with the standpipe hose in the building. Two fatalities were discovered, both on the 11th floor where the fire originated in room 1103. The heat was so intense it melted the plastic name tags on firemen's helmets. Thick smoke filled the 11th floor and parts of the 10th floor. Seventeen persons were transported to the hospital in addition to the fatalities. Some were treated and released, others admitted. A third death from a heart attack was reported later which was attributed to the fire. Approximately 80 persons were treated at the Rescue Command Post, then transported by bus to Hoggard High School where the Red Cross had established a shelter.

Evacuation of the eleven story building was accomplished in 40 minutes, with the assistance of police per-

sonnel and some by-standers, and the fire was under control in less than 60 minutes. The quick evacuation and low death rate was attributed to the pre-fire planning activities and fire escape drills conducted at Solomon Towers on a regular basis by the Fire Department.

Wilmington Fire Department's personnel and equipment were featured in a hazardous materials safety film entitled "Blueprint for Safety" sponsored by the DuPont Corporation in 1983. The film was coordinated by Chief of Training Leon G. Thomas and featured several members of the department including Battalion Chief Charles Bland at the Command Post. After extensive showings throughout the country, the film has won two international awards for safety films and three state awards.

Physical fitness became the topic of concern in many circles during the 80s, and fire service personnel were not left out. Much research was being done that revealed how vitally important fitness was for firefighters. In light of this, a physical strength and agility test for recruits was developed by the fire department in 1983 and was used for the first time to test applicants in May of that year. The following year, the same test became a requirement for all existing firefighting personnel.

The crossing of another milestone in the department's history took place in December, 1983, when Wilmington's first female firefighter, Joyce B. Mercer, was employed. In July, 1984, two more females were employed and assigned to various shifts.

The annexation of a large area of South Wilmington and Pine Valley subdivision in April, 1984, and another section in the Winter Park area several months later added over 5,000 new residents and increased the city's territory to 32.72 square miles. With this increase, twelve new positions were added to the fire department and construction began on two new stations, one in the 3900 block of Carolina Beach Road and one on the Municipal Golf Course property.

In July, 1984, all firefighting companies assumed the responsibility of fire prevention inspections in their response territories, increasing the company's familiarity with all public buildings to which they respond, as well as increasing the safety of the property involved.

The eyes of the nation were on Wilmington during the week of September 11, 1984, when Hurricane Diana wreaked havoc along the eastern shores and "settled in" for several days a few miles off the coast from Wilmington, bringing torrential rains and devastating winds for hours on end, finally coming ashore in the early morning of September 13. Fire Department resources were taxed to the limit in responding to 120 alarms in two days, the majority of which involved electrical wires blown down or burning, trees on houses, or evacuation of residents from threatened areas. After the storm was over, the department was called on to perform a new service — pumping water from basements!

Under Chief Wolfe's direction, the department embarked on a massive smoke alarm campaign in October, 1984, co-sponsored by the Wilmington Board of Realtors, in which smoke alarms financed by various sponsors were installed by firemen in homes of senior citizens, handicapped and low income families. In less than six months, over 200 smoke alarms had been installed, increasing the life safety of these deserving citizens.

In April of 1985, a "fire storm" of woods fires that burned for days taxed the strength and endurance of both personnel and equipment as strong, persistent winds spread fires over hundreds of acres of dry woodlands, threatening homes and businesses. With the assistance of every volunteer department in New

Hanover County, the fires were confined to wooded areas, and were finally brought under control without the destruction of any houses.

With the completion of the new fire stations at Municipal Golf Course, designated as Station #4, and at 3939 Carolina Beach Road, designed as Station #6, the old Station #6 at Third and Willard was closed. With this closing in August, 1985, the Headquarters Station at Fourth and Dock was the only remaining station in the Wilmington Fire Department with sliding poles.

As this history has been compiled, it has been evident that through the years, service to our fellow man has been the primary function of the department. Only a few of the major fires have been mentioned, but all fires leave an impact on the people involved.

Through each generation of firefighters, the same pride and dignity has remained in this profession that is known for its compassion and sacrificial service. Even after they retire from the firefighting profession, these brave firefighters continue to look back with pride and a sense of excitement at the services they performed, the property they protected and the lives they saved. As new firefighters join the ranks, the same sense of excitement prevails as they proudly wear their uniforms and spend endless hours studying and drilling, waiting for the alarm to sound, knowing that they are a part of a very important team.

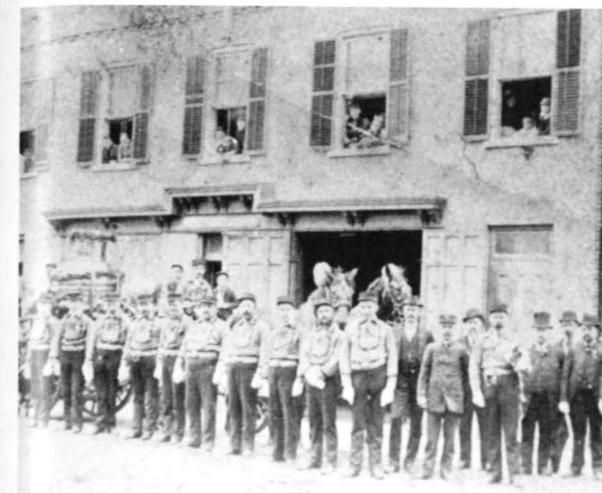
May this album serve as a tribute to all members, past and present, who have served as FIREFIGHTERS of the Wilmington Fire Department.



1938 Parade of Progress



Backyard of old Headquarters Station.



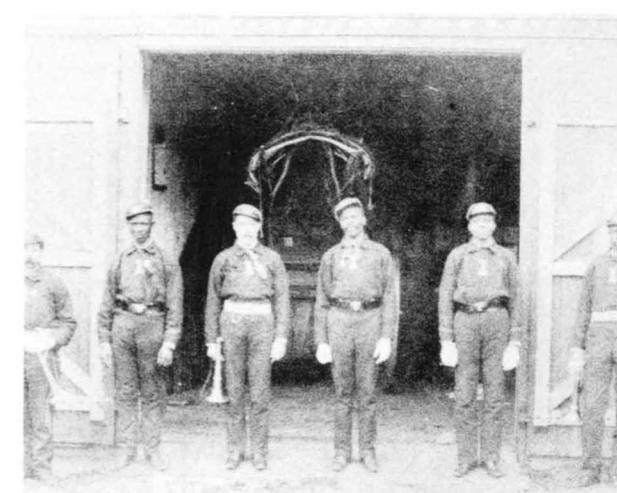
Headquarters late 1800's.



Horse-drawn equipment leaving headquarters in early 1900's.



Old Station #4, 4th & Campbell.



Company #1, late 1800's.



Motorized equipment early 1900's.



First telephonic fire alarm system installed late 1800's.