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# INSTITUTE OF GOVERNMENT

The University of North Carolina  
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CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG SURVEY

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## Fire Protection in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County Consolidation Possibilities

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They are apparent to the most casual observer of modern life. Their seriousness in just one of many fields is illustrated by the Report of the President's Conference on Fire Prevention in 1947, which stated,

"In addition to the ordinary fire hazards on the farm, the mechanization and electrification of agriculture has introduced new causes of accidents and fires that make close cooperation necessary between Federal, State and private agencies in the development of effective organization plans for reducing these fire losses." [Emphasis supplied.]

#### B. Development of Fire Departments

North Carolina's early settlers, just as did their brothers elsewhere, relied upon the "bucket brigade" to protect them in case of fire. This was a technique, rather than an organization, in which all the neighbors rushed out with buckets whenever the dread cry of "Fire!" went up, formed a line to the nearest source of water, and passed water along this line to the fire.

Although this technique was occasionally able to extinguish a fire, it was patently not enough to rely upon once people clustered together in towns and created the danger of community-wide conflagrations.

The device which replaced it was at first a purely voluntary organization, with no governmental assistance. This was the volunteer fire department--which first appeared in North Carolina at New Bern in 1773, was the universal answer to the fire protection problem during the 19th century, and is still today the backbone of the state's fire service.

These "companies" were commonly composed of the leading citizens of the community. They drilled together periodically to attain skill

in the use of their equipment. They raised funds for the provision of new equipment--first including hand pumps and then steam pumps--which was far more efficient than the old buckets. And they held contests of speed and skill with other companies, which frequently led to rivalries at the scene of actual fires.

It is not known just when Charlotte's first volunteer company was formed. In 1831 the city made a contribution to such a company for the purchase of equipment, and in 1833 the General Assembly passed a special act limiting the "Charlotte Fire Engine Company" to 60 members and returning the excess to militia duty.<sup>1</sup> It seems reasonable to assume that the company began around 1830.

#### Inducements to Join Fire Departments

##### General Statutes

The state's first general law dealing with fire protection was the offering of an inducement to join volunteer companies. In 1829 the General Assembly declared that in return for such service, volunteer firemen would be exempted from militia duty, except in case of war, insurrection, or invasion.<sup>2</sup> As we have seen, this proved so effective in Charlotte that a limit had to be set upon the number of men in its department.<sup>3</sup>

In 1870 the General Assembly provided that citizens serving as firemen for seven consecutive years should thereafter be exempted from jury duty and from militia duty except in time of insurrection

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1 Laws, 1833, c. 180.

2 Laws, 1829, c. 25.

3 Laws, 1833, c. 180.

or invasion.<sup>1</sup> In 1883 this was extended to provide that no member of a fire company should be required to serve as a juror.<sup>2</sup> This exemption is preserved today as to jury duty,<sup>3</sup> but not as to militia duty.<sup>4</sup>

Inducements of a different type were provided by the General Assembly in 1891 when it created a state firemen's relief fund, to be used for relief of firemen "who may be injured or rendered sick by disease contracted in the actual discharge of duty as firemen, and for the relief of widows, children, and if there be no widow or children, then dependent mothers of such firemen..."<sup>5</sup> Originally dependent upon state appropriations, this fund was augmented in 1907 by proceeds of a tax on all fire insurance companies doing business in the state, based upon the amount of premiums they collected.<sup>6</sup> Five per cent of this money was turned over to the State Firemen's Association for general purposes and the remainder distributed to local relief funds over the state. In 1917, all cities were granted the power to set up a fund for relief of firemen and policemen "who have become superannuated, disabled, or injured in such service."<sup>7</sup>

#### Local Acts and Charter Provisions

Charlotte's city charter of 1850-51 was the first which mentioned volunteer firemen. It provided that members of volunteer companies "shall be exempted from militia duty, except in cases of insurrection,

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1 Pub. Laws, 1869-70, c. 164, s. 4.

2 N. C. Code of 1883, s. 1723.

3 G. S. 9-19.

4 G. S. 127-5.

5 Pub. Laws, 1891, c. 468; G. S. 118-12 to 118-16.

6 Pub. Laws, 1907, c. 831; G. S. 118-1 to 118-11.

7 Pub. Laws, 1917, c. 136, sub-ch. 5, s. 1; G. S. 160-200 (25).



for which only one truck is needed, it can notify others to return to their stations. If a call comes in while a truck is returning from a fire, it can be sent directly to the new fire without waiting for its return to the station.

The newly-created office of Director of Personnel and Training, is, so far as is known, the only one of its type in the state. In addition to the duties indicated by his title, this officer assists with the conduct of an annual school conducted by the North Carolina State Firemen's Association for 300 to 500 volunteer firemen of the state.

The Fire Alarm Division, included at the beginning of 1950 a superintendent, an assistant superintendent and two linemen, in addition to five operators for the switchboard maintained in the fire alarm room. Because the old alarm system was unable to handle with maximum efficiency the vastly increased number of calls resulting from the city's continuous expansion, a new alarm system has been contracted for and is in the process of installation.

The department also contains a Mechanics' Division, made up of two mechanics who draw captains' pay and who have assignments on the aerial truck in addition to their other duties. These men are charged with maintaining the mechanical equipment of the department.

#### B. Other Towns in the County

All of the five incorporated towns outside Charlotte--Cornelius, Davidson, Huntersville, Matthews, and Pineville--have volunteer fire companies, and all possess fire apparatus of some sort. All five

are helped in their fire-fighting by having water systems within their limits.

Cornelius has a fire truck purchased from the War Assets Administration in 1947 at a cost of \$2,500. It is equipped with 300 feet of hose, a 250-gallon water tank, and a front pump which can be used to pump water from wells and streams. The overall cost for hose and truck was approximately \$2,800. It is housed in the city hall. The siren on the truck is used to give alarms. The town carries liability insurance for the volunteer company of 15 men, but no compensation insurance. The men receive no pay, but the town pays their dues in the State Firemen's Association, bears their expenses to conventions and required drills, and gives them an annual dinner.

Davidson has a fire truck purchased in 1932 for \$3,500. It is equipped with a 150-gallon water tank, a front pump for pumping water from wells and streams, fog nozzles and spray equipment, two asbestos outfits, and oxygen equipment. It is housed by the city. There is a siren alarm system. The town watchman is on duty at all times, which gives the town better fire insurance rates. There is a volunteer company of 23 members who are given a token payment of \$1.00 per year, so as to make them eligible for workmen's compensation.

Huntersville has a fire truck carrying 1,250 feet of hose, a tank containing 50 gallons of soda acid with a smaller hose, and fire extinguishers; it is not equipped with a water tank or with a pump capable of operating from a stream or well. It is housed and maintained by the city. A siren alarm is used. The volunteer company is made up of 50-75 men, for whom the town carries insurance.

The chief receives a token payment. In addition to the town equipment, the Anchor mill possesses a sprinkler system, hydrants, and hoses, and it has its own water supply and pressure pumps which may be thrown into the town system for fire-fighting purposes.

Matthews' fire equipment consists of a trailer carrying 500 feet of 2 1/2-inch and 250 feet of 1 1/2-inch hose, whose overall cost was \$1,100. When there is a fire, the first car on the scene hooks onto the trailer and takes it to the hydrant nearest the burning building. The trailer is housed in a private building in the town. The size of the town renders an alarm system unnecessary. The alarm is spread by word of mouth. The volunteer company receives no pay and is not covered by insurance.

Pineville has a truck purchased from the War Assets Administration in 1947 at a cost of \$2,300, to which it has added an extra \$640 worth of equipment. The truck carries 1,500 feet of hose, ladders, fire extinguishers, and, for fires where there are no water mains, a 500-gallon tank of water and a front pump which can draw water from a nearby well or stream. The truck is housed in the town's new city hall and maintained by the town policeman. For an alarm, the town has a siren. Calls are telephoned into the switchboard in the city hall and the siren is then used to call the firemen. None of the firemen are paid, either for calls or for training sessions. However, the town does carry compensation insurance for them, to cover possible injuries.

### C. Mecklenburg County

Mecklenburg County itself owns no fire protection equipment. However, the County Rural Police are called upon to render some assistance in this field. All rural fire calls to the Charlotte and Davidson fire departments are routed through the Rural Police headquarters. In addition, it is the practice to send a Rural Police car to the scene of each rural fire for the purpose of handling traffic, providing radio communication facilities through which trucks may be kept under control by their home authorities, and otherwise aiding the firefighters.

### D. Other Facilities

At present there are volunteer companies at Wilkinson Boulevard, Woodlawn (on the old Pineville Road), and Pinoca (on the Mount Holly Road). Another, designed to serve the Mint Hill community, is in the process of formation. Each of these companies has been equipped through fund-raising activities among the communities they serve. The Wilkinson Boulevard company, which was the first to be formed, has two pumpers costing a total of \$7,000, purchased from the War Assets Administration. The Woodlawn company has a pumper carrying 750 gallons of water, plus a tank truck carrying an additional 1,000 gallons. The Pinoca company built its own station at a cost of \$1,500 for materials and converted a surplus army 6 x 6 truck into a pump engine carrying 1,250 gallons of water, at an outlay of some \$4,000 additional. The Woodlawn company charges annual dues of \$6 for protection. The Pinoca company charges home owners \$10 for

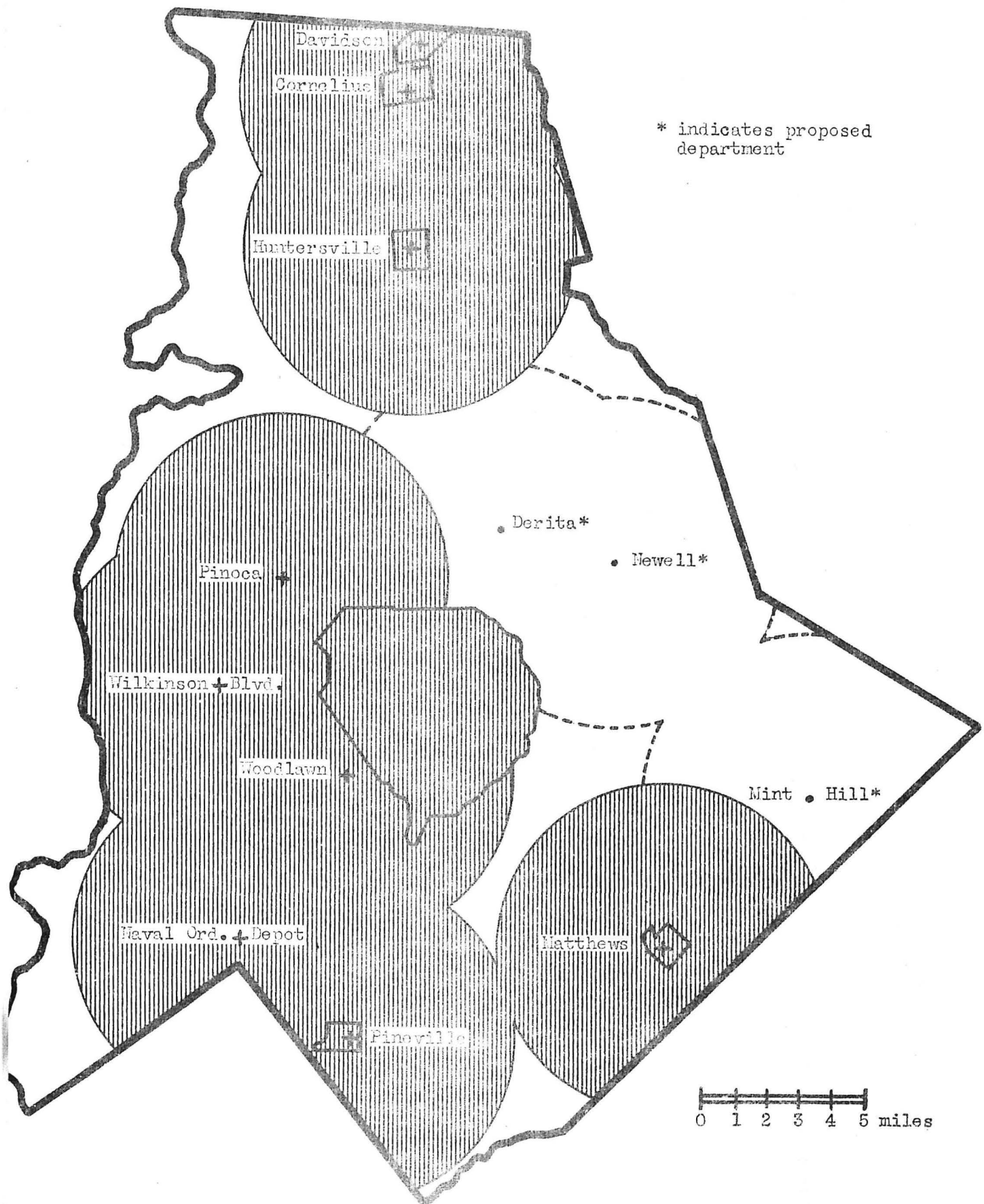


membership fees and the first year's dues, and \$5 per year thereafter; it charges home renters \$5 the first year and \$3 per year thereafter; and it asks business establishments to contribute what they can afford each year.

In addition to these volunteer companies, the county is further protected by the fire department of the Naval Ordnance Depot.

Authorities of this depot have expressed willingness to send equipment to assist at fires outside its limits, provided a minimum of equipment is retained for its own safety.

AREAS WITHIN FIVE MILES OF EXISTING AND PROPOSED FIRE DEPARTMENTS  
OTHER THAN THE CHARLOTTE FIRE DEPARTMENT



### III. THE FUNCTIONS THESE FACILITIES ARE REQUIRED TO PERFORM

#### A. Legal Powers and Duties

##### General Statutes

##### Powers and Duties of Governing Bodies

G. S. 153-9 (39): "Any county shall have power to provide for the organization, equipment, maintenance, and government of fire companies and fire department; and, in its discretion, may provide for a paid fire department, fix the compensation of the officers and employees thereof, and make rules and regulations for its government. The board of commissioners of the county may make the necessary appropriations for the expenses thereof and levy annually taxes for the payment of same as a special purpose, in addition to any allowed by the constitution."

G. S. 130-39 (13): [Sanitary district boards have power] "To establish a fire department for the protection of property within the district, or to contract with cities, counties or other governmental units to furnish fire fighting apparatus and personnel for use in the district."

Sess. Laws, 1947, c. 958 gives citizens of Mecklenburg County power to create fire protection districts in rural areas. Governing boards of such districts are authorized to enter contracts with municipalities for fire protection or to set up, equip, and maintain a fire department for the district.

G. S. 160-235: "The [municipal] governing body shall have power to provide for the organization, equipment, maintenance and government of fire companies and a fire department; and, in its discretion, may provide for a paid fire department, and for this purpose may create any offices and employments and fix their compensation as to the governing body may seem right and proper."

The municipal governing body may also regulate the storage of explosives and other combustibles; regulate the use of explosives; set up a firemen's relief fund and take out group insurance for its firemen; condemn and remove buildings which are dangerous to