

Wilmington Volunteer Fire Companies – 1847 to 1897

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Introduction

These research notes are based on the 2019 research paper “Wilmington’s Black Firemen: A History” by Kaleigh M. Wagner at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Supplemental sources are listed, and include these abbreviations:

- EBF - Early Black Firefighters of North Carolina, Annotated, <https://legeros.com/history/ebf>
- STS – Strength Through Struggle: The Chronological and Historical Record of the African-American Community in Wilmington, North Carolina – 1865-1950 by William M. Reaves, edited by Beverly Tetteron, published 1998 by the New Hanover County Public Library.

Other research resources include:

- Historical North Carolina Digital Newspaper Collection via North Carolina State Library, <https://statelibrary.ncdcr.gov/research/information-researchers/online-resources>
- North Carolina Steam Fire Engines Database, <https://legeros.com/history/nc/steamers.shtml>
- Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps via North Carolina Maps, <https://web.lib.unc.edu/nc-maps/>

Pre-History / Early History

- 1745 – Town officials authorized to tax residents for purchase of fire equipment.
- 1754 – Town officials enact chimney cleaning rules. Also purchase fire engine from England, using new tax levy.
- 1759 – First designated fireman of town, assigned to maintenance of the engine.
- 1791 – Wilmington Fire Company incorporated.
- 1801 – Local law requires all citizens who are subject to militia duty also respond to help fight fires, and with penalty for failure.

- 1806 – Town officials authorized to appoint fire wardens, who have authority to direct citizens in firefighting, order the demolition of buildings to help prevent the spread of fire, and removing contents from buildings in danger of fire.
- 1810 – First conflagration, started on Market Street. Burned several homes.
- 1819 – Major fire destroys several blocks downtown, in area of Water, Princess, Second, and Dock streets.
- 1827 – Another major fire occurs, in same area of 1819 fire.
- 1840 – Another major fire occurs, again downtown.
- 1841 – Town officials adopt ordinance to reorganize fire department. Includes new positions of Chief and Assistant Chief Fire Warden, as well as Chief Engineer, to command the town’s five Fire Wardens. Individual fire companies still answered to their own captain.
- 1843 – Worst fire in city’s history destroys large portion of town.
- 1846 – Another major fire occurs, in same area of 1819 and 1827 fires.
- 1851 – New law updates structure of fire department, gives fire wardens additional power to make rules and regulations for fire safety, and to purchase a fire engine.
- 1869 – First steam engine purchased, with money raised by white citizens. Operated by Wilmington Steam FE FC.
- 1870 – Second steam engine purchased. Operated by Howard Relief FC.
- 1871 – Third steam engine purchased, with money raised by black community and matched by city. Operated by new Cape Fear Steam Engine FC.
- 1871 – Fire department reorganized in preparation for arrival of new steam engine. All hand engine companies disbanded, except for Brooklyn FC.
- 1875 – New steam engine for Wilmington Steam FE FC.
- 1883? – Last hand engine retired?
- 1885 – New steam engine for Howard Relief FC.
- 1886 – New steam engine for new Atlantic FC.
- 1887 – New steam engine for Cape Fear FC.

List of Fire Companies

Name	Demographic	Years	Notes
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Name	Demographic	Years	Notes
A. Adrian Fire Engine Co.	White	1873? to 1897	Alternate name for Howard Relief Company, with A. Adrian as name of steamer delivered in 1870? Citations include Morning Star, 5/2/73; 6/2/85; 7/12/95; 2/28/97
Atlantic Fire Co.	White	1886? To 1896?	Named after new steam engine, named Atlantic. Citation, Morning Star, 12/18/66. Citation, Messenger, 9/30/96
Bannaker Hose Reel Co.	Colored	1883? to 1890?	Granted use of City Hall in May 1886 (STS). Last found citation, other than fire house for voting locations, Daily Review, 9/30/90. Located 1890 on Ninth between Castle and Queen. (Daily Review, 10/28/90) Old "hose reel house" damaged by fire on 3/19/96. (Morning Star, 3/21/96)
Bannaker Hose Reel Co. No. 2	TBD	1891 to ?	Organized 1891 with old hose reel of Howard Relief FC and assigned to old Fifth Ward Hook & Ladder house on Ninth between Castle and Queen. (Messenger, 3/24/91)
Brooklyn Bucket Company	Colored	1875? to 1879?	Citation, act to incorporate, Daily Journal, 3/18/75 Last citation, parade, Daily Review, 5/24/79 From KW, First Ward FC / Dread Naught FC was possibly operating as Brooklyn Bucket BC in 1880.
Brooklyn Fire Engine Co. No 4	Colored	1866? to 1883?	Located in 1866 on N. Fourth Street between Bladen and Brunswick. (STS) New engine house erected March 1876 on Brunswick between Sixth and Seventh. (Star, 3/21/1876 via STS) Hand engine cited Morning Star, 12/27/78.

Name	Demographic	Years	Notes
C. M. Stedman Fire Co. No. 1	TBD	1879 to 1883?	<p>Organized 1879. Described as “bucket organization.” Named “to compliment” Maj. C. M. Stedman. (Daily Review, 10/2/79).</p> <p>Still active in May 1882, having received new equipment. (Morning Star, 4/14/82)</p> <p>Disbanded in 1883? at direction of city? And after attempting a re-organization? (Post, 9/7/83)</p>
Cape Fear Steam Fire Engine Co. No 3	Colored	1871-1897	<p>Only black steam fire engine company in the U.S. at the time (1871-1898).</p> <p>First engine house 110 Ann Street. (STS). Due to its poor condition, site sold in December 1895. (STS) New engine house erected at corner of South Sixth and Castle. (STS)</p> <p>New steamer delivered June 1887. (STS)</p>
Compton Hose Reel Co. 2	Colored	1894 to 1897	<p>To be located with Phoenix FC in their new house next to Fourth Street Market, once completed. (Morning Star, 5/1/94, 5/8/94)</p> <p>Officially ordained and recognized as one of the city’s fire companies by city officials in July 1894. (Morning Star, 7/3/94)</p> <p>Last citation August 1897, petition from FC saying that it has 25 members and requests equipment. (Messenger, 8/3/97)</p>
Dread Naught / Dreadnaught (Dread Not) Bucket Co. No 5	Colored	1876 to 1893?	<p>Organized about 1876. (STS)</p> <p>Located on Love’s Alley in north section of city. (STS)</p> <p>“Reel house” burned by Sep 6, 1892. (Messenger, 9/6/1892 via STS)</p> <p>--</p> <p>Apparently renamed from First Ward Bucket Co. No. 5 after 1891/1892?.</p>

Name	Demographic	Years	Notes
Fifth Ward Independent Bucket Co. No. 1	TBD	1875? to 1878?	Citation, organization has been formed, Morning Star, 1/30/75. Last citation, fire report, Morning Star, 12/27/78. Location 1878 on Ninth between Castle and Queen. Engine house cited as "former quarters" in Morning Star, 2/6/79.
Fifth Ward Hook and Ladder Co.	TBD	By 1886 to 1897	First citation May 1886 (Morning Star, 5/22/86) Located 1890 on Nun between Fourth and Fifth Citations through 1897.
Fire Engine Co. No. 1	Colored	1866-?	1871, absorbed into Cape Fear SFE Co? (KW) Location in 1866 on Third Street across from City Hall. Likely moved to new location in 1869 (Star, 1/31/1869 via STS).
Fire King No. 2 Fire King Engine Co. No. 2	Colored	1866? to 1871	Listed in city directory in 1886 (STS). Located 1886 on SE corner of Front and Nun streets. Engine sold 1871 to location "west of Cape Fear River", when Cape Fear steam engine was purchased. (KW)
First Ward Bucket Company			Earlier name for First Ward Independent Bucket Co. ?
First Ward Independent Bucket Co. [No.5]	Colored	1876? To 1892?	Application to city officials in January 1876, for "truck, equipments, and suitable house". (Morning Star, 1/22/76) Cited as No. 5 in Morning Star, 3/4/83. Cited as "First Ward Bucket Co. No. 5 (Dread Not)" in Morning Star, 4/7/91. Cited as "First Ward Bucket Co. No. 5 (Dread Naught)" in Morning Star, 1/17/92. Apparently renamed to Dread Naught Fire Co. after 1891/1892.

Name	Demographic	Years	Notes
Go Ahead Fire Co. No. 3	Colored	1856? to 1857?	Citation Daily Herald, 4/17/56
Go Ahead Fire Co. No. 5	Colored	1865? to 1867?	Named No. 2 by 1867? Or printing error? (Post, 8/17/67)
Hook and Ladder Co. No. 1	White		See Wilmington Hook and Ladder Co. No. 1
Hook and Ladder Co. No. 2	TBD	By 1876	Citation, incorporation application to G.A. (Cape Fear, 12/10/76)
Howard Relief Fire Engine Co. No. 1	White	1856 to 1897	Locations included 14 South Forth Street Continued operating as a "social and benefit society" through at least 1900 (Morning Star, 2/22/00).
Independent Bucket Co.	Colored	1876	Alternate name for First Ward Independent Bucket Co.?
J. C. Abbott Fire Engine Co. No. 5	Colored	1869	Citation, bill to incorporate company, Journal, 2/13/69. No citations found after 1869.
Kidder Hill Fire Co.	Colored	1882	Likely alternate name for Little Columbia Fire Co. Citation Morning Star, 7/18/82.
Little Columbia Bucket and Hose Reel Co. Little Columbia Fire Co. No. 5 Little Columbia Hose Reel Co.	Colored	1881? to 1889?	First citation, Morning Star, 12/6/81. Last citation, Morning Star, 4/10/89. Alderman recommends company be disbanded, company is worthless, composed entirely of boys who are often in the way other fire companies. Locations included 413 Nun Street. Location in 1888 was South Front Street on Kidder's Hill (Star, 5/30/1884 via STS. Also cited as nearly opposite the cotton factory, Daily Review, 11/14/84.)

Name	Demographic	Years	Notes
Little Giant Steam Fire Engine Co. 1	White	1869 to 1884?	<p>Alternate name for Wilmington Steam Fire Engine Co. No. 1, whose engine was named Little Giant?</p> <p>Citation Morning Star, 1/11/76</p> <p>Cited as celebrating 11th anniversary in Post, 3/28/80.</p> <p>Last citations Nov/Dec 1884.</p> <p>Locations included 322 Princess Street</p>
Mechanics Hose Co.	TBD	1872 To 1873?	<p>Cited Daily Journal, 5/17/72, as newly organized, named Mechanic's Fire Association.</p> <p>In 1872, house bill introduced to incorporate the fire company. (Star, 12/12/1872 via STS)</p> <p>Last citation Morning Star, 4/20/73</p>
O. G. Parsley Fire Co. No. 3	Colored	By 1865	<p>Named for Mayor O. G. Parsley [?], who was mayor in 1856 (and presumably other years).</p>
Phoenix Hose Reel Co. 1	Colored	1882 to 1898	<p>Organized Sep 1, 1882 (Dispatch, 9/4/1895 via STS)</p> <p>In 1897, six members were hired by the new paid FD (Star, 11/28/1897 via STS)</p> <p>In 1898, new hose wagon received (Star, 2/13/1898 via STS)</p> <p>Located 1888 on Brunswick between Sixth and Seventh.</p> <p>In 1900, their engine house was demolished. (Star, 11/6/1900 via STS)</p>

Name	Demographic	Years	Notes
Vigilant Fire Engine Co. No. 3	Colored	1865? to 1871	<p>First citation 1865, Herald, 8/2/65.</p> <p>Last citation 1871, Daily Journal, 3/4/71</p> <p>Engine sold September 1871, _____, 9/8/71</p> <p>Located in 1866 on South Second Street, between Market and Dock. (STS)</p> <p>Steam [?] (more likely hand?) engine sold to city of Charleston in 1871. (Star, 9/8/1871 via STS)</p>
Wilmington Fire Bucket Co. No. 1	Colored	1874 to 1884?	<p>Alternate name for First Ward Independent Bucket Co. No. 1 [KW]</p> <p>Cited in news story in May 1884 (Star, 5/30/1884 via STS).</p>
Wilmington Hook and Ladder Co. [No. 1]	White	1846 to 1897	<p>Cited 1849 in Tri-Weekly Commercial, 6/26/49.</p> <p>No citations after 1849 until 1866 in Herald, 2/23/66.</p> <p>Morning Star, 7/20/97, noted the company had been serving for fifty years. Also cites start year as 1847.</p>
Wilmington Steam Fire Engine Co. No. 1	White	1869 to 1897	<p>Also called Little Giant Steam Fire Engine Co. No. 1 until circa 1884.</p> <p>Bill to incorporate, Post, 2/21/69</p> <p>Received new steamer named Little Giant 1875.</p> <p>Held 14th anniversary in 1883, Daily Review, 3/28/83.</p>