

A Brief History of the Asheville Fire Department

About 40 years before the fire department was founded, the newspapers of the day were calling for such an organization to protect Asheville. Many conflagrations were destroying other cities around the country, but so far Asheville had been spared. The Town of Asheville was founded in 1797, and since that time fire was fought only with the help of neighbors and what water-holding vessels and wells and streams were around. An 1858 *Asheville News* article stated the 1500 citizens of Asheville could only ring bells, yell “Fire!” and hope people would come to help.



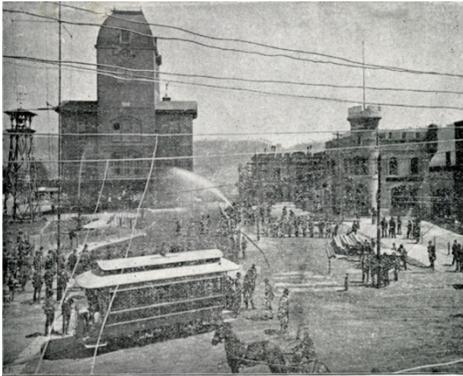
Finally, on May 2nd, 1882, the Asheville Fire Department was founded with J.P. Sawyer appointed the first chief, and E. J. Aston his assistant. The first headquarters for the all-volunteer department was in the Buncombe County Courthouse (shown), with the first rough-plank building to house the fire apparatus built behind it next to the jail sometime after October. The new Hook and Ladder apparatus, built in Rochester, NY, arrived in November and consisted of a hand-drawn wagon with ladders, buckets, chemical extinguishers, and minimal tools. The fire district comprised $\frac{1}{4}$ square mile.

During the evening of September 20th, 1883 the largest fire in Asheville up to this time occurred on the Southwest corner of Pack Square (shown at left in the picture), then known as Court Square. Two buildings were destroyed, and several others were damaged or jeopardized. The two chemical extinguishers on the Hook and Ladder truck failed. There was no water system with hydrants so they could stop the fire by only throwing tubs and buckets of water down onto the burning buildings from neighboring roofs. They also covered exposed windows with wet blankets. The only water available was from wells, springs, and cisterns around the city. Axes and ropes were used to demolish



structures to prevent the spread of fire. Citizens near the fire were recruited to help stop the massive blaze. In the end, no one was hurt, the city was saved, and the volunteers of the Hook and Ladder Company had their first big fire.

The Hook and Ladder Company was most certainly a welcome addition for the citizens of Asheville, but an issue of at least equal size needed addressing – the absence of a water system. The first waterworks system was completed in 1884, consisting of a spring-fed tank on Town Mountain with a small main that brought water down into the city. Its pressure in the area of Pack Square was in the 90 pounds-per-square-inch range, allowing the use of fire hose that was attached to a hydrant without the need for a pumper to boost pressure. Once this occurred, Hose Company No. 1 was formed on August 7th with a hand-drawn hose reel and 800’ of 2.5” hose. Hose Company 2 and 3 formed in December 1889 at Charlotte Street and East Chestnut Street, and at Haywood Street and Buttrick (later Clingman) Avenue, respectively, with hand-drawn hose reels.



COURT-HOUSE SQUARE AND FIRE COMPANY.

A fire bell was installed in the court square in the winter of 1884 (seen in the photo on the tower to the left of the courthouse) to alert the firemen. It was upgraded in 1890 when the first Gamewell fire alarm system with 15 boxes was installed throughout the town. When a box was “pulled” the bell rang a sequence of numbers which corresponded to that box. The firemen heard the sequence, referred to a card that listed each box’s location, and responded accordingly.

The system, upgraded over the years, was changed in 1924 when the fire bell was removed and paid firemen replaced the volunteers. The entire system was abolished March 17th, 1987, when the last box, 47, was ceremoniously activated at Eagle and Market streets. The 1884 bell can be heard ringing on Sundays from the Central United Methodist Church on Church Street, and the 1890 bell can be heard every hour ringing from the top of City Hall.



Although hand-drawn equipment remained, horses were introduced in 1887 when a new hose wagon was bought, supplementing the existing wagon. It was a beautiful piece with nickel and polished steel, a reel for the hose, lanterns for light, and a gong to clear the way when responding. A stable was built next to the apparatus shed for the horses, possibly named Dick and Tom, and a room for the driver. Since the abilities of large numbers of men were required at each working fire, the addition of horses allowed those hand-drawn efforts to be re-focused onto firefighting. Caring for the horses created strong bonds, which was immediately evident when the alarm rang. As the gong sounded and the stall chain dropped, each horse calmly, on its own, moved from its stall to the front of its apparatus. There it waited until the driver lowered the harness onto the horse's neck, and it was quickly fastened. The bay doors were opened, and each apparatus raced through the streets, the horses as excited to get to the fire as the firemen. A more efficient firefighting organization was beginning to emerge. One of the early horse-drawn hose wagons purchased sometime around 1893-1898 is shown in the picture.

Asheville was growing rapidly – from 2600 people in 1880 to 10,000 in 1890. Downtown was developing into a thriving business district. From a probable combination of a sense of civic duty and the desire to preserve their interests, several businessmen became volunteer firemen.

One man stands out, John Brooks. The exact date of his hiring has yet to be found, 1890 or before, but he, joined by Lem Ricord, became a driver for our department. The earliest pay records found show them both being paid in July 1891 at a rate of \$7 weekly, each. “Teamster” Brooks’ position on Hose Company No. 1 was unique because he was the first African-American on the fire department.

An African-American hook and ladder company existed in the city as early as 1891. A record exists of AFD establishing an African-American hose company in November of 1914 at Hazard and Pine Streets.



On August 2nd, 1892, Asheville's new city hall (shown) opened behind the courthouse on East Pack Square, which housed the police department, fire department, courtrooms, a market, and city staff. This became the first substantial fire station and headquarters.

Another enormous fire occurred at 11:40 p.m., February 7th, 1895 at the same southwest corner of Court Square (shown) as the previous large fire. This time the temperature was 9 degrees below zero with a heavy wind. The fire started in J. M. Alexander's harness shop from a stove that was heavily stoked for the cold night. When Hose Company Number 1 arrived, they found the water system for the city turned off to prevent pipes from bursting in the cold weather (a common practice then), and could not get water on the fire for another 30 minutes until the water system was turned back on.



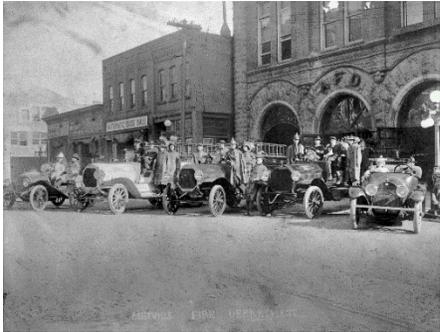
A fire had to be started around a hydrant to thaw it out so water could flow. The firemen fought under tremendous conditions, from having their frozen hands knocked from a nozzle when they were relieved, to being carried into nearby businesses so their clothing (and they!) would thaw. One fireman's heavy overcoat froze solid and broke into pieces, falling from him. Many citizens helped in the firefighting efforts and opened their stores, offering coffee, food, warmth, dry clothes, and gloves. The fire was fought all night, with four buildings being involved before it was all over. One building sat on a spot that now had three buildings burn – one before 1893, one during the September 20th, 1893 fire, and now this one.



Silas G. Bernard (standing at left holding nozzle) became AFD's chief in 1903 and served for seven years before Neal B. Wilson (standing with derby hat in the wagon) took the job in 1909. He served just over a year before J. H. Wood (standing

between horse and the wagon) became the chief of the department, starting in May 1911.

In 1911, much to the chagrin of at least some of the firemen, the city's leaders authorized the purchases of their first motorized apparatus – two Seagrave hose wagons, one red, and one white. The red one arrived first in March of 1912



with the white one a few days behind. The wisdom of such was questioned – the reliability of the gasoline-powered trucks was not universally proven, and some firemen wanted the horses retained as a “sure thing” in case the noisy new rigs failed. But it was not to be. The last fire horses left the department on April 15th, and the motorized age came to Asheville just as it came to every other community.

At least eight horse-drawn units had been bought and 26 horses used by this time. The first motorized ladder truck, the city's third and final Seagrave, arrived in 1914. The Seagraves are all shown in the picture with the white and red hose wagons at left and the ladder truck at right. The two cars on the ends are those of the chief and his assistant.

On July 16th, 1916 the remnants of two hurricanes dumped 22 inches of rain in 24 hours in the region, causing massive flooding along the French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers, leaving fifty persons dead, and losses totaling \$4 billion in today's dollars. Chief Lipe of the Biltmore Fire Department lost his life trying to save four people, including his daughter stuck in a tree surrounded by raging water. Shown in the photo is Asheville's train station across from the Glen Rock Hotel on Depot Street.



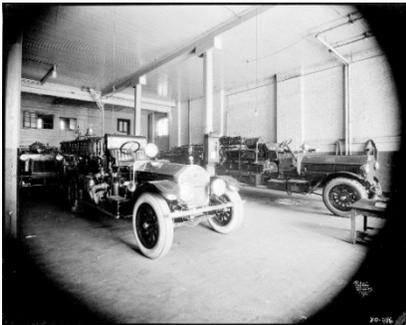
On the morning of November 16, 1917, an alarm came in some 19 minutes after a fire was discovered at the Catholic Hill School for Colored Children (shown). There was no phone in the school, the nearest one being several hundred feet away in a residence. There



were approximately 300 students in the three-story, seven-classroom brick building. The fire was believed to have begun in the furnace room on the first floor. Wooden floors and a large, open central stairwell running from the basement to the top floor caused the fire to spread rapidly, with no hope for saving when the firemen finally arrived.

Five panicked children fled from their teacher while she was trying to organize the class to escape the building, and perished. Two other children were lost in the smoke, thought to have frozen in fear at their desks while their class was escaping. Seven children died, making this one of the worst civilian casualties the department had experienced to date. The Stephens-Lee High School was later built just above this site, opening in 1923.

West Asheville was a separate town, having its own fire department that was founded in December 1914, and remained as such until being voluntarily annexed by the city in 1917. The existing fire station on Dunwell Avenue, across from the intersection of Haywood and Brevard Roads, became Asheville Fire Department's first West Asheville fire station.



1919 saw the purchase of the fire department's first pumper, a 750 gallon-per-minute American LaFrance (ALF) (shown at left with the Seagrave ladder truck on the right). The earlier Seagrave trucks had only chemical extinguishers with a hose attached, and 2.5" hose in the bed to attach to hydrants directly for fighting fires. The city's exclusive relationship with

ALF lasted through 1984, during which time they bought twenty-eight trucks from the manufacturer.



Alonzo L. Duckett (shown in uniform) became Chief of the department on January 23rd, 1920. He started with the hose reel company in the West End community in 1895 and joined AFD the following year, working his way to assistant chief under James Wood, whom he succeeded. He retired

December 9th, 1938 having served over 40 years with the department (he left for two years) and being the longest serving Chief up to that time. He was highly regarded among his men and peers, loved by the community, and was sorely missed.



Station Two, on Depot Street at Ralph Street (shown) opened March 14th, 1922 as Hose Company Number 3. It was in the industrial depot section of town and was referred to as the Glen Rock station for the nearby Glen Rock Hotel.

Starting as early as February 1895, the fire department tried to become a paid organization. This partially started in August of 1904 when seven men were paid \$8 per month to sleep in the firehouse each night, and 20 others were paid \$5 a month as regular firemen to respond to calls during the day from wherever they were, but \$1 would be deducted for each missed fire. Drivers were paid \$12.50 weekly, and the Chief was paid \$25 per month. Nearly twenty years later, on April 1st, 1924, the Asheville Fire Department finally became a fully paid organization with 56 men at three stations, each paid approximately \$110 monthly.



Firemen have worked, or more closely lived, at the station since the days of the horse-drawn drivers. When the department became fully paid, shift work began. The work schedule changed many times over the years. The firemen worked in one of two platoons or shifts, 79-89 hours each week at first without a full day off, changing at 1 p.m. on Sundays. Later a 24-hour Sunday off was added every two weeks when the platoons changed shifts. "Overtime" wasn't in the vocabulary. Finally, in 1973 a third platoon was added to give the firemen four consecutive days off. The picture shows AFD in front of the original Headquarters around 1924.

On December 27th, 1925 at 5:40 A.M. the Farmers Federation Building was reported to be on fire. The temperature was 5 degrees below zero. Clothes froze to the firemen so badly from the spray of the firehoses that they had to be

surgically removed. The loss of the building was put at \$310,000, the highest loss of the city up to that time.



Douglas Ellington designed Station 4, located at 300 Merrimon Avenue (shown), which opened with much fanfare on August 15th, 1927. It included a drill tower for department training. The building remained an active fire station until 1976. It reopened as an active fire station for a short period in 2009 to gather research data for the fire department, but only during the daytime hours. It became the location of the joint Asheville-Buncombe County Arson Task Force.

As a result of “financial overextending,” the city reduced its firefighting force from seventy-eight to sixty-eight on December 15, 1928. One of those released was a lieutenant and six-year veteran. The others had been hired within the past four years. This was one of the several steps the city took in its “program of economy.”



Biltmore Village was annexed by the City of Asheville on July 1st, 1929. A fire department, supported by George Vanderbilt, had existed in the village since 1903, fully organizing on April 6th, 1906. AFD assumed fire protection when the area was annexed, and opened Station 5 (shown) there on August 29th, 1929.

On November 15th, 1931, twenty-three firemen were dismissed. The Great Depression hit the “financially challenged” city hard. This reduction necessitated a change in the work schedule such that those remaining worked a shift of 96 hours, with three hours off each day for meals. At the end of the 96-hour shift, the men were given 24 hours off. As difficult as this may seem, at least the men had a job. John Nolan, a member of the department at that time, was quoted as saying that he never missed a payday during the depression, although there was one payday when the city was late in its payment, and one payday when they paid in scrip, redeemable for food, and later transferred to cash. The city had the highest debt

per capita in the country (over \$800 million in today's dollars). The leaders decided not to default, but pay it all back, which they finally did on June 30th, 1976.

Some of the men were re-hired in 1936 when the city's finances improved, but some did not return, of their choosing or because the city could not afford to re-hire them all.

On December 24th, 1936, at 10:13 P.M., an explosion at the Broadway Fireworks Store, 25 Broadway, killed two and injured eleven. The explosion rocked the downtown. Seven of AFD's nine companies responded. One of the remaining companies was subsequently called to the fire, leaving only one AFD company available for the remainder of the city. This fire helped the State of North Carolina ban fireworks, and the NFPA develop codes against fireworks stores.



Jennings C. "Fitz" Fitzgerald (shown) was appointed chief on December 9th, 1938 after the retirement of A. L. Duckett. He joined the department October 1st, 1916 and served as Chief Duckett's assistant for 14 years. He would go on to serve as the department's chief for a record of nearly 24 years before retiring December 31st, 1962 with 46 years of service. He was regarded as one of the best in his profession.

On October 20th, 1944, at 7 P.M., Harry L. Williams (shown) died of a heart attack while engaged in firefighting efforts at the Bon Ton Cleaners at 276 Haywood Road. He was 47 years old and had been a member of the fire department since August 23rd, 1924. He was a driver of Engine 3 at Station 2. His was the first known line-of-duty death (LODD) within the Asheville Fire Department.



One fire that was particularly difficult for the firemen began during the late evening of March 10, 1948, on Zillicoa Street at Highland Hospital, (shown), where patients with mental and nervous disorders received treatment. All windows had bars on them, and all doors had steel slabs.

When crews arrived shortly before midnight, they found the four-story building heavily involved in fire. The alarm was turned in late. Attempts at forcibly entering the structure to rescue patients and staff were extremely challenging. Due to the barred windows, firemen reported later, they had to watch patients die in front of them. Nine patients died in this fire, including Zelda Fitzgerald, widow of author F. Scott Fitzgerald.



Grady D. Wilson (shown) died of a heart attack shortly before noon on June 28th, 1948 at Station 3 on Haywood Road. He was 48 years old and had served since October 27th, 1924. He was the driver of Engine 4 at Station 3. His was AFD's second LODD.

Station Six opened in West Asheville on Haywood Road on December 7th, 1953 with a new city policy to build libraries and community centers with fire stations. Station Seven (shown) opened in North Asheville on September 11th, 1958. Stations 8 on Tunnel Road and 9 on Fairview Road opened on June 6th, 1960 when the Beverly Hills and Oakley areas were annexed. Stations 8 and 9 were each first located in a house with a large garage built to house a fire engine until their permanent stations could be built.



Deckard B. Dover (on left in photo) began his duties as chief on January 1, 1963. Chief Dover served as Fitz's assistant since 1948 and had been with the department since 1924. He retired on May 8th, 1965 with 41 years of service.

On December 9, 1963, at 3:17 p.m. the fire department's dispatcher received an alarm reporting smoke in the two story, brick Susquehanna Antique Shop at 23 Biltmore Avenue (shown). The entire basement was on fire when the first



firefighters arrived. Off-duty fireman Gus Werhan, one of many called into service, was told to get the reserve engine from Station 4 and standby. Instead, he went to the fire. Water was being poured into the building for over an hour when the floor collapsed and pinned Gus, who was between four and ten feet inside the building, against an old piano. The firemen were told just minutes before to evacuate the building. They worked for over an hour trying to free him, sending in oxygen and even two physicians. Eventually, a crane was brought to the site to remove

the debris off Gus to free him. He was pronounced dead of asphyxiation when he arrived at Mission Hospital shortly after 5:30 p.m. He was 25 years old. Gus entered service on March 8th, 1960 and was the driver of Engine 1A at Station 1. He was the first fireman to die in a structural collapse. Station 1 is named in his memory.



Lieutenant George House suffered a stroke at Station 1 which days later led to a fatal heart attack at 3:15 p.m. on August 18th, 1964. He was 40 years old and had served for 12 years since September 16th, 1951.



Rufus L. Smith rose through the ranks just as his predecessors. He served as Chief Dover's assistant starting in 1963 and became chief of the department on May 9th, 1965. He had been serving the department since April 8th, 1926. Chief Smith retired August 31, 1970, after 44 years of service.

Arthur W. Duckett (shown) responded to a brush fire on Chapel Park Road at 3:30 p.m. on March 7th, 1966. After returning to Station 5 in Biltmore, he told his crew to go ahead and clean the equipment without him, saying that he wasn't feeling well



and was going to lie down upstairs. After his crew had finished cleaning, they went upstairs around 4:20 p.m. to find Arthur dead of a heart attack. He was a 63-year old lieutenant, assigned to Engine 5 at Station 5, and had served the department since April 1st, 1924, almost 42 years.



On April 22nd, 1969 at 10:23 A.M. fire was reported at Dunham's Music House and the Bank of Asheville (BoA shown, Dunham's at left) at 62 and 68 Patton Avenue across from Pritchard Park. The fire started in the basement of Dunham's and spread quickly. Every company in the city fought the fire for three hours before it was brought under control, using at one point 15 2.5" hose lines. It took another three

days before the fire was completely out. The loss from this fire was set at \$1,168,000 making it the highest loss in city history.



Powell Ball (shown) was appointed chief on September 1, 1970 after having served the fire department for 20 years, since September 1st, 1950. He served as Chief Smith's deputy since December 1969. He retired July 1st, 1986 but stayed on until November as interim until the new Chief arrived, making 36 years of service. He was known for being very progressive and instituting many changes in the department.



Assistant Chief of the Fire Prevention Bureau, J. L. Dalton (shown), 68 years old, retired on January 31st, 1974 after serving 47 years and three months. He started with the department on November 1st, 1926. He had been in Fire Prevention since 1949 and in charge of the Bureau since 1966. Chief Dalton was the longest-serving member of the Asheville Fire Department.

Fireman Jimmie Trent (shown) died on November 13th, 1975, days after fighting a fire at the Red Chair Restaurant at 6 North Pack Square on November 1st. He was 35 years old and had joined the department on February 16th, 1974. Fireman Trent



became ill while fighting the fire, sought medical treatment afterward, and returned to work on his next shift, where he again became ill. He died from the results of a heart attack on what had been planned as the day of his discharge from the hospital. The circumstances surrounding his death met the requirements for his death to be considered as having occurred during the line of duty. Station 8 is named in his memory.



In 1979 the first female firefighters were hired. Meg Bryson (shown) became the first official City of Asheville female firefighter on the payroll, while Yvone Pierberg, Wanda Pickens, and Rene Spencer were hired with a federal grant.

On May 26, 1982, a fire started at West Asheville after lightning struck the steeple, setting the attic ablaze. A full alarm at 10:16 p.m. and Engine Company 6 was first due at 926 Haywood Road. Crews with two hose lines had entered the auditorium to fight a blaze near the back of the room when they saw fire under the steeple and signs that it was about to collapse. They began to quickly exit through doors and windows. Firefighter Raymond J. Flowers (shown) was just behind his crew when the steeple collapsed on him shortly after 10:30 P.M. Firefighter Flowers had been a member of the department for a little over a year, having entered service April 27th, 1981. He was 35 years old. Several hundred people followed Firefighter Flowers funeral procession on foot from headquarters to Riverside Cemetery. Station 6 is named in his memory.



City Manager Doug Bean's search for a new Chief resulted in the November 10, 1986, hiring of John Rukavina (shown), former chief and acting city manager of St. Joseph, MO. This was the first time that a chief was chosen from outside the ranks of the Asheville Fire Department. He resigned in 2000 to become Emergency Management Director for Wake County, NC.

Captain Oliver J. Rankin, (light-blue uniform, fire truck on the right) shown at Station 5, retired January 1st, 1984 after serving since March 19th, 1947. In his nearly 37 years of service, he never missed a day of work. A record indeed.



On April 2nd, 1995 a fire started in the century-old Earle-Chesterfield Mill on West Haywood Street (shown on fire). The fire quickly grew out of control and spread across the railroad tracks to the Asheville Cotton Mill on Riverside Drive. Both buildings were once powerhouse industries in the area but were

destroyed.



On July 24th, 1998 an arsonist set fire to the Thomas Wolfe house (shown). The house was heavily involved in fire, but three-fourths of the artifacts were saved. It took \$2.4 million and two years to restore the home.

On November 1, the Burlington, NC Asheville's chief. He Carolina's fire chief. on November 13th, Fire Department in 1995 and earned his way to assistant chief by 2006.



2000, Greg Grayson (left), former chief of Fire Department, was appointed as resigned to become Greensboro, North He was succeeded by Scott Burnette (right) 2009. Chief Burnette joined the Asheville



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Stations 10 and 11 opened on July 9th, 2007. Station 10 is located on old Haywood Road, and Station 11 is on Rocky Ridge Road. Station 12 (shown) was formerly the Haw Creek Fire Department which was founded in 1961, but ceased



operations and turned the station over to Asheville Fire Department officially on July 1st, 2009.



Captain Jeff Bowen responded with his fellow firefighters to fire on the fifth floor of the 445 Biltmore Avenue medical complex on July 28th, 2011 at 12:30 p.m. The building did not have a sprinkler system and the standpipe system was not working. It had taken nearly 25 minutes before water was being put on the fire by an outside ladder company. While inside searching the building, Captain Bowen died when his tank of air was depleted. He was 37 years old. He was a Captain on Rescue 3 at Station 3 and had served the department for 13 years. Investigations surrounding Captain Bowen's death resulted in the creation and implementation of programs and policies aimed at reducing the likelihood of a recurrence. The fire was ruled arson and the person who set this fire has yet to be brought to justice. The Smoky Park Bridge was renamed in memory of Captain Bowen.



Engine 6 Engineer Will Willis, after battling for a year, succumbed to a rare form of kidney cancer on his 34th birthday February 27th, 2018 after 8 years of service. Will's death was AFD's first cancer LODD and North Carolina's second.

Fifty-eight year old Assistant Fire Marshall Karen Shuart succumbed to ovarian and intestinal cancer on January 31st, 2019 after almost 25 years of service. She battled her cancer for 8 months.



In history, "firsts" are a good point on which to build an understanding of where one originates, or where the traditions of an organization begin. In the fire service, history and tradition are an important part of how and why we do our job. They foster an appreciation for the seemingly mundane tools and procedures used every day. They also instill a high degree of respect for people like Harry Williams, Grady Wilson, Gus Werhan, Arthur Duckett, Jimmie Trent, Raymond Flowers, Jeff Bowen, Will Willis, and Karen Shuart, who went before us and paid the ultimate price. Many fires have been fought, and many lie ahead. A very solid foundation has been laid for us by our past brothers and sisters of the

Asheville Fire Department. We will continue to build on this foundation and pioneer new “firsts” in our future.