

# NEARBY HISTORY: Downtown fires

*Volunteer fire departments struggled to keep up with major, devastating blazes*

A fire destroyed most of Rock Hill's downtown buildings on June 3, 1878. Twenty buildings burned down on Main Street. One of those was the firehouse, then called the engine house, and a lot of the equipment was lost.

The only other fire protection the town had was a large underground cistern from which the firefighters dipped water using rubber buckets.

The fire attracted a large number of looters who stripped the stores of whatever goods they could get their hands on.

The result was the formation of the Rock Hill Hose and Ladder Company. More than 40 young men joined the organization that A.E. Hutchison termed a social, fraternal, political, literary and civic club that was everything except religious. A new engine house was built with the help of \$275 from the town council and \$200 in subscriptions for fire service.

The firemen wore blue trousers with a red stripe, rubber coats, high-topped boots and helmets.

In 1882, the town purchased a pump mounted on four wheels. Two men could handle it. They pumped water from three cisterns and, if need be, would pump water from wells in the backyards of homes.

Residents formed a bucket brigade. Shortly after the new equipment arrived, there was another disastrous Main Street fire that destroyed a number of the buildings that had been built following the 1878 blaze.

At 1:05 in the morning of March 24, 1887, the fire broke out. At 2 a.m. the flames leaped into the Globe Hotel and the Frew Building. It didn't take long for all of the buildings and warehouses on the west side of Main Street to go up in flames. The post office was torn down in an effort to block the fire's path, which would have destroyed the town library.

Nearby, Yorkville had a terrible fire in 1870 and another in June 1888. The town had a number of residences that had been turned into store buildings. Typically, in downtown Yorkville, the first floors housed shops and the owners lived on the top floor. Fortunately, the occupants all managed to escape the fire, which destroyed much of the

west side of Congress Street.

Another fire occurred in Rock Hill in 1898. This one destroyed the Friedheim Store area of Main Street and also destroyed Kimbrell's Stable. After that, the city council passed an ordinance forbidding the use of wood shingles on downtown buildings.

Chester and Lancaster also had volunteer fire departments. Chester actually had two fire departments, one run by the white people of Chester and the other by the black people. In March 1889, the Chester News reported that the white department, known as the Stonewall Fire Engine Company, was "on its last legs" but that the "colored fire organization, the 'Lincolns,' have been full of life and always promptly to the scene at the first ringing of the fire bell."

Speaking of fire bells, Rock Hill purchased one in 1924 from Columbia, which had used the bell from 1900 to 1924. The bell weighed 3,000 pounds and was called "Big Bess." Big Bess and its tower were taken down in April 1954 by Sol Aberman.

At the same time that Rock Hill purchased Big Bess, a La France fire truck was purchased. Horses were no longer used.

Every town seemed to have at least one or more disastrous fires in the pre-World War I period. The business section of the town of Kershaw, below Lancaster, burned to the ground in 1897.

In 1908, Lancaster had a large fire and, as a result, abandoned its bucket brigade and installed a town water system.

It is said that Indian Land in the Panhandle of Lancaster County had the first volunteer fire department that was organized for a rural area in South Carolina. The impetus was at least twofold.

First, Indian Land High School burned in August of 1941. High school students were bused to Van Wyck High School until the end of World War II (1945) when materials became available for the rebuilding. Later, following the burning of his grandson's home, which was under construction at the time, James Rodgers took the lead in setting up a fire department and buying the needed equipment that was for many years in a building on Pettus (my family) property at the corner of U.S. 521 and Jim Wilson Road.

Louise Pettus is a retired Winthrop University history professor. Her column appears Sundays.



Louise Pettus