

Bucket brigade days

■ Firefighting started
with 41-member company.

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In 1869 the town of Rock Hill petitioned the legislature to charter its first volunteer fire company. It had 41 members and was called The Hook and Ladder Company.

A.E. Hutchison once wrote of its socially prominent membership that The Hook and Ladder Company was "social, fraternal, political, literary, civic (everything but religious)."



Nearby history

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Rock Hill and every other town around was plagued by fires. Most of the houses were of wooden construction. Wood was burned in fireplaces and kitchen stoves. Stores were generally of wooden construction and built without fire walls, so if one caught fire the whole street was likely to go up in flames.

A fire on June 3, 1878, destroyed most of downtown Rock Hill. Twenty Main Street buildings and two homes burned down. Even the fire company's engine house burned to the ground along with a lot of the equipment.

Yorkville had a terrible fire in 1870 and another devastating fire in June 1888. The Yorkville Hook and Ladder Co. could not cope with the fire which started in T.M. Dobson & Sons's combination store and dwelling, a house that had been constructed in 1820 by Capt. John Blair. The fire moved down the street, only temporarily stopped by the flooding of some of the houses that stood in the path. The west side of Yorkville's Main Street was destroyed.

Chester had two fire companies in the 1880s. One was composed of white men and called the Stonewall Fire Company; the other was made up of black men who called themselves the "Lincolns." The Lincolns took a great deal of pride in always managing to be the first on the scene when the fire bell rung.

In 1882 the Rock Hill fire fighting equipment consisted of "a pump mounted on four wheels with a handle that could be worked by two men." The water was pumped from wells at first but later the town put up three cisterns to supply the water.

A disastrous fire in 1883 destroyed one side of Main Street. On March 24, 1887, half the town's business houses went up in flames. The fire started behind the First National Bank and moved on to W.L. Roddey & Co. Then the flames leaped into the Globe Hotel and to the Frew Building. The west side of Main Street was gone in about two hours. The post office was torn down in an effort to stop the fire which was headed toward the town library.

In 1898 another terrible fire destroyed the opposite side of Rock Hill's Main Street. There were so many fires that the town passed an ordinance forbidding the use of shingle roofs.

In 1897 the entire town of Kershaw burned to the ground when a bakery overheated while trying to feed a circus crowd.

In 1908 Lancaster had such a fire on Main Street that the town well was drained dry. This convinced the citizens to install the town's first water system. The same thing happened to Fort Mill in 1914.

Sometime in the early 1900s Rock Hill bought its first steam engine. In 1908 the town abandoned the volunteer system in favor of paid firefighters. The pay was \$15 a month.

In 1924 Rock Hill purchased a 3,000-pound fire bell from the city of Columbia. The bell hung from a tower and was nicknamed "Big Bess." Sol Aberman bought the bell and tower when it was scrapped in 1954.

In 1953 and 1954 Rock Hill suffered from two major fires. In 1953 the Ratterree Building and three smaller buildings burned on Main Street. On Dec. 7, 1954, the Rock Hill Bleachery caught fire in 18-degree weather. A section of the roof caved in but only two men were injured.

Modern firefighting has come a very long way since the days when volunteers made up the "bucket brigade."

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