

Records of the City of Charleston Fire Department, 1848–1979

The Charleston Archive, Charleston County Public Library

Compiled by Kathleen Gray, February 2008

Collation: 15 linear ft.; 61 volumes, 66 folders, 14 reels microfilm

Description: This collection consists of Minutes of the Board of Fire Masters (1848–1910), Summary of Expenditures (1883–1923), Bills for Materials and Supplies (1881–1914), Fireman's Pension, Disabled, and Superannuated Fund (later changed to Fireman's Insurance and Inspection Fund) (1905–1963), Pay Roll of City Apparatus (1855–1869), Return Books (1851–1869), Rules and Regulations Governing the Fire Department of Charleston, S. C. (1895), Company House Journals (1911–1979), loose materials (1860–1960) and microfilm (1848–1964).

The Minutes of the Board of Fire Masters consist of three bound volumes that contain the continuous record of the meetings of the Fire Masters from 15 May 1848 to 07 Dec 1910.

The Summary of Expenditures comprise four bound ledgers covering the years 1883–1923. These ledgers provide a monthly accounting of monies spent by the Fire Department on various necessities, such as pay roll, forage, gas, oil, supplies, etc. The expenditures for each segment of the department are listed separately within a given year. For example, the expenditures of each engine are listed, as well as those of the chief, the supply house, and the fire alarm telegraph. The figures given represent monthly sums paid out and do not list specific businesses or individuals.

The Bills for Materials and Supplies comprise five slim bound ledgers covering the years 1890–1914. These ledgers contain a detailed accounting of the manner in which the Fire Department spent its funds, including specific businesses and individuals to whom they owed money, amounts paid, and, in some cases, specific items purchased.

The Fireman's Pension, Disabled, and Superannuated Fund (later changed to Fireman's Insurance and Inspection Fund) constitute five ledgers, which contain a monthly accounting of the finances of the fund from 1905–1963. These ledgers include lists of individuals to whom pensions were paid.

The Pay Roll of City Apparatus is a single volume, which lists payments made to city engine companies for duties carried out, the majority of which are responses to fires, for 1855–1869. Each page contains the date and location of a fire and includes, for each city apparatus, the number of managers, number of hands, time allowed, premium, amount paid, and the signature of the receiver. This pay roll contains sums paid to entire companies and does not list the individuals involved.

The Return Books are two volumes, containing a chronological listing of fires occurring in Charleston (22 Jun 1851–09 Dec 1864; 18 Dec 1861–17 Aug 1869). For each fire, the response of both the volunteer fire companies and city engine companies are listed and include the number of hands responding, time, premium, and amounts paid. These volumes represent sums paid to entire companies and do not list the individuals involved.

The Rules and Regulations Governing the Fire Department of Charleston, S. C. is a single volume published in 1895 that outlines the governance of the Charleston Fire Department. A duplicate of this item was transferred to the South Carolina Pamphlet Collection.

The Company House Journals are 43 bound volumes that document the daily activities of various fire companies from 14 Jun 1911–25 Dec 1979. Information found in the journals includes alarms sounded and responses to them, day and night watches, roll calls, testing of boxes, leaves of absence, visitations of Fire Chief, etc. The collection is not complete and does not contain a continuous record of each fire company. Most volumes contain no markers or titles to identify the specific fire company represented. Several volumes have been grouped into probable company sub-collections based on serial dates and continuity of staff members. Personnel listings in the volumes have been cross-referenced with departmental pay rolls, City of Charleston Yearbooks, and city directories to identify company designation. Company and station designations fluctuated throughout the years, and therefore journals have been labeled with the company number appropriate for the represented time period.

The loose materials contain official documents of the Charleston Fire Department, including correspondence, legal documents, reports, and contracts, and are divided into the following subject areas: Sales, Buildings, Equipment, Personnel, Finances, and Miscellaneous. The Sales files contain correspondence, legal documents, and contracts concerning the City's purchase of equipment from the volunteer fire companies following the creation of the paid fire department in 1881. The Buildings files contain contracts for the construction and repair of various engine houses within the city. The Equipment files comprise materials relating to hydrants, alarms, pipes, and wells. The Personnel files contain items pertaining to departmental employees, particularly regarding the Inspection and Insurance Fund. The Personnel files are not extensive and do not contain comprehensive listings of fire department employees or volunteers. The Finances files chiefly contain tally sheets and expenditure listings for the department. The majority of the financial papers were removed from the bound volumes within the collection. The Miscellaneous files contain an assortment of materials on fire department matters, including correspondence, plats, departmental histories, blank stationary, and fragments of company house journals and board minutes.

The microfilm of the Charleston Fire Department records consists of 14 reels. Reels 1–8 contain materials available in their original format in the Special Collections Department, including the Minutes of the Board of Fire Masters, Return Books, published Reports of the Board of Fire Masters, and a portion of the Company House Journals. Reels 9–14 contain the City of Charleston Fire Department Payroll for 1889–1924, including both ledgers and vouchers. The Ledgers list the employees of each engine or hook and ladder company, their pay rate, length of service, and signature. The vouchers are individual slips of paper whereon an employee is authorizing another individual to collect his pay. The Payrolls were microfilmed in 1994, and, since that time, the originals have been missing and are presumed lost. The microfilm, therefore, is the only known format for these materials. Additional rosters of Fire Department employees are sometimes included in the annual report of the Fire Department, published in the City of Charleston Yearbooks (1880-1951). The appearance of the roster in the annual report is sporadic and seemingly random, but include the years 1917, 1924, 1940, 1945, and 1948.

Historical Note: Fire has been a reality of life in the city of Charleston from its earliest days and throughout its long history. For nearly two hundred years, fire suppression in Charleston was a mixture of official administration and volunteer efforts. The government (first state and then city) supplied funds for the purchase of materials and managed all efforts. However, average citizens and volunteers were responsible for the actual fighting of fires.

The first known legislation pertaining to the suppression of fire in Charleston dates to 1698. A group of commissioners, appointed by the governor, were responsible for the collection of levied monies and the purchase of ladders, buckets, and fire hooks for the use of the citizens of Charleston in the fighting of fires.¹ The act detailing the scope of the fire department was altered numerous times over years, usually in response to an incidence of fire within the city. In 1701 the equipment guidelines were expanded to include “one engine for quenching of fire.”² The commissioners were further empowered in 1713 to ensure that wells were dug and pumps were fixed throughout the city in order to supply the engines with water.³

When the city of Charleston was incorporated in 1783, the newly formed city government assumed responsibility for fire suppression.⁴ From 1796 onward, the selection of Fire Masters became a responsibility of the Charleston City Council. It was also at this time that the city ordered the Fire Masters to raise and maintain a company of axemen, “consisting of a foreman and two assistants, with forty-seven privates.”⁵ Although this company of axemen is mentioned in subsequent ordinances, there is no existing discussion of its management, composition, or term of use. This company is often listed in the same ordinances as, but is separate from, the volunteer fire companies.

The first official reference to the volunteer fire companies dates to 1804, wherein they are described as companies formed “for the express purpose of removing the goods and effects of the citizens, which shall be endangered by the fire.”⁶ It is evident, however, that such companies were in existence prior to the ordinance of 1804. According to existing records, the first volunteer fire company in Charleston was the Vigilant Fire Company, which submitted a petition for incorporation to the House of Representatives in 1793.⁷ Furthermore, their mission included not only the removal of fire-threatened property, but also the active suppression of fire, as evidenced by their private purchase of a fire engine.⁸ The Vigilant was followed in later years by numerous other companies, including the Charleston Axe (1800), Eagle (1818), Vigilant (1819)⁹, Phoenix (1826), Charleston (1826), Aetna (1829), Marion (1839), German (1839), Palmetto (1841), Hope (1843), Washington (1849), Palmetto Axe (1849), and Protection (1850).¹⁰ In

¹ *Statutes at Large of South Carolina, Vol. 7, 1840*, p. 11.

² *ibid.*, p. 20.

³ *ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴ *Ordinances of the City of Charleston, 1802*, p. 20.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 151–160.

⁶ *Ordinances of the City of Charleston, 1804*, p. 259.

⁷ Several secondary sources claim the first volunteer fire company in Charleston was the Hand-in-Hand Company, founded in 1784. However, no primary source materials are currently available to verify this assertion.

⁸ *Journals of the House of Representatives, 1792-1794*. For further discussion of the Vigilant Fire Company see *South Carolina Historical Magazine, Vol. 87*.

⁹ The relationship between the 1819 Vigilant Company and the 1793 Vigilant Company is unclear.

¹⁰ *Minutes of the Board of Fire Masters, 16 May 1855*.

addition, by the late nineteenth century, there were also several African American volunteer companies, such as the Ashley (1869), Hook and Ladder No. 3, Comet (1869), Niagara (1869), Promptitude (1870), Prudence (1869), Union Star (1869), and United (1869).¹¹

The exact relationship between the Board of Fire Masters and the volunteer companies is slightly ambiguous. The Fire Masters provided all the resources necessary for the suppression of fire (reels, hoses, engine houses, etc.), and the fire companies provided the manpower. While this manpower was given voluntarily, the city did offer slight monetary compensation to the companies for the time spent at fires, with a special premium awarded to the company arriving first on the scene.¹² What remains uncertain is the exact disposition of fire engines throughout the city. The city itself owned several engines, which are sometimes referred to as ward engines. During the mid-nineteenth century, these ward engines were largely manned by African Americans, both free and enslaved, under the direction of a handful of white supervisors.¹³ It is clear from Charleston City Council minutes that city-owned engines were sometimes left in the possession of volunteer fire companies.¹⁴ In addition, fire companies also purchased engines themselves, either independently, with the aid of the city, or from the city directly.¹⁵ By 1872, the well-developed Fire Department comprised eleven steam engines and two hook and ladder trucks staffed by over eight hundred white citizens and seven hand engines operated by eight hundred and forty-six African American men.¹⁶

In 1881, the City Council of Charleston approved an ordinance creating the city's first official paid fire department, ending the era of the volunteer fire companies. The fire department, as laid out by the ordinance, was to consist of six steam engines, two reserve engines, and two hook and ladder trucks. The administrative arm of the department comprised a chief, two assistant chiefs, one fire alarm operator, and one clerk, while each engine and truck would have a complement of twelve firemen.¹⁷ To aid in the creation of the new department, the Aetna Company donated its steam engine to the city. All additional apparatus required by the department were purchased from the volunteer fire companies.¹⁸

Since its official inception, the Charleston Fire Department has continued to grow and adapt to the changing needs of the Charleston area. In July of 1907, the department took possession of its first automobile, a 2-cycle Oldsmobile acquired for use of the Fire Chief.¹⁹ Three years later, the first motorized fire engine was purchased.²⁰ The department steadily motorized the fleet until only three horses remained, which were put to pasture in 1940.²¹ In order to more effectively

¹¹ *Charleston City Directory, 1878*, p. 37–38. Incorporation dates taken from *Statutes of South Carolina, Vol. 14, 1868-71*, p. 179-180, 185-187, 193, 325.

¹² See *Return Books* for specific amounts, premiums, etc.

¹³ *Board of Fire Masters Minutes, 23 Feb 1849, 18 Jun 1849.*

¹⁴ *Charleston City Council Minutes, 14 Aug 1866.*

¹⁵ For examples of each type of acquisition, see *Charleston City Council Minutes, 08 Mar 1870; 3 Jul 1866; 14 Aug 1866*, respectively.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 9 Jan 1872.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 22 Nov 1881.

¹⁸ *City of Charleston Yearbook, 1881*, p. 179–197 and *Loose Materials, Papers of Sale, 1881-1882.*

¹⁹ *Board of Fire Masters Minutes, 01 Jan 1906, 07 Mar 1906, 03 Jul 1907.*

²⁰ *ibid.*, 07 Sep 1910, 05 Oct 1910.

²¹ *City of Charleston Yearbook, 1940*, p. 120.

battle fires along the waterfront, the department added a marine division consisting of three tugboats equipped with pumps and hoses.²²

In addition to equipment modernization, the Charleston Fire Department has also periodically made changes to its personnel. In 1920, the department replaced the continuous-duty system with the two-platoon system. Splitting the force in half in this fashion allowed the companies to rest personnel while still having them available for emergencies.²³ This eventually gave way to the three-shift 24/48-hour system in use today.²⁴ It is clear that African Americans have played an active role in Charleston's fire department both in the era of the volunteer companies and in the paid department. Early twentieth century personnel rosters and pay rolls suggest that initially African Americans were only allowed to serve support roles in the paid department, such as driver or helper. Precisely when the first African American was given the official duty of firefighter is unclear. The first black man to achieve the rank of chief officer occurred in 1981.²⁵ The first female firefighter was admitted to the force in 1977.²⁶

As of 2008, the Charleston Fire Department consists of 19 companies, administered by the Fire Chief, three Assistant Chiefs, and twelve battalion chiefs. The region covered by the department is divided into five areas: uptown, downtown and West Ashley, James Island, Daniel Island, and John's Island.²⁷

²² *ibid.*, 1913, p. 191.

²³ *ibid.*, 1920, p. 340.

²⁴ City of Charleston Website, <http://www.charlestoncity.info/dept/?nid=11>.

²⁵ Calvin C. Allen was promoted to battalion chief in 1981, having served with the department since 1952. *News & Courier*, 06 Feb 1981.

²⁶ *News & Courier*, 18 Sep 1977, p1C.

²⁷ City of Charleston Website, <http://www.charlestoncity.info/dept/?nid=11>.

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Collection Outline

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01 Apr 1933–06 Feb 1935	BOX 13
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Company No. 8

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Unidentified Station B

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Unidentified Station C

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Folder 18: Contract to repair Palmetto Engine House and Hook and Ladder No.
2, 1877
Folder 19: Contract to repair German Fire Co., 1877
Folder 20: Contract to repair Hope Steam Fire House, 1878
Folder 21: Contract to repair Palmetto Fire House, 1879
Folder 22: Contract to repair Certain Fire Houses, G. W. Egan, contractor, 1879
Folder 23: Contract to repair Certain Fire Houses, T. Hancock, contractor, 1879
Folder 24: Contract to build Engine Houses, Meeting and Wentworth Sts., 1887

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C. Equipment

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Folder 28: Contract to clean Fire wells, 1880
Folder 29: Correspondence re fire alarm telegraph, 1883
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Folder 34: Report of Inspection of Hydrants, 20th century (blank form)
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Folder 57: Correspondence, Mayor to Fire Masters, re: firemen leaving city, 1864
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Folder 59: Committee report, Washington Fire Co., 1866
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 Folder 61: Plat, Niagara Steam Fire Co., 1881
 Folder 62: Office of Clerk of Fire Department stationary, blank, 1880s
 Folder 63: Published minutes of City Council of Charleston (with handwritten annotations), 20 December 1904
 Folder 64: Fire Co. House Journal 16 Apr 1910–12 May 1910
 Folder 65: Fire Co. House Journal 30 Mar 1945–12 Apr 1945
 Folder 66: Correspondence re: Fire Department Records, Historical Commission, 1947–48
 Folder 67: History Charleston Fire Dept, typescript, D. A. Amme, 1953
 Folder 68: Board of Fire Masters, typescript, compiled by M. A. Sparkman, n.d.
 Folder 69: Running card for telephone or still alarms, n.d.
 Folder 70: Plat, Union Star Engine House Lot, n. d.
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III. Microfilm

A. CFD 01

Board of Fire Masters Minutes
 15 May 1848–20 Mar 1872
 17 Apr 1872–02 Dec 1896
 04 Jan 1897–07 Dec 1910

B. CFD 02

Report of the Board of Fire masters City of Charleston
 1911, 1912, 1913, 1914, 1920, 1926, 1927

C. CFD 03

City of Charleston Fire Dept. Company House Journal
 22 Jun 1851–09 Dec 1864 (MISLABELED: Return Book)
 19 Dec 1861–17 Aug 1869 (MISLABELED: Return Book)
 16 Apr 1910–12 May 1910
 14 Jun 1911–24 Jul 1912
 26 Jul 1912–14 Oct 1913
 13 Feb 1916–16 Mar 1917
 16 Apr 1917–31 Jan 1919

D. CFD 04

City of Charleston Fire Dept. Company House Journal
 01 Apr 1933–06 Feb 1935
 07 Feb 1935–30 Nov 1936
 01 Dec 1936–20 Aug 1938
 16 May 1940–01 Feb 1942
 01 Feb 1942–19 Nov 1943
 30 Mar 1945–12 Apr 1945

E. CFD 05

City of Charleston Fire Dept. Company House Journal
09 Aug 1948–31 Dec 1949
14 Apr 1948–12 Oct 1950
19 Jun 1949–21 Apr 1950
22 Apr 1950–09 Feb 1951
01 Jan 1950–29 Apr 1951

F. CFD 06

City of Charleston Fire Dept. Company House Journal
13 Oct 1950–24 Dec 1952

G. CFD 07

City of Charleston Fire Dept. Company House Journal
14 Jun 1955–24 Oct 1956
25 Oct 1955–13 Apr 1957
30 Mar 1956–13 Aug 1957
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14 Aug 1957–01 Jan 1959

H. CFD 08

City of Charleston Fire Dept. Company House Journal
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I. CFD 09

City of Charleston Fire Department Payroll
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J. CFD 10

City of Charleston Fire Department Payroll
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Vouchers: 13 August 1896–01 Dec 1902

K. CFD 11

City of Charleston Fire Department Payroll
Ledger: 15 Jan 1903–31 Oct 1908
Vouchers: 15 Jan 1903–02 Nov 1908

L. CFD 12

City of Charleston Fire Department Payroll

Ledger: 15 Nov 1908–31 Dec 1912

Vouchers: 01 Dec 1908–21 Dec 1912

M. CFD 13

City of Charleston Fire Department Payroll

Ledger: 15 Jan 1913–15 Jun 1916

Vouchers: 14 Jan 1913–01 Jul 1916

N. CFD 14

City of Charleston Fire Department Payroll

Ledger: 15 Jul 1916–15 Apr 1924

Vouchers: 14 Aug 1916–01 Mar 1924