

History of The Gastonia Fire Department:

Acknowledgements

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Robert L. Ridgeway, Former Fire Chief

Chapter 1: The Beginning

The history of the Gastonia Fire Department mirrors the development of Gastonia from a “reconstruction era” southern town located on a railroad line into the large commercial, industrial, and residential center it has become today. Gastonia was incorporated in 1877 with a population of about 200. By 1890, there were two hotels, a variety of stores, a newspaper called *The Gaston Gazette*, and a population of 1,033 which was noted to be “twice that of Dallas”.

City records indicate that fire protection for the City and its inhabitants was discussed as early as 1889. The early 1890’s saw numerous references in City records relating to fire protection including: limiting the use of fireworks, insuring the fire safety of steam engines and stove pipes, and enactment of an ordinance which prohibited “anyone from smoking on or within 25 feet of the cotton platform”. In May of 1899, the Board of Aldermen (termed the City Council today) authorized the purchase of a chemical wagon for fire protection. The chemical wagon was received on August 3, 1899, and R.F. Rankin was appointed to erect a shed to house the apparatus, hose, ladders, and other equipment.

By 1900, the population of the town had grown to 4,610 and the Board of Aldermen began to seriously consider the formation of fire companies to provide formalized fire protection for the town’s citizens. Gastonia now had six cotton mills, a third hotel, and an opera house. In recognition of the growing threat of fire, town Aldermen passed a motion on December 6, 1900 “to allow Negroes to organize a fire company of 12 members, to relieve them of the poll tax, and to give each member a shirt and a cap”. This action was followed on February 7, 1901 by the acceptance of an application for the formation of “a white volunteer fire company”, and “equipment for 5 of their number was ordered to be purchased”.

During 1901, the Board of Aldermen continued with efforts to add to and formalize fire protection in Gastonia. On May 23, 1901, a permit was issued “allowing Anders and Floyd to erect a wooden shed adjoining the stable now occupied by them and situated within the fire limits of the Town of Gastonia”. On June 6, a motion was passed that authorized T.L. Craig to “buy for the town two mules, harnesses, and a wagon, the kind of wagon, harnesses and mules to be determined by Mr. Craig”. Thus, by the end of 1901, Gastonia had formalized the organization of fire companies and purchased its first fire engine.

On May 16, 1902, the Mayor appointed V.E. Long and J.L. Robinson to serve as a committee to investigate the needs of the fledgling fire department, and to make a report back to the Board of Aldermen. The committee was authorized to “purchase such hose, suits, nozzles, and such as per list submitted”. On June 12, it was moved and seconded “that we erect an ordinance creating a Chief of the Fire Department”. On September 11, 1902 the committee recommended that a fire chief be elected, and “that we elect George Glenn Chief of the Fire Department”. This motion was passed, and the Gastonia Fire

Department has its first chief.

On April 11, 1904, W.P. Upton succeeded George Glenn as Fire Chief, at a salary of \$ 100. per year, while other members of the volunteer fire company were paid \$ 20. per year. A major organizational change in the fire department occurred at this time by combining both the white and the “colored” volunteer fire companies under the control of one chief. As noted in the minutes of the Board of Aldermen meeting on April 11, 1904: “the colored men were to be under the control of Chief Upton and to get the same pay as the white (men) do”.

On September 19, 1905 the town adopted its first fire code and established “fire limits” within set boundaries. The established fire limits were bordered by Oakland Avenue to the east, Airline Street to the north, Chester Street to the west, and Franklin Avenue to the south. The ordinance adopted that established fire limits required that “no person, firm, or corporation shall erect any building or structure, other than brick or stone with metal or slate roof within the fire limits”. The concept of fire limits remains in effect to this day in the ‘downtown’ section of Gastonia, where the use of wood for building construction purposes is still prohibited in nearly the same geographical area as the limits established in 1905.

Demand for service and a general lack of support apparently doomed the two volunteer fire companies, and the colored Fire Company was disbanded on October 1, 1906. Aldermen V.E. Long and T.W. Wilson specified in Town records that “the thanks of the Board were extended to the “colored” firemen for their efficient services”. The disbanding of the colored volunteer Fire Company was followed on July 23, 1907 by the mass resignation of “the volunteer firemen of Hose Company Number One”. The letter of resignation submitted to the Board of Aldermen noted that “the volunteer firemen have not had the proper support and funding from the Board of Aldermen that a volunteer fire company should receive”. Apparently the mass resignations and complaints of the volunteer firemen served to good purpose, because another volunteer fire company was immediately organized by the Board as Gastonia Fire Company Number One, and B.H. Parker was elected as Chief.

Chapter 2: The Early Years

As noted in the May 4, 1940 edition of *The Gastonia Gazette*, “the City began to take its fire problems seriously in 1907, when the first fire wagon and horses were purchased”. Raising of the money needed to purchase the horses was documented in the minutes of the Board of Aldermen meeting on July 9, 1907 as follows; “a great part of the money to purchase same was raised by public subscription, with the balance being paid by the City”. The horses were purchased from Walt Davis’ Livery Stable, which was located on North Marietta Street. The horses were named “Frank” and “Dan” by the firemen, and their job was to pull the fire wagon with its load of fire hose, ladders, and other equipment to the fire when the alarm sounded.

But even as Gastonia firemen were proudly harnessing their new team of horses to the fire wagon, changes were sweeping the nation that would soon doom the fire horses to retirement. Those changes were duly noted in the “Gastonia Centennial”, the commemorative booklet on Gastonia’s first one hundred years, as follows; “In 1904 B.M. Holland brought his shiny one-cylinder steam Oldsmobile to town, to be followed shortly by R.B. Babington’s Locomobile, also steam”. The era of the “horseless carriage” was being ushered in, and both the City and the Fire Department would be faced with making major improvements over the next several years to adjust to the changing technology.

The earliest fire alarms were transmitted by men shouting to their neighbors for help to insure that the volunteer firemen were notified of a fire. The volunteers would then respond to the fire shed, hook up the horses to the fire wagon, and go as quickly as horse and wagon could carry them to the location of the fire. The Board of Aldermen discussed the method of transmitting fire alarms on several occasions, and on May 12, 1908 the “installation of a new electric lamp at the power house was referred to the fire committee”.

On November 12, 1908 the Board directed Mr. Rutter “to keep up steam enough to blow the fire whistle in case of fire until a satisfactory bell can be installed”. Fire bells were often used early in the 20th. Century as a system that could both alert the firemen to the presence of a fire as well as let them know the general location. For example, three bells sounded in quick succession would indicate a fire on the northside of town, two in quick succession would indicate a fire on the southside, and so forth. This type of alerting system remained in place in most towns in the United States until replaced by telegraph fire alarm boxes in the 1920’s.

The search for improved methods of reporting fires and alerting the firemen coincided with the development of plans for Gastonia’s first real fire station. On December 15, 1908 the Board of Aldermen “met for the purpose of considering plans and specifications for the contemplated fire station”. On December 22, 1908, E.N. Lineberger made a motion to appoint .., “a building committee to have plans and specifications completed, advertise for bids, and proceed to have the fire station built at once”. The site for new fire station was located on South Street, near the current location of the Webb Theater. The station was completed, and at a special meeting of the Board

of Aldermen on April 29, 1909, "It was ordered that the fire station be accepted, and the committee in charge was instructed to settle with the contractors as per contract".

B.B Gardner succeeded B.H. Parker as Fire Chief on May 11, 1909, at a salary of \$ 100. per annum. At the same meeting, Lewis Kerr was elected driver for the fire wagon at a salary of \$35. per month. As reflected in the minutes of the Board of Aldermen's meeting on May 10, 1910, the "annual statement (budget) for the Fire Department, including salary of chief, firemen, horse feed, and other supplies was \$ 2,246.55".

By 1910, Gastonia had established a public school system, had begun paving roads, and boasted two newspapers, electric lights, telephones, and a population of 5,759. The state legislature had revised the charter, and the word "town" was replaced with the word "city". After going to the polls three times over the issue of whether the County Seat should be in Dallas or Gastonia, the issue was finally decided in Gastonia's favor in 1909, and a new Courthouse was established here in 1911.

Improvements to the City's water supply for fire protection were becoming a priority in 1910, as noted in the minutes of the City Council meeting of July 12; "a motion for installing three fire hydrants and a half dozen small extinguishers for the graded schools was referred to the fire committee with the power to act". However the City obviously realized there were limits to the Fire Department's capabilities, as noted in a November 9, 1910 agreement with Loray Mill: "City agrees to provide water to the Loray (now called Firestone) Mill at current rates. This expressly understood that the Town of Gastonia furnishes no fire protection to the Loray Mill and guarantees no specified pressure or flow or volume of water".

By 1911 however, the area including the Loray Mill had been annexed into the City, and the "Town issued bonds to enable them to provide the newly annexed area with annual police and fire protection, water works, etc.". The annexation led the City to consider expanding the Fire Department's ability to provide fire protection past the area that could be readily served by the South Street fire station. On August 18, 1913, City Council discussed "the matter of placing a reel and hose or some kind of fire apparatus at or near the stores at Loray. Thus, the need for expanded fire protection in the City was becoming apparent.

The overall condition of the Fire Department at that time was duly reported to City Council in a report from the Chairman of the Fire Committee dated May 16, 1913 as noted below: "That upon investigation the fire committee found everything in very good shape, reported about 1,500 hundred feet of hose in good condition, and made the following recommendations: that the fire committee be allowed to purchase 1,000 feet of fire hose and 100 feet of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch hose, some couplings and rings; and that the committee be given the authority to refuse the loaning of hose to anyone for other than fire purposes, and that the best hose not be used for washing the streets, and that as much of the sprinkling as possible be taken off of the horses, and that the present chief and driver be reelected, provided Mr. Hayes agrees to discontinue the use of intoxicants, and that the committee be given the authority to employ or discharge either or both of the last named employees".

This report was received and accepted, the committee was given the authority purchase the equipment recommended, and B.B Gardner was reelected as Chief at the same salary of \$ 100. per year. On August 18, 1913, the City Treasurer “was authorized to pay the expenses of \$ 33.45 of Chief of Fire Department B.B. Gardner and Fireman V.G. Grier incurred in attending the Carolina Firemen’s Association meeting held in Wilmington, NC.”. This was the first documented instance of the Fire Department’s involvement in the Association, which today is called the North Carolina Firemen’s Association.

On May 12, 1914 the Fire Committee convinced the City Council to approve two items, both of which were to have a major impact on the City’s ability to provide fire protection for its citizens. The first item was the creation of a fulltime fire chief’s position, and the second involved the purchase of the department’s first motorized fire engine. The idea of a fulltime fire chief coincided with discussions on the need to expand fire protection to meet the needs of a growing, expanding Gastonia. To meet this need, V.G. Grier succeeded B.B. Gardner in 1914 and became the City’s first fulltime Fire Chief. Grier would serve as chief until 1916, when he resigned to accept a job as the City’s tax collector. Robert B. Terrell, who would serve in that capacity until 1919 when he left to join the Gastonia Police Department, succeeded him as Chief.

The improvement of the internal combustion engine for use in automobiles coincided with mass production and the development of the Model ‘T’ Ford. Simultaneous with this development was the production of motorized fire apparatus, and specifically the American LaFrance fire engine. American LaFrance had been building fire apparatus since the mid- 1850’s, and was among the early entrants in motorized fire apparatus. Accordingly, Gastonia purchased a new 1914 American LaFrance pumper and placed it in service at the South Street station later that same year. The fire horses and hose wagon were retained however, and remained “on duty” until the 1920’s. Whether the horse-drawn wagon was retained as a backup to the motorized engine, or whether the firemen in 1914 simply didn’t fully trust their newfangled fire engine, is open to speculation.

Both the 1914 American LaFrance and the horse-drawn hose wagon were put to good use in 1917, when a major fire occurred at the J.L. Adams Drug Company. This building, which was located at the intersection of South Street and West Main Avenue with entrances fronting on both streets, burned to the ground. However, it was soon replaced at that same location by the Eagle Store, a building that would ultimately prove to keep several future generations of Gastonia firemen busy.

In 1916, dozens of Gastonians were called up with their local National Guard unit and sent to the Mexican Border to help quell incidents along the Rio Grande River inspired by Pancho Villa. They returned in 1917, just in time to be sent to France as World War I “Doughboys”. By the end of 1918 most of them were back, and Gastonia as well as the rest of America prepared to embark upon a time of tremendous national growth and prosperity.

Chapter 3: The Roaring Twenties

As noted in Gastonia's Centennial Book; "Gastonians of the 1920's "kept cool with Coolidge and weathered the scandals of the Harding administration along with the rest of the nation. Her leaders came together in the Rotary, Civitans, and Kiwanis clubs. In fact, so pleased with the situation were Gastonians that they participated in electing several Republican candidates in 1928 to County and State offices, something unheard of since the late 1870's hereabouts."

In early 1920, discussions began within the Fire Department and on City Council on the need to purchase a second fire engine. As a result, on June 1, 1920 "the City manager was authorized to get bids on additional fire apparatus, and to conform to the rules of the Southern Underwriters Association". Accordingly, bids from fire engine manufacturers were requested and submitted, and reported to City Council on September 3, 1920 as follows:

- Ahrens-Fox Company \$ 13,500. less 5%
- Seagrave Company \$12,500.
- American LaFrance Fire Engine Co. \$ 12,500.
(1/3 on delivery, remainder in 2nd. and 3rd. year if desired)

After considerable discussion, the bid of the American LaFrance Fire Engine Company was accepted. On a motion by W.J. Clifford and seconded by F.L. Smyre and the Mayor, "City Manager and City Clerk were authorized to sign a contract with the American LaFrance Fire Engine Company for same". Voting for the motion were R.G. Cherry, W.D. Anderson, W.J. Clifford, and F.L. Smyre, while A.K. Winget voted 'nay'.

The addition of a second motorized pumping engine to the Fire Department's growing fleet spelled the end of horse-drawn fire apparatus in Gastonia. The passing of the fire horses from the local scene was duly noted by *The Gaston Gazette* in an article on the Gastonia Fire Department that appeared on May 4, 1940; "And the old fire horses were through, discarded to become a symbol of a day that had passed. They spent their last days in ease and comfort, those old fire horses that served Gastonia faithfully and well so many years. The City pensioned them, giving them the best of care in a local livery stable and for the rest of their lives they grazed peacefully in retirement in the livery lot, though at times perhaps, they longer for the harsh sound of the fire gong and the thrill of action".

Meanwhile, the Fire Department moved to regulate a growing problem created by the advent of the automobile; the storage of gasoline. On March 15, 1921 the City adopted an ordinance for this purpose, containing the following language: "That it shall be unlawful for any person, firm, or corporation to build, construct, or erect any storage tank or filling station, for the storage, selling, or distribution of gasoline or other inflammable oils, gases or combustibles of any nature, within the corporate limits of the City of Gastonia, without having first obtained permission from the City Council; and such

storage tanks or filling stations shall be constructed within said corporate limits only in such manner and upon such conditions as maybe prescribed by said City Council”.

On July 18, 1922 on a motion by Dr. D.A. Garrison, George F. McLaughen was appointed as Fire Chief. At the time of his appointment, *The Gaston Gazette* noted that “he was the youngest chief of a municipal fire department in the United States”. Chief McLaughen had been with the department since 1915, when he was hired as a driver for the horse-drawn fire wagon. He would go on to serve the department for 35 years (28 as Chief), and witness the transition of Gastonia and its Fire Department from a sleepy Southern mill town to a mid-sized city in 1950.

1921 American LaFrance Pumper

On September 3, 1920 City Manager Alexander received authority to purchase a new American LaFrance fire truck and 1,200 feet of hose. A September 3 article in *The Gaston Gazette* noted that “while the present LaFrance (1914 model) is a four-cylinder truck which has a pumping capacity of about 500 gallons per minute, the new one is of the Big Six type and furnishes 750 gallons of water per minute. The article noted that the 1914 truck cost approximately \$ 7,000., “the new one will be purchased at a cost of \$ 12,500.”. The intent to maintain both trucks and finally replace the horse-drawn fire wagon was also noted as follows: “The new truck will be an addition to the present fire fighting apparatus and will not replace the truck now in operation. However, the two horses and wagon, relics of former times, will be dispensed with”.

This fire truck served the Gastonia Fire Department faithfully and well for many years until it was eventually disposed of in the 1980’s, after which it changed hands several times. In 1997, Fire Chief Robert L. Ridgeway began work to relocate the truck and “bring it back home” to coincide with the Fire Department’s planned Centennial in 2001. After three years of searching, the truck was finally located in Port Huron, Michigan. Mr. Terry Ernest of that city had purchased the vehicle several years before, and was working on its restoration. He graciously agreed to its return, and the truck was returned to Gastonia in April, 2001. Members of the Gastonia Fire Department are currently completing restoration work with the goal of having the truck “street ready” by the Centennial Celebration on October 27, 2001.

On February 26, 1924 City Council accepted “the bid of the Gamewell Fire Alarm System for the City for \$ 17,928”. Acceptance of this bid resulted in the installation of Gastonia’s first citywide system of street fire alarm boxes. The boxes were placed at virtually every intersection in the city, and were activated by pulling down handles on the alarm boxes. The spring-loaded handle transmitted the fire alarm via telegraph lines to the fire department, where a series of “punch outs” on a telegraph tape indicated the exact location of the alarm box and (thus) the fire. Installation of the alarm (or ‘call’) boxes represented a vast improvement over the old ‘alarm bell’ system, and also reduced the amount of time that it took for the firemen to respond to fires.

By June 1, 1924 the Fire Department's budget had grown to \$ 20,920., with disbursements as follows:

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| • Chief's salary | \$ 1,740. |
| • Assistant chief | \$ 1,320. |
| • Six firemen (salary) | \$ 7,200. |
| • Six call firemen | \$ 360. |
| • Five firemen for new station | \$ 6,000. |
| • Tires | \$ 1,000. |
| • Gas and oil | \$ 500. |
| • New hose | <u>\$ 2,800.</u> |
| • Total | \$ 20,920. |

A growing Gastonia produced a corresponding need for growth and expansion of the Fire Department, and on March 25, 1924 "the City Manager presented bids for the construction of a (second) fire house on North Falls Street". To insure adequate fire apparatus would be available, the City purchased its third motorized American LaFrance fire engine on February 23, 1926. In addition, expanded facilities were provided for the Fire Department in the newly constructed Gastonia City Hall. The department moved into their new quarters in time for the first City Counsel meeting in the new City Hall on January 11, 1927, and the old South Street station was abandoned and demolished.

Both stations, as well as all available apparatus and members, were sorely needed on April 29, 1927, when a major fire occurred at the Old Mill in Gastonia. This was Gastonia's first textile plant and it was totally destroyed, along with 3,000 bales of cotton that had been stored there. The May 4, 1940 edition of *The Gastonia Gazette* noted that this blaze was "the biggest fire in the history of the fire department and the City, which ran into a damage loss of far over \$ 100,000. No other local fire has ever anywhere near equaled the Old Mill conflagration in the amount of damage".

Chapter 4: The Great Depression Hits Gastonia

In 1929, the famous labor strike at the Loray Mill (now known as the old Firestone Mill) brought National Guardsmen, guns, and the goons of the communist labor bosses onto the local scene. The bloody strike resulted in at least two shooting deaths, violent confrontations, and a fractured community. It ended with union leader Fred Beal fleeing to Russia for sanctuary, as a convicted accomplice to the murder of Gastonia Police Chief O.F. Adderholt.

At virtually the same time that strife was occurring at the Loray Mill, Gastonians were bracing themselves for the worst depression the nation had ever known. By the end of 1930, approximately one half of the City's labor force was out of work and several major banks had closed their doors. Fortunately the Citizens National Bank, under the leadership of A.G. Myers and supported by Mayor Emery Denny, managed to weather the storm and helped the citizens of Gastonia to begin the long road back to economic recovery.

By 1930, Gastonia had grown to a City of 17,093. Firemen of the 1930's in Gastonia, as well as most of their counterparts around the nation, worked long hours for low pay. Of course, most of them were probably just glad to have jobs, with so many of their fellow citizens out of work. The hard times were underscored on June 25, 1935 when former Chief B.B. Gardner appeared before city council "with request that the salary of Fire Chief George McLaughen be raised to approximately \$ 1,800. (annually), stating that his duties of building inspector had been added without compensation".

The work shift for all City firemen in the early 1930's was 24 hours each day, with one day off per week. Not until 1936 did the department move to working the firemen in shifts to provide fire protection. *The Gaston Gazette* noted this change in the May 4, 1940 article, when it referred to "the present plan, under which firemen work 12 hour shifts. An eight-hour shift for firemen should be the next move for the City. Most policemen are now on eight hour shifts".

The life of a fireman in Gastonia during this time period was chronicled in *The Gazette* through an article that appeared in the late 1920's: "To the casual observer the life of a fireman, especially in a small city, seems especially quiet and tranquil. Nothing to do but sit around swap stories – with a fire now and then to wake you up. Such a person forgets however, that a fireman is nothing short of a voluntary prisoner while he is on duty. He can no more pick up and leave his job, even if he is almost absolutely certain that no alarm will come, than a telephone operator can quit her phones or a convict can throw down his rock hammer and sit it out under the trees".

"The thing about it is this: no one knows just when an alarm will be sounded (the Fire Department responded to approximately 150 alarms per year during the 1930's). There is that air of watchful waiting for something expected, yet unexpected. It may never sound, but then, two may come together and another soon after that. And the thing that the fire laddies are paid to do is to stay on the job – to be there when the bell clangs

out its message. Thus, the men of the fire department see life from many angles. Their duty is to be on the spot when danger threatens, and to risk their lives if necessary in the interest of other lives and property”.

As Gastonia grew in both geographical size and population, the need to improve fire protection was becoming more acute. The Fire Department had not grown appreciably for over 10 years, even though the population had increased significantly during this time. One noteworthy action did occur on May 27, 1930 when “Mr. Stewart from American LaFrance presented plans for financing purchase of an aerial ladder for the city fire department”. Although City Council minutes from that date indicate that no action was taken at the time, this was the first documented discussion of the need for an aerial ladder company in Gastonia.

Staffing during the early 1930’s was noted to be “12 men on the paid staff of the Gastonia Fire Department. Six volunteer firemen also lend their able assistance whenever they are called on”. Thus, it was not surprising when Mr. J. Stacey Boyce of the Boyce Insurance Company addressed city council on March 9, 1937 and “recommended that the city officials approve and request a survey by the Southeastern Underwriters’ Association for the purpose of ascertaining the requirements of additional firefighting equipment or men for the purpose of obtaining lower insurance rates throughout the city”. On April 27, the city manager reported back to council that Southeastern Underwriters “had completed the survey in the city, and had filed with him their recommendations, stipulating the necessary additional equipment, costing approximately \$30,000. with an annual expense of \$ 10,000. for additional men , in order to place the city in Class ‘A’ plus 10 to 20%”.

This report was followed on May 11, 1937 by a recommendation from the Chamber of Commerce ‘fire committee’ that needed improvements “be phased in over a period of 5 years, and all stated that they were interested in obtaining better equipment and facilities but without additional burden to taxpayers, if possible”.

One of the major recommendations of the Southeastern Underwriters was for a new fire engine, and on July 13, 1937 Chief McLaughen and the city manager reported to city council on a visit to Newberry, SC. On “inspecting a new pumper and equipment similar to such equipment (as) the city contemplates purchasing”. Accordingly, the city manager reported to city council on August 10, 1937 “purchase of a Seagrave V-12, 750 gallon (per minute) pumper fire equipment at a price of \$ 8,850.”. Council approved this purchase, and when the new engine arrived on November 9, 1937 the city manager “stated that a public demonstration of the fire engine would be made upon arrival of the Underwriters’ representative”.

Even though news reports of fires during the 1930’s are somewhat sketchy, there is little doubt that Gastonia firemen were kept busy on several major “workers”. Much of the housing in the downtown area at that time was substandard and overcrowded, and the housekeeping left much to be desired. This fact was noted by Chief McLaughen in a report to city council on January 25, 1938 when he reported that the State Fire Marshal

had visited rooming houses on the T.L. Craig property on West Airline Avenue, stating “that conditions prevailing in these buildings were the worst he had ever contacted”.

As the 1930’s drew to a close, Chief George McLaughen addressed City Council on a new concept that beginning to make inroads in the fire service in the State of North Carolina as well as nationally; mutual aid. On February 14, 1939 the Chief “was heard relative to correspondence from approximately 50 towns and cities as to the manner in which out-side fire services are handled, and it was ascertained that all insurance companies have a feature in the form of a ‘rider’ that would protect the insured and guarantee payment of expenses of the city in answering out-side of city calls”. This was the first recorded discussion of the need for the Gastonia Fire Department to provide (or receive) ‘outside’ service, which is referred to as mutual aid today. City Council members present at the meeting “expressed a sentiment to adopt an ordinance requiring remuneration in some form for attending out-side calls by the Fire Department”.

Chapter 5: The War Years

Though war clouds loomed on the horizon in 1940, Gastonians were more aware of the slowly recovering economy. As noted in the Centennial Commemorative Book, “Gastonia now had 21,313 residents, but almost as many lived on its immediate outskirts”. The annual Cotton Festival had been inaugurated, and was viewed by thousands each year.

The May 4, 1940 edition of *The Gaston Gazette* celebrated George F. McLaughen’s 18th. anniversary as Fire Chief with a full page article about the Fire Department and its history. The article noted how the duties of the department and its personnel had changed over the years, and made reference to how the department had “cooperated with the Chamber of Commerce in operating a fire prevention bureau which over a period of the past 10 years has aided in materially reducing the city’s fire loss. Last year’s fire loss was \$ 37,162 as compared with \$ 68,295 in 1930”. The annual budget for the department in 1940 was noted to be “\$ 40,147., as compared with \$27,253. ten years ago”. The article further noted that the 20-man fire department’s “equipment includes the latest, most modern and up-to-date type of firefighting machinery”.

On July 22, 1941 J. Stacey Boyce again came before City Council “and urged the council to purchase one additional fire engine or pumper, stating that the Underwriters Association was contemplating a complete survey of the city in the near future for the purpose of rerating the insurance rates and the purchase of the new equipment would be favorable in effecting lower rates”. Mr. Boyce had been instrumental in convincing City Council to purchase the 1937 Seagrave pumper four years earlier, and this time was informed “that funds for purchase of a new fire truck was included in the 1941-42 fiscal year budget”. Obviously, the City Fathers had realized the necessity of providing the Fire Department with modern, efficient fire apparatus and equipment.

Specifications for the fire engine were prepared and submitted for bids, and on August 12, 1941 Council reviewed the bids. The American LaFrance Company had objected to “the stringent specifications and failure to place bid on such equipment”. But Chief McLaughen “related clearly the reason for stringent specifications and stated that the bid of the Seagrave Corporation on their 750 gallon triple combination pump engine at \$ 9,052.50 complied in every respect with specifications, including extra equipment specified. In any case, the Council agreed with the Chief and “the City Manager was authorized to execute the contract therefore, attested by the City Clerk”. The unit was ordered, but was not received and placed in service until September 1942, with the delay probably coming due to the ongoing war effort.

At the same July 22, 1941 meeting, City Council adopted an ordinance entitled, “Fire Apparatus Calls Beyond City Limits”. This ordinance was developed out of discussions that took place in 1939 concerning the giving of mutual aid (referred to as out-going) assistance from surrounding fire departments. The ordinance as adopted allowed that “the Chief of the Fire Department or the Assistant Chief may authorize one or more fire trucks to be carried to a fire in any suburb of the City of Gastonia within a radius of four

(4) miles, provided that the request for such apparatus is arranged for before or at the time of the fire by a responsible person who shall agree to pay for the use of such apparatus the sum of \$ 100.”.

Pearl Harbor came to Gastonia as it did to the rest of the nation; “not as a total surprise, but as a sobering blow”, as noted in the Centennial Commemorative Book. Once again, Gastonians marched off to war, part of the “greatest generation” of Americans that would swell our military to nearly 15 million men and women before the end of 1945. “Convoys of jeeps, trucks, and tanks thundered down Franklin Avenue, and formations of planes from nearby Morris Field roared overhead. Ration stamps became a way of life, and the children of the town dressed as ‘junior commandos’ to collect scrap paper and metal.

On December 16, 1941 a special meeting of the City Council was called by Mayor P.W. Garland (Jick’s father), and all councilmen and department heads attended. “Mayor Garland stated the meeting was called for the purpose of considering matters pertaining to emergency defense measures, and requests of the Board of Trustees of the Orthopedic Hospital for the usage of certain city equipment and other matters that may come up”. Obviously intending to prepare for any emergency that might arise, Mayor Garland appointed committee chairmen per “emergency defense measures as promulgated by the State Defense organization”, and named Chief McLaughen to head the Fire Protection Committee.

In addition to the purchase of new equipment, the Underwriters Association had recommended that the Fire Department hire additional personnel. Thus, on February 10, 1942 Chief McLaughen “appeared before the Board and made request for at least four additional men for his force, stating that these were sorely needed to man the equipment and for adequate protection under existing conditions”. This request was followed by former Chief B.B. Gardner appearing before the Board on March 10, 1942 to underscore the Chief’s request, “and urged that additional men be added to the fire department’s personnel” This approach proved to be successful and, by resolution, “Councilman Killian made motion, seconded by Councilman Todd, that four (4) additional men be secured for the fire department personnel, and that sufficient funds to cover the cost thereof be transferred, if needed”. This motion passed unanimously, and the four additional personnel were put to work.

The effect of the war on personnel in both the fire and police departments was reported to City Council on September 8, 1942 when both chiefs advised the Board, “stating that replacements and drafting their men for the U.S. service was being replaced without much inconvenience, with the exception of having to train new men in the workings of the department”. However by January 12, 1943 both chiefs found it necessary to “ask that they be permitted to employ men above the age of the 32 age limit regulation now in force, especially during the war emergency”. The Board advised them that they could use their own judgement in the matter, and make recommendation to the Council for men as they thought appropriate.

World War II was drawing to a close when a pension fund was created for City of Gastonia Fire Department employees on February 5, 1945. Under the new plan, City employees were to have “deducted 3% from paychecks of said employees and remit such amounts to the Pension Fund Treasurer”. The idea of pension fund, which was the first of its kind for City firemen, probably arose out of “new deal” politics and programs championed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt., although a “Firemen’s Relief Fund” had been in place for nearly 20 years.

The end of the war allowed the economy to again shift “from the production of guns to butter”, and rapid economic growth occurred across the nation. The growth was reflected by increased growth in business, industry, and population in Gastonia, as well as the need to expand city services. This expansion was reflected in the adopted budget for the Fire Department for fiscal year 1946-47, which was \$ 73, 346.. By the 1948-49 fiscal year, the budget had increased to \$ 98,472.

The increased funding enabled the department to consider replacing the 1921 and 1926 American LaFrance engines, both of which were still in service as backup units. Accordingly, specifications were prepared and bids received and opened on August 10, 1948 for a new engine. The bids were reviewed and “after conferring with the City Manager and Fire Chief McLaughen as to the various features of each machine, on motion of Councilman Carothers, seconded by Councilman Morgan, the City Manager was authorized to purchase the Seagrave pumper at the price of \$ 13,500., and to execute the price therefor”. To insure that the new Seagrave and the other apparatus were maintained in top condition, “the City Manager was authorized to arrange to send the mechanic of the Fire Department to a special mechanic training school to be conducted by the Seagrave Corporation ...” in 1949.

Chapter 6: The 1950's Rock into Gastonia

November 25, 1950 was a bitterly cold Saturday night in Gastonia. On this night, the Fire Department experienced the worst fire in its history up to that time. At about 6:50 p.m., two alarms came in for the Eagle Store, one by telephone and one by the alarm box located on the square at South Street and Main Avenue. The Fire Department was notified and responded quickly, but the 15-degree temperatures hampered the fireman as they struggled to establish a water supply and advance hose lines on the rapidly extending fire. After about 30 minutes, fire was showing from every floor and window in the seven-story building. While slipping on the ice, the firemen carried large amounts of hose and equipment to the scene. The water was freezing almost as fast as it was being sprayed toward the fire.

Those people in town who had their radios turned on got a first-hand account of the fire from Pat McSwain, a local radio celebrity who was observing the fire from his radio studio in the National Bank of Commerce Building across the street. In response to his requests, hundreds of local citizens offered to provide whatever help they could, bringing hot coffee and warm gloves to the frozen firemen. The fire was finally brought under control in about five hours. Firemen remained on the scene until Sunday night, extinguishing hot spots and overhauling. The entire building was gutted, with an estimated fire loss in excess of \$ 400,000. The fire was believed to have started in the basement area, but the exact cause is unknown.

The Eagle Store fire was also the first fire that the department would have to handle since its inception without the services of B.B. Gardner. On June 29, 1950, "Mayor Rankin was delegated to write Mr. B.B. Gardner accepting his resignation as volunteer fireman, which position he has held for twenty or more years". In fact, Gardner had served for over 41 years, had served as Chief from 1909 – 1914, and was the department's last surviving volunteer fire chief as well as one of its last volunteer firemen. Over the years, he had been a steadfast supported of George McLaughen, and had also been instrumental in helping to obtain new apparatus for the department and pay raises for the firemen.

On February 28, 1951, George F. McLaughen resigned as Fire Chief after 35 years of service, including 29 years as Chief. He had originally been hired to drive the old horse-drawn fire wagon in 1915, and his firefighting career had lasted almost to the space age. Although he stepped down as Chief, McLaughen was retained in the position of Fire Inspector, at a salary of \$ 240. per month. Robert L. Rhyne, another long time member who had served as Assistant Chief for many years, succeeded him as Chief. Chief Rhyne would serve until February 15, 1955, when he resigned and was replaced by John L. Farris.

One of the first items on the agenda for newly installed Chief Rhyne was the need to add a fire station on the westside, and on October 2, 1951 "Architect Griffin (was) employed to submit plans and specifications for a fire-station building at Franklin and Webb". In addition, Station # 2 on North Falls Street needed to be relocated to accommodate the new Water Filtration Plant, and the City Manager was directed to

“purchase the house and lot located at 315 N. Marietta Street . . ., for the purpose of relocating Fire Station No. 2”.

On December 18, 1951 bids totaling \$ 21,448. Were approved for the construction of Station # 3. The specifications for the new Station # 2 were noted to be essentially the same as for Station 3, “with the exception of additional heating equipment necessary to keep the liquid batteries used in connection with the signal and fire department alarm system in good condition”. Thus, the contract for construction of Station 2 was awarded on April 1, 1952 for a total of \$ 26,748..

While the northern and western ends of the City would be amply protected by the two new ‘substations’, the downtown area would still be served by the 25 year-old headquarters station operating out of City Hall. The station was no longer adequate for modern fire apparatus, and did not provide ample office space for the department’s administration. Therefore, City Council voted on July 7, 1953 “to employ Frank Griffin, on a 6% basis, to prepare plans and specifications for a new fire station to be constructed at the southeast corner of West Second Avenue and South Street”. The bids were prepared and accepted, and on April 26, 1954 W.G. Holland received the general construction bid for the new ‘headquarters’ station # 1.

On Saturday October 10, 1953, Lt. George Parham was assisting with station duties on the second floor of Station 1 when he was stricken with a heart attack. On-duty firemen gave him artificial respiration and he was transported to the hospital, but he succumbed. Parham’s death marked the first documented on-duty death of a Gastonia fireman since the department’s inception in 1901.

George's Ghost

Lieutenant George Parham succumbed to a heart attack while on duty at Station 1 on October 10, 1953. Like George McLaughen and B.B. Parker, he had been with the Fire Department since the early 1920's, and had over 30 years of service. According to an article in *The Gaston Gazette* on October 10, 1953, "he was stricken with a heart attack while assisting with cleaning tasks at the station". The 59 year-old veteran had never married and lived in the fire station, as was common for single men in those days.

Since George's death, several generations of Gastonia firemen have been convinced that his ghost watches over the firefighters at Station 1, and still does to this day. Doors opening and closing in the station in middle of the night when everyone at the station is in bed are common occurrences, and are usually met with a comment from one of the firemen such as, "George just closed the door". When an alarm occurs, it's common to hear the pole rattling (as it does when firemen slide down to the engine room) before anyone is out of bed. The comment, "let's go guys, George is already on the apparatus" usually follow this phenomenon.

One positive output of World War II was improved technology, and on October 16, 1951 the city awarded its first bids for four (4) two-way radios for the Fire Department to the Link Radio Corporation for \$ 2,081. This innovation was followed on March 17, 1953 with the purchase of three Chemox oxygen rebreather air masks, as well as several Scott Air-Pak cylinders. While acquisition of the Chemox masks, along with the earlier purchase of Scott Air-Paks, insured that self-contained breathing apparatus were available for Gastonia firemen, the masks didn't really gain wide acceptance for use until the early 1970's. The breathing apparatus of the time were heavy and cumbersome to wear, so most of the time firemen simply "hugged the floor" and fought floors without respiratory protection.

A new American LaFrance engine was purchased at a cost of \$ 17,650. on October 19, 1951, marking the first time since 1926 that the Fire Department had acquired an American LaFrance. This purchase was followed by renewed discussions on the need for an aerial ladder, no doubt generated by the Underwriters Association report on the City's fire protection capability. Thus, on September 7, 1954 the Gastonia City Council voted to accept "the bid of the Seagrave Corporation in the amount of \$ 33,500. For a combination ladder and hose truck with booster system".

The 1950's also saw the Gastonia Fire Department become involved in local athletic programs, and most notably in the textile baseball league. Many of the members of the department had grown up in the local textile "mill villages", constructed by the textile mills for their workers. All of the local mill villages sponsored baseball teams with excellent players, and people came from miles around to watch the games. But, competition was not limited to the industrial leagues, and the minutes of the City Council

meeting from April 15, 1952 note that “Chester Freeman, representing the Optimist Club, promoters of the Police-Firemen Annual Baseball Game, requested that the Board approve arrangements for participation by the police and fire departments in such activities”. On a motion by Councilman Spencer, seconded by Councilman Parks, “that the Board go on record not to interfere with members of the Police and Fire departments engaging in practicing and playing in the Annual Policemen and Firemen Baseball games ...” .

Chapter 7: The Turbulent 60's

The August 1, 1960 edition of The Gaston Gazette carried an article showcasing “a new \$ 18,000., 1,000 gallon per minute Howe pumper for the Gastonia Fire Department”. The article also noted that “the total number of units (in the department), including the large ladder truck, is now seven, and housed in three stations. Won't be long, at the rate the city is growing, before two additional stations, one in South Gastonia and one in East Gastonia, will be a necessity”.

To help meet this growth and the increasing demand for service, property was purchased on April 20, 1965 on South New Hope Road for Fire Station # 4 at a cost of \$ 11,000., and construction was begun. The station opened in 1966 at its present location at 1012 South New Hope Road. To insure adequate pumping apparatus would be available to meet the growing needs of the city, the first of several new Mack pumps was purchased; one in 1964 and the next in 1969.

Like the rest of the nation, Gastonia struggled with civil rights issues and tried to comprehend the events of the 1960's: the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; an unpopular war in Southeast Asia, and mounting civil unrest in communities across the nation. Future Gastonia Fire Chief Robert L. Ridgeway was a 19 year-old Marine Corps 'Boot' in training at Parris Island, SC. on that November day in 1963 when President Kennedy was assassinated, and vividly remembers the reaction:

“Our training platoon was qualifying on the rifle range that day when someone ran out on the range yelling that President Kennedy had been shot, and that everyone was on 'alert'. That evening, our Senior Drill Instructor told us that the President had died, and that Lyndon Johnson had just been sworn in as our new President. 'Mr. Johnson will be a little more reactionary than Mr. Kennedy', he said. 'Don't be surprised if you find yourselves in a 'brush fire' war in the next few years'. Boy, did he ever hit it on the head”!

As noted in the Gastonia's Centennial Book, “the unity of Gastonia's ethnic groups became an indispensable ingredient during the tumultuous sixties, and Gastonians could thank the foresight of the fifties for a relatively peaceful situation”. But times were changing, and black Americans began to demand their rightful place in society and the workplace. Thus, on April 27, 1968 Lester Nixon became the first black firefighter for the city. He would follow in the tradition established through the formation of the old black volunteer Fire Company in Gastonia, nearly 70 years earlier.

The Centennial Book also noted that “the year 1960 had seen a population count of 37,276, and the city now boasted two shopping centers in outlying areas. Interstate 85 crept slowly from the east, finally making its way into Gaston County in 1961 and bypassing the city the following year. In addition, the year 1963 saw Gastonia recognized for the first time as an “All America City”, and the city was bursting with

pride. Gastonia continued to grow through new construction and annexations, especially in the southeastern part of the city.

The advent of the 1960's seemed to usher in a plethora of fires for city firemen. On December 23, 1961 a serious fire occurred in the Franklin Hotel, which was listed as a three-story rooming house for men. The fire resulted in the death of one man, but firemen using ground and aerial ladders rescued 17 others. Another serious fire occurred in 1967 at the Page Apartments on Page Street. No one was seriously injured at this fire, mainly due to the efforts of Gastonia firemen. As noted in a *Gazette* article at that time: "T.R. Thomas, a veteran of 10 years with the Gastonia Fire Department, went into the burning building and led several people out through the dense smoke. After locating an unconscious man in a bedroom on the second floor, the article noted how Thomas, "held him by the belt and inched him along to the stairway. How we found the stairway I don't know. Somehow we got down the stairs to fresh air", Thomas said.

Both Thomas and the man he rescued collapsed in the street. An ambulance transported both men to the hospital, and they both made a full recovery. At the time of the rescue, T.R. Thomas weighed about 140 pounds "soaking wet"; the man he drug out of the second floor bedroom at the Page Apartments weighed "well over 250 pounds". Fire Captain L.F. Jenkins stated at that time, "There's no question but that Thomas saved this man's life".

On August 23, 1963 City Council "voted unanimously to adopt by reference the National Board of Fire Underwriters (called National Fire Protection Association today) 1960 Fire Prevention Code". To add teeth to the adoption of the Fire Prevention Code, the Fire Department formalized its efforts by creating a fire prevention bureau in 1966. Fireman Howard Hand, at that time a veteran of 14 years as a city employee, was given the rank of inspector and designated to head the bureau. As noted in a *Gaston Gazette* article at that time; "he will be relieved of all ordinary duty in order that he may devote as much time as possible to fire prevention work. Chief Farris said Hand will be in charge of all inspections aimed at prevention of commercial building fires".

The appointment of Howard Hand and the creation of a fire prevention bureau changed the mission and focus of the Fire Department's duties from fire suppression and code enforcement and included - for the first time - fire prevention. Those efforts and focus on the prevention of fires and other emergencies continues to this day, and is now well ingrained in our society. Hand was also charged with developing the department's first public fire education program, as well as making appearances before school, civic, and other groups on fire safety topics.

Growth in Gastonia also served to highlight concerns about fire protection, and on May 7, 1969 "Mayor Earl T. Groves presented the request that comprehensive analysis of the Fire Department be made as early as possible in fiscal year 1969-70. He related the need for a more professional approach to Fire Department operations in Gastonia because of the ever increasing complexities of providing the most effective fire protection service to the citizens of Gastonia". While the study (which was ultimately conducted by the North Carolina League of Municipalities) focused mostly on cost effectiveness, this was

the first documented attempt by the city to apply a planned ‘systems’ approach to fire protection, and laid the groundwork for the strategic planning that is regularly conducted in both the city and the Fire Department today.

The 1960’s were coming to a close when one final fire hit the Eagle Store on South Street and Main Avenue. At 11:50 p.m. on December 1, 1968 fire lit up the sky as the Eagle Store once again burned to the ground, with damage estimates of \$ 350,000.. A Gaston Gazette article on December 2 noted the history of five fires at that location over the years, and relived some of that history as follows: “If it’s true that history has a way of repeating itself, it has been doing so at 181 West Main Avenue since 1917, when the building was then occupied by the J.L. Adams Company. In that year, Gastonia residents saw the building burn to the ground. Only a few years later, they saw a florist shop and the same rebuilt location gutted. And several years later, after the Eagle Store opened there, the place burned down again. So no one trusted the age-old saying, and before long another Eagle Store was in operation. It was on November 25, 1950 that history again took its revenge with what the then Fire Chief George McLaughen called the ‘worst fire in Gastonia’s history – even worse than the old Valley Waste Mill fire in 1927’”.

Chapter 8: The 1970's; A Decade of Change and Controversy

One of the changes in the American fire service that came out of the turbulent 1960's was the replacement of the word "fireman" with the word "firefighter". While many people believe that this change came about as a direct result of women entering the fire service, the change actually resulted from the profession attempting to distance itself from the old-time railroad position of 'fireman' on locomotive engines. For many years thereafter, a person who called a firefighter a 'fireman' was usually told, "firemen shovel coal; we're firefighters".

On March 3, 1970 Interim City Manager Dan Eller reported to City Council on the recently completed work of the Fire Department Study Committee. According to his report, "the committee held several meetings to discuss problems within the Fire Department and to formulate plans to solve the problems as quickly and equitably as possible". All items in the report had been discussed with the members of the Fire Department, and "the overwhelming majority of the men approved the suggested changes".

The single biggest change to come out of the study was a reduction in the firefighters' work schedule from 72 hours to 56 hours per week. This change marked the first time since the mid-1930's that the firefighters' workweek had been reduced. As noted in Eller's report; "This reduction in hours will mean that the men will work a 24 hour tour of duty followed by 48 hours off duty". Under the old schedule, firefighters were required to work a '24 on – 24 off' schedule. Implementation of the new work schedule required the department to shift from a two-shift schedule to three shifts, and also necessitated the hiring of 6 additional personnel at a cost of \$ 52,450.. However even with the additional personnel, it was noted that "the new work week schedule can be implemented by using smaller fire companies", thereby reducing existing 'per unit' minimum staffing.

Another positive change that came out of the Fire Committee's recommendations was the adoption of a 'merit' based system for the promotions that would be needed as the department expanded to accommodate the addition of the third shift.. The report "recommended that promotions be based on written tests and oral interviews. The written tests will be ordered from a testing company and will be graded by them. The tests will be related to job knowledge and, in so far as possible, appropriate review material will be made available to those taking the promotional examinations".

Change proved to be the order of the day for the Gastonia Fire Department during the 1970's, especially during the second half of the decade. On May 20, 1975, John Farris retired as Fire Chief, citing a heart condition. He was replaced by forty-year veteran J.W. Spargo, who resigned on February 15, 1977 after serving in the position for only two years. His resignation was controversial, and newspaper articles at the time indicated that he felt that he was forced out of office.

In May of 1977, Alford Miller replaced Spargo as Chief. Miller left the Fire Chief's

job in Shelby to accept the position in Gastonia, thus becoming the first chief ever hired in the city from the “outside”. At the time he was hired, Miller stated that his only established goal was to make Gastonia “one of the best departments in the country – one the people can be proud of and respect”. However after only two years in office, Miller resigned on March 13, 1979, citing communication problems with the city council.

On the heels of five years of controversy involving the Fire Department, city administrators decided to go back to hiring from within, and in June 1979 Robert L. “Bob” Murray was appointed as Fire Chief. Murray became the Fire Department’s fourth Chief in five tumultuous years, and his appointment seemed to have a calming effect on the department. At the time of his appointment, Bob Murray was 39 years old, a 15-year veteran of the department, and had served as acting Chief since the departure of Chief Miller. At the time of Murray’s appointment, City Manager Gary Hicks noted that he had done a satisfactory job since taking over the department, and “he has displayed a proven record during the last three months”. Murray would continue to serve as Gastonia’s Fire Chief for the next 17 years, marking the second longest tenure of any chief in the department’s history.

As Gastonia continued to grow and annex property to the southwest, property was purchased for Fire Station # 5 at a cost of \$12,000.. The property was located at 900 Hudson Boulevard West, and on October 7, 1975 the architectural firm of Stewart and Cooper was hired to design the fire station. The new station’s design proved to be the first of the modern, “drive-through” designs that are commonly used today in Gastonia, as well as throughout the country. Construction on the station was completed in early 1977, and a formal opening was held on Sunday, July 17 of that year. As noted in a *Gazette* article about the opening; “an estimated 500 citizens turned out at 2 p.m. to inspect the new (\$ 350,000.) building, which is the fifth station in the city”. ... ‘It’s a fine building’, said Chief Al Miller. “It’s something the city can be proud of for many years to come”.

The City of Gastonia also celebrated its centennial as a city in 1977, and firefighters, police officers, and virtually everyone else grew beards as a part of the celebration. By paying \$ 1., any man could become an official member of the ‘Brothers of the Brush’, which meant he must grow a beard and wear a special button identifying himself as a member of the order. As noted in an article that appeared in *The Gazette*, all hair and beard regulations were suspended until May 30, 1977 to allow the growing of beards; “but firemen must keep their beards trimmed enough not to interfere with oxygen masks they may have to wear while fighting fires”.

Gastonia was the scene of several significant fires during the decade, including a major fire at Rose’s Department Store in Akers Center during December 1973. On November 1, 1977, a gas explosion and resulting fire occurred at 1723 Armstrong Park Drive. The force of the blast lifted the roof off the house and blew out the walls. Clothing from inside the home came to rest in the branches of nearby trees. Screens and broken glass were blown about 30 feet in the street. “The shock jarred our Number Four fire station; it almost shook them out of there”, Assistant Fire Chief J.P. Isenhour was quoted in *The Gazette* as saying as he surveyed the twisted, charred hulk of the house.

Fortunately, the city had the foresight to insure that the Fire Department remained will equipped and capable of dealing with these emergencies, and the purchase of Mack fire apparatus continued in the 1970's. A new 1,000 gallon pumper was purchased on November 4, 1975 for \$ 58,872., and a Mack 'Aerialscope' elevating platform was purchased in May 1976 for \$166,926.. The Aerialscope was a welcome addition, and was sorely needed to replace the aging 1954 Seagrave aerial ladder, but its purchase necessitated the lowering of the floor in one bay at Station # 1 to accommodate the height of the vehicle. To make room for the new equipment, the department offered both the 1942 and the 1949 Seagrave pumpers for sale to the highest bidder, and former Chief George F. McLuaghén purchased the 1949 rig for the sum of \$ 400..

As the 1970's drew to a close, both the city and the Fire Department began to focus on the need for improved education and training for its firefighters. To help meet this need, the position of department Training Officer was created in 1976. In addition, increasing requirements for education and technology in the fire service profession led to the development of an Associate's Degree program in Fire Science at Gaston College in the early 1970's. Several Gastonia firefighters enrolled in the program, and the first group of them received their A.A. degrees in May 1976. Mayor T. Jeffers recognized the firefighters at the City Council meeting on June 1, 1976, and City Manager Gary Hicks "commended these men for their efforts in that they had attended school in their off time and added that they are now eligible for the City's educational pay".

Chapter 9: Catching up with Growth

Wednesday February 13, 1980 started off just like any other day for the Gastonia Fire Department. Firefighters were doing their morning apparatus check and station cleaning duties when an alarm came in at 09:24 for a house fire on Gilmore Street. Among those members from Station # 1 who responded was Captain John Stepp. A veteran of 34 years with the fire department, Stepp was also one of the founding members of the Gaston Life Saving Crew, where he had served for 12 years. Shortly after arriving on the scene, he suffered a major heart attack and died an hour later at Gaston Memorial Hospital.

Stepp, 52 had suffered previous heart attacks. Dave Baity, reporting for the *Observer Gastonia* Bureau, wrote an article about Stepp that outlined his final wishes. “Concern for his health had led to plans for his funeral in 1975”, said Ernest Dow, a longtime friend. “He told me back then he wanted to be carried out on a fire truck with his rescue friends following”, Dow said. “And that’s the way it’s going to be”. So in the end, John Stepp got his wish and was laid to rest following a full fire service funeral, complete with a fire engine as his caisson. He rests today at Gaston Memorial Park, his name among those inscribed on the memorial to honored firefighters and police officers that died in the line of duty.

John Stepp was gone, but the lessons he helped teach would be put to good use by future generations of Gastonia firefighters. Eight months later, firefighters were beginning to think about lunch on October 24, 1980 when an alarm for a structure fire was received at 911 West Mauney Avenue. The fire was reported about 11:15 am and shortly afterward, Lt. Steve Foy arrived on the first fire engine on the scene. Upon arrival, Foy determined that a three year-old boy was trapped inside, and he and his crew charged into the structure. “They just hit the fire a lick or two to knock it back before Foy went in. He had an air tank and found the boy lying in a rear bedroom. The boy wasn’t breathing when Foy found him, but Steve gave him CPR and got him breathing before they rushed him to the hospital. ‘He saved the boy’s life’, said Fire Chief Bob Murray ...”. For his efforts in this rescue, Lt. Steve Foy was recognized as “Firefighter of the Year” by the Gastonia Jaycees at their annual awards banquet in 1981.

The 1980’s came into Gastonia amid concerns about American hostages being held by extremists in Iran following the overthrow of the government there. But the United States a new “greatest generation” President in Ronald Reagan, and began to stand tall again in the world following the aftermath of the war in Vietnam. While the decade proved to underscore unrest in many parts of the world, it also ushered in tremendous advances in technology, most notably the personal home computer, or PC. Before 1980, the Gastonia Fire Department (like the rest of the nation) completed its administrative work through the use of typewriters and file cabinets. But by the end of the decade, the PC had replaced the typewriter, and the floppy disc and the hard drive had replaced the file cabinet.

But even though technology was changing the face of work places across the nation, the City of Gastonia was struggling to keep pace with the fire protection needs of a growing community, and this fact was borne out by the city's insurance rating. When the ISO conducted its fire protection survey on the City of Gastonia in 1986, the city was found to be deficient in several areas. Among other deficiencies, the report noted that "the department lacks ... adequate engine companies, and ... Manning of existing companies is only fair. Response assignments to some alarms are somewhat inadequate because of the limited response of the ladder company". Based upon the ISO's rating, Gastonia was rated as a "Class 4", which was only fair for a municipality of its size. Inasmuch as fire insurance costs are determined due to a city's rating, the lack of adequate fire company distribution and staffing was costing everyone in the city real dollars. Clearly, some significant improvements would have to be made in the areas of apparatus, facilities, and staffing if this rating were to improve.

At about the same time as the ISO was surveying Gastonia's fire protection capabilities, the city began to address needed improvements when it contracted with the North Carolina League of Municipalities for a study on fire station locations. The author of the ensuing report, which was submitted to the city manager and Mayor Glendell Brooks on February 18, 1985, was Sherman Pickard. Pickard was a noted national fire service administrator, as well as Fire Chief for the City of Raleigh. The study looked at existing fire station locations, call volume, and response times, as well as apparatus staffing. Accordingly, the study made recommendations for the relocation of Station 2 to the area of Ozark Avenue and I-85, as well as construction of an additional station (# 6) in the vicinity of Robinwood and Kendrick Roads.

The city's administration and the Fire Department moved forward with attempts to implement the study, but several issues surfaced that would ultimately result in a different plan being implemented. As Pickard recommended, a new station was constructed in 1988 on Ozark Avenue, next to I-85. However, local residents expressed concern about the removal of Station # 2 from the Highland area. In order to address their concerns, city administrators made the decision to construct a new Station 2 at 510 New Way Drive. This station was constructed in 1989, and the Ozark facility became Station # 6. Construction of these two stations resolved the need for expanded facilities in the older "downtown" area. However, the burgeoning growth areas to the south as noted in Chief Pickard's report would still have to be addressed in the near future if the city was to maintain existing response times and improve upon its insurance rating.

In addition to changes brought on by technology, the basic job of the firefighter was beginning to change as duties other than fighting fires began to be added. In Gastonia, one of these changes surfaced in 1979, when the City Council offered an extra \$ 650. salary stipend to any firefighter who would take the training and become certified as an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT). The idea of having firefighters trained in emergency medical care was not new; City firemen as far back as the 1930's had responded on "inhalator runs" to assist citizens in distress. However, as reported in an article in *The Charlotte Observer* on October 5, 1981, the EMT training began to pay big dividends almost immediately. As noted at the time by Fire Chief Bob Murray; "70 of the department's 91 employees have taken the course. And, ... at least five Gastonia

persons are alive because firefighters knew how to revive them after they had succumbed to smoke”. Even through the Fire Department’s participation in EMT training was primarily intended to help citizens who were injured or overcome by smoke at structure fires, the training helped to lay the groundwork for what would become a revolutionary program a decade later: the emergency medical ‘First Responder’ program.

Concerns about the city’s pay plan and low wages resulted in the commission of a study in 1988 by Derrick Associates, a consultant firm in Charlotte. While recommending pay raises of between 3 – 6%, the report “encouraged the (personnel) committee to look beyond inequities that have arisen within the city’s pay plan and modify many pay ranges to make them more competitive”. To underscore the problem, an article in *The Gazette* on February 15, 1989 noted how the city was under pressure to develop a new plan, as “a fourth of (the) city’s firemen were ready to look for new jobs”.

The decade of the 80’s closed out with Eric Sanders becoming the first black firefighter promoted to Captain, on December 2, 1989; he would go on to become the first black Captain to be promoted to Division Chief in 1996.

Chapter 10: The 90's & the Changing Role of the Fire Service

By the late 1980's, the fire service was beginning to focus on a new challenge that was making itself known through changing technology and increasing federal regulations. This challenge involved the safe handling and disposal of hazardous materials, and mitigating their effects on the environment. To counteract this threat, several fire departments across the nation were establishing "hazardous materials response teams", or haz mat teams, that could be specially trained and equipped to control and clean up chemical spills, as well as decontaminate exposed persons and the environment.

Prior to 1990, mitigation services for hazardous materials had to be obtained from the Charlotte Fire Department, as they were the only organization within the region capable of providing this service. However the lengthy response times from Charlotte, as well as an increasing need for this service locally, drove Gastonia and Gaston County to look for a local solution. This need resulted in the establishment of an agreement between the City of Gastonia and Gaston County that created the Fire Department's Haz Mat Team. Through the joint agreement, the Gastonia Fire Department would establish, train, and maintain a Haz Mat Team that would respond to all hazardous materials emergencies within both the city and Gaston County. In return, Gaston County agreed to provide a substantial amount of the funding necessary start the team, as well as an annual stipend to insure its continued operation.

But if a Haz Mat Team were to be formed, its members would need to be trained and considerable equipment would need to be obtained. The Charlotte Fire Department again provided valuable assistance, as noted in an article that appeared in *The Gazette* on August 16, 1991; "in the past year the 30-member team has been established, after training with the Charlotte Fire Department and completing other training including a 40-hour course at Gaston College". The same article noted how "Gastonia has invested \$ 300,000. for the team's expenses including equipment and hazardous duty pay". In addition, two emergency response vehicles were purchased and placed in service at a total cost of \$ 165,000. After nearly two years of preparation and training, the Gastonia Fire Department's Haz Mat Team was finally "in service" and ready to respond to emergencies.

In addition to the two units purchased for the Haz Mat Team, the department began moving to replace its aging fleet of Mack pumpers. Between 1989 and 1992, two Grumman 'Telesquirts' and two pumpers were added. In addition, two Pierce pumpers were purchased, one in 1995 and the other in 1996. In 1992, a 102' Grumman Tower Ladder was purchased to serve as a replacement for the old Mack Aerialscope. This purchase was controversial, as noted in an article in the June 6, 1993 *Gaston Gazette*; "City Councilman Royce Robinson made an issue out of the truck when he said there weren't enough high-rise buildings in Gastonia to justify its \$ 638,000. price tag". But after nearly a year of wrangling, the 11 additional personnel needed to staff the unit were hired and it was placed in service. The truck was put to work almost immediately at a major fire involving the Tri-State Plastics Company on East Davidson Avenue.

Following the fire, Chief Bob Murray noted that “if firefighters had not the state-of-the-art truck, they wouldn’t have been able to douse the fire”.

The changing face of the fire service continued to show itself on May 15, 1993 in Gastonia, when the city hired its first female firefighters. Karen Goff and Jeanna Spiker graduated from the 10-week Recruit Training Program at Gaston College and were assigned to stations effective July 22, 1993. At the time, Fire Chief Bob Murray noted, “the two went through the same tests as the men and passed. We’ve made no special provisions for them”, he said.

The changes continued to come to the Gastonia Fire Department when Chief Bob Murray retired on February 3, 1996. Murray had served for nearly 37 years with the city, including the last 17 years as Fire Chief. In July 1996, 52 year-old Robert L. Ridgeway, formerly the Fire Chief in Cape Girardeau, MO., was hired as Murray’s replacement. A veteran of 35 years in the fire service, Ridgeway had served as fire chief in two previous departments, and was the second chief to be hired from the “outside”, following Alford Miller in 1977. Coincidentally, both he and Murray had the same first and middle names (‘Robert Lee’), and both had wives named ‘Louise’.

One of the first tasks undertaken by Chief Ridgeway was the development of a comprehensive, five year “strategic plan for fire protection”. Over the years, the city had contracted for numerous studies on station locations and personnel, but had never developed a single, all-inclusive plan that dealt with all aspects of the city’s fire protection needs. After nearly one year of effort, the strategic plan was developed and presented to City Council, where it was accepted. The strategic plan concept remains in effect to this day, where it serves as the basis for all department activities and requests, and is updated annually.

The strategic plan would also serve as the foundation for the largest single administrative undertaking that a fire department could undergo, and one that would insure continued excellence well into the next century; fire department accreditation. Participation in fire service accreditation forces an organization to look at every aspect of the services it provides to its citizens, and to do a full analysis of the effectiveness of these services. Beginning in 1997, the Gastonia Fire Department worked for over two years on the accreditation project, until it was finally completed and submitted to the Commission on Fire Accreditation International for review. But it would not be until the next millennium, in January 2000, that the Commission would make its final decision.

Sunday, January 26, 1997 dawned clear and cool in Gastonia, with temperatures only reaching the high forties. On this date, Gastonia firefighters would perform one of the most unique rescues in their 90-year history. Three teenage boys were walking in the mud of the construction site for the new Social Services Building off Marietta Street when one of them, 14 year-old Conan Kimble, became stuck. His friends and several civilians worked for over an hour to free him, but he kept sinking further into the mud until finally rescue workers were called.

As noted in *The Gaston Gazette* the next day, “Firefighters and GEMS paramedics first tried to pull Conan out by hand without success. Then rescuers used boards and

ladders to no avail". For over two hours, firefighters and rescue workers tried everything from backhoes to the Tower Ladder to free him, but nothing seemed to work. By this time, only the boy's head and shoulders were still above the mud, and hypothermia was becoming a problem. Finally, Firefighter Mark Jenkins hit on the idea of using a fire hose to create an air pocket in the mud, as he had seen done for cattle that became so entrapped. The "hose was stuck into the mud beneath Conan's legs. The water pressure blew a hole and created an air pocket so that rescue workers could wriggle Conan out". And after over three hours of effort, the boy was rescued with only a minor case of frostbite to show for his ordeal.

Y'all Old Men Can Hit

Gastonia's firefighters had played baseball in the area's recreational and industrial leagues since the early 1940's. By the 1970's, baseball had given way to slow-pitch softball, but the city's firefighters were still viewed as "kings of the hill" throughout the area. In those days, the department sponsored a team that competed statewide at the industrial league level. "We reached the state finals one year, and did well in the city league too", noted player Hoyle S. Foy in a Gazette article on the team in 1992.

During this time the Fire Department's team was still managing to win tournaments and titles year after year, even though many team members were getting somewhat "long in the tooth". In winning the annual Gaston County Firemen's Association Softball Tournament in 1992, the article noted how "the "Gastonia Fire Department team, with an average age of about 40, swept to the tournament championship with four straight victories. The oldest team was also the best hitting among the 11 fire department squads in the tournament". Fire Captain Nelson Ervin, 44, was the team's leading hitter with a .850 batting average. After winning the tournament, a younger opponent was overheard commenting to a member of the team, "y'all old men can hit".

The tournament was especially fun for Foy. He got to play alongside his son Kerr, 20, who played outfield "but also lowered the average team age". "I used to play and babysit Kerr at the same time", Foy said. "This time I didn't have to keep an eye on him the whole time. He and the other younger players really helped us". Several weeks later, Jerry 'JJ' Gibson, another team member, was sitting at home one evening when a young man came to his home to take one of his daughters out on a date. In conversations with the young man, J.J. informed him that he was a member of the Gastonia Fire Department. The young man (who was a volunteer fireman at Catawba Heights), proceeded to tell him how badly his team had been beaten by Gastonia's "over the hill gang" recently in the softball tournament. JJ just smiled and said, "yeah, I know; I was playing shortstop".

The role of Gastonia's firefighters expanded significantly in early 1998 when the fire department began a full "Medical First Responder Program". In the 1930's and 40's, the department had responded to a limited number of "inhalator runs" to assist victims experiencing serious heart and respiratory problems. By the early 1980's, most members had received training and become certified as Emergency Medical Technicians, but until

1997 their role had been limited to providing emergency medical care on fire scenes until an ambulance could be summoned.

The fire department had initially expanded its role to include response to motor vehicle accidents involving injuries in 1997, with planned further expansion into full 'first responder' status a year later. To support response to vehicle accidents and rescue situations, the department placed its first 'Heavy Rescue Company' in service, utilizing the personnel previously assigned to the second engine company at station # 1. A new heavy rescue was designed, ordered and placed in service for this purpose in 1998.

Chief Ridgeway made a presentation to City Council on implementation of the first responder program on January 7, 1998 and noted that, "this is something we should have been doing all along. To me, it's simply taking trained emergency personnel already there and expanding their role". Councilman Walker Reid, who served as an Assistant Fire Marshal in Mecklenburg County, commented at the time: "Being in the fire service, I see great advantages in this. Basically, it's improving service for our citizens. And really at no cost". And indeed, with the advent of the Medical First Responder Program, the department had truly come a long way since the old "inhalator runs" of the late 1930's.

Sunday evening November 22, 1998 was an evening that will be remembered for many years to come as the night that the old Gaston County Courthouse burned. County offices had occupied a new, 25 million-dollar courthouse earlier that year, and plans were being made to raze the old structure when the fire struck. First arriving firefighters reported a major 'working' fire on the top floor of the structure, and made saving the attached jail their top priority. In the process, 120 prisoners from the attached jail had to be evacuated and transferred to other correctional facilities in the area.

The third alarm fire drew every unit from the city and several surrounding area departments to help extinguish the fire, as well as guard the city during the fire's height. Initially, "firefighters took an aggressive approach toward the blaze, hoping to extinguish it at its source", as noted by Division Chief Steve Foy. "When that proved impossible, they decided to pull back and shift from offense to defense". Among the several hundred spectators on the scene was County Manager Phil Hinely, who noted that watching the old building burn was "like watching then Titanic going down". While the fire was determined to be intentionally set by investigators and one man was charged with the crime, he was released due to a lack of evidence and no one else was ever charged.

Chapter 11: The Last Alarm

With the approach of the New Millennium, both the general public and the Gastonia Fire Department were concerned about the possibility for disasters and breakdowns in technology that might occur. But the stroke of midnight on December 31, 1999, came and went without incident, as the concerns proved to be mostly unfounded. Instead, Gastonia firefighters began to focus their attention on something they had been working toward for over two years; fire department accreditation.

On January 29, 2000 the Gastonia Fire Department was officially notified by the Commission on Fire Accreditation International that they had been elevated to “accredited agency” status. As noted in an article that appeared in *The Gazette* on March 13, 2000, “Accreditation means the department has met 234 standards that govern how they do their daily work’. With this recognition, the department became one of only 33 accredited fire service agencies in existence at that time. Accreditation meant that the fire department was elevated to recognition as one of the nation’s elite fire service agencies, and would be considered as a ‘benchmark’ organization in the future.

As the new millennium came to Gastonia, the fire department took on greater responsibilities in the area of community “quality of life issues”. Since the late 1990’s, city firefighters had been serving as mentors and “lunch buddies” for the Gaston County School system, as well as attending community watch group meetings and block parties. They had also been assisting with “Camp Celebrate”, a three-day summer camp for burn survivors sponsored by the North Carolina Jaycee Burn Center at UNC Hospital. Their roles expanded again as noted in an article that appeared in *The Gazette* on March 25, 2000. This article related how the department was participating in ‘Operation Safe Place’ by providing a safe haven for youth in trouble. Of course, as noted by Life Safety Educator Teresa Crew, “We’ve been doing this for years; we just haven’t had the sign”.

One of the studies that had been conducted in conjunction with fire department accreditation was an in-depth study and analysis of fire station locations and accompanying apparatus response times. Station # 8 had been constructed on Gaston Day School Road in 1991 to help reduce response times on the south side of town, but several other stations needed to be relocated. Accordingly, the study recommended that stations # 1, 3 and 4 be relocated, and called for a new station # 8 to be built in the recently annexed West Gastonia/Chapel Grove area. The city had previously committed to build a new station in the Chapel Grove area during discussions with residents on annexation, and now had the basis to make the additional station part of a comprehensive, overall plan for facility improvements.

City Manager Dr. Danny Crew prepared a plan that would provide the funds necessary to construct four new fire stations: the new station in Chapel Grove, as well as the three needed relocations noted above. The plan would be funded through a bond issue paid for by a 2-cent property tax increase dedicated for that purpose. After several study sessions and discussions, the City Council approved a 1.75 cent tax increase on June 5, 2000 to pay for the seven million-dollar bond issues that would be necessary to build the new stations.

The plan as approved became the most comprehensive expansion of facilities ever undertaken by the Gastonia Fire Department. When fully completed, the new department Headquarters will be relocated to Station # 3 at 260 North Myrtle School Road. Station # 1 will be relocated to 717 Wellons Drive, and Station # 4 will be relocated to 900 Armstrong Park Road. The Chapel Grove area will receive new Station # 8 at 613 Carson Road, and fifteen additional firefighters will be hired to staff the new station. Specifications were prepared and contracts awarded for Stations 1, 4 and 8, and completion is anticipated in the Spring of 2002. Completion of the # 3 Headquarters station is slated for late fall of 2002.

Spring of 2000 also saw the City of Gastonia receive recognition as an “All America City” for the first time since 1963. Receipt of this honor for the city coincided with planning efforts that were beginning for celebration of the fire department’s Centennial Celebration, scheduled for October 2001. These two events combined in a decision to design a new patch for the Gastonia Fire Department in honor of the coming Centennial. The previous patch, which had been designed by Division Chief Gary Cook nearly 25 years earlier, was getting dated “and the feeling was that a new patch should reflect the department as it was today”. After receiving input from several members, Firefighter Joel Kelly designed the new patch, and it began appearing on firefighters’ uniforms in December 2001.

But 2000 was not slated to go out quietly, as shown by a major fire that occurred on New Year’s Eve. At 3:30 p.m. on December 31, 2000, County Dispatch received a report of a fire at the Industrial Electroplating Company on Linwood Road. Arriving firefighters were faced with a major ‘working’ fire that quickly escalated to a third alarm. The fire was extending toward several surrounding structures, and also involved significant amounts of hazardous materials. Using elevated and portable master stream devices, firefighters were able to contain and ultimately extinguish the fire without loss of life or injury. However, the incident produced in a fire loss of over two million dollars, and the temporary loss of 80 jobs. Fortunately, the company was able to rebuild and is doing business at their facility to this day.

The Industrial Electroplating fire ushered in 2001 with a bang, and the fires continued unabated into the New Year. Chief Ridgeway noted this fact in his column printed in the department’s Newsletter “Burning Issues”, in the March 2001 edition: “Between December 31, 2000 and March 5, 2001 the Gastonia Fire Department responded to a total of 42 working structure fires. These fires, which included two multiple alarm incidents, caused over 3.5 million in direct losses, several civilian injuries, and one fatality”. He noted how the department had employed virtually every tactic and tool at its disposal during this period of time, and also noted how “not one member of our department suffered any type of disabling injury as a result of emergency operations ...”.

Progress continued through 2000 – 2001 as the department’s Haz Mat Team was expanded to 45 members, and a Technical Rescue Team was added. The Technical Rescue Team formalized the department’s rescue capabilities in the areas of high-angle, confined space, heavy-duty extrication, and other specialized rescue areas. To insure

proper coordination of these activities, the department was reorganized administratively to reflect the addition of a Special Operations Division.

To insure that the necessary equipment will be ready to provide service at the new stations, a 75' American LaFrance Quint and a 1,000-gallon American LaFrance Pumper-Tanker were ordered in early 2001. The pumper-tanker will be housed at Station 8 to insure adequate water supplies in that area, along with a new Brush Unit that was received in August. The Quint will replace one of the aging Telesquirts in front-line service, and both vehicles are slated for delivery in early November 2001.

The events involving terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 shocked the entire world. As noted in *The Gazette* on September 12, 2001; Gastonia's firefighters "gathered around television sets at Station # 6 Tuesday, drawn to the pictures of billowing smoke from terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C.". Captain Woody Thomas was quoted as saying, "You see accidents, you see fires, but you don't see something like this". "It's unbelievable", said Firefighter Jimmy Holler". "This is just sad and terrible", said Division Chief Dale Burkett, "It's horror". Burkett came in on his day off to be with his colleagues, seeking some security from watching the tragedy with others who share his interest.

Among the dead at the World Trade Center were 343 members of the New York City Fire Department. They had responded to their "Last Alarm" while trying to rescue the thousands of people who were in the buildings at the time of the disaster. Gastonia's firefighters paid homage to their lost comrades through local memorial services, while they honed their emergency response capability for the uncertainty that is certain to follow. And while there is much uncertainty in the world about the response that is sure to come from this horrific incident, one thing remains certain. As the Gastonia Fire Department enters into its second hundred years of existence, it will be prepared for any eventuality. Whether the situations we are called upon to handle involve fires, rescues, hazardous materials, medical emergencies, or chemical and biological hazards, your fire department will be ready to answer the call.

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- *Burning Issues*; Newsletter of the Gastonia Fire Department; 1997 – 2001.
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- *Records of Meetings of the Board of Aldermen and City Council*; Town and later the City of Gastonia; 1900 – 2001.

Past Fire Chiefs of the Gastonia Fire Department

- 1902 – 1904: George Glenn
- 1904 – 1905: W.P. Upton
- 1905 -- 1907: John L. Beal
- 1907 – 1910: B.H. Parker
- 1910 – 1914: B.B. Gardner
- 1914 – 1916: V.G. Grier
- 1916 – 1919: R.B. (Bob) Terrell
- 1919 – 1920: J.C. Elliott
- 1920 – 1922: Joe E. Orr
- 1922 – 1951: George F. McLaughen
- 1951 – 1955: Robert L. Rhyne
- 1955 – 1975: John L. Farris
- 1975 – 1976: J.W. Spargo
- 1977 – 1979: Alford O. Miller
- 1979 – 1996: Robert L. Murray
- 1996 – Present: Robert L. Ridgeway