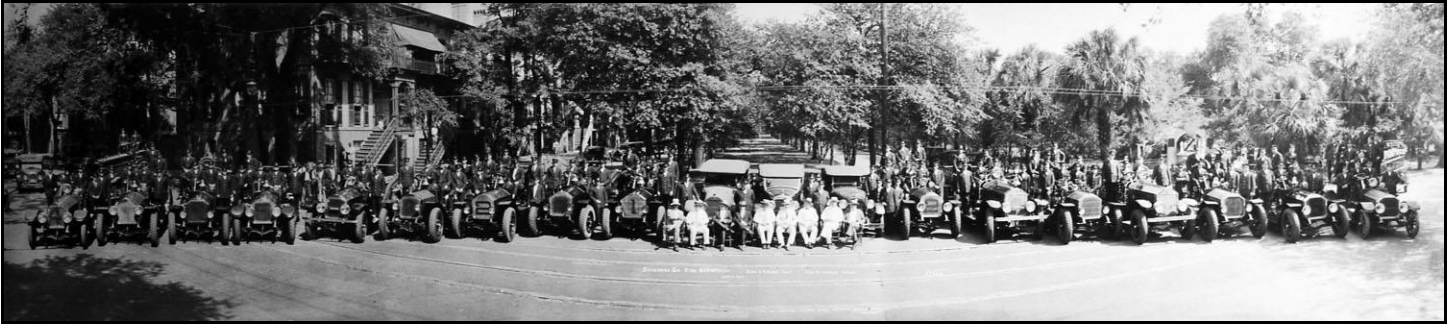




City of Savannah's Fire Department History



Savannah Fire Department in September 1927 – Fire Chief John H. Monroe

February 1, 1733, General James Oglethorpe and the colonists landed at Savannah.

THE FIRST FIRE

In 1737, the entire population, with one exception, turned out to extinguish it. The exception, referred to as a Mr. Jones, had charges filed against him for "standing by with his hands in his pockets, looking on, while his townsmen were working passing buckets of water and using other methods for putting out the fire."

THE FIRST FIRE COMPANY FORMED AND THE FIRST FIRE ORDINANCE

In 1759, fifteen townspeople organized and a hand engine was purchased.

An act, passed by the General Assembly, prohibited the erection and repair of wooden chimneys under a penalty of five pounds sterling. The money collected was used to maintain the fire engine.

NOTE: At this time, Savannah consisted of 400 dwellings, a church, an independent meeting house, a council house, a court house and a filature. There were thirteen streets, six squares and two suburbs -Yamacraw and Trustees' Garden. The limits of the town were on the west - Jefferson Street, on the east - Lincoln Street, and on the south - Oglethorpe Avenue.

EVERY HOUSE REQUIRED TO HAVE A LADDER

In 1760, the owner of every house in the city was required to provide his property with a ladder able to reach the roof his house in case of fire. This law was strictly enforced and appears to have been in effect up to 1796. The Mayor, during this time, was fined \$10.11 for sending out one of the public fire ladders for private use.

TEN SHIPS SET ABLAZE

On March 3rd, 1776, Savannah's "Council of Safety" ordered eleven ships loaded with rice to be destroyed by fire. This order came when British forces captured these ships and after several unsuccessful attempts to recapture the vessels by the towns militia. The Inverness was set ablaze and drifted over to the ships setting fire to a number of them. Seven were totally destroyed and three were badly damaged.

FIRST FIRE DEPARTMENT PARADE HELD

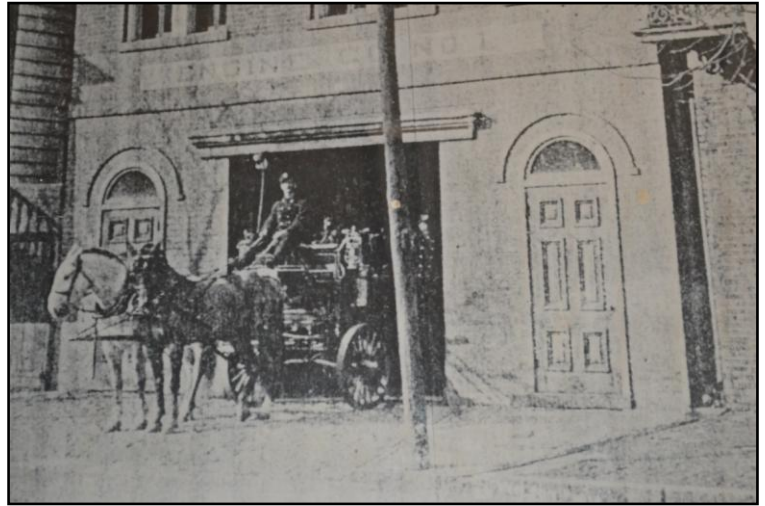
On August 6, 1795, and was reviewed by all municipal officers and citizens. The fire uniforms were a blue short cropped jacket and overalls with a leather cap.

FIRST LARGE SCALE FIRE DESTROYS 229 BUILDINGS

November 1796, a fire which began in a bake shop near the old market, spread in every direction. Referring to the lack of proper fire fighting facilities, one of the papers of that day stated: "The fortunate escape of the city from loss by fire for a number of years had greatly lulled the vigilance of its inhabitants and suitable preparations had not been made to meet the emergency."

FIRST WATER BORNE FIRE ENGINE PUT IN SERVICE

On November 16, 1807, \$1000 was appropriated for the purchase of a floating engine which was in service until 1812 when it was condemned and floated into the marsh.



TWO HORSES USED TO PULL FIRE ENGINES

January 12, 1818, the change to using two horses was made to increase response times.

SECOND LARGE SCALE FIRE DESTROYS 463 BUILDINGS

On January 11th, 1820 at 2:00 a.m., after 24 years, a fire broke out in a livery stable near the market. Every house between Broughton and Bay streets from Jefferson to Abercorn Street, except the State and Planters Banks, the Episcopal Church and three other brick buildings were destroyed.

FIRST OFFICIALLY ORGANIZED FIRE DEPARTMENT FORMED

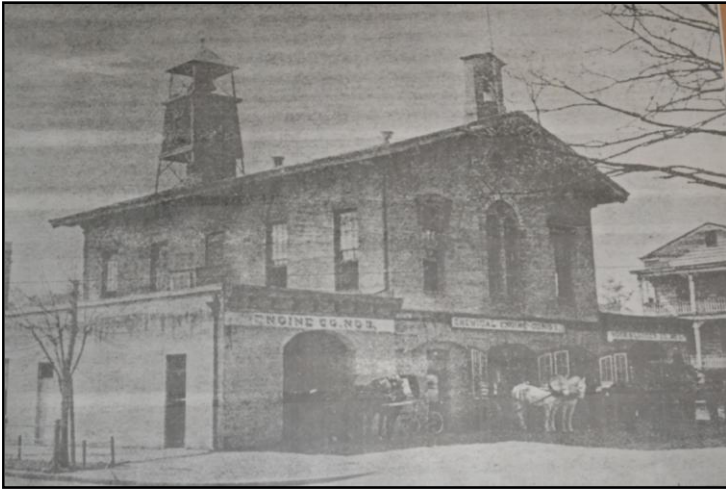
On March 11th, 1825, City Council appointed, by authority of the State Legislature, twenty persons to form the Savannah Fire Company. All of the engine houses, apparatus and equipment in the city were turned over to the Savannah Fire Company.

- ★ There were no salaries paid and the City Council filled all vacancies.
- ★ One clerk was authorized and paid a salary of \$8 per month.
- ★ "Free men of color, free Negroes and hired slaves" performed firefighting duties, and a schedule for monthly drills and apparatus maintenance was established.
- ★ The Mayor and Aldermen were required to attend fires.
- ★ Persons sounding a fire alarm received a reward agreed upon from time to time by the fire company. (This reward was abolished in 1826)
- ★ The Savannah Fire Company was divided up, and foremen were assigned to manage the black firemen of the different engines and were called "Masters of Engines." They were authorized to administer "prompt and immediate correction" whenever a slave "disobeyed or otherwise offended." Each slave fireman was provided with a badge, which entitled him to the "immunities and privileges of a fireman."

FIREFIGHTERS BEGIN TO RECEIVE PAYMENT FOR SERVICES

On May 25th, 1826, an ordinance was enacted providing for the enrollment of a greater number of slaves and the payment of "121 cents per hour" "while engaged at drills or at fires."

- ★ Slave firefighters were paid the following incentives to respond to fire alarms; the first slave firefighter to arrive on an alarm received one dollar. The second and third received fifty cents each.
- ★ Slaves failing to answer alarms forfeited one hour's pay for every fifteen minutes he was late, and they lost their badge if fines became excessively late.



WHITE INDEPENDENT FIRE COMPANIES FORMED

In 1845 the young men of the city began to take an interest in the fire department, and early in 1846 the independent Oglethorpe Fire Company was organized, subject to the Savannah Fire Company rules and directions. The city was divided into five fire districts

In 1847 the Young America Fire Company was organized and was made up of the “rough elements of the community.” At almost every fire the Young Americans engaged in a fight with someone, and on a number of occasions they drove the faithful slaves away from their posts. In 1852 the company was disbanded.

NOTE: In 1860 the Savannah Fire Company consisted of fourteen fire companies.

- ★Four independent white companies.
- ★Ten colored companies, which were the original Savannah Fire Company.

SFD COMPANY SURRENDERS WITH CONFEDERATES AT FORT PULASKI

Engine Company No. 8, with a large quantity of hose, was stationed at Fort Pulaski at the time of its surrender to Union troops. On July 30, 1862, 120 men of the First Regiment of the Georgia Militia were detailed to serve temporarily as firefighters for the City of Savannah.

A THIRD MAJOR FIRE DESTROYS OVER 100 BUILDINGS

On January 27th, 1865, a fire was purposely set by soldiers of the 20th U. S. Army Corps in an attempt to prevent the necessity of their remaining after the arrival of Sherman's army. They started fires at various places throughout the city. The largest fire occurred in a stable near the corner of Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue and Zubly Streets. This building had previously been used by the Confederates as an ammunition arsenal, which still contained explosives. As the fire rapidly grew, citizens and soldiers, under the direction of U.S. Army officers, began removing the ammunition and assisting in working the fire engines. When the fire reached the gunpowder, “explosion after explosion followed in rapid succession and fragments of shells flying in all directions, killing spectators and workers, finally driving them from the scene.”

ALL FIRE ENGINES CONVERTED TO STEAM ENGINES

May 1, 1866, City Council approved the replacement of all hand-operated engines to steam engines.

SAVANNAH FIRE COMPANY DISSOLVED

On Jan. 29, 1867, the Savannah Fire Company was dissolved and on February 1st, 1867, the Savannah Volunteer Fire Department was organized. The new Fire Chief, while reorganizing the department, was met with resistance after demanding the Savannah Fire Company's equipment. After numerous conferences with City Council the old company agreed to comply. However, they were able to retain the funds on hand, which amounted to about \$12,000, and divided the money among the members of the old fire company.

TELEGRAPH FIRE ALARM SYSTEM INSTALLED

In 1870, nineteen telegraph fire alarm boxes were put in service throughout the City.

FIRE CHIEF AND ASSISTANT CHIEF RECEIVE SALARIES

These salaries began in 1875 and the positions were appointed by City Council.

IMPROVEMENTS MADE IN THE FIRE DEPARTMENT (From 1869 to 1873)

- ★Horses and harnesses were purchased as well as stables provided.
- ★Firefighter's sleeping quarters were supplied at fire stations.
- ★Apparatus drivers and engineers were employed.
- ★An electric fire alarm was installed on May 1st, 1872.
- ★The big bell (5,500 lbs.), known as "Big Duke," was purchased for \$2,353.14.
- ★The last of three hand engines controlled by “colored” firefighters was placed out of service in 1871.

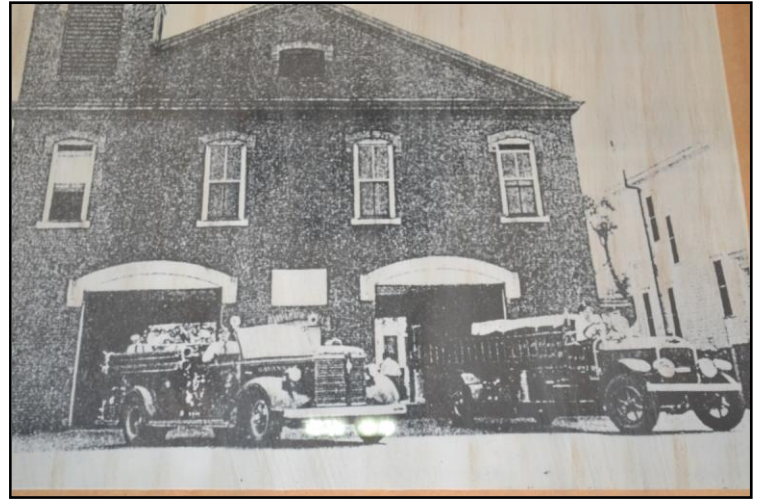
FOURTH LARGE FIRE CLAIMS 3 LIVES AND 300 BUILDINGS

October 31st, 1883, the fire, which started in a cotton warehouse on Fahm & Bay Street, claimed three civilian lives (James Cash, a clerk, and two colored laborers) and destroyed more than 300 houses.

FIRE DEPARTMENT RECEIVES ITS FIRST TELEPHONE

Installed in 1885 at Fire Headquarters located at M.L.K. Blvd. and Indian Street.

NOTE: In 1888 the department consisted of 74 personnel: 25 men paid full time, 25 men paid part time as an on-call force, and 24 Volunteers of Hose Company No. 1.-



FIRE DEPARTMENT BECOMES FULL-TIME PAID

On February 1st, 1890, the call force was abolished and the service was reorganized on a full paid basis. Twenty-two additional men were employed, making a total of 47 paid full time and 25 volunteers with Companies in southern section of the City.

BRASS POLES INSTALLED

1891 -- Brass sliding poles were furnished and telephones installed at several stations.

SEVEN SHIPS SET ABLAZE

November 5, 1894 - Seven ships were discovered on fire at different places along the wharves, some had fires set in more than one place. Only one ship received heavy damage.

FIRE HEADQUARTERS MOVED PRESENT LOCATION - May 1897

FIRST RESERVE APPARATUS DESIGNATED

Old hose reels were thoroughly overhauled and assigned as the first reserve apparatus.

CATHEDRAL OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST BURNS

On the night of February 6th, 1898, a total of seven fires were reported with two of them being large fires. While firefighters were fighting a large fire on River Street that involved a warehouse, many train cars loaded with hay and straw, and five buildings on the south side of River Street. An alarm was turned in from box 27, reporting a fire at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. After a hard fight, the fire was confined to the Cathedral which was totally destroyed.

FIRST FULLY- MECHANIZED FIRE DEPARTMENT IN THE U.S.

In 1911, after the purchase and successful operation of the new American La France's Auto Combination Chemical Wagon, City Council ordered 11 of the new apparatus to upgrade the entire department.

SFD RESOURCES SENT TO AUGUSTA, GA. TO HELP FIGHT MAJOR FIRE

On March 22, 1916, 34 Savannah Firefighters and two apparatus were sent to assist the City of Augusta in fighting a major fire that threatened to burn the entire City.

FIRST FIRE APPARATUS WATER TANK DEVELOPED IN SAVANNAH

In 1929, SFD Fire Chief John H. Monroe designed and invented a water tank to replace the soda-acid tank that was standard equipment at the time. After the tank proved successful, Fire Chiefs throughout the country were informed of this development through "Fire Engineering Magazine" and his tank is now the industry standard.

FIRE DISPATCH SWITCHBOARD INSTALLED AT FIRE HEADQUARTERS

In 1931, a telephone switchboard system was installed to improve fire responses.



BATTALION CHIEFS POSITION CREATED

In 1937, City Council created and assigned four Battalion Chief Positions

TWO-WAY RADIOS INTRODUCED TO THE DEPARTMENT

In 1954, two-way radios were installed in all apparatus, cars, and HQ's dispatch center

FIRE FIGHTERS ISSUED OFFICIAL TURNOUT GEAR

In 1958, the number of SFD firefighters increase from 163 to 171. All firefighters were furnished with helmets, boots, and turn-out pants.

FIRE PROTECTION SUBSCRIPTIONS BEGAN

On August 1, 1961, subscription fire protection was made available to residents and businesses outside of the City limit. It is still in effect to this day.