

# The History of the Chapel Hill Fire Department - Chapel Hill, NC.

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**C**hapel Hill Fire Department's inception originated as a proposal to the town leaders in 1896. However well-received the idea was, the department was not officially formed until 1901 with a hook and ladder outfit, 2 reels of hose, a handful of volunteers and a determination to protect the community's life and property. Since that first loosely assembled band of men demonstrated fearlessness in the face of danger, the Chapel Hill Fire Department has grown to nearly 100 professional firefighters spread across five stations strategically placed to best respond to our ever-growing community's needs.

**T**hroughout its history, the CHFD has heroically fought countless fires that have altered Chapel Hill's landscape, pierced the town's consciousness with tragedy, and cheerfully accepted the role as community helpers that the area's residents depend upon today. An extended roster of strong leadership among its chiefs has defined the success and longevity of the CHFD. Additionally, CHFD has a history of making ground - breaking decisions to include minorities and women in its ranks well ahead of countrywide trends. CHFD's professionalism and bravery in the face of extreme situations have placed them in the national spotlight and consequently their efforts have been documented and used to train other fire departments across the US.

**T**raining of CHFD members has changed radically over the past one hundred plus years. From the 1914 Ford fire truck to the present day fleet of blue tucks symbolic of Chapel Hill's town and gown relationship with the University of North Carolina, CHFD remains in the forefront of state-of-the-art training. In the early years of the department, the traditional role of firefighters was fire suppression. The function of first responders has been altered drastically, most notably in the wake of 9/11. Today's CHFD training includes emergency medical training, the handling of hazardous materials, weapons of mass destruction response, fire suppression, urban search and rescue, vehicle extraction, fire prevention and continuing physical fitness training.

**T**he decision to become a firefighter can range from fulfilling a child-hood dream to continuing aspects of a military career in civilian life. But it is the culture, which began first as a brotherhood and is now a familial, close-knit community, that provides fire personnel with a life-style few would exchange for another.

**I**n a letter from the Greensboro Fire Department in 1966 regarding a fireman and his wife suffering injuries from a car accident while in the area, the Greensboro Chief wrote of CHFD's help to a fellow firefighter. Fireman Hooks was not seriously injured, but his wife required intensive care.

*“Knowing that true hospitality existed among Firemen, naturally he visited your station number one where he knew he would find friends...Fireman Hooks told me how your men provided housing, meals and many other services to him while in your city. He also told me that some of your men’s wives visited Mrs. Hooks and tried to assist in anyway possible...I am sure they must feel a great inward satisfaction in rendering such a fine service to a brother fireman and his family in distress.”*

**A** colorful past peppered with triumph and loss, politically savvy and affable leadership, superior training and ranks of devoted and courageous firefighters paid to run into burning structures, should remind us that this is a profession never to be taken for granted. Chapel Hill has ample reason to express an enduring pride for every firefighter who has donned the turn-out gear, driven a speeding fire engine and come to our collective and individual rescue. Jane Toy Coolidge said it best in her book *Growing Up With Chapel Hill: A Village 1901-1925* when she wrote:

*“...Fire Practice held on summer evenings when members of the volunteer company raced down the middle of the street pulling the reel, connected the hose and squirted a stream of water up in high, triumphal arc. All this was timed to the last second, and after weeks of diligent practice the team would go to compete in the state tournament at Asheville...Everybody who could get through supper early congregated to wait impatiently through the seemingly endless preliminaries. At last the cry went up; “Here they come!” and you pushed through the crowd to watch spellbound while the team dashed past and finished the run in a cascade of glory. Our hearts were filled with loving loyalty for these brave friends who strove so hard to protect us from the flaming perils and carried Chapel Hill’s banner proudly throughout the state.”*

On August 23, 2007 the Chapel Hill Museum, in collaboration with the Chapel Hill Fire Department, opened a permanent exhibit entitled Heroes of Yesterday, Heroes of Today- The History of the Chapel Hill Fire Department. The exhibit is a multi-media display featuring a professionally produced documentary featuring interviews with retired CHFD firefighters. A timeline, beginning with the department’s inception in 1896, containing photos and articles spanning the town’s major fires and departmental milestones. CHFD badges and uniforms throughout the years, as well as call books from the early 1900’s are just a few of the historical artifacts included in the exhibit. The centerpiece of the installation is Chapel Hill’s first motorized 1914 Ford fire truck. Designed and curated by Chapel Hill FD 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant Chris Bradley and Chapel Hill Museum Director, Traci Davenport, the exhibit reception hosted 200 community members, CHFD retirees and current employees.

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