

HISTORY OF THE OXFORD VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANY

Several large fires in the mid 1800's prompted some Oxford citizens to organize the Oxford Hook and Ladder Company (a private company) January 31, 1876. This was primarily a bucket brigade and during the next 20 years it was intermittently active. The group was reorganized in 1902 as the Edwards Hose and Ladder Company, which was named for their leader, J. Frank Edwards. This fire company was composed of the white and the colored companies. In 1905, this company became the official fire department for the town but retained its name until it became the Oxford Fire Department in 1915. The colored company, Company #2, was disbanded in the early 1940s.

In 1907 horses named Big Sam and Mamie were bought to pull the water wagon and hose reels, which had previously been pulled through the streets by the men. In 1916, the first motorized "auto truck" was purchased at a price of \$5,500, a real bargain as one of the department's latest purchases, a 95 foot platform ladder truck in 1998, had a price tag of \$720,000.

The capabilities of the fire department were severely limited for many years by an inadequate water supply. A private water department was established in 1905 and drew its water from several deep wells and installed hydrants and a 100 ft. high, 100,000 gallon tank. Water was still scarce at times until the building of a dam on Tar River and a filter plant southwest of town in 1925 eased the situation as did the building of Lake Devin as a water storage facility. In 1978, the regional water system that draws water from Kerr Lake became operational and now provides a plentiful supply of water.

The town's firemen have been called into action by a variety of methods through the years. In the beginning various bells in town were rung, then in 1904 a "fire alarm" was placed on the courthouse bell. The town was divided into 5 districts and the location of the fire was designated by taps on the bell corresponding to the number of the district. Next a larger bell, with a Gamewell alarm system was installed in the tower of the Opera House. After the Opera House burned in 1921, the bell, which had been ruined by the fire, was replaced by a Diaphone compressed air fire alarm system. In the 1940's a master phone system was installed that rang every fireman's home at once. The master phone system was replaced in 1979 when each man was issued a pager, a small electronic device that permitted each fireman to be notified of the location and nature of a fire no matter where they were.

The present Oxford Fire Department is composed of 10 paid men (primarily to man the station and drive the trucks) and 36 volunteers. Their equipment includes 2 pumper trucks, a pumper/tanker truck, a rescue truck and the platform ladder truck. They are housed in a modern fire station on McClanahan Street that was built in 1993. The original location for the station was on Wall Street behind the present Penny Furniture Company where in 1906, in conjunction with the Granville Grays (the local National Guard unit) a joint firehouse, armory, and city hall was rented. Later, in 1908, a new fire station, armory and city hall were built on Williamsboro Street, just behind the courthouse. In

1956, the department was moved next door into the old Morgan & Crews Building (formerly the Opera House) where it remained until the move to McClanahan Street in 1993.

Vehicles, buildings and equipment are only a part of the story of the fire department. It is the firemen themselves who make a department what it is and they have been a very special group through the years. About 250 men, a veritable cross section of the population, have served the town and city of Oxford in an outstanding manner.