

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

Title and Dates:

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

Creators:

City of Charleston Fire Department
Board of Fire Masters

Quantity:

2 cubic feet and 15 rolls of microfilm

Forms of Material:

Correspondence, minutes, newspaper clippings, reports, pamphlets, petitions, company house journals and payroll records

Processed by:

Rebecca Schultz, 2018

Location:

22-D-007, 22-D-008, and MM-4-8 (Rolls FRD.JOU.001 to FRD.JOU.009, FRD.MIN.001, and FRD.PAY.003 to FRD.PAY.004)

Series List:

Series I: Correspondence and Subject Files, 1919-1976

Series II: Board of Fire Masters Meeting Minutes and Reports, 1848-1979

Series III: Charleston Fire Department, Company House Journals, 1917-1979

Subseries I: Company No. 2

Subseries II: Company No. 3

Subseries III: Company No. 4

Subseries IV: Company No. 8

Subseries V: Company No. 11

Series IV: Fire Department Payroll Records, 1916-1924

Abstract:

The collection consists of both the physical and microfilmed records of the City of Charleston Fire Department and the Board of Fire Masters. The physical records primarily contain correspondence, reports, and meeting minutes dating from 1919-1976. The microfilmed records consist of minutes, ledgers, and payroll records. Two early ledgers (1851-1869) document the response of both Volunteer and City Fire Companies to fires that occurred throughout the city. Later ledgers (1917-1979), called Company House Journals, detail the daily activities of various City Fire Houses.

Historical Information:

From its earliest days, Charleston has struggled to protect itself from the threat of fire. In February 1698, not long after the founding of Charles Towne, one-third of the city was destroyed by fire. In October of that same year, the first legislation concerning fire regulation was passed by the proprietary government. *An Act for Settling a Watch in Charles Town, and for Preventing of Fires 1698* banned the use of wooden chimneys and designated three Commissioners to gather taxes from every household for the purpose of providing “ladders, fire hooks, and leather buckets, for the benefit of preventing further encreasing [*sic*] and quenching of fires.” The Commissioners were likewise given the authority “to give all such directions for the pulling down or blowing up any such house or houses, that shall be by them adjudged [necessary] to be pulled down or blowing up for the stopping or preventing the further spread of [fire].”¹ Some have assumed these Commissioners were the earliest members of the Board of Fire Masters. During the Proprietary Era in South Carolina, however, commissioners were often named for the sole purpose of carrying out an act or statute.²

Over time, the above-mentioned statute was amended and altered depending on the needs of the City. In August 1701 “one engine for quenching of fire” was added to the firefighting apparatus of the City. In November 1704 the statute was amended again to stipulate fines for persons with unkempt chimneys, ban the boiling of “any pitch, tarr, [*sic*] rosin, or turpentine within the bounds of Charlestown,” and set regulations for the keeping of “still-houses.” In December 1713, the City enacted its first significant building regulations, which dictated that “no dwelling house, shop, warehouse, bar, stable, or any other building whatsoever, of timber, (unless the said timber be upon the very spot of land,) shall be erected or set up within the lines of the fortifications of Charlestown, but of brick.”³

After the reestablishment of South Carolina as a royal colony, the General Assembly passed a series of laws that created permanent commissions to address the needs of Charles Town’s residents. *An Act For Preventing as much as may be Accidents which may happen by Fire in Charles-Town in the Province of South Carolina 1736* established a Board of Fire Masters, which held all the responsibilities of the old Commissioners with some additional powers. The Fire Masters were authorized to “enter into the Houses, Out-houses, Stables, Yards or Backsides of every Owner or Tenant” to ensure that ladders and buckets are kept in every building “and also to view, search and examine, if any Quantities of Hay, Straw, Pitch, Tarr, [*sic*] Rosin, Turpentine, Oyl, [*sic*] Tallow or other sulphurous or combustible Matters are lodged in any Place within the said Town.” They were likewise authorized to dig wells or erect pumps and “command any person or persons whatsoever, that shall be present at any Fire, to aid and assist in pulling down Houses or Buildings, or in extinguishing of Fire.”⁴

¹Snowden, Yates, *History of South Carolina*, v. I., (Chicago and New York: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1920), 132. McCord, David J., ed. *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina; Edited, under Authority of the Legislature, Volume Seventh, Containing the Acts Relating to Charleston, Courts, Slaves and Rivers* (Columbia, S.C.: A.S. Johnston, 1840), 7-12.

² *Year Book – 1881, City of Charleston, So. Ca.* (Charleston, S.C.: The News and Courier Book Presses, 1882), 332. Butler, Nic, “Charles Town’s Growing Pains,” Charleston Time Machine, Charleston County Public Library, March 9, 2018, <https://www.cepl.org/news/charles-town%E2%80%99s-growing-pains>.

³ McCord, *Statutes*, 17-22, 41-43, 58-60

While the Fire Masters were established to assume authority and give directions at the outbreak of fire, the main work of firefighting was undertaken by private citizens. As early as 1765, Charleston's citizens joined together to form volunteer fire companies.⁵ In 1793, the Vigilant Fire Company (founded in 1789) became the first volunteer fire company incorporated in South Carolina. Other volunteer fire companies including the Charleston Fire Company of Axemen (1813), the Phoenix Fire Engine Company (1825), the Charleston Fire Engine Company (1825), and the Aetna Fire Engine Company (1829) soon followed.⁶

There were several disadvantages to the Volunteer Fire Department, which eventually came to be composed of seventeen separate companies. Confusion, inefficiency, and quarreling between various factions ultimately led to the push for consolidation of power under a paid, city-operated fire department.⁷ The new Charleston Fire Department employed 103 men, "six steam fire engines, two reserve steam fire engines, two hook and ladder trucks, and such horses, hose, reels, fuel wagons, and other appliances as may be deemed necessary by the Fire Commissioners constituting the Board of Fire-Masters." The Department was commanded by a Fire Chief Frank L. O'Neill, two Assistant Chiefs, a Superintendent of Fire Alarm and a Clerk, who also served as Secretary to the Board of Fire-Masters.⁸

Scope and Content Note:

The collection consists of the administrative records, minutes, reports, and journals of the City of Charleston Fire Department and the Board of Fire Masters. The collection is separated into four series. The first series consists of the files of six Fire Department Chiefs, Louis Behrens (1907-1932), John H. Wohlers (1933-1942), George W. Stout (1942-1943), Norman G. Olsen (1943-1957), Fred C. Shokes (1958-1967), and Wilmot E. Guthke (1967-1992). The second series consists of the minutes and reports of the Board of Fire Masters dating from 1848 to 1979. The third series consists of Company House Journals (1917-1979) and is subdivided according to the originating Fire Company. The fifth series consists of Fire Department Payroll Records (1916-1924).

The Records of the City of Charleston Fire Department, 1848-1979 provide valuable insight into the evolution of firefighting and emergency services in a southern municipality. The Board of Fire

⁴ *Acts Passed by the General Assembly of South-Carolina, At a Sessions begun and holden at Charles-Town the Fifteenth Day of November, in the Seventh Year of the Reign of Our Sovereign Lord George the Second (1736)*, (Charleston, S.C.: Lewis Timothy, 1736), 29-33. Butler, "Charles Town's Growing Pains."

⁵ Stevens, Michael E., "The Vigilant Fire Company of Charleston," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Vol. 87, No. 2 (Apr., 1986), 132. Walsh, Richard, *Charleston's Sons of Liberty: A Study of the Artisans, 1763-1789*, (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1959), 30.

⁶ McCord, David J., *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina; Edited under Authority of the Legislature by David J. McCord. Volume Eighth, Containing the Acts Relating to Corporations and the Militia.* (Columbia, S.C.: A.S. Johnston, 1840), 181, 269, 348, 353, 366.

⁷ For further discussion of the inefficiencies of the Volunteer Fire Department see: Pease, Jane H. and William H. Pease, "The Blood-Thirsty Tiger: Charleston and the Psychology of Fire," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Vol. 79, No. 4 (Oct., 1978).

⁸ Bryan, G.D., *The General Ordinances of the City of Charleston, S.C. and the Acts of the General Assembly Relating Thereto*, (Charleston, S.C.: The News and Courier Book Presses, 1882), 99.

Master Minutes and Reports contain information on the early system of volunteer firefighting, as well as, the establishment of the City Fire Department. Other subjects of note include reports of civil unrest during the Civil Rights Movement, the operation of the South Carolina State Firemen's Association and the operation of the Firemen's Insurance and Inspection Fund.

Note to Researchers:

In 2002, the City transferred a portion of its historical records to the South Carolina Room of the Charleston County Public Library. Among these records were some of the City's Fire Department and Board of Fire Master Records. A list of these records can be found at <https://www.copl.org/records-city-charleston-fire-department-1848-1979>.

Box Folder

Correspondence and Subject Files, 1919-1976

2	1	Board of Fire Masters, Committees, 1958-1973
2	2	Budget Information, 1957-1970
1	1	Chaplains, 1964
	2	Report on Civil Disturbance, 1969: papers re: Charleston Hospital Workers Strike, racial tension
	3	Civitan Club, 1975
	4	Controller Correspondence, 1964-1970: papers re: fire station renovations, fire vehicles and apparatus
	5	Corporation Counsel, 1953-1956
2	3	Corporation Counsel, Mutual Aid Fire Protection Agreement with St. Andrew's Public Service District, 1961-1963
2	4	Corporation Counsel, New City Code, 1962
1	6	Corporation Counsel, Rights of Emergency Drivers, 1960-1961
	7	Corporation Counsel, Gasoline Storage Tanks, Savannah Highway, 1962
	8	Daycare Centers, 1968
	9	Downtown Motor Inn, 1962-1963
	10	"E," Miscellaneous, 1958-1961
	11	City Electrician, John Mellard, 1957-1961
2	5	Employee Correspondence and Promotions, 1958-1960
2	6	Equipment - Bids, Purchases, and Specifications, 1959-1971
1	12	Esso Standard Oil Fire, 1959
	13	False Alarms, Rewards, Etc., 1960-1969
	14	Fire Boat, 1958
	15	Fire Department, Rules and Regulations, n.d.
	16	Fire Extinguishers, 1965-1968
	17	South Carolina State Firemen's Association Committees, 1974-1975
	18	South Carolina State Firemen's Association Correspondence, 1964-1976: papers re: firefighter strike
2	7	South Carolina State Firemen's Association, Legislation, c. 1949-1975
1	19	South Carolina State Firemen's Association, Pamphlets and Reports, 1963-1974
	20	Firemen's Insurance and Inspection Fund Board of Trustees, Meeting Notices, 1960-1966

Box Folder

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| 1 | 21 | Firemen's Insurance and Inspection Fund Board of Trustees, Minutes, 1959-1966 |
| | 22 | Firemen's Insurance and Inspection Fund By-Laws, 1959-1960 |
| | 22a | Firemen's Insurance and Inspection Fund Constitution, 1923 |
| | 23-24 | Firemen's Insurance and Inspection Fund Contributions, 1940-1963 |
| | 25 | Firemen's Insurance and Inspection Fund Correspondence, Controller, 1957-1960 |
| | 26 | Firemen's Insurance and Inspection Fund Correspondence, Legal Department, 1958-1961 |
| | 27 | Firemen's Insurance and Inspection Fund Correspondence, Mayor, 1959-1960 |
| | 28-31 | Firemen's Insurance and Inspection Fund Correspondence, Miscellaneous, 1939-1972 |
| | 32-35 | Firemen's Insurance and Inspection Fund, Letters of Approval, 1944-1964 |
| 2 | 8 | Firemen's Insurance and Inspection Fund, Special Data, c. 1939-1972 |
| 1 | 36 | Firemen's Insurance and Inspection Fund, Petition, 1960 |
| | 37 | Fire Station Improvements and Repairs, 1957-1966 |
| | 38 | "G," Miscellaneous, 1959-1960 |
| | 39 | "H," Miscellaneous, 1958-1962 |
| 2 | 9 | James Island Public Service District, 1961-1963 |
| 1 | 40 | "L," Miscellaneous, 1958-1968 |
| 2 | 10 | Long-Range Planning, c. 1970-1974 |
| 1 | 41 | "M," Miscellaneous, 1958-1960 |
| | 42 | Marcus Building Fire, 1963-1964 |
| | 43 | Miscellaneous Correspondence, 1958-1970 |
| 2 | 11 | Miscellaneous Policy and Department Information, c. 1963-1969 |
| | 12 | Oil Heaters Ordinance, 1958-1959 |
| 1 | 44 | Optimist Club, 1961-1963 |
| | 45 | Orders - By Direction of the Board of Fire Masters, 1950-1969 |
| 2 | 13 | Ordinances and Resolutions, 1959-1969 |
| 1 | 46 | "P," Miscellaneous, 1958-1963 |
| | 47-49 | Commissioners of Public Works, 1919-1971 |
| | 50 | "R," Miscellaneous, 1958-1961 |
| | 51 | "S," Miscellaneous, 1959-1968 |
| | 52 | South Carolina Electric and Gas Company, 1960-1965 |
| | 53 | South Carolina State Highway Department, 1962 |
| | 54 | South Carolina State Ports Authority, 1959 |
| | 55 | Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company, 1960 |
| | 56 | Southern Railway Company, 1957-1961 |
| | 57 | Spurling Fire Alarm System, 1953-1962: also see: "City Electrician, 1957-1961" |
| | 58 | Sympathy Expressions Acknowledged, c. 1953-1965 |
| | 59 | Theatres, Safety Concerns, 1965-1972: also see Ordinances and Resolutions |
| | 60 | Tidewater Terminal Fire, 1955 |
| | 61 | Traffic Engineer, 1967-1969 |
| | 62 | Training, 1969-1973 |
| 2 | 14 | Training Tower, 1968-1969 |
| 1 | 63 | Underwriters Associations, 1938-1970 |
| | 64 | Uniform Specifications and Bids, 1958-1970 |
| | 65 | Veterans Hospital, 1962-1963 |
| | 66 | "W," Miscellaneous, 1960-1969 |
| | 67 | Ways and Means, 1967-1970 |

Roll Book*Minutes and Reports of the Board of Fire Masters, 1848-1979*

M.01 1-3 Board of Fire Master Minutes, 1848-1910

Box Folder

1 68-73 Board of Fire Masters Minutes, 1953-1958
2 15-25 Board of Fire Masters Minutes, 1959-1970
2 26-28 Board of Fire Masters Minutes, 1976-1979
1 74 Board of Fire Masters Report, 1921
75-77 Board of Fire Masters Reports, 1923-1925
78 Board of Fire Masters Report, 1927
79 Board of Fire Masters Report, 1928

Roll Book

J.01 1 Board of Fire Masters, Return of Fires, 1851-1864
2 Board of Fire Masters, Return of Fires, 1861-1869

*Charleston Fire Department Company House Journals, 1917-1979
Company No. 2*

J.01 7 Company House Journal, Company No. 2, April 1917-January 1919
J.02 13 Company House Journal, Company No. 2, March 1945-April 1945 (partial copy)
J.03 16-17 Company House Journals, Company No. 2, June 1949-February 1951
J.05 27-28 Company House Journals, Company No. 2, March 1956-May 1858
J.06 31 Company House Journal, Company No. 2, May 1959-September 1961

Company No. 3

J.02 8-10 Company House Journals, Company No. 3, April 1933-August
11-12 Company House Journals, Company No. 3, May 1940-November
J.03 15 Company House Journals, Company No. 3, April 1948-October 1950
J.04 19 Company House Journals, Company No. 3, October 1950-December 1952
J.05 26 Company House Journal, Company No. 3, October 1955-April 1957
29 Company House Journal, Company No. 3, April 1957-November 1958
J.006 33 Company House Journal, Company No. 3, January 1959-November 1960

Company No. 4

J.003 14 Company House Journal, Company No. 4, August 1948-December 1949
18 Company House Journal, Company No. 4, January 1950-April 1951
J.005 25 Company House Journal, Company No. 4, January 1955-October 1956
J.006 30 Company House Journal, Company No. 4, February 1958-January 1960
J.006 32 Company House Journal, Company No. 4, January 1960-December 1961
J.007 39 Company House Journal, Company No. 4, June 1965-February 1967

Roll Book

Company No. 8

J.001 3-5 Company House Journals, Company No. 8, April 1910-October 1913
6 Company House Journals, Company No. 8, February 1916-March 1917

Company No. 11

J.006 34 Company House Journal, Company No. 11, January 1962-May 1964
J.007 35-36 Company House Journal, Company No. 11, January 1964-November 1968
J.008 41-43 Company House Journals, Company No. 11, November 1968-February 1976
J.009 44-45 Company House Journals, Company No. 11, March 1976-December 1979

Box Folder

Fire Department Payroll Records, 1916-1924

P.003 1 Fire Department Payroll Records, 1916-1922
P.004 2 Fire Department Payroll Records, 1922-1924