

# Raleigh Fire Department Mutual Aid by Train

By Michael J. Legeros

Before the motorization of the Raleigh Fire Department in 1912, requests for aid required the city's horse-drawn apparatus and volunteer firefighters to be transported by train. From neighboring Cary to farther away Fayetteville, Raleigh firemen rode the rails many times in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The following accounts record several "mutual aid calls" to nearby cities and towns during that period. Distances between locations have been computed "as the crow flies."

## Fayetteville – 54 Miles

On November 5, 1885, the Fayetteville Hotel caught fire. The city was hosting the Governor and other state officials, and the fire was reported while they were delivering speeches at the fairgrounds. Located at the corner of Hay and Donald streets, the three-story brick building caught fire about 1:00 p.m. Newspaper accounts called the scene was "one of great confusion" and said the fire department was "miserable" and the "water supply poor."<sup>1</sup>

From all indications, the buildings on the block west of the hotel would soon be burning. Much property was removed from the hotel, including the possessions of the Governor and the other officials. As the military guarded the salvaged items, the Raleigh Fire Department was called at 1:15 p.m. The Rescue Company steamer and 34 men including Chief Engineer T. W. Blake and Foreman W. R. Dick were loaded aboard a special train, which left at 2:40 p.m.

The station was ten miles from the hotel, and its smoke was visible as the train arrived at 5:20 p.m. Steamer engineer T. Mortimer Fleming "made quick time" over the "strange road" as he led the horse team into Fayetteville. The steamer "went to work at once," with water drafted from Cross Creek. The crowds cheered the firefighters and treated them with the "greatest cordiality." The fire did not extend beyond the hotel building, and the firemen were expected to return home that night.<sup>2</sup> Sanborn Maps from March 1885 describe Fayetteville as a population of 5,000, with no steam engine, two hand engines, no hose carts, and water facilities including a 5,000 gallon reservoir.

## Louisburg – 29 Miles

On January 22, 1904, four buildings in Louisburg caught fire at 3:05 a.m. When the news reached Raleigh, preparations were made to send the Rescue Company and its 1870 Gould steam engine by train. Before they departed, word was received that the fire had been controlled.<sup>3</sup> Sanborn Maps from February 1904 list Louisburg as a population of 1,500, with no hand engine, no hose cart, no hook & ladder truck, and no water facilities.

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<sup>1</sup> *News & Observer*, November 6, 1885.

<sup>2</sup> *News & Observer*, November 6, 1885.

<sup>3</sup> *News & Observer*, January 23, 1904.

## **Durham – 20 Miles**

When a block of downtown Durham burned on August 1, 1895, the Raleigh Fire Department received word of the fire and anticipated a request for help. Though they made preparations for travelling, their assistance was not requested.<sup>4</sup> Two years later, Raleigh firemen traveled to Durham to render aid. On October 14, 1897, seven tobacco factories and eight dwellings in downtown Durham were destroyed by fire. The \$250,000 blaze began about 11:00 a.m. on the roof of a home on Morgan Street. At 12:10 p.m., the Raleigh City Clerk's office received a call for help. Personnel and equipment were quickly rounded up and a special Southern Railway train departed the Capitol City at 1:05 p.m.

Aboard the two flat cars and a passenger car were the Rescue Company hose wagon, the Rescue Company steam engine, and some 25 members of the Capital, Hook and Ladder, Rescue, and Victor companies. Also aboard were as many citizens as could fit into the coach. At 1:40 p.m., the train arrived in Durham, and just as the fire had been brought under control. With no assistance to render, the visiting firemen toured the city and were entertained by the Durham Fire Chief and members of the Durham Fire Department. They left to return to Raleigh at 5:30 p.m.<sup>5</sup> Sanborn Maps from February 1898 describe Durham as a population of 10,000, with a water system, and a horse-drawn fire department with hose wagons and a hook & ladder truck.

On May 1, 1907, the Carolina Hotel in Durham caught fire. News reached the Capitol City just before midnight that the hotel was burning and that an entire block of downtown Durham was threatened. Raleigh Mayor James L. Johnson received a request for assistance and he immediately granted permission for the fire department to respond. Fire Chief Lonnie Lumsden contacted the Southern Railroad for a special train to take the fire companies to Durham. What happened next, however, has not been determined.<sup>6</sup> Sanborn Maps from August 1907 describe Durham as a population of 18,000, with a water system including 164 hydrants, and a horse-drawn fire department with a steamer, two hose wagons, and a hook & Ladder truck.

## **Apex – 14 Miles**

On June 12, 1911, nine buildings were destroyed in downtown Apex. The population of the western Wake town was awakened at 1:30 a.m. by the whistle of a passing Seaboard Airline Railroad train. The engineer saw the flames and blew the whistle to awake the townspeople. The blaze spread rapidly from a wood-frame building on the corner of Salem and Chatham Streets. As citizens tried to fight the fire with bucket brigades, a phone message was sent to Raleigh. Chief Lumsden began preparing to send the fire department until he learned that no water supply was available. He still came to the scene in his automobile, arriving about 4:00 a.m.<sup>7</sup> Apex had neither a fire department nor a water system in 1908.

## **Cary – Eight Miles**

On February 25, 1908, the largest building in Cary caught fire. The 33-year-old brick grist mill and office building contained four mills, a gin, a post office, a coffin builder, two store rooms, three lodge halls, several offices, and an Episcopal chapel. Fire was discovered at 3:30 p.m. in the roof and the Raleigh

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<sup>4</sup> *News & Observer*, August 2, 1895.

<sup>5</sup> *News & Observer*, October 15, 1897.

<sup>6</sup> *News & Observer*, May 3, 1907.

<sup>7</sup> *News & Observer*, June 13, 1911.

Fire Department was immediately requested. Fire Chief Frank Simpson responded by sending the 1905 American LaFrance steamer and a company of experienced firefighters on a special train. As the town feared the entire business district would be burned, the request for assistance was authorized by Mr. T. F. Wilkinson, one of Cary's leading citizens. By the time the train arrived, Cary firefighters had successfully prevented the fire from spreading to other buildings. The steam engine was not removed from the train car, and the Raleigh firefighters returned home after inspecting the fire.<sup>8</sup> Cary fire department and water system information in 1908 is incomplete.

### **More Information**

For information about Raleigh Fire Department mutual aid in the late 1920s, see this web page: <http://www.legeros.com/ralwake/raleigh/history/writing/essay-mutual-aid.shtml>.

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<sup>8</sup> *News & Observer*, February 26, 1908.