

# **Division of Fire**

## History

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For generations, Henrico was a rural area and the county's fire protection was non-existent. In 1887, a fire near Westham destroyed a barn and killed several horses. The owner could only watch helplessly as the fire destroyed his property and livestock.

Before there was a county maintained fire service, each citizen provided for his own safety in a variety of ways. One approach was the community fire department. This was the type of protection established in the town of Ginter Park, located in northern Henrico County. Initially, there was the Lewis Ginter Land and Improvement Company hose reel house. This hose reel was pulled by the citizens of the community to fires since no horses were available. In time, a fire station was built on Chamberlayne Avenue and a piece of motorized apparatus replaced the hose reel. This station and its triple combination pumper were acquired by the City of Richmond when Ginter Park was annexed from Henrico by Richmond in 1914.

Whereas Ginter Park's fire service was supported by the public, another option was the private ownership of a hose reel. This was the form of fire protection found in the 1920's in western Henrico County. A hose reel was maintained and kept in the garage of John Dicks, located on Libbie Avenue. Chief Dicks, as he was known, received fire alarms on his personal telephone. Upon receiving a call, a fire bell on his garage roof was rung to summon volunteer firefighters. The hose reel was either pulled to the fire by the neighbors, or young boys would sit in the back of a pickup truck, hold the handle of the hose reel, and the truck pulled the hose reel to the fire scene. In 1930, the hose reel was moved to the Laurel community. It was kept in a shed on the Laurel Golf Course, where it afforded some measure of fire protection to this area for a number of years.

Windsor Farms, an affluent residential community in western Henrico County, had its own fire department. This department was established in 1927 by Windsor Farms, Inc., and the apparatus was housed in a fire station near the community center. Like Ginter Park, Windsor Farms would be annexed by the City of Richmond.

The large industrial plants in eastern Henrico County also required fire protection. The Fulton Railroad Yards of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway, the Richmond Chemical Works, and the Richmond Cedar Works were among the industries that provided their own fire brigades supplemented by the Richmond Fire Department.

By the end of the 1920's, Henrico County had developed to the point that these methods of fire protection were no longer adequate. Neighbor helping neighbor, community fire protection, and industrial fire brigades could not provide the protection for the growing county.

Henrico County's population exceeded 30,000 in 1930, and most of these people lived west of Lafayette Street which was the approximate location of the 1914 corporation line

which separated the western part of the City of Richmond from Henrico County. Although the area was urban in its needs, it did not have any type of public supported fire protection. This service was provided without charge by the City of Richmond. However, this service was about to end. A city of Richmond ordinance was enacted on March 15, 1930 which authorized the city to enter agreements whereby the city would be reimbursed for the cost of sending fire apparatus beyond city limits. Henrico elected not to enter the agreement with Richmond; thus, Henrico County no longer had any fire protection from the City of Richmond.

Fortunately, a new station was to be built on Maple Avenue near its intersection with Grove Avenue. Construction bids for the new station were received on June 15, 1930, and it was completed by September of the same year. Although officially known as Henrico County Fire Department #1, it was popularly called the Westhampton Fire Department. To operate the apparatus and fight fires, the station was staffed by both paid and volunteer firefighters. Three paid firefighters all lived within a 3-block radius of the station and worked a shift of 48 hours on duty and 24 hours off duty. L. J. Mesco was named captain of the paid force. He had served 23 years with the Richmond Fire Department. Captain Mesco was destined to be the only man to ever command this station while it was under the jurisdiction of Henrico County.

At about the same time the Westhampton Fire Department was established as a county operated fire department, the community of Sandston, in the eastern part of Henrico, was securing fire protection on a different basis. The Sandston community made arrangements with the Royal Fire and Water Service Company on February 19, 1930 to provide *rue* protection. This company, headed by James R. Gondolfo, was a privately owned firefighting service which maintained *rue* stations in several Virginia localities. The department operated on a subscription basis. Subscribers paid 50 cents per month for fire protection. For a number of years, this private fire company provided fire protection for the eastern part of Henrico County.

The decade of the 1940's brought many changes to *rue* protection in Henrico County. On July 28, 1941, Lakeside Station 5 went into operation in a converted church building on Lakeside Avenue. Less than a month later, on August 8, 1941, the Highland Springs-Sandston Fire Department started operations in a service station located at Holly Avenue and Nine Mile Road.

On January 1, 1942, the Westhampton Fire Department passed into history. At 8:00 a.m., the City of Richmond took over the station when its annexation of that part of Henrico County took effect.

To bring about some conformity in firefighting efforts, Chief P. L. Burnett of Highland Springs-Sandston was named Acting Chief of all Henrico County Fire Departments on September 27, 1943. Chief Burnett was the head of a decentralized fire department. There were paid men in each station and each station had its own chief.

The Glenwood Farms Fire Department, or Station 7, was organized in August of 1948 to protect the developing areas along Mechanicsville Turnpike. In June of 1949, the Glenwood Farms Civic Association asked the county to assume the operation of the station.

The 1940's came to a close with one more addition to the Henrico County Fire Department. On October 21, 1949, the Tuckahoe Fire Department, or Station 8, went in service at 8000 Patterson Avenue.

On three occasions, the residents of Varina tried to establish a fire department without success. They were successful in 1952 on their fourth attempt when a fire station was constructed on Gregg Road, one block north of Route 5, by the Varina Fire Protective Association. Varina was the fifth station in Henrico County.

Each station in the county was a self-contained unit with its own chief. This changed on July 1, 1952, when Chief P. L. Burnett was named the Chief of the entire Henrico Department. Chief Burnett was the head of the largest county-owned fire department in the state.

A group of prospective auxiliary firefighters met on January 25, 1954 at the Montrose School on Williamsburg Road. From this meeting, the Williamsburg Road Auxiliary Fire Department was formed. The year 1955 saw fund-raising and the purchase of a lot at Cambria and Emporia Streets. Before the new station went into operation on August 16, 1956, its name was changed. The unwieldy name of Williamsburg Road Auxiliary Fire Department was changed to the Eastover Gardens Fire Department.

Throughout the 1950's and into the early 1960's, rapid expansion took place in the western part of Henrico County. On May 19, 1957, Chief Burnett recommended that a new station be constructed in the vicinity of Horsepen and Broad Street Roads. Approval of the plans for the new station at Horsepen Road at Crescent Avenue did not take place until June 13, 1961. On May 19, 1962, Station 10 was placed in operation.

On July 1, 1962, Henrico County started to operate a county-wide fire department. Although such a system had been under consideration since the early 1940's and efforts were made in the 1950's to have each station report to one fire chief, a true county-wide system did not become operational until this date. Another major change occurred on November 1, 1962, when Chief Burnett became the Civil Defense coordinator of the county and Richard C. Gilman, a captain in the Richmond Fire Department assumed the rank of Chief in Henrico.

Chief Gilman's tenure with the Henrico County Fire Department brought many new pieces of apparatus and new stations. Bond issues provided for the construction of a new Station 7 on Laburnum Avenue, and Station 9 on Quioccasin Road. Both stations were dedicated on September 9, 1964. A new Station 4 in Varina and Station 11 on Hungary Road entered service on April 10, 1965. A new station, built at Laburnum

Avenue and Jan Road, was opened on August 5, 1969. This station, designated as #6, was built to replace the Eastover Gardens station.

After Chief Gilman's resignation in early 1971, Deputy Chief Walter R. Stickel was named chief of the Henrico Fire Division on December 3, 1971. Chief Stickel was able to open two new stations for the county. They were designated Station 12 and Station 2, and were dedicated on June 2, 1975. Station 12 was built on West End Drive in the western section of the county.

Station 2 was built in the eastern section of the county on Darby town Road on land donated by the A. H. Robins Pharmaceutical Company.

The increase in the size of the department necessitated a change in the management structure of the department. In October of 1976, Chief Stickel indicated that the new approach would reflect the needs of a big city operation which was more in line with the present status of the Henrico County Division of Fire.

Upon the retirement of Chief Stickel, Chief John A. Bowes, was appointed Fire Chief in December of 1983. Under his command, a career development program for all firefighters was implemented. He also opened Station 13 in 1986, Station 14 in 1988, Station 15 in 1990, and Station 17 in 1993.

Under Chief Bowes' command, the Division of Fire started to provide pre-hospital emergency medical care in July of 1988. This service became necessary because more and more of the county's rescue squads lacked the manpower to operate day and night.

In 1994, Chief Mark Light, a Deputy Fire Chief from Roanoke County was picked to replace Chief Bowes after his retirement. Chief Light created the Fire/Police Marine Patrol Unit and led the Division of Fire through the accreditation process to become the ninth Accredited Fire Service Agency in the world.

Chief Light left the Division in 2000, and a year later was replaced by Chief Ronald Mastin, a Deputy Fire Chief from Fairfax County. Chief Mastin added Station 18 in 2002 and Station 22 in 2004. Heavy Rescue Squad units were added in 2004, and placed in service at Stations 13, 18, and later at Station 21.

Chief Mastin left the Division of Fire in 2007 to return to Fairfax County. On August 18, 2007, Henrico County Manager Virgil R. Hazelett appointed Edwin W. Smith to be the next Chief of the Henrico County Division of Fire. Chief Smith continues to lead the Division of Fire today.