

History of the City of Conover Fire Department

The history of the established Conover Fire Department can be dated back to 1942, with earlier forms of unorganized firefighting being traced to the early 1900's. The Town of Conover's firefighting was handled primarily by an unorganized group of men before the fire department was organized in 1942, operating a hand pump or "wheeler" consisting of a water tank and hose. In the 1930's another "wheeler" was fabricated by several business men in the town and attached to the rear of a town-owned-trash truck. This "wheeler" was stationed at the old Conover Jail located in downtown Conover and was destroyed in a wreck in the later years. In 1942, the Town of Conover Fire Department was chartered with Walt Saunders as the first Fire Chief. The original founding members included a Fire Chief, two drivers, and fifteen volunteer firefighters. Most of these early founding firefighters were business men who owned or worked at businesses in Conover, and responded to calls when needed.

According to a set of minutes of a Town Board meeting in the 1920's, reference was made pertaining to payment or reimbursement to the Newton Fire Department for firefighting and is assumed that they were called on to assist with major fires that had occurred. In addition, in the 1930's according to charter members of the Conover Fire Department, the town board had agreed to pay the Hickory Fire Department if needed to assist in major fires.

The original fire department was housed in the Old Reformed Church in downtown Conover, until the church was demolished in 1967, and a new municipal building was completed in 1968 which stands in its place. The fire department then was housed in the new municipal building until 1996 when the new fire department headquarters was constructed.

In 1942 the department purchased their first new Ford pumper. The fire truck was equipped with American LaFrance equipment, and had a pump capacity of 500 gallons, and a booster tank capacity of 750 gallons. In the early years, the fire department had lacked certain equipment such as turnout gear until around 1945. Other Fire Chiefs of the Conover Fire Department after W.W. Saunders tenure were Chief F.W. Moehlman, Chief Hugh Liem, and Chief John F. Dellinger.

In 1950, John Alvin Bolick was appointed Fire Chief and held the position until 1973. In 1957, a new Ford pumper, equipped with Howe fire apparatus equipment and having a pump capacity of 500 gallons and a booster tank capacity of 500 gallons was purchased. This 1957 Ford Pumper was eventually sold to the Sugarloaf Fire Department in Alexander County.

Charles Davis, The County Engineer and Planner, created the Conover District Boundaries in September, 1955. A contract with the county paid the municipality \$75 for each rural call answered. However, the Fire Chief had the right to refuse to answer the call, if in his opinion services would be deemed useless because of distance.

In 1957- 1958, a bunch of people, including firemen had CB radios. The CB radios were the utilized as the firefighter's radio equipment, as they were also notified of fire calls through these radios.

In the late 1960's the department purchased miscellaneous mobile equipment. This equipment included a surplus military weapons carrier that was converted into a wild land and brush truck, and a military surplus jeep for transporting rescue and emergency equipment to incidents. This equipment was eventually replaced with a 1978 Chevrolet four-wheel drive mini-pumper and a 1968 Chevrolet Van. In 1966, the department purchases a new 1,000 gallon per minute Ford Pumper with a 500 gallon booster tank and with Howe equipment for approximately \$38,000. Five years later in 1971, the department purchased a new 1,500 gallon per minute Ford tanker equipped with a "quick-dump" valve. This tanker was declared surplus in 1983 and the original 1942 Ford Pumper was sold to a small volunteer department near Louisville, Mississippi, after the merger with St. Timothy Fire Department.

In 1975, the department went to the City Council and requested equipment as the need arose. Fund raisers, such as hamburger sales and spaghetti dinners, were held to purchase the equipment that was not acquired through the City Council. In 1976, a new 1250 gallons per minute, 1,000 gallon Mack Pumper was purchased and placed at Station Number 1. The department later acquired a 1982 Chiefs car and a new 1985 personnel van.

During the time after John Alvin Bolick's term as volunteer fire chief, a multitude of men have held the unpaid post, including , Calvin Pitman, William Larry Setzer, Ronald G. Kaylor and J. Reid Poovey, Jr.. In the following quote from Chief Poovey, he explains the positions he held with the Conover Fire Department throughout his thirty years of service:

"I've been up and down the ladder; I started out a regular fireman and, due to training, was promoted to training officer. I was Assistant Chief for years. I served under three Chiefs. I was elected Chief several times. In 1979, the paperwork and duties were so heavy- I was a volunteer Chief at the time- that I was having feelings about the time I was spending away from work... sometimes twenty, even thirty hours per week."

As Chief Poovey's workload increased, he spoke with the City Manager about the problem, and was hired as the Town's first paid full-time Chief and the first full-time employee in the fire departments history.

In the fall of 1970, the Conover Rural Fire District Committee was formed because of an ultimatum given to the County Commissioners by the City of Conover. The City was losing money on calls answered outside of city limits, and unless paid more money per call by the county the city threatened to stop services outside of the city limits. Throughout the spring of 1971 meetings were held to finalize the plans a new department. In February 1971, approximately 58 Conover area residents met at the St. Timothy Lutheran Church on Old Hwy 70. After this discussion, it was decided that the needs of the rural area surrounding formerly served by the Conover Fire Department could best be met by forming a new fire department and Dwight Rockett, Nelson Sigmon, and Dewey Hunsucker, were elected to serve on the Board of Directors along with the original Rural Fire District Committee, consisting of Chairman Grover Herman, Vance Hollar, Claude Hefner, Michael Rowe, and Paul Bolick. Throughout the spring of 1971, many meetings were held by the Board of Director in

finalizing plans for the new department. County Fire Marshall David Yount and Hickory Fire Captain Harry Yount were instrumental in offering additional advice.

On March 15, 1971, the new department was chartered as the St. Timothy Volunteer Fire Department, Inc.

On March 23, 1971, at the Board of Directors meeting, Nelson Sigmon was elected as the first Fire Chief, George E. Lafone, was elected the assistant chief, Charles M. Sigmon was elected captain, Paul G. Yount and Dale Stewart, were both elected Lieutenants, in addition to Connelly Huffman, elected as secretary, Wayne Thornburg, elected as treasurer, and Rev. K.H. Reidenbach as the Chaplain. A total of 29 men attended a 50 hour Introduction to Fire Training Course held at the St. Stephens Fire Department.

In 1971, Herman Sipe and Company built and rented a brick fire station to the St. Timothy Fire Department. The newly formed fire department bought the new station shortly after it was built and eventually was expanded and renovated to accommodate more apparatus and equipment. The department in the first year of operation purchased approximately \$60,000 worth of equipment. The department also purchased a new 1971 Ward-LaFrance 1000 gallon diesel pumper, the first diesel fire truck in Catawba County, a 1971 International 1200 gallon tanker, a military surplus brush truck, and other equipment needed around the department such as air packs and turnout gear. The firemen of the department sent a petition to the county in 1972 for levying a fire tax. The monthly earnings from the fire tax would be used to cover department expenses and to purchase more equipment. Some of the equipment purchased included a 1974 Dodge mini-pumper, and a 1976 Kenworth 2000 gallons per minute pumper- tanker which was the first of its type in the southeastern United States. They also purchased a new 1979 Kenworth 2000 gallons per minute pumper- tanker with a remote controlled Santa Rosa 1000 gallons per minute turret nozzle, and a 1983 GMC 1250 gallon tanker.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Conover experienced rapid growth, involving the annexation of much of the industrial area in the St. Timothy Fire District. This annexation took away much of St. Timothy's tax base and led the Board of Director to enter into a merger agreement with the City of Conover Fire Department.

In 1982, the St. Timothy Volunteer Fire Department Inc. merged with the City of Conover Fire Department. The City of Conover assumed all outstanding debts in exchange for the St. Timothy assets. The debts included an insubstantial amount owed on a pumper-tanker and a substantial amount owed on the fire station. The departments assets included: a 1971 Ward LaFrance 1000 gallons per minute diesel pumper, a 1974 Dodge brush truck, a 1976 Kenworth 2000 gallons per minute pumper-tanker, a 1979 Kenworth 2000 gallons per minute pumper-tanker with a remote controlled 1000 gallons per minute turret nozzle, and a 1983 GMC 1250 gallon tanker. All of this equipment remained at Station Number 2 except for a 1971 1250 gallon capacity International Tanker was transferred from Station Number 2 to Station Number 1 to replace the 1971 Ford Tanker that was sold as surplus.

In the 11 years of operation of the St. Timothy Volunteer Fire Department, they were led by three chiefs, including Nelson Sigmon, Charles Sigmon, and the District Chief, Paul G. Yount.

The newly formed organization of the two departments operated with Reid Poovey Jr. as Fire Chief, Larry Setzer as District Chief of Conover Station #1, and Paul G. Yount as District Chief of Conover Station #2. The area served by the stations was divided along Interstate 40 with Conover Station #2 or the St. Timothy Station covering Interstate 40 and all of the areas to the north and west, and Conover Station #1 covering all of the areas south and east of Interstate 40. After the merger was completed, the fire department roster had about fifty members, up from approximately twenty-five before the merger.

In 1986, The Conover Fire Department decided rather than purchasing a new \$260,000 vehicle, they would modify and recondition the 1976 Kenworth pumper at a cost of \$76,000. The truck was refurbished as retro-fit pumper with a 50-foot telescopic aerial water tower. The specifications were developed by Sherman Pickard, who was the Fire Consultant for the North Carolina League of Municipalities. The Modification of this pumper completed Conover's service plan for the western area, including the Conover Rural Fire District, formally the St. Timothy Fire District.

In 1987 the Conover Fire Department had answered 227 fire calls between the two fire stations. The property loss from fire in 1987 was approximately \$40,000 amounting to around \$180 per fire. The department also had a Class 5 insurance rating. The firefighters were often Notified of incidents through telephones, CB radios, or with a good set of lungs.

Throughout the history of the Conover Fire Department, many major incidents have been handled including the Timmerman Manufacturing Plant Fire, the St. John's Lutheran Church Fire of 1950, and again in 2001, the Conover Lumber Company fire on April 28, 2015, the Claremont Hardware and Farm Supply fire in Claremont on January 24, 2015. The department has also responded out of county to respond and assist during incidents such as the Valdese Wildfire on April 4, 1985, the Chemical Coatings LLC. Fire in Hudson on May 28, 2011, the Godfrey Lumber Fire in Troutman on July 4, 2014, and the Economy Inn Fire in Triple Community on November 22, 2016

In 1991, a new 1991 Pierce Lance engine was purchased with a 1500 gallons per minute pump and 1,000 gallon tank.

In 1996, a new fire department headquarters station was constructed at the corner of the newly constructed Thornburg Drive and Conover Blvd. East, this station replaced the station that was housed in the municipal building.

In 2000, a new Pierce Dash 75' ladder truck was purchased to better serve the growing population of eastern Conover.

In 2003, J. Mark Hinson was hired as Fire Chief, a position that he still currently holds. In 2004, the City of Conover Fire Department earned an ISO Class 5 rating.

In 2005, the department purchased two, 2005 Pierce Enforcers engine companies with a 1500 gallon per minute pump and 1,000 gallon booster tank, which replaced the 1976 Mack pumper, the 1979 Kenworth, and the 1971 Ward LaFrance. The 1979 Kenworth was sold to the Alarka Volunteer Fire Department in Swain County, and the 1976 Mack CF611F was sold to the Hankins-North Fork Fire

Department in McDowell County. In addition to the new apparatus, a new two-story fire station was constructed and opened on September 11, 2005 to serve the northern portions of the Conover Fire District.

In 2007, a new Ford F-450 was purchased to replace the aging 1974 Dodge brush truck and the 1978 Chevrolet C-30/Hamerly four-wheel drive mini-pumper which was sold to the Alarka Volunteer Fire Department in Swain County. Fire Station 2 was also renovated and retrofitted with an automated sprinkler system and improved living quarters for the full-time personnel stationed there, and all three fire stations were retrofitted with exhaust removal systems.

In 2009, a new Pierce Contender engine company was purchased with 1,500 gallons per minute pump and 750 gallon booster tank, which replaced the 1991 Pierce Lance as a front-line apparatus.

In 2012, a 1999 Spartan/Saulsbury Heavy Rescue truck was purchased from the Mechanicsville Volunteer Fire Department in St. Mary's County, Maryland to replace a 1990 Chevrolet Step Van and a 1983 GMC 7000/Pierce tanker, as well as to carry the needed equipment to provide the community with exceptional technical rescue capabilities. The 1983 GMC 7000/Pierce tanker was sold to the Bradshaw Volunteer Fire Department in Mitchell County.

On June 13, 2013, Conover was impacted by a strong Severe Thunderstorm with a micro-burst that resulted in wide-spread damage throughout the city. In approximately 3 hours, the department had responded to 78 emergency calls including structure fires, structural collapses, multiple trees that had fallen on houses, motor vehicle accidents, fire alarms, and downed trees and power lines.

On July 27, 2013, Catawba County experienced a declared State of Emergency after near-record breaking rainfall fell within a short period of time causing massive flooding. In 24 hours, the Fire Department had responded to 85 emergency calls including, 7 swift-water rescues totaling 13 rescues, hazardous material leaks, trees down, and traffic control. The City of Conover sustained major damage to several major thoroughfares including one bridge that was destroyed and many roads that were washed out. An Emergency Operations Center was opened at Fire Station 1 and was operated until the afternoon on July 27th.

Everything has changed since the fire department was organized in 1942. Equipment has been modified to better protect the firefighters, and the fire trucks are modern and versatile in their uses. The Conover Fire Department now answers approximately 1,600 calls per year. The department is now responsible for providing Fire Suppression, Technical Rescue Operations, Fire Prevention, Public Education, Emergency Medical Services, and Hazardous Materials Operations in the City of Conover and the surrounding rural area. The department currently protects an area of 18 square miles with a permanent population of approximately 11,000 and a day time population of well over 30,000.

The Conover Fire currently operates out of three strategically located fire stations, Fire Station 1 was built in 1996 and serves as the headquarters station, Fire Station 2 was built in 1971 and is the original St. Timothy fire station, and Fire Station 3 was built in 2005. In 2014, the department was

awarded a \$226,434 grant to hire three full-time firefighters, bringing the current roster to eighteen full-time, and forty part-time/paid-on call employees.

In 2015, the department was awarded a \$328,820 grant to purchase 40 new air packs to replace the current packs, and 25 sets of Structural Turnout gear to replace ageing and worn out sets.

In 2016, the Conover Fire Department responded 4-Firefighters to assist the Triple Community Fire Department on a Fire at the Economy Inn.

In 2017, the department paid off the remaining debt balance on the two-2005 Pierce Enforcers, Engine 2 and Engine 3. Engine 2 was also refurbished in 2017 with it receiving a new engine, new pump, and new transmission.

In November 2017, Fire Station 2, the original 3,960 square foot St. Timothy Fire Station, was demolished to make room for the construction of a new 10,600 square foot building.

In 2017, the department responded to a total of 1,794 requests for service.

In 2017, the City of Conover Fire Department earned a ISO Class 4 rating.

In 2018, the Conover Fire Department responded to a total of 2,090 requests for service, including 1,300 Fire and Rescue responses and 790 medical responses. The department took over full rescue response responsibility on July 1st after the Newton-Conover Rescue Squad disbanded and acquired the NCRS 1991 Chevrolet Kodiak/Frontline Heavy Rescue.

On February 12, 2019, Fire Station 2 was re-dedicated to the citizens of Conover and on February 15, 2019, Fire Station 2 and Rescue Company 2 entered into service.

