Fire and Fire Control in Colonial Wilmington

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The recent publication of *The Wilmington Town Book, 1743-1778,* illuminates in detail innumerable aspects of urban history in colonial North Carolina. Wilmington, established under that name in 1739, flourished from its inception to become one of the most populous towns in the province. Originally North Carthage, New Liverpool, and Newtown, Wilmington thrived under the promotion of provincial governors and successfully contested Brunswick for the trade of the lower Cape Fear region. By the outbreak of the Revolution Wilmington contained 150 to 200 houses, mostly frame but often two or three stories high with double piazzas which were very impressive. Only New Bern and Edenton, also seaports and county seats, rivaled Wilmington in size before 1775.

The functions of the Wilmington town commissioners reflected the myriad activities of everyday life in the town. The commissioners directed the construction and repair of such public facilities as drainage arches, streets, and wharves. They restricted the operation of taverns during church hours, employed trash collectors, supervised the public markets, and instituted some means of traffic control. Sinking public wells, assizing bread, regulating necessary houses, and controlling the activities of slaves who led seemingly autonomous lives in Wilmington also came within the purview of the commissioners.

Throughout the colonial era the commissioners also grappled with the constant threat of fire. Of course the danger of fire was not restricted to urban areas. It represented a hazard for all colonials. Hence kitchens were more or less separated from the houses on plantations as well as in the towns. Although most fires were accidental, arson was not unknown. Slaves were suspect on such occasions, but often arson was the product of malicious persons who burned public buildings, particularly jails.

Admittedly relatively few North Carolinians fell under the rubric of town dwellers. Urbanization proceeded slowly in the province. Before the Revolution some two dozen towns appeared in the colony; they contained approximately two percent of the population of the province, or perhaps 5,000 people. North Carolina was slightly less urbanized than other British American colonies, and its largest towns did not remotely approach the populations of Philadelphia, New York, Boston, or Charleston.

Nevertheless, the potential danger of fire was greater in urban situations. Houses which were clustered together contributed to a rapid spread of flames, particularly when many buildings were frame with daub and wooden chimneys. Such structures caught fire easily and blazed fiercely. The Great Fire of London in 1666 was a horror long remembered. Fires also occurred with startling regularity in many of the larger colonial towns in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Only a year after the formal establishment of Wilmington, Charleston experienced its worst fire in the colonial era. During the afternoon of November 18, 1740 a blaze broke out in a hatter's shop on Broad Street and raged out of control for hours. It was still burning the next day. The fire destroyed all the buildings from Broad and Church streets down to Granville's Bastion on the Cooper River. Detachments of soldiers from warships in the harbor and local militia patrolled the area for weeks to prevent looting. The burned area included 334 shops and warehouses which constituted the most valuable part of the town. The damage was estimated at £200,000 to £250,000 sterling. Colonials in other provinces took up collections for the sufferers; Parliament granted £20,000 sterling for damages.

Although colonial Wilmington never experienced such a devastating fire as that which ravaged Charleston, fires were recorded in the town in 1756 and 1775. More destructive were the conflagrations of 1786 and 1798. The 1756 blaze necessitated the appointment of a night watch headed by town commissioner Thomas Finney to prevent pillaging. Janet Schaw related the incident of the 1775 fire in *The Journal of a Lady of Quality.* While writing in the early morning hours in the house of her hostess, Mrs. Alice Heron, widow of Benjamin Heron, Miss Schaw heard "an outcry like that of a score of hogs going to the shambles to be slaughtered." She ran downstairs to find that several outbuildings belonging to Mrs. Heron were ablaze. Although a crowd of some 500 blacks and whites had gathered, Mrs. Heron's home and perhaps many others were saved only by the timely assistance of some British sailors who pulled down sufficient paling to prevent the fire from spreading. The effect of the fire of 1786 was recorded by a traveler, Robert Hunter, Jr., who wrote that "The late fire has entirely destroyed the beauty of the town, if it ever possessed any." Hunter later added, "Wil-
Meeting

Time: May 1, 1975, 8:00 P.M.
Place: St. James Great Hall
Speaker: Mr. William Pheiffer

Mr. Pheiffer is the Headmaster of the Charlotte Country Day School. He formerly was in charge of education for the Historic Williamsburg Foundation. Architecture is his special interest.

GIFTS TO THE ARCHIVES

Your Society is fortunate that as a result of Colonel William deRosset’s interest in the Society and Wilmington, we have received 34 valuable and informative original letters from General Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., USMC retired, Commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, U. S. Department of Justice, Washington, D. C. There are 17 letters written between 1812 and 1832 by Thomas Wright, a member of St. James who during this time became a minister in the Episcopal Church. Mr. Wright’s letters were written to John Scott in Tennessee. Mr. Scott was the son of Dr. John Scott, a physician in Wilmington who, according to family records, died in the late 1700’s and is buried in St. James graveyard. Dr. Scott was the great-great-great-grandfather of General Chapman. The other 17 letters were written between 1822 and 1835 by Christopher Dudley, Jr., postmaster of Wilmington and also a member of St. James. The letters contain business information and general news of Wilmington. Colonel deRosset who now lives in Sarasota, Florida has three sisters in Wilmington: Miss Fanny deRosset, Mrs. Ludlow Strong and Mrs. Frank Clark.

Miss Dorothy Knox of Charlotte has given the Society claguerreotypes of her ancestor the Rev. Paul A. Repiton and his second wife, Sarah Cowan. Miss Knox has previously given us several articles pertaining to the Rev. Mr. Repiton who faithfully served Wilmington during the 1862 yellow fever epidemic.

Miss Margaret Hall has given the Society a photograph of B. F. Hall of Pearsall and Hall. We do appreciate these gifts.

Fire and Fire Control

Wilmington without exception is the most disagreeable, sandy, barren town I have visited on the continent—consisting of a few scattered wood and brick houses, without any kind of order or regularity.7 After the November 1798 fire, the attractiveness of Wilmington was, if possible, further reduced. Only twelve houses were reported standing in the wake of that blaze.8

Despite the absence of serious fires in the colonial period the inhabitants of Wilmington undertook precautionary measures to protect the town. Inasmuch as most fires in colonial towns resulted from sooty chimneys, the commissioners of Wilmington in 1752 enacted an ordinance which placed a fine on every person whose chimney caught fire. The fine was doubled in 1758, and similar ordinances were passed in 1763, 1765, and 1768. By 1773 the commissioners decreed that persons must pay fines even though fire did not blaze from the tops of their chimneys. Pecuniary impositions apparently provided little incentive for persons to guard against chimney fires however; a 1778 statute reiterated the former prohibitions against such fires.9

The town book shows that at least nineteen persons were fined or cited for permitting their chimneys to catch fire.10 Significantly, four instances were recorded in the 1750s, two in the 1760s, and thirteen in the 1770s. The increased number of prosecutions for chimney fires in the last decade reflected the growing population of Wilmington and the heightened concern about fire in the town.

Most of the offenders complied weekly with their punishment. Only John Walker, Sr. protested his fine. Although he offered no reason why he should not have paid the fine, Walker asked to appeal the decision to the county court.11 His request was granted but the final disposition of the case is unknown. James Arlow, constable and tavernkeeper, reported that his own chimney had blazed. Perhaps he epitomized the public spirited citizen; or perhaps he cunningly reduced his fine since half of the money went to the town and the other half to the informer.12

Those fined for chimney fires constituted a diverse group of people. They included three women, a husband and wife (who later separated), at least four tavernkeepers, a justice of the peace, and the illustrious William Hooper, one of North Carolina’s signers of the Declaration of Independence.13 Nevertheless, the offenders shared a unifying characteristic: most violated other town ordinances. James Arlow, Benjamin Morrison, James Gregory, William Wilkins, Henry McLorinan, John Kelly, and Thomas Henderson often failed to work on the streets. Gregory and McLorinan defaulted on their taxes. Catherine and Henry McLorinan, Harold Blackmore, and John Moffat illegally traded with slaves. John Walker, Sr. and Erasmus Hanson were convicted of “immoderate riding” in the town. A similar offense by William Wilkinson was excused “owing to Boys making his Horse unruly in the Streets.”14 Lehansius DeKeysers was fined for permitting
his hogs to run loose in the streets. This is not to say that those whose chimneys caught fire were inveterate lawbreakers, but their numerous violations of the law indicated that as a group they were unlikely to observe strictly the town ordinances.

Since defective chimneys were the most common cause of fire, the practice of cleaning chimneys periodically should have been one of the foremost preventative measures for averting fire. In 1754 the commissioners ordered the inhabitants of Wilmington to sweep their chimneys every fourteen days. In 1768 the fine for a chimney fire was waived if the responsible person could prove that the chimney had been well swept within the past two weeks. The 1754 ordinance was modified in 1772 to permit the sweeping of chimneys every twenty days from October to April inclusive. Kitchen chimneys, however, were to be swept throughout the year. Again, Wilmingtonians seem to have been lax in their compliance with the law. A chimney sweep might have proved beneficial, but an attempt by the town to hire a sweep was unsuccessful.

Low chimneys also constituted a danger since sparks could more easily fall on roofs. In 1749 the town commissioners required all Wilmingtonians to raise their chimneys to a height at least three feet above the ridges of their roofs. Five years later the assembly permitted the commissioners to order residents to raise their chimneys to a height at least four feet above the ridges of their houses. Presumably most chimneys met this requirement. The commissioners found it necessary thereafter to order only two persons, Henry Rooks and John Quince, neighbors on Marsden’s Alley, to raise their chimneys.

The risk of fire in Wilmington was increased by the practice of boiling pitch, tar, and turpentine on the wharves and burning rubbish in the streets. In 1756 the commissioners banned fires on the wharves after dark and in 1772 extended the injunction to rubbish fires. In 1769 flammable materials such as hay, fodder, and oakum were ordered removed from all dwellings and forbidden in private residences thereafter.

Fire prevention was not sufficient however. Even the best preventative measures would not ensure safety from fire. Positive efforts were needed to combat fire once it started. Wilmington instituted its fire fighting program in 1750 when a town tax was levied to purchase fire ladders and buckets. Taxes in 1751 and 1755 were imposed for similar purposes. At least four ladders and sixteen buckets were immediately procured, but to the dismay of the town commissioners Wilmington residents used the town’s fire ladders for private purposes. It was not an uncommon practice; Wilmingtonians also availed themselves of the town’s wheelbarrows with the same disregard for public property.

The commissioners attempted to curtail the unnecessary use of the fire ladders in 1752 by decreeing that no one could use the ladders (except in case of fire) unless he intended to sweep his chimneys. And then the person had to obtain the permission of a majority of the commissioners before taking a ladder. The order was altered two years later to restrict the use of the ladders for sweeping chimneys to twelve, then three, hours. Eventually six hours was deemed sufficient time to sweep one’s chimneys.

The increasing size of Wilmington and the expense of fire buckets prompted the commissioners in 1765 to decide that homeowners should bear the responsibility of supplying buckets. A 1768 ordinance commanded every homeowner with two fireplaces to furnish one leather bucket, and every homeowner with more than two fireplaces to furnish two buckets. The buckets were to be marked with the names or initials of the owners in order that they could be returned to the proper persons after a fire.

Wilmingtonians once more showed their reluctance to comply with the law. Seven months after the passage of the 1768 statute, thirty-eight homeowners had neglected to obtain the required buckets. And it was necessary to enact additional ordinances in 1772 and 1778 to demand residents to procure fire buckets. The former law stated that chimneys of kitchens and other outbuildings were to be counted when determining the number of chimneys in a household, indicating that some residents attempted to evade the purchase of buckets by minimizing the number of chimneys in their homes.

An obvious deterrent to the acquisition of fire buckets was the expense. The town paid 9s 4d each for buckets bought in 1751. The Moravians found in 1775 that the cost of leather for a fire bucket was 6s, and that the charge for making the bucket in "ordinary" fashion was another 6s, or, if made properly, 8s. Thus a bucket cost 12s to 14s, a considerable sum of money, equal perhaps to a year’s provincial and county taxes.

The premier instrument in Wilmington’s fire fighting arsenal was the water engine or fire engine. Wilmington was the first town in the province to acquire a fire engine. The town commissioners were permitted by legislation passed in 1745 to levy a special tax for the purchase of an engine but did not immediately take advantage of that act. Instead the commissioners decided in 1752 that surplus tax revenues from the annual town tax would be set aside for the purchase of an engine. Similar provision was made for surplus moneys in 1753 and 1754.

Unfortunately, normal tax receipts proved insufficient to buy a fire engine. The assembly, recognizing the need for an engine in the rapidly-growing town, commanded the town commissioners by law in 1754 to levy an ad valorem property tax on the houses in Wilmington and use the proceeds to purchase an engine. The following year the commissioners valued the houses which ranged from £2 10s 0d proclamation for one belonging to Joshua Grainger to £512 10s 0d for one belonging to Arthur Mabson. A one percent tax was assessed on the valuations. Of course compliance was not complete. Warnings were issued to defaulters on April 17 and May 2. Finally, on December 20, 1755, the commissioners ordered warrants of distress issued against those who still refused to pay the tax.

Captain Benjamin Heron, who had served in the British navy before settling in North Carolina and who later became deputy surveyor and auditor of crown revenues, clerk of the crown, naval officer, and member of the council in North Carolina, was commissioned to buy the fire engine in London. The town sent Heron £60 proclamation to purchase the machine but the final charges amounted to £121 12s 9d. The engine alone cost £76 2s 14d; freight and insurance comprised the bulk of the remaining expenses. It is noteworthy that the engine was shipped to Wilmington via Portsmouth, England and Charleston, South Carolina. Wilmington had not rivaled Charleston as a port of commercial importance since it was necessary or easier to send the engine
to Charleston rather than ship it directly to Wilmington.

Inasmuch as the cost of the engine greatly exceeded the sum raised for its purchase, the commissioners announced that the difference would have to be met by private subscription or an additional tax. Generous citizens failed to appear, and in 1758 another special property tax was imposed to pay the debt and buy fire hooks for pulling down buildings. The proceeds of that tax were sufficient to pay the accumulated arrears of the purchase of the engine, build a shelter for the machine, and presumably buy the fire hooks.25

Once the town acquired a fire engine, it had to hire someone to tend it. Thomas Newton, ferrykeeper from Wilmington to Point Peter, was the first caretaker. He agreed to keep the engine oiled and in working condition. In addition, he was supposed to “play” it once a month. Alexander Duncan, merchant in partnership with John Ancrum and Robert Schaw, replaced Newton as caretaker of the engine in 1759. His compensation was the exemption of two of the members of his family from working on the streets in Wilmington as all male taxables were annually required to do. Yet, town financial accounts showed that in March 1760 Alexander Adamson, a constable, was paid for cleaning and repairing the engine, mending one of the leather boxes, and buying oil. And in November 1760 Caleb Mason, a commissioner, received compensation for taking care of the fire engine.26

Lack of a major fire caused Wilmingtonians to become complacent in the ensuing years. The fire engine was neglected until 1765 when the town commissioners allocated part of the town tax for repairing the building in which the engine was housed, mending the engine, and paying a person to look after the machine. Still, in 1767 the assembly noted that the fire engine was in a state of disrepair and directed the commissioners to see that the engine was mended and operated monthly. The law also demanded that the commissioners sink two wells near the courthouse in order that water might be readily available in case of emergencies such as fire. Within a year the commissioners had complied with the behest to dig wells.27 The fire engine remained neglected.

In 1772 the town commissioners decided to obtain a new fire engine for Wilmington. Not only was the old engine decayed but it was also deemed too small for the town. The commissioners directed the firm of Ancrum and Schaw to sell the old engine in Philadelphia and purchase a newer, larger model with two fire chains and hooks. Apparently American manufacturers had taken precedence over English goods, or at least over the costly Newsham & Ragg or Nuttall engines emanating from London. And, in fact, colonial craftsmen produced excellent fire engines. In the 1760s Richard Mason, a Philadelphia carpenter, improved on London models by putting the pumping lever on the end instead of the side of the engines to allow more room for bucket brigades.28

Meanwhile, the Wilmington town commissioners developed reservations about parting with their old engine. Later in 1772 they contracted with James Blythe, a silversmith and planter, to repair the old engine so that it would “throw water an equal distance of a New Engine” purchased by the town. Otherwise Blythe would receive no compensation for his work. Blythe honored his contract and the commissioners eventually appointed him keeper of the engine and hooks. Six months later, however, Blythe’s negligence resulted in his replacement by William Campbell and Richard Player. By that time, October 1773, the new engine had arrived. In order to protect the fire engine a new lock was bought for the engine house. The three keys to the engine house were distributed to Campbell, Player, and Henry Rooks, a pewter maker who probably lived close to the house.29

Janet Schaw did not indicate that the fire engines were utilized to combat the fire at Mrs. Heron’s house in 1775. Probably desuetude had again overtaken the machines. In 1778 commissioner John DuBois was directed to find some person to repair the engines, make two public ladders, and put handles on the fire hooks. After that work was completed, the town contracted with John Gilliard to find four able blacks to work the engines once a month.30 The fires of 1786 and 1798, however, proved that the engines, if available, were unequal to their task.

Wilmington was not the only town in North Carolina to attract the attention of the provincial legislature in the assembly’s attempt to protect urban Carolinians from the danger of fire. The legislature often alluded to the need for fire protection in laws designed to regulate many of the incorporated towns in the colony. Wooden chimneys, which constituted an obvious fire hazard, were forbidden in many towns. Residents of Hertford and Halifax who had already erected wooden chimneys were ordered to raze them within five years. A fine was imposed on inhabitants of Edenton who insisted on constructing wooden chimneys. In other towns the assembly permitted the town commissioners to deal with the problem.31

Other legislative regulations pertained to fire fighting equipment. In 1756 the town commissioners of Edenton were permitted to impose a special tax to purchase a fire engine, and in 1770 each homeowner in Salisbury was required to procure two fire buckets and a ladder.32 By 1773 the assembly found that the “great increase of Buildings in the Town of New Bern” necessitated “water Engines, and other Instruments for extinguishing Fire.” It enjoined the commissioners of that town to levy a tax on houses and the values of businesses for purchasing an engine, buckets, and ladders, and for erecting public pumps. Upon the arrival of the engine the town was instructed to form a fire company to manage the engine and to exercise it regularly. Furthermore, each homeowner was directed to obtain two water buckets and a ladder at least twenty-five feet in length to guard against future fires.33

Advanced as Wilmington appeared in fire control, the Moravians in Wachovia probably had formulated the most effective means for combating fires in the colonial era. As early as 1759 Bethabara designated one member of each house in the community as a fire inspector. After the establishment of Salem in 1766 a commission of fire inspectors was appointed. That body annually investigated the buildings in Salem to ferret out fire hazards. By 1775 the inspectors must have found many faulty chimneys because the town masons repaired most of the chimneys of Salem during that year.34

Salem’s superior fire control program was also evidenced by the employment of a public chimney sweep. Andreas Broessing served as the first sweep, followed by Matthew Oesterlein. Oesterlein was unable to continue because he was too fat and got cramps in his feet. The town then secured the services of a young man, Gottlob Krause, who worked under the supervision of Oesterlein. Salem also instituted fire fighting measures before the Revolution which consisted of the procurement of thirty-
six fire buckets and a number of ladders placed judiciously around the town. A fire engine was obtained soon after the Revolution.\(^{35}\)

When Wilmington’s efforts to provide fire protection are viewed in broader perspective, against the activities of the larger colonial cities, they pale perceptibly. As early as 1638 smoking out of doors near the Town House in Boston was prohibited because “fires have been often occasioned by taking tobacco.” A decade later all fires during the evening hours were ordered covered or extinguished to lessen the danger of fire at night.\(^{36}\)

Chimney inspections and building regulations supplemented smoking and curfew laws in Boston. After 1651 chimneys were regularly inspected and fines imposed for defective or dirty structures or for those which blazed from the top. In 1655 two town chimney sweeps were appointed. Eventually, responsibility for the chimneys rested solely with the sweeps who worked under the direction of a superintendent. Following the fire of 1691 at Boston, the General Court of Massachusetts required houses in the town to be constructed of stone or brick and covered with slate.\(^{37}\)

The “Great Fire” of 1711 in Boston and its resulting confusion induced the General Court to provide a more systematic scheme for fighting fires. Thus the town was divided into ten wards supervised by fire wardens who would care for public fire apparatus and direct efforts in their districts to extinguish fires. The town then made extensive purchases of ladders, hooks, pails, axes, and powder (for demolishing buildings to prevent the spread of fire) in addition to three fire engines. The first colonial fire company was founded in Boston in 1717 when a group of public spirited citizens agreed to bring buckets and bags to every fire and to protect private property from looting. The organization furnished a model for the famous Philadelphia fire companies which began to apparent almost twenty years later.\(^{38}\)

Bostonians continued to add the number of their fire engines during subsequent years. The machines were exercised regularly on the last Monday of the month by the members of the engine companies. In 1742 the town offered an award of £5 to the company whose engine arrived first at a fire. In 1763 the number of fire permits was increased to sixteen which included ten engines, each manned by a captain and thirteen to twenty men. Private citizens supplemented public efforts. Most kept leather buckets, ladders, ropes, hooks, and axes which could be used to combat fires.\(^{39}\)

Boston’s fire defenses exemplified those of most of the urban centers in England America. Curb laws, building codes, chimney inspectors, public chimney sweeps, fire engines, and organized fire companies characterized the efforts of Newport, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston to reduce the risks of fire. Philadelphia owed its success to the endeavors of private citizens, notably Benjamin Franklin, rather than public planning, and the relative immunity of the city from fire may have occasioned the formation of the first successful American fire insurance company.\(^{40}\) Wilmington and other North Carolina towns could have benefited from the experience of these older, larger communities, and the assembly certainly hailed their example in 1773 when directing New Bern to organize a fire company upon the arrival of its fire engine.

Wilmington, then, before the Revolution possessed the most advanced means of fire control of any town in North Carolina with the possible exception of Salem. A large corps of town ordinances contained directives to govern fire prevention and fire fighting. The fortunate absence of a major fire in Wilmington generated apathy toward fire control measures which inhibited their effectiveness. Nevertheless, Wilmington had established precedents which would serve the town well during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the town formulated a more advanced fire control program to meet the needs of its citizens.

FOOTNOTES

1. Raleigh, 1973, hereafter cited as WTB.
3. See the Minutes of the Edgecombe County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, April 1763 and the Minutes of the Chowan County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, June 1769, State Archives.
6. WTB, 89; Janet Schaw, Journal of a Lady of Quality, edited by Evangeline Walker Andrews with the collaboration of Charles McLean Andrews (New Haven, 1923), 169-170; Robert Hunter, Jr., Quebec to Carolina in 1785-1786, edited by Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling (San Marino, Calif., 1943), 286-287; Moreau de St. Merry, Moreau de St. Merry’s American Journey (1793-1798), edited by Kenneth Roberts and Anna M. Roberts (Garden City, N. Y., 1947), 333.
7. WTB, 54, 94, 123, 155, 177-178, 214-215, 234.
8. WTB, 85, 86, 102, 184, 188, 206, 210, 213, 221, 222, 223, 225, 226, 227, 228, 235.
9. WTB, 210-211.
10. WTB, 46, 85.
11. WTB, 184.
12. WTB, 213.
13. WTB, 73, 177-178, 197-198.
14. WTB, 135.
16. WTB, 88, 97, 123, 177, 191-192, 197.
18. WTB, 54, 73, 79; also 94, 123.
19. WTB, 156, 178.
22. SR, XXIII, 236; WTB, 51, 60, 63.
23. SR, XXV, 260; WTB, 77-78, 79, 80, 83.
24. WTB, 81, 87, 90.
25. WTB, 91-92, 95-96.
26. WTB, 97, 99-100, 109, 111.
27. WTB, 160, 181; SR, XXV, 512.
30. WTB, 235, 231.
31. SR, XXIII, 453, 478, 808; XXV, 399, 487.
32. SR, XXIII, 466, 811.
33. SR, XXIII, 916-917.
34. MR, II, 756, 763-764, 822, 877.
35. MR, II, 705, 894, 896, 899.
36. Bridenbaugh, Cities in the Wilderness, 56.
37. Ibid., 206-207.
38. Ibid., 211-212.
39. Ibid., 367; Bridenbaugh, Cities in Revolt, 100, 294.