

Memorandum

To: Fire Station No. 8 History & Legacy Working Group **Date:** May 22, 2018
From: John Liebertz, Historic Preservation Planner
Subject: Fire Station No. 8 Historic Overview

This memorandum provides additional information regarding the history and historic significance of the Hall's Hill Volunteer Fire Department (HHVFD) and Fire Station No. 8. This document is not meant to be a comprehensive history of either the fire station or its firefighters, but serves to supplement the resources, oral histories, and information collected and shared by community members, the previous task force, and this committee.

Historic Significance

The HHVFD (later designated Fire Station No. 8) is a historically African American fire company that is significant for (but not limited to) the following reasons:

- The HHVFD was the first African American-operated fire station in Arlington County;
- Its association with the social history and development of Hall's Hill/High View Park, one of the oldest communities in Arlington County;
- It provided valuable opportunities for leadership development in the community;
- It provided a safe location for African Americans to gather and interact in a segregated society;
- Its transition from volunteer to a combination of volunteer and professional (paid) firefighters represented a milestone for African Americans in Arlington County and the surrounding region's struggle for equal access to employment;
- Its association with African American leaders of Arlington County who served as either volunteers or professional fire fighters;
- The site's representation of the legacy of racial segregation and unequal treatment, and the community's ability to overcome such obstacles;
- The desegregation of the Arlington County Fire Department;
- Its role as a landmark and source of pride for the Hall's Hill/High View Park community; and
- Its importance as a historical and cultural touchstone that reminds all residents and visitors how Arlington's African American community had the courage and conviction to strive for equal rights, progress, and justice.

Brief History of the Hall's Hill Volunteer Fire Department and Fire Station No. 8 (1918-1963)

Organized as a volunteer unit, present-day Fire Station No. 8 was Arlington County's first black-operated fire station. C.B. Rose wrote in *Arlington County, Virginia: A History* that "A [volunteer fire] company was organized by the Black residents of Hall's Hill in 1918."¹ *Arlington County's Annual Report, 1953-1954*, stated that the Hall's Hill Volunteer Fire Department (HHVFD) was first organized in 1925.² This later date of formation is corroborated by an article in the *Washington Post* on August 21, 1925, and the *Evening Star* on August 22, 1926, that stated:

The newly organized Halls Hill, colored fire department will hold its first annual carnival August 25, 26 and 27 on the lots opposite the John M. Langston school at Hall's Hill. Chief C. H. Chinn is general chairman. The officers of the department are Robert Nickerson, president, Samuel Taylor, vice president F.W. Ewell, secretary, and William E. Lewis, treasurer, and C.H. Chinn, chief. [*Washington Post*]³

The Hall's Hill Volunteer Fire Department, recently organized, will stage a carnival on the grounds of the John M. Langston School Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday nights. Chief C. H. Chinn, with the following officers of the department, will be in charge: Robert Nickerson, president; Samuel Taylor, vice president F.W. Ewell, secretary, and William E. Lewis, treasurer. [*Evening Star*]⁴

The *Arlington County's Annual Report, 1953-1954* stated that the volunteer fire fighters first housed equipment at the John M. Langston School. The HHVFD utilized a two-wheel cart with a 60-gallon chemical tank pulled by six men. In 1926, the department purchased a 1917 Mitchell and mounted a 60-gallon chemical tank/extinguisher to this vehicle. The community supported the purchase of the engine by means of door-to-door canvassing and subscriptions.⁵

In 1927, as required by Chapter 20 of the Acts of the Assembly, the HHVFD incorporated and received a charter.⁶ The officers were Robert Nickerson, president, William Clark, secretary, and William E. Lewis, treasurer. Directors were Horace Chinn, Charles Chinn, F.W. Ewell, and

¹ The author failed to provide a direct citation for the date of organization. The Historic Preservation Program and the Arlington County Library staffs will coordinate research efforts to ensure accurate information on any future interpretation. C.B. Rose, *Arlington County, Virginia: A History* (American Historical Society, 1976).

² Arlington County, *Arlington County's Annual Report, 1953-1954*.

³ "[untitled]," *Washington Post*, August 21, 1926, ProQuest.

⁴ Carnivals were one of the primary revenue-generating means for operational expenses for fire houses throughout the county. "[untitled]," *Evening Star*, August 22, 1926, Newsbank; Arlington County Board, "Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board," September 24, 1932, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>.

⁵ Arlington County, *Arlington County's Annual Report, 1953-1954*.

⁶ Arlington County, "Copy of List Certified to the Court House, May 16, 1947, Members of Arlington County Fire Company #8," Center for Local History, Arlington County Public Library.

James Moore.⁷ The same year, the HHVFD moved to a small one-story garage at 1137 Lee Highway (likely owned by William and Susana Hicks). In addition, the department purchased a Ford automobile and mounted two 60-gallon chemical tanks/extinguishers to the vehicle.⁸ Newspaper articles noted the participation of the HHFVD in the protection of property throughout the County. On February 29, 1929, the *Evening Star* stated that apparatus from Hall's Hill answered the call for a fire at a dairy storage room in Clarendon:

Clarendon, VA., February 4 – Fire of undetermined origin yesterday caused damage of approximately \$2,000 to the garage and storeroom of the Arlington Dairy, located on Wilson boulevard, near Clarendon.... Apparatus from Potomac, Jefferson District and Hall's Hill answered the alarm, but found the fire under control.⁹

The HHVFD and East Arlington Department both participated in Firemen's Parades in Washington, D.C. on September 5, 1932. The District of Columbia fire department and firefighters from seven other states marched in the Capital while over 100,000 spectators lined Pennsylvania Avenue. The HHVFD were one of twelve representatives from Virginia.¹⁰ Arlington's African American firemen participated in the parade the following year as well.¹¹

In July 1, 1932, Arlington County started to provide equipment and pay utility bills (heat, light, etc.) for volunteer fire companies.¹² In addition, the County provided HHVFD with a 1929 Diamond T. pumper.¹³ Circa 1934, the HHVFD built a new fire house at 2209 North Culpeper

⁷ While the fire station was located in Hall's Hill, presumably at the first temporary station at 1137 Lee Highway, the principal office was located in Ballston. "Hall's Hill Volunteer Fire Department Granted Charter," *Washington Post*, October 10, 1927, Proquest.

⁸ The location of the first fire station and the equipment is from the 1929 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map. The 1929 Sanborn Map recorded a Ford vehicle, while the later history of the station noted a Chevrolet chassis. Arlington County, *Arlington County's Annual Report, 1953-1954*; Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, *Cherrydale, Arlington County, Virginia* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Sanborn Map Company, 1929), 1 and 12.

⁹ "Dairy Storeroom Damaged by Fire," *Evening Star*, February 4, 1929, Newsbank.

¹⁰ "100,000 Line Avenue as Thousands March in Firemen's Parade," *Evening Star*, September 5, 1932, *Chronicling America*; "District's Labor Day Parade," *Washington Post*, September 5, 1932, Proquest.

¹¹ "Firemen's Parade Program," *Evening Star*, September 4, 1933, Proquest.

¹² The County paid a "personal service" to the volunteer fire companies. In 1939, the County paid the six white-operated fire stations between \$100 and \$120 dollars. The two African American-operated fire stations, East Arlington and Hall's Hill, received \$90 and \$80, respectively. The County Board minutes also note the funding of a soda machine at the station on Lee Highway. The fire protection fund noted an expenditure of \$4.25 to M.E. Horton, Inc. for soda. Arlington County Board, "Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board," September 24, 1932, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>; Arlington County Board, "Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board," June 18, 1932, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>; Arlington County Board, "Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board," January 30, 1939, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>.

¹³ Arlington County, *Arlington County's Annual Report, 1953-1954*.

Street on Lot 26 of the Cottage Park subdivision.¹⁴ The property belonged to William and Susana Hicks, prominent residents of the Hall's Hill community who subdivided Cottage Park (along Lee Highway) in 1905. It is unknown if the Hicks family provided funds as well as the land to build the station. The family retained ownership of the property until conveying it to the HHVFD in 1944.¹⁵ The new station served as an informal community center, offering a safe location to congregate, a place to share information and news, and the convenience of a public telephone and soda machine.¹⁶

On July 14, 1938, the firemen of East Arlington and Hall's Hill united to form the East Arlington and Hall's Hill Fireman's Association. Barred from joining other organization, the firemen elected Robert Branch as President. The *Evening Star* stated that "the two volunteer companies are said to be the only colored fire units in the State."¹⁷

At a Special Meeting of the County Board of Arlington County, Virginia, on March 27, 1939, the County Board reviewed the provisions to create a professional (paid) fire department. The proposed budget, however, neglected to include money to pay firefighters at either the East Arlington or Hall's Hill stations. The meeting minutes recorded the following comments:

Robert Branch, President of the Arlington County Colored Firemen's Association, spoke on the faithful service rendered by the two colored companies and asked the Board to include an appropriation for paid firemen in these two companies as well as the white companies.

William R. Minor, of the Arlington County Wide Citizens Association and Natalie Oorman, representing the colored youth of Arlington, both spoke in favor of paid firemen at the colored companies...

The County Manager stated he had endeavored to serve all the citizens and better conditions throughout all sections of the County. He stated with respect to the firemen, that no survey had been made as yet to determine the number of companies required and at the present time the equipment of the colored companies was not a standard type and the companies were not in shape to have

¹⁴ The date of construction is unknown. Aerial photographs from 1934 do not depict a building on this site; however, the 1936 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map notes the Hall's Hill Volunteer Fire Department Station at 2209 North Culpeper Street.

¹⁵ For more information on the Hicks Family, see the documentation completed for 2211 North Culpeper Street. Arlington County Land Records, "Susana Hicks, et al. to E. T. Morton, et al." (July 6, 1944), Liber 644, Folio 240-241.

¹⁶ County Board Meeting Minutes confirm the location of the soda machine at the previous station. The installation of the phone is substantiated through multiple corroborating oral histories. Arlington County Board, "Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board," June 18, 1932, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>.

¹⁷ The following others were elected: William O Cammack, vice president; Charles Smith, secretary; Roscoe Richards, treasurer; Richard Smith, representative; and Finton Goldman, chaplain. "Fire Units Elect: East Arlington and Hall's Hill Name Robert Branch," *Evening Star*, July 14, 1938, Newsbank.

paid men, regardless of color. He stated, however, the Budget contemplated continuing the monthly allowance to these companies just as it had been done during the past year.¹⁸

Arlington County started a paid fire department on July 1, 1940, but excluded the two African American fire companies.¹⁹ The average annual salary of paid firefighters was approximately \$1,200.²⁰ The East Arlington Volunteer Fire Department protested at the October 30, 1940, meeting of the County Board. S.W. Tucker, an attorney representing the station, stated that the County had discriminated against the two African American stations as the other six white-operated companies all had paid firemen.²¹ The County Board refused to take action on the matter and directed the attorney to the County Manager.²²

In 1941, the County Board approved the monthly stipend of \$65 to each of the six white companies with paid firemen. This allowance covered the up-keep of the buildings and other related expenses. With respect to the HHVFD, the County increased the monthly budget from \$90 to \$115, which included \$35 for rental of the fire station and \$80 for personal service (instead of having salaried firefighters).²³ At the same meeting, *The Sun* reported that the County Manager informed the County Board of the closing of the East Arlington Volunteer Fire Station. The exact reasons for the disbandment of the company are unknown, but the County Manager stated that the East Arlington Volunteer Fire Department was closed due to a “lack of cooperation.”²⁴

In the 1940s, the Arlington County Fire Department continued to expand its number of positions, created pension plans for fire fighters, and offered other job-related services. Yet, the County still refused to allocate funds for paid positions for African American firemen. The HHVFD, however, continued to provide service throughout the county when called upon. For example, when a forest fire broke out near Chain Bridge in 1941, Cherrydale and Hall’s Hill fire companies jointly responded to the blaze that burned for 5 hours.²⁵

¹⁸ Arlington County Board, “Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board,” March 27, 1939, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>.

¹⁹ The Chief of the Fire and Safety Division became a salaried position in 1937. Arlington County Board, “Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board,” June 14, 1940, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>.

²⁰ The salary for first, second, and third year fire fighters had raised to \$1,690, \$1,870, and \$2,050, respectively, by 1943. Arlington County Board, “Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board,” July 30, 1941, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>; Arlington County Board, “Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board,” August 7, 1943, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>.

²¹ Samuel Wilbert Tucker was a nationally renowned attorney with the NAACP who argued numerous cases before the United States Supreme Court.

²² Arlington County Board, “Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board,” October 30, 1940, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>.

²³ Arlington County Board, “Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board,” February 14, 1941, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>.

²⁴ “County to Pay \$54 Fire House “Rental,” *The Sun*, February 21, 1941, Arlington County Public Library.

²⁵ “Forest Fire Rages Five Hours Sunday,” *The Sun*, November 19, 1941, Arlington County Public Library.

By 1944, the HHVFD had been renamed Arlington County Fire Department Engine No 8, but the station still was manned by volunteers.²⁶ The following volunteers served at Fire Station No 8. in 1947: President Robert Nickerson, Vice President Richard Whaley, Chief Leonard Beckwith, Captain John H. Moten, Captain Roscoe Richards, 1st Lieutenant Harrison Taylor, 2nd Lieutenant Richard A. Whaley, Sargent Herman Nickerson, Fire Marshall Robert N. Branch, and Privates Clovis H. Chinn, Georg Spriggs, Mervin Williams, Robert Nickerson, William Smothers, William Peterson, Granterson Clark, Priceton Simms, Guy Thorton, Frederick Deskins, Rochester Weeden, Richard Brown Jr., John Hicks Jr., Willis Lewis, Leo R. Hill, Nathaniel Spriggs, Charles Courtney, George Moten, Theodore Harris, Howard Moten, Wilburt Johnson, Louis Williams, and Samuel Hyson.²⁷

On March 29, 1948, County Board Member Florence Cannon lobbied for an increase of the Fire Department budget by \$8,000 to provide for 3 paid firemen and equipment at Fire Station No. 8.²⁸ The community made the following comments:

Mrs. Hicks endorsed Cannon's recommendation of paid firemen and better equipment for Hall's Hill, calling attention to the service rendered by those volunteer firemen for a number of years.

Mr. Grant Clark, President of the North Arlington Veterans' Committee and the John M. Langston Citizens' Association, called attention to the fact that Fire Company #8, Hall's Hill is the only one not having paid firemen though it has been in operation for 30 years. It is the most important residential section of the County and the volunteer firemen have rendered valuable service there. He urged provision for three paid men and that the fire equipment be replaced.

Mr. H. H. Howe urged an appropriation to put Hall's Hill Fire Department on the same basis as the other fire companies.²⁹

On April 30, 1948, County Board Member Cannon made the formal motion to allocate \$7,380 to the Fire Department for the creation of the three paid positions at Fire Station No. 8. County Board Chairman Daniel Dugan seconded the motion in support of the African American firefighters. In what appears to be an attempt to provide political cover to the other board members, Dugan stated that salaried firemen in Hall's Hill were required since Country Club Hills (a neighboring white subdivision) lacked a fire station. He suggested that it would be in the interest of the white home owners to have a professionally staffed department in close proximity.

²⁶ Arlington County Land Records, "Susana Hicks, et al. to E. T. Morton, et al." (July 6, 1944), Liber 644, Folio 240-241.

²⁷ Arlington County, "Copy of List Certified to the Court House, May 16, 1947, Members of Arlington County Fire Company #8," Center for Local History, Arlington County Public Library.

²⁸ Arlington County Board, "Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board," March 29, 1948, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>.

²⁹ Arlington County Board, "Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board," March 29, 1948, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>.

The motion, however, failed to pass with three County Board members in opposition.³⁰ Fire Station No. 8 still received only the monthly \$115 allocated for personal service established in 1941. While the County provided fire apparatus, Fire Station No. 8 primarily received used equipment from other stations when they were allocated new equipment.³¹

In 1949, the Arlington County Civic Federation and the Columbia Pike Citizens' Association unsuccessfully lobbied the County Board to appropriate a full-time fireman at Fire Station No. 8.³² The following year, numerous members of the community also requested payment for the firemen:

Mr. Carrol A. Deskins, of the North Arlington Community Veterans' Committee, spoke of the volunteer service rendered by the Negroes [sic] of Halls Hill over a period of many years in affording fire protection for the northwest section of the County, and of the fact that it is the only company in the County that does not have paid firemen. He stated those citizens wish to be of service to other citizens of the County and he urged that they be permitted to do so by the establishment of from three to five paid firemen in the Hall's Hill fire company.

Mrs. Georgiana Cobb, of the John M. Langston Citizens' Association, asked for [paid firemen] for Hall's Hill and that the men be invited to the Fireman's Association and trained as firemen.

Mrs. Jean G. Hanchette, speaking as an individual, favored...paid firemen at Hall's Hill, and stated she was willing to pay increased taxes if necessary.³³

County Board Chairman Dugan and County Board Member Cannon again supported the requests and the County Board ultimately approved the creation of three paid positions for Fire Station No. 8. The positions, which were open on July 1, 1950, were not immediately filled to Cannon's dismay because Arlington County established a police and fire merit examination. It is unknown if the intent of the examination was to limit African American employment opportunities. Thirty-two caucasians and four African Americans took the exam, but only eight caucasians and one African American passed. The committee reviewing the results stated that new board examinations were required due to an insufficient number of qualified candidates. Cannon

³⁰ The three board members in opposition were: F. Freeland Chew, Basil M. Delashmutt, and Alfred Frisbie. Arlington County Board, "Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board," March 29, 1948, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>.

³⁰ Arlington County Board, "Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board," April 30, 1948, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>.

³¹ Arlington County Board, "Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board," July 3, 1948, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>.

³² Arlington County Board, "Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board," March 29, 1949, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>; Arlington County Board, "Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board," April 19, 1949, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>.

³³ Arlington County Board, "Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board," March 27, 1950, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>.

objected to the delayed hiring of these positions and requested that the vacancies at Fire Station No. 8 immediately be filled, but failed to rally support.³⁴

On Monday, January, 8, 1951, Julian M. Syphax, of 1327 South Queen Street, and Alfred W. Clark, of 1935 North Emerson Street, reported to Fire Station No. 8 as the first two paid African American firemen in Arlington County.³⁵ The number of paid firemen at Fire Station No. 8 would continue to expand in the 1950s. Arlington County added the fourth position in 1951, the fifth position in 1952, the sixth position in 1953, and the seventh and eighth positions in 1954.³⁶ The company expanded to 12 firemen (2 Captains, 2 Lieutenants, and 10 fire fighters) by 1962, the last year they occupied the fire station on North Culpeper Street.³⁷

Numerous sources have attributed Fire Station No. 8 as the first black-run or first black-paid fire station south of the Mason-Dixon line. While additional research needs to be conducted on the context of African American firemen and stations in the South, Washington, D.C., had employed a number of firemen since 1868 and its first all-black company was established in 1918.³⁸ The City of Richmond, Virginia, hired its first paid African American firemen in May 1950. Ten men were hired from a large applicant pool and assigned to Engine House No. 9, an all-black station under the supervision of white officers.³⁹ The *Richmond Afro-American* noted the following:

The ten who were formerly chefs, college students or businessmen will celebrate their first anniversary June 28 [1961] at the engine house at Fifth and Duval streets with the knowledge that not a single person in distress has mention the color of their skin.⁴⁰

Other neighboring jurisdictions such as Alexandria, Virginia, did not hire African American firemen until July 27, 1966.⁴¹ Ronald Deskins, who was one of four students who integrated

³⁴ Arlington County Board, "Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board," August 12, 1950, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>.

³⁵ On December 11, 1950, the County Manager stated that the station would be "manned" the following day, but newspaper records suggest a later first day of employment. "Two Colored Firemen Appointed in Arlington," *Evening Star*, January 6, 1951, Newsbank.

³⁶ Arlington County, *Arlington County's Annual Report, 1953- 1954*.

³⁷ Arlington County, *Arlington County's Annual Report, 1961- 1962*.

³⁸ Cultural Tourism DC, "Engine Company No. 4, African American Heritage Trail," <http://www.culturaltouristdc.org>.

³⁹ Michael Eric Taylor, "The African American Community in Richmond, Virginia, 1950-1956," Thesis, Master of Arts in History, University of Richmond (1994), 47-48.

⁴⁰ *Richmond Afro-American*, May 26, 1951, quoted in Michael Eric Taylor, "The African American Community in Richmond, Virginia, 1950-1956," Thesis, Master of Arts in History, University of Richmond (1994), 47-48.

⁴¹ Alexandria City Government, "African American in Alexandria Public Safety," <http://www.alexandriava.gov>.

Stratford Junior High School in Arlington County in February 1959, stated that he was the fifth black fireman hired by Fairfax County when he joined the department in 1973.⁴²

Arlington County continued to provide Fire Station No. 8 with second-hand equipment in the 1950s. The company received a second 1928 GPM American LaFrance pumper in 1950 and replaced the existing 1935 pumper with a 1929 GPM American LeFrance in 1951.⁴³ In 1954, the station received one of its first pieces of new equipment, a G.M.C. 750 GPM Pumper. Five years later, they received a new 750 GPM Peter Pirsch Pumper.⁴⁴

Planning for a new county-owned fire house in Hall's Hill started in the early 1960s. The County Board acquired a number of parcels of land, contracted architect Richard L. Parli to design the building, and paid \$134,216 to build the station in August 1962.⁴⁵ Almost one year later, on June 17, 1963, Arlington County placed in operation the fire station at 4845 Lee Highway. Fire Station No. 8 became a combination engine and truck company. To accomplish this change, the County assigned a new 100-foot aerial ladder truck to the company and increased the number of men from 12 to 21. Similar to other County stations, Fire Station No. 8 consisted of three platoons. Platoons A, B, and C, were staffed by Captains Hartman S. Reed, Alfred W. Clark, and James K. Jones, respectively. There was a total of 3 Captains, 3 Lieutenants, and 15 fire fighters. The volunteer portion of the company consisted of 35 members.⁴⁶

The date of integration of the Arlington County Fire Department remains unknown. Secondary sources and oral history suggest the department desegregated prior to the opening of Fire Station No. 8 at 4845 Lee Highway in late 1962 or early 1963. Additional research will be undertaken to determine when the desegregation of the department occurred.

⁴² Gregg McDonald, "Fairfax African American firefighters: Reaching out from within," *Washington Post* July 3, 2013, Washington Post.

⁴³ Arlington County, *Arlington County's Annual Report, 1952- 1953 and 1953-1954*.

⁴⁴ Arlington County, *Arlington County's Annual Report, 1953-1954 and 1962-1963*.

⁴⁵ Richard L. Parli, a noted local architect, also designed Fire Station No. 10 at 1559 Wilson Boulevard. Alcon Construction Company received an award of merit from the Northern Virginia Builders Association for Fire Station No. 8. The acquisition of land for Fire Station No. 8 included five parcels acquired between 1962 and 1968. Arlington County Board, "Meeting Minutes of the Arlington County Board," February 10, 1962, <http://www.archives.arlingtonva.us>; Evening Star, "Nine Builders Will Receive Awards of Merit," *Evening Star*, April 3, 1964, Newsbank.

⁴⁶ Arlington County, *Arlington County's Annual Report, 1962-1963*.