African Americans have played a significant role with the City of Charlotte Fire Department throughout its History. Many people think that the First African American hired, Hazel Erwin, was the first African American ever on the payroll but the First Documented Firefighter that was paid by the City of Charlotte was the Engineer for the Neptune’s. His pay was $96 compared to $120 for the Hornet and Pioneer Engineers. This is documented in 1878 and full three years after the CFD was formed. One of the best-known Firefighters with the Neptune Company was Samuel Lafayette Taylor. He served as the Foreman (Effectively the Station Captain) for a period, later he was an Alderman, a Lt. Colonel in the US Army, an accomplished Ballroom dancer, musician, shoemaker, and barber.

It was not until 1906, when William Silas Orr, Chief of the Fire Department hired additional personnel that the Neptune’s would cease to operate and the end of African American Firefighters until 1967. The first Civil Service Charter had within it a requirement to have “Rights of Suffrage”, which was effectively a Jim Crow Law. This clause was not removed from the Civil Service Requirements until the 1940’s.

In 1967 Lieutenant Jesse Adkins filed a lawsuit about Promotional Processes, hiring practices and the inability to be a Member of a Union. This lawsuit effectively opened the door for Hiring of African Americans with the CFD. The story goes that Jesse Atkins, and the Members of the Firemen’s Assembly were contacted by opposing council and told if they didn’t drop the lawsuit that they would hire an African American as a Firefighter but if they did drop it this would be off the table. Jesse Atkins made his stance clear, the CFD was going to be integrated at some point it should be now. The lawsuit proceeded with Famous Attorney Julius Chambers representing an all-white Firefighters Assembly and Jesse Atkins and true to their word the City hired Hazel Erwin, the First paid Firefighter for the CFD after the Neptune’s had been disbanded. Hazel was assigned to Station 1.

In 1969 David Taylor was hired and he would go on to become the First African American Lieutenant, Captain, Battalion Chief, Division Chief and Deputy Chief. Chief Taylor would retire in 1998. After his retirement he would become the First African American Chief within the CFD to go on to a Fire Chiefs Job elsewhere becoming the Fire Chief for the High Point Fire Department.

Captain Earl Adams would be the third African American to be hired and he became the First African American Captain to be assigned to Haz-Mat. His son would be hired many years later and as most of you are aware Earl Jr. passed away a few years ago while still an active member.

In 1977 the hiring for Engines 21, 22 and 23 took place and under the direction of Jack Lee and on the heels of Rule 9 being enacted in 1973, a rule to ensure equitable hiring and Promotional Practices within the Fire and Police Departments African American Firefighters would be hired at an increased rate. In fact, the CFD hired African Americans at a rate of 33% which was greater than the required 25% so the CFD was never put under a consent decree. Within that 1977 hiring group some of the pillars of this organization were hired. Howard D. “Pete “Key, who would go on to become the First African American in CFD History to occupy the Fire Chiefs Office. This being such an historical event Mayor Viola Alexander Lyles proclaimed that December 28, 2019 would be Fire Chief Pete Key Day.

Chief Mackey served as the first Recruitment Chief in CFD History and after his retirement he to would go on to become a Fire Chief for Elizabeth City for many years. Jerome Fredrick would rise to the rank of In 1977 Larry Mackey was also hired and Battalion Chief Mackey would go on to become the First Battalion Chief before retiring. Lee Belton would become the First African American assigned to a

Rescue Company (Squad 2, later Squad 10, Rescue 10) as a Captain. Chief Belton would also become the recruitment Chief upon Chief Mackey’s retirement.

Linda Lockhart would become the First African American Woman hired on the CFD and would make Firefighter II prior to her retirement but Linda didn’t really retire she became the First Seamstress for the CFD and continues to serve today as a Receptionist at the General Office.

Pricilla Johnson would be the First African American to be promoted to Captain (She was forced to file a lawsuit to be promoted and part of the settlement included her seniority being changed to the day she should have been promoted). P.Y. continues to serve the CFD through her sideline business catering countless fire department events.

Sylivia Smith Phifer would be promoted to Captain and would become the First African American Woman to reach the rank of Battalion Chief. Riding some of the busiest companies as a Captain she was the first African American Woman Captain on Engine 1 and she has been instrumental in the CFD Recruitment Efforts. Jeff, her husband, and Chief Smith Phifer were the First African American Husband and wife team.

Venessa Roy became the first female African American Engineer in 2019 and still holds that rank at fire Station 22.

The list is long and those on it have made major impacts, Battalion Chief Willie Summers would retire and go on to be the Chief of Asheboro where he continues to serve today. Engineers Kay Blake, Levi Steele, Captains Fred Archie, and Fred Caldwell all laying the groundwork for others to follow.

In 2018 Reginald Johnson would become the First African American Fire Chief hired from outside the CFD. Being only the second Fire Chief hired from outside the CFD.

Today African Americans make a significant impact on our Deparment. Deputy Chief Samuel Jones, Division Chief Kelvin Brim, Battalion Chiefs Tim Brown, Derrick Cooper, and Smith Phifer to name a few. The CFD reached a peak of 18% African American Firefighters in 1987 and remained at 18% for many years but this percentage dwindled but is back on the rise. As we look forward it most assuredly is the goal of the City to obtain a percentage of 35% as this is the percentage of African Americans in the City Limits. If the Organization would have continued Chief Lee’s Model of 33%, we would be so much closer than we are currently.

The African American Community has provided significant Impacts to our CFD since 1875 and this will continue. To all Black History Month is a time to celebrate, learn and become more familiar with all our history.

This was compiled by CFFA Local Historian Shane Nantz