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MAYOR

*City of Charleston*  
*South Carolina*

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PUBLIC INFORMATION

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## **COURTENAY SQUARE DEDICATED**

*Charleston, SC*—Mayor Joseph P. Riley, Jr. and Fire Chief Karen Brack dedicated the small square at the corner of Meeting and Wentworth Streets today. This site had been covered with concrete for the most of its existence. The City removed the layers of concrete and designed a beautiful new garden with colors, plants and hardscape materials used throughout historic Charleston including antique roses, boxwoods, flowering perennials and benches to create a public square for everyone to enjoy. The 128 year old cast iron and wood pavilion has been restored to endure as a well preserved remnant of Charleston's nineteenth-century urban landscape for hundreds of years to come. The cost for the renovation was \$348,000. Mayor Riley said, "This small courtyard is a peaceful place for all to visit. Mayor William Courtenay was a man of great insight and we honor his dedication to the establishment of a paid Fire Department for the City of Charleston."

Firefighting in Charleston began in the early years of the colonial period. Although the colonial government instituted some regulations, firefighting in the city was a communal effort until the latter part of the eighteenth century. Property owners kept filled buckets of water ready for the next sound of the alarm. In the case of a fire, all citizens were expected to assist in the effort to stop it.

During the 1700s, Charleston experienced a series of devastating fires. This led to the establishment of several volunteer firefighting organizations by 1784. While the volunteer fire companies protected the city from fire during much of the nineteenth century, the Great Fire of 1861 served as the catalyst for the creation of a larger and more permanent firefighting infrastructure in Charleston.

The Great Fire of 1861 remains one of the most devastating city fires; flames roared across the peninsula burning 540 acres, 575 private homes, numerous public buildings and businesses, and five churches.

By 1870, Charleston had 1,600 volunteer firefighters and over a dozen companies on the roster. In 1877, Charleston became the first city in America to institute the Gamewell fire alarm telegraph system. By the next decade, the Gamewell system was accompanied by fourteen steamers, three truck companies, and a new water system that supplied water to the steamers.

On January 1, 1882, Mayor William A. Courtenay and the Charleston City Council established a paid fire department under the Department of Police. Replacing the old volunteer system,

the new Charleston Fire Department consisted of 101 men and 29 horses serving six engine companies (steamer and hose carriages) and two truck companies.

Meanwhile, during the 1880s, the City of Charleston planned a small park in honor of Mayor William A. Courtenay at this location where we are today. In 1885, the City erected this cast iron pavilion on the site of the artesian well. Then, the first major challenge for the new professional fire department occurred just four years after its establishment. In August 1886, a disastrous earthquake destroyed a large part of Charleston.

A few minutes after the earthquake shocks, fires broke out in several areas of the city. Debris obstructed the engine houses, and the fire alarm telegraph system was rendered useless. Amid the chaos, Charleston's firemen moved their apparatus to several fires, often carrying hoses by hand. The earthquake and the subsequent fires damaged nearly 2,000 buildings, while more than 12,000 chimneys had been sheared off at the roof line. Damages reached close to \$6 million and over 100 people died.

While the city began to clear the debris, Mayor Courtenay advocated the establishment of new fire houses strategically located throughout the city. As an acknowledgement to the brave services of the fire department during the earthquake, he suggested the construction of modern engine houses should provide every convenience to the officers and men of the department. Chief Brack said, "Mayor Courtenay established a fire department which has saved our city many times. His insight provided safety and comfort for our citizens for centuries.

In 1886, City Council chose to erect three modern fire stations: a central one at Meeting and Wentworth Streets, an upper one on Cannon Street near King Street, and a lower one on Meeting Street near Queen Street. The position of the new firehouses would provide the opportunity for efficient administration while offering comfortable quarters for the officers and their men. The city had abandoned plans for the park to use the site for the construction of a centralized modern firehouse.

The central station on the corner of Meeting and Wentworth Streets provided fire protection for the most costly perishable properties in the city. With four engines housed at this location, the wholesale and retail stores of Meeting and King Streets, and the wharves of East Bay Street could be accessed readily in case of a fire. The location also afforded the firefighters a straight course from the Cooper River to the Ashley River and the most efficient north-south route through the peninsula.

Since the pavilion was already constructed on the lot, the fire station was built around the pavilion. Local leaders decided the pavilion, which was originally intended to be part of the park honoring Mayor Courtenay, still had a place in front of the fire station.

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