

Fire Department History

The Roanoke Fire Department was first organized in the fall of 1882 by concerned citizens, specifically Norfolk and Western Railroad employees and downtown businessmen. A totally volunteer organization of 40 individuals started functioning in 1883, with horse-drawn equipment from a 1st Street and Campbell Avenue location. The department hired the first paid firefighters in 1906, with the establishment of Fire Station 1 on Church Street. The city was small enough that most fires could be spotted from the bell tower of this historic building. In 1911, the 1st engine powered fire trucks were purchased: three Seagrave pumpers, each with a powerful 75-horse-powered engine. In 1918, the last horse-drawn fire wagon was placed out of service, a sign of the changing times for the City of Roanoke and the Roanoke Fire Department.



The department grew slowly as major fires plagued the downtown business district. In 1936, men were hired to start a two-platoon system. It wasn't until 36 years later in 1972, that a three-platoon system went into effect, which caused significant growth in the department, and is the current shift configuration.

Making Changes

Major jurisdictional annexations took place in 1949, when 29 square miles were acquired, and again in 1976, when the western boundary was established. These annexations caused the growth of the department in both numbers of fire stations and increased personnel. In 1952, firefighters organized to form a union, IAFF (International Association of Firefighters) Local 1132. To this day, IAFF Local 1132 plays a significant role in the culture and services provided to Roanoke citizens.

The Nation's First Volunteer Rescue Organization

A significant customer service initiative was undertaken in 1991, with the First Responder program, the department's first involvement in providing medical services to the community. Appropriately, in 1995, the Roanoke Fire Department merged with the Roanoke EMS (Emergency Medical Services) to form the Roanoke Fire-EMS Department. This merger also linked the fire department with Roanoke Emergency Medical Services, the first volunteer rescue organization in the nation. Roanoke Emergency Medical Services, REMS, helps provide ambulance and rescue services during the night and weekends by staffing at least 1 Advanced Life Support (ALS) ambulance during those hours.



REMS draws a set stipend from ambulance fees and acts as a purchasing agent for all the medical supplies used by any city ambulance, in addition to providing all ambulance maintenance.

Expansion

Expanded regional cooperation with the County of Roanoke, City of Salem, and Town of Vinton, has taken place since 1995. A regional radio system, permitting the four jurisdictions' emergency units to talk directly with each other, has greatly enhanced the ability to respond to major incidents and coordinate emergency efforts.

Standardization of equipment and fire-fighting components, such as 5-inch supply hose and the adoption of a valley-wide Incident Management System

(IMS), have laid the foundation for greater regional cooperation.

Training Center

The most significant regional cooperative effort for the fire service has been the construction of the Roanoke Valley Regional Fire-EMS Training Center. This modern training complex provides the Roanoke Valley with a state-of-the-art training facility that will foster and support future regional efforts.

Expanding Services

Since 1995, the newly consolidated Roanoke Fire-EMS Department has been growing professionally, expanding services with the following progress:

- Expanded public fire safety education program for youth.
- Increased advanced life support personnel.
- Increased ambulance service.
- Acquired modern fire apparatus.
- Updated radio system.
- Improved fire suppression water delivery system.
- Implemented a company building survey program
- Adopted a National Incident Management System (IMS).
- Increased fire inspection program for businesses.
- Enhanced vehicle extrication capability.
- Increased department-wide training in both fire and EMS disciplines.
- Developed regional training center.
- Upgraded ISO (Insurance Service Organization) rating, an institution that sets residential insurance fire rates for communities.
- Registered to become a Nationally Accredited Fire Department.
- Increased minority and female recruitment.
- Diversified apparatus purchases to provide a more diverse fleet arrangement (i.e., Quints, Telequirt, etc.)
- Named a Nationally Accredited Agency by the Commission on Fire Accreditation International.

