

Nichols College Fire Department, 1959 -- 1999

From the Archives

Fire Department (NCFD) became a reality. Once established, it would serve the Nichols community well for 40 years.

Both moral and tangible support came from Col.

Conrad and the Fire Department of Cranston, R.I. Two old, but serviceable, 1927 fire trucks were purchased from Cranston in 1959 and the fire department was given a room in the basement of Budleigh Hall. By 1968, the department had a 1927 Maxim Cities Service ladder truck, a 1940 Mack 500-gallon pumper, and a 1945 International forest fire truck. The equipment was kept in a garage behind the gymnasium (now the auditorium).

The NCFD was charged with planning the evacuation of all college buildings in the event of an emergency and with the scheduling and supervision of fire drills which were required to be held by all dormitories at least once each quarter.

Members had to maintain a certain academic average, and many were volunteer firemen in their own communities. They were trained in all phases of firefighting and lifesaving by the Cranston Fire Department in the early years and later by the Worcester Fire Department. Each student had to take a 30-hour course for state firefighter certification. By 1965, the department had working assistance arrangements with the towns of Southbridge, Mass., and Quinebaug, Conn.



The Fire Department proved its worth numerous times over the years, particularly in 1969 and 1987. On Feb. 18, 1969, strong winds fanned a blaze that caused extensive damage to Olsen Hall. More than 75 fire fighters from the College and neighboring towns fought the fire for more than two hours. A day after the fire, a local newspaper article noted that the 25-member college fire department was credited with a big assist by firefighters from Dudley, Webster, and Quinebaug. One are doing." Fortunately, the only injury reported was a slight cut of the eye. In 1987, when fire broke out in Budleigh Hall due to an overheated reading lamp, the NCFD again impressed local town firefighters with their "cooperation and expertise."

In 1999, most likely due to insurance costs and concerns, the Nichols College Fire Department was dissolved without public fanfare, and the equipment was sold or donated to local fire department training programs, or scrapped.

Fires have, unfortunately, been a recurring event on the Hill and while they have not resulted in major injuries or loss of life, they have caused significant damage to buildings. For much of the 19th century, if a fire occurred on the Hill, residents were pretty much dependent on themselves and close neighbors to save what they could as best they could. The nearest volunteer fire department was established in 1846 in Webster, and once it was notified it could take a half hour or more to be of any assistance.

In 1816, fire destroyed the Universalist church that served as both church and the Nichols Academy building. Fire would destroy the Academy's boarding house in 1883. In 1890, the Congregational church, along with several houses and barns, was destroyed. In 1931, less than three months after the first students registered for the newly opened Nichols Junior College, the beautiful Budleigh Towers (the former summer residence of wealthy industrialist and Academy trustee and benefactor, Hezekiah Conant) that served as a residence for students burned to the ground. The Junior College's dining hall suffered the same fate in 1937. In 1958, T-Hall residence was destroyed. In 1969, another residence hall, Olsen, was severely damaged; and in 1987, fire damaged Budleigh Hall.

In the early 1930s President James Conrad Sr. purchased a rebuilt Cadillac fire truck; the town of Dudley supplied some accessories. A student-run fire department was the topic of an article in the student newspaper, *The Budget*, in 1934 and again in 1935, when there was a call for volunteers. Other than that, however, there is no mention of a fire department on the Hill in any yearbook, student newspaper or alumni publication, suggesting the College continued to rely on local municipal fire departments until the late 1950s.

Then, in 1958, one of the Junior College's residence halls, T-Hall, suffered major fire damage. Soon after, Reid H. Corning '61 and several other students approached President Conrad with the suggestion of again establishing a volunteer, student-run fire department on campus. In 1959, the Nichols College



Contributed by Jim Douglas

"These kids know what they are doing."

