





Chapter Five 1950-1959

The first black Fire Fighter was hired in 1955, however it was not the first time a black man fought a fire in Houston. In 1863 slaves provided the manpower keeping the city safe while the majority of the Fire Fighters were involved with the Civil War. It would take 92 years after the Civil War before a black man would officially wear the uniform of the Houston Fire Department.

The size of the Department would grow to over 700 men by the early 1950's and fire trucks were being fitted with two-way radios to improve communication.

Along with the added Fire Fighters, the Department acquired 19 pieces of equipment in 1952 to meet the demand of the cities expansion.

Air Pac's were introduced in 1953 but it would take a period of adjustment before the rank and file Fire Fighters would use them.

By the end of the 1950's the Department responded to calls in a 400-square mile radius and serviced a population of over 900,000.

The variety of fires fought during this time illustrated the risk associated with being a Fire Fighter. Intentional fires set by an arsonist in 1953 would damage four lumber yards. During the same year a fireworks factory would explode killing four and wounding over 70 people. A spectacular fire on the "Amoco Virginia" tanker would end the 1950's with great loss of life and property. Much like the 1920's the number of line of duty deaths this decade was high.

Fire Chiefs:

Thomas J. Powers
Joe Lobue
Claude A. Bullock

Line of Duty Deaths:

Rufus J. Temple
Joseph Earl "Bull" Connor
Charley Albert Middlekauf
Fidel Chabolla
Joseph "Joe" J. Solito
Frank Catino

Woodrow Wilson Erwin
Delbert Harvey Sherfy
William Henry Kersten
Willis Neal McWhorter
D.H. Chandler Jr.
Charles A. Jedlicka

Left: Amaco Virginia ship fire at the Hess Terminal on Federal Road on Houston's East side. (Family of W. O. Hunter)





Top Left and Bottom Left: Two additional photos of the Farrar Lumber blaze showcase the fire storm the Fire Fighters endured. (Houston Fire Department)

Above: This image is a photo of the uniform patch that was worn in the late 1940's until the middle 1950's. The Fire Fighters wore a kakki uniform with the patch above the left breast pocket. (Houston Fire Museum)

Opposite Page: The afternoon of September 7, 1953 Farrar Lumber Company located 2401 Texas Avenue caught fire and was a total loss. The business covered the whole block and by the time the first engine arrived they had a large amount of fire and smoke visible. The Fire Fighters endured tremendous heat battling this blaze. (Owen Johnson-Houston Post)



Above: Chief David Fuller as a young captain at the “Drill Tower” later became the HFD Training Chief. He served HFD proudly for 39 years. Photo taken late-1950’s. (Family of W. O. Hunter)



Above Right: Shown in this photo is the “Wild Line” exercise all cadets must complete. The two-and-a-half inch hose line is charged and the cadet must go to the end and “catch” the open butt of the hose line. The trainee Fire Fighter in the photo is Wilbur A. Robson, who entered the HFD in early-1959. (Family of Wilbur Robson)

Right: Ladder drill at the HFD Training Facility. Photo taken 1957. (Houston Fire Department)





Caption. (Credit)





Above from Top Left to Bottom Right: Houston Fire Department Fire Chiefs 1950-1959. (All Photos Houston Fire Department)

Thomas J. Powers, Fire Chief, 1951

Homer Lyles, Fire Chief, 1951-1953

Joe Lobue, Fire Chief, 1953-1958 and 1964

Claude A. Bullock, Fire Chief, 1958-1964

Top Right: Three Houston Fire Department Chiefs commanding a large fire in 1951. Left to right, Chief W. O. Hunter, Chief Joe Lobue and Fire Chief Tom Powers. (Houston Fire Museum)

Bottom Right: Two fire dispatchers in 1950, left to right, Phillip Mitchell and Roy Cutbert. (Earl McWilliams)

Opposite Page: A 1953 house fire in the south part of town. Engine 29 is shown in the foreground. The other truck is a late-1920 model still running strong. (Family of W. O. Hunter)





Top Left: Houston Fire Department Light Truck. This truck was used from 1950 until about 1977. The Fire Fighter in the photo is the truck's Chauffeur Theodore Manahan. The truck was automatically dispatched on all two alarms after sunset. The truck chassis is a 1950 Ford truck. The body was built by the HFD repair shop. (Family of "Slim" Templeton)

Top Right: This photo was taken in front of the Foleys downtown store. It was part of a fire truck display for Fire Prevention week October 1955. (W.O. Hunter)

Bottom Left: This is what the Light Truck looks like today. It rests in a fenced-in alley between the HFD Repair Shop and the HPD impound lot. (Scott Mellott)

Opposite Page: The crew of Fire House No. 42 in front of their 1955 Mack pumper. The Fire House opened in 1955 when the city annexed the area. The building was built in 1950 as the City of Clinton Park's City Hall. In 1955 the City of Houston remodeled the building for it to function as a Fire House. **NEED NAMES.** (Houston Fire Museum)





Opposite Page: Fire Fighter's Union meeting in 1956. Wallace Whitley was the President and he was leading the montly meeting. (Earl McWilliams)

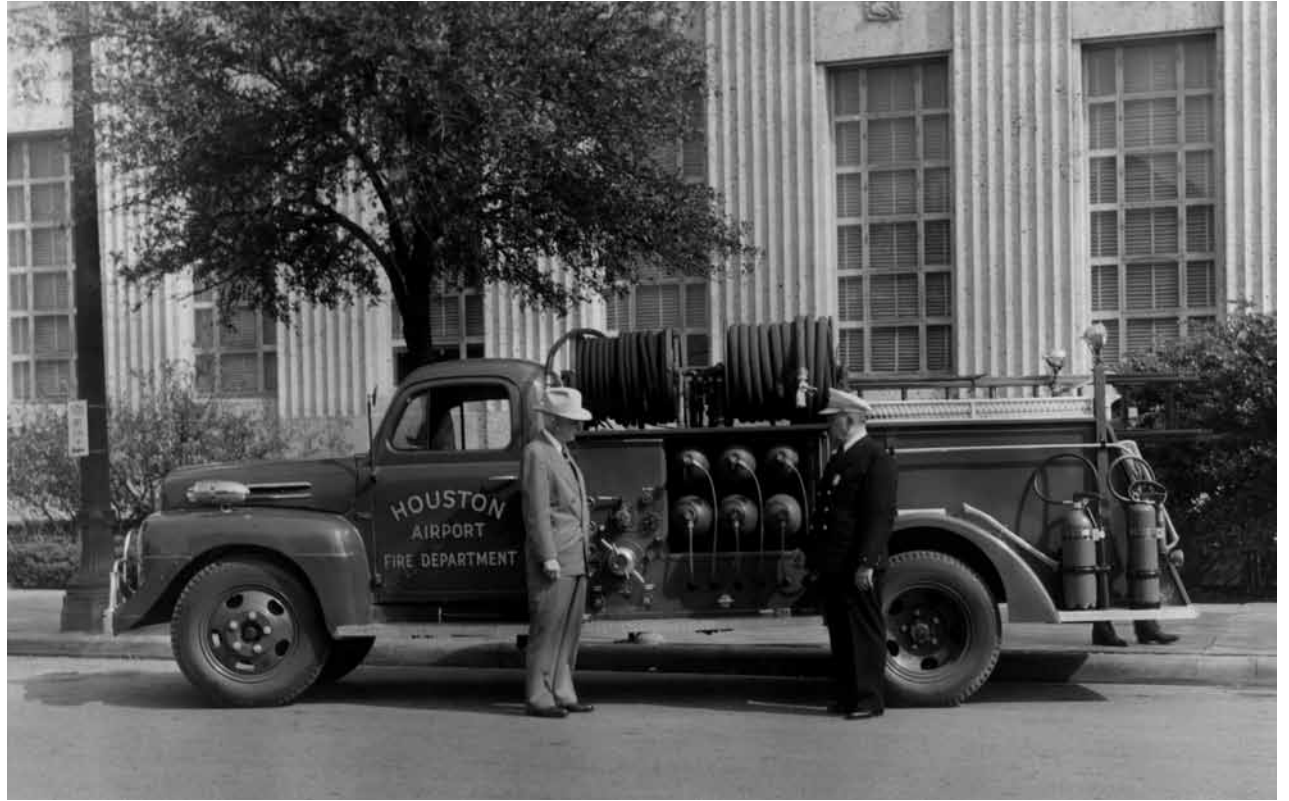
Left: Ground breaking for the new Union Hall, 1952. (Earl McWilliams)

Below: Ralph "Pinchy" Grant, Houston Fire Department photographer in 1957. He helped start the first Department Photo Division. (Family of Ralph Grant)





Above: Water Tower 1 in front of the Central Station on Preston in Downtown Houston. This apparatus was the first one bought by the Department in 1912. It was still going strong in 1955 when this photo was taken.
(Family of W. O. Hunter)



Top Right: One of the first trucks, a 1948 Ford Crash Truck, to be assigned to Houston Municipal Airport (Hobby). Photo taken early-1950's.
(Family of W. O. Hunter)

Bottom Right: Crew of Municipal Airport Field Crash Station. The Crash Truck is an 1953 American LaFrance Engine and Foam Truck. The photo was taken in 1956 and the next year the crew moved to Fire House 36, 7720 Air Port Blvd which was considered a crash station.
(Family of J. B. Martin)



Opposite Page: Fire House No. 22, located 7825 Harrisburg. Photo taken in 1956. Identified in this photo from left to right, top row, Cleatus "Stumpy" Dunn, Unknown, Loren V. Thomas, Fred Pratorius, and Joe. The two Fire Fighter sitting in the from the one on the left is Unknown, the one on the right is Robert Godbey,
(Family of L.V. Thomas)





This Page: It was described as one of the worst fires in 20 years for downtown Houston. Known as the Alaskan Fur fire, this early morning blaze would test the stamina of every Fire Fighter who braved the subfreezing weather to fight it. It was a four alarm event that would entail the use of miles of hose and twenty three pieces of equipment including the Department's battle veteran Water Tower.

Sixteen guided streams of water attacked the fire thru smoke that was at times so thick it obscured the forty plus Fire Fighters on Main Street assigned to control it. The fire ended up damaging seven stores located in the 600 block of Main with an estimated loss of over \$500,000.

Tragically two Fire Fighters , Captain Rufus "Bullock" Templet and Chauffer Joseph "Bull" Connor would suffer fatal heart attacks due to the fire. Photo made January 31, 1951. (Family of J.B. Martin)

Opposite Page: Over 45,000 pounds of explosives ignited at the Alco Fireworks Specialty Company Plant on June 5, 1953. This created a mushroom cloud and panic in the streets. Over 100 people were injured with four fatalities recorded due to the explosion. The city council would soon ban firework production material within city limits. (Houston Fire Museum)







Above: Grand opening of Fire House No. 37 in 1955.
(Houston Fire Department)

Right: The Houston Fire Department Band in the mid-1950's. (Houston Fire Department)





Top Left: Crew of Fire House No. 14 during a training exercise led by Chief Robert Earl Sunday. Shown seated in the photo, left to right, is Floyd "Red" Evans, NAME and NAME. (Family of Floyd "Red" Evans)

Top Right: View of the 1950 Mack Engine in front of Fire House No. 14. (Family of Floyd "Red" Evans)

Bottom Left: Captain Frank "Barney" Barletta cooking spaghetti for the crew at the Central Station 1955. (Jake Cook)

Left: NAME and "Red" Evans working on the evening meal. (Family of Floyd "Red" Evans)





Top Left: Fire House No. 38, 1120 Silber Road, opened in 1955. In front of the left apparatus bay is a 1950 American LaFrance City Service Truck, the middle bay holds a 1955 Mack 1000 GPM Engine, and the bay on the right shows a 1956 Ford Chief's Car. When this Fire House opened there were two shifts. Assigned on each shift were one District Chief, two Captains, three chauffeurs, and 10 Pipe and Laddermen. (Houston Fire Department)

Above: Trainees jumping into a safety net at the Sam Houston Coliseum 1954. (Houston Fire Department)

Left: Fire House No.45, 4200 Banner Road. It was built in 1950 as the Fire House for O. S. T. Acres which was annexed in 1956 and became a City of Houston Fire House. When it was opened only one Chauffeur per shift was assigned, in 1959 the HFD fully manned the Fire House. (Houston Fire Department)

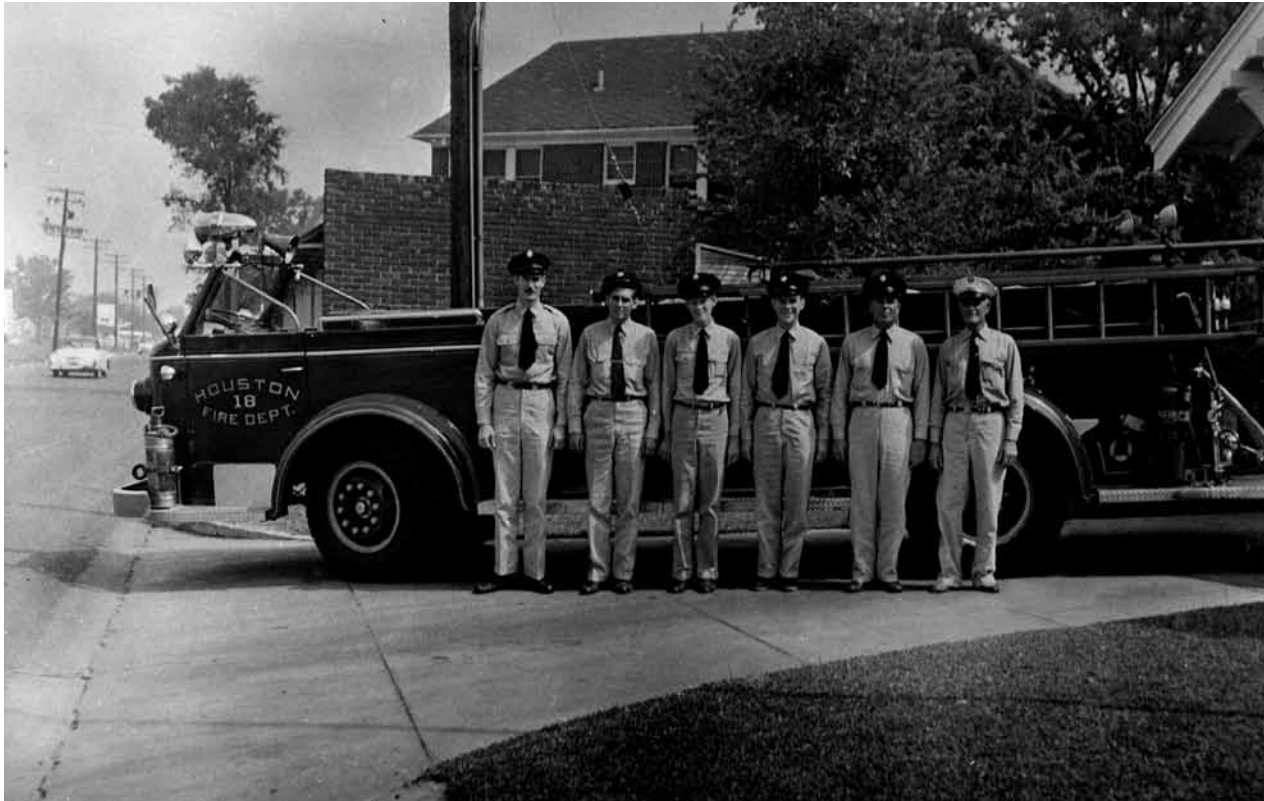
Opposite Page: Crew of Fire House No. 18. "Buster" Green is the only Fire Fighter identified in this photo. He is sitting in the driver's seat. Photo taken 1953. (Family of A. C. "Buster" Green)

Above Right: Two Fire Fighters take a training exam at Fire House No. 33. Show in the photo, left to right, Shift Captain David Fuller, NAME and Troy Robinson. Photo taken 1956. (Houston Fire Department)



Right: Chief Charly Middlekauf in 1950 in front of Fire House No. 2. The car is a 1950 Model Oldsmobile. The name of the chauffeur is unknown. Chief Middlekauf would die in the line of duty in 1953. (Houston Fire Department)





Top Left: The Crew of Fire House No. 18 in about 1955. They are manning a 1952 American LaFrance Engine. (Houston Fire Department)

Above: Fire Fighter J. D. Fisher training on the Pompier Ladder. He entered the Drill Tower (the Academy) in 1959 and served the HFD for 30 years. He only worked at Fire House No. 28. (Family of J. D. Fisher)

Left: Fire House No. 7, 2403 Milam, in 1955. The engine and truck are 1952 model American LaFrance and the Chief's car is 1952 Ford. (Houston Fire Department)



Pages 128-131: The Ladies Auxillary began in the early-1950's when Ms. R.J. Templet awoke in the middle of the night to bring her husband coffee while he worked fighting a blaze. It later expanded to a large group of Fire Fighters' wives who became affiliated with the Fire Fighters Union. In 1954 they purchased a Chevrolet Station Wagon they used to serve coffee and snacks at large fires (three-alarms or more) for many years. The Chevrolet Station Wagon still exists today. It is in storage at the Houston Fire Museum.

(All photos courtesy of The Rufus Templet Family, The Bill Hausinger Family, and the Houston Fire Museum)











On Sunday morning, November 8, 1959, the Amoco Virginia, a 150,000-gallon tanker and the pride of Amoco's fleet, was loading gasoline at Hess Terminal located on the Houston Ship Channel. A worker who was loading the ship did not realize that there was a hole in the rubber loading hose which was leaking gasoline over the deck of the ship and into the water below. The volatile fuel was ignited by a lantern on the bow of a passing tugboat and the ensuing fire traveled back to the deck of the Amoco Virginia. When the fire reached the ship, it followed the path of the leaking gasoline into its hold where a massive explosion followed, ripping a large hole in the deck. After about 16 hours, 500 Fire Fighters finally took control of and extinguished the blazing inferno. Seven men who were on the ship when it exploded perished and about 40 workers, including Fire Fighters, were injured. During the clean up phase of the fire, Jim Chandler slipped and fell into the gaping hole in the deck; death came instantly.

(All photos Houston Fire Department)







Crew of Fire House No. 42 in 1955. The Fire Fighters from left to right are, Garrett Young, Milton Alford, Captain Doyle Ebel, Wayman Cravin, Samuel Kemp and Chauffeur D. Cunningham is the top of the photo. (Doyle Ebel)



In the 1950's Houston had an impressive skyline. The rail yards to the North continued to generate commerce and downtown would continue its upward growth pattern. This view showcases Houston from the North looking southeast.
(Library of Congress)