KENTUCKY BIOGRAPHICAL NOTEBOOK
WILLIAM T. ADAMS (1912-1974): AFRICAN-AMERICAN FIREFIGHTER, LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

Bruce M. Tyler

William T. Adams joined the Louisville Fire Department in 1937 when the Louisville Board of Safety established a second all-black fire-engine company, Engine Company No. 9.[1] Democratic party politics played a role in hiring black firefighters. Neville Miller became Louisville's Democratic mayor after William B. Harrison served briefly in 1927 as a Democratic mayor. Prior to Harrison and Miller, Republicans had controlled the office of mayor in Louisville from 1917 to 1927. Most African-Americans shifted to the Democratic party in 1936 as a result of their inclusion in Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies.[2] Apparently, the new, all-black fire unit was a response to the influence of black Democratic voters and Roosevelt's policies of inclusion that filtered down to the local level. Constitutional racial segregation was national policy from 1896 under the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of the United States Supreme Court that made "separate, but equal" racial policy until 1954 when the United States Supreme overturned this decision. The Louisville Fire Department followed a well-established pattern of racial segregation until 1954 when Mayor

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1 This is the full designation for engine companies, but these companies will be referred to in the text simply with the number and the word Engine.

2 *List of Louisville's Public Officials*, Office of the Mayor, City Hall, Louisville, Kentucky, and information desk, Louisville Free Public Library, Louisville, Kentucky. For the national political context, see Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) and Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

Andrew Broaddus declared that he would hire Louisville civil servants regardless of race. The Louisville Fire Department began to integrate its firefighters. This biographical sketch of William T. Adams chronicles his rise to assistant chief in the Louisville Fire Department in 1967.

Adams was born in Louisville on 12 February 1912. His father William Quincy Adams owned a market wagon selling vegetables. He finally opened a grocery on south Twelfth Street which he ran for many years. The Great Depression, however, caused him to close down his shop because he ran a credit business, and people could not pay their accounts. Adams's mother was a housewife who died 25 September 1937, only two months after he joined the Fire Department on 17 July 1937.[3]

Adams stopped working full-time with his father after he got a job in 1931 at General Hospital on East Chestnut Street. He read about the Fire Department opening another black company and applied for a job there. Adams passed a written civil-service examination and a medical examination.

Adams received firefighting training at the Seventeen Street and Garland Avenue Drill School that was right next to Engine Company No. 17. William Girk drilled them for six to eight weeks in firefighting equipment and techniques. He officially started to work on 17 September 1937. Adams began at the all-black Engine 8 to work with experienced firemen who taught him how to fight fires. He was soon sent to Engine 9 at Jackson and Roselane streets.

Adams had to buy his own equipment and uniforms. The fire department provided the helmet, ladders, and hatchets. The pay scale had grades A, B, and C. Grade A paid $25.90 a week; Grade B paid $27.72, and Grade C paid $29.54. The drivers earned $31.04 a week. The salary helped convinced Adams to join the department. He

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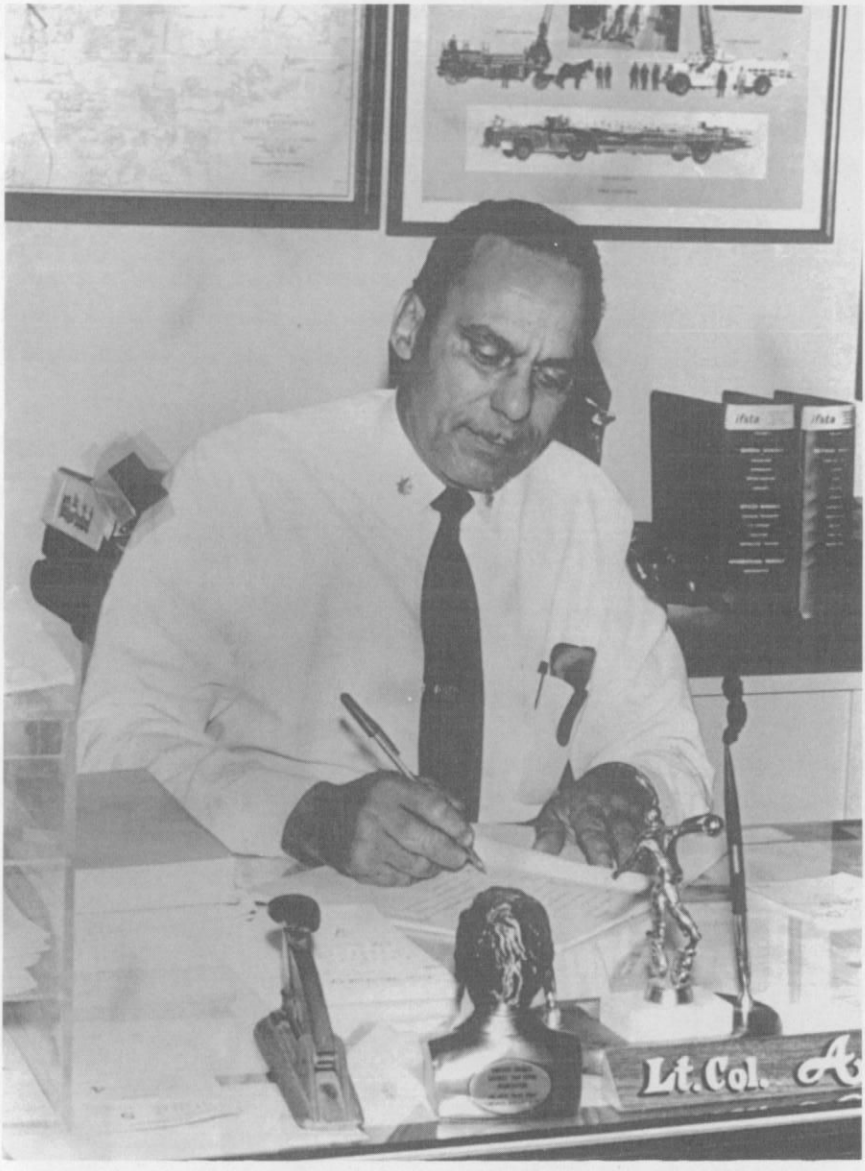
3 Author interview with William T. Adams, 12 June 1991, Louisville, Kentucky. I edited Adams's taped interview which is the source for all material about his life unless other sources are cited. Adams was dying of cancer when he granted me this interview.

Lieutenant Colonel William T. Adams
Fire Division of City of Louisville



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worked twenty-four hours and got twenty-four off. There was one captain in each firehouse with two lieutenants and two engineers.

Engine companies 8 and 9 made numerous runs in the West End as far as Fourth Street but did not usually go downtown. They covered a large area. Engine 8 was in the first district as was the headquarters; Engine 9 was in the second district. If there was a multiple-alarm fire, Engine 8 went into the industrial district to fight fires. Engine 6 was in the Portland area. Engine 8 did not make very many fires in that area. Most of their fire runs were with Engine 7 and with Engine 17 at Seventeenth and Garland streets. They were paired with white companies on first-alarm fires.

Adams recalled that:

> In the beginning, when they first started, the black firefighters at 9s, the pattern was that the first at the fire would be the first to go when the fire was knocked down and the last company at the fire did the clean up, the overhaul work. That was really done by orders of your battalion chief. There were some battalion chiefs who knew you were the first on the scene and they would let you go home. We had different battalion chiefs who responded differently to black crews. When they began to racially integrate the fire department, then things started to change. I, however, have no complaints about that uneven pattern.[4]

Overhauling a burnt property meant checking for hidden fires and hazards and pulling apart material that might flare up later if not checked. Truck company firemen regularly did the overhauling work, not the engine companies who mainly fought fires. Officers might complain to the men for holding back and letting a fire get out of control or for not being at the right place fighting a fire. Adams's unit was not a problem unit and did not get complaints—"those who know will tell you so."[5]

Firefighters took a lot of the punishment fighting dangerous fires. "All of the white companies got gas masks and we didn't have any," Adams recalled, adding:

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4 Adams interview.
5 Ibid.

> The first thing they would tell firefighters, get in there and fight that fire. Naturally, we wanted our jobs and got into the firefight. We would do the best we could and we were taking a whole lot of smoke. We were inhaling that poisonous smoke and gas from fires, but we survived. It was quite some time before they got around to giving us face masks. I think we got one mask.

He said that when he retired in 1974, they had more gas masks.[6]

Adams was promoted to lieutenant on 17 October 1939. The rule was that firefighters had to be in the department several years to earn that rank. Adams was then promoted to captain on 5 April 1941, two years later. He passed both civil-service exams required for promotion.[7]

Other firefighters recalled that Adams was an aggressive firefighter who ran into fires, knocked them down, and taught other black firefighters how to fight fires effectively. In discussing his method of fighting fires, Adams recalled:

> When I was an officer, I didn't stand back and holler at the men to get in there to fight the fire or nothing like that, I led them in there. I felt that it was my duty to do that as an officer and that I should go in and see what the situation was rather than send somebody in there with less experience than I had. I felt that the leader and most experienced man should take the most risks.[8]

He used a large, powerful stream of water to knock the fire down as quickly as possible.

In the winter, Adams and other firefighters had to go out and salt down the cisterns and water hydrants to keep them from freezing. Sometimes they got a service truck if the white companies were not using it. Often black firefighters drove their own cars with bags of salt to dump around the cistern caps to keep them from freezing. They had to open the caps to get to the water. The water in the cisterns did not freeze because they never filled them up so there was a space

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6 Ibid.

7 William T. Adams, personnel file, Louisville Division of Fire, Louisville, Kentucky.

8 Adams interview.

before the freeze would affect them; with that cap on them, they never had water freeze. The cisterns were huge underground water tanks that varied in size and the amount of water they could hold. Firemen dropped a fire hose in the cisterns and used their water pumps from fire truck engines to fight fires. The cisterns were scattered throughout the city. Every fire company had to go out and maintain the cistern system. Keeping the cisterns operational was a time-consuming job.

Adams never had problems going into white neighborhoods to fight fires; he did not witness whites shouting slurs at blacks. Also, blacks were teamed up with the white firefighters of Engine 17 when they went out to fight fires. On a box alarm, in most cases, they got a truck company and two or three engine companies. A truck company carried the ladders to reach tall buildings and engine companies carried smaller ladders. The engine company was the most limited in equipment. If the building was six or seven stories tall, a ladder company was required. Engine 8 and Engine 9 carried about two hundred gallons of water, and they had booster lines. A booster line had a small inch-and-a-half hose that was on a reel on top of the hose bed. If there was a small fire, they would use that inch-and-a-half hose and draw from the water keg they had on the apparatus. If there was a bigger fire, then they would have to lay two-and-a-half-inch hose lines and hook them up to a hydrant.

Adams said that the firehouses were community centers and that a lot of people stopped by the black firehouse at Engine 9 to play cards and talk. Black firefighters from other states came to the Kentucky Derby and stayed in the firehouse while their families stayed with other people. Taylor Redd and other black police officers had walking beats in Smoketown, and they stopped at Engine 9. They frequently came in to talk and eat lunch or dinner there.

Firefighters never had a salary differential like the black and white teachers in Louisville.[9] When Adams joined the newly created

9 White and black firefighters and the chief's office confirmed that there was no racial differential in salary.

all-black Engine 9, they hired ten black firefighters. Under the segregation system, black firefighters could not expand their numbers or officers. The two black companies had ten each, five per shift or platoon.

Adams knew Chief Edward McHugh (1924-1927, 1934-1943).[10] Adams thought that, "He was a fella you didn't like to come around too much. The longer you stayed away from him, the better off you were." Garland Kaufman, another black firefighter, recalled that once when they were fighting a fire, Chief McHugh shouted commands beginning with "you niggers." The black firefighters resented it and crowded around him. McHugh walked over to other black firefighters and told them that those blacks got mad because he had called them niggers. Adams remembered McHugh coming to Engine 9 and asking for Paul Hopson by saying, "Where is my nigger?" Still, McHugh was not the one who gave the black firefighters the worst assignments. Those decisions rested with the district chiefs who had that authority; they were closer to the firefighters and gave them the direct commands. The chief did not make too many small fires, but he did come to the major ones. Adams recalled that Chief John Krusenklaus (1943-1963)[11] was a nice man, as was Chief Eugene Dotson (1963-1970),[12] with whom Adams worked. Adams reported that both Krusenklaus and Dotson advanced the professionalism of the department.

Adams was still at Engine 9 when the fire department started integrating in 1954. Blacks were assigned to the white companies. In 1961, Adams became captain of Squad 5; this was the first time that an African-American had been officially put in charge of a largely white company. He was promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel, an assistant chief, on 1 July 1967 and placed in charge of purchasing firefighting equipment, tools, and accessories; he was in command of

10 David C. Wright, et al., *Louisville Fire Department History* (Paducah, Kentucky: Turner Publishing Company, 1989), 11.

11 Ibid., 12.

12 Ibid.

Assistant Chief William T. Adams's Retirement
Left to Right: Lieutenant Colonel John Zinninger,
Captain Jesse West, Mrs. William T. Adams, William T. Adams,
Assistant Chief Jack Cummings, Mrs. Jack Cummings
Fire Division of City of Louisville

all fire department activities.[13] Adams said that he did not recall any complaints by blacks about how they were treated in those white companies.

Raymond Ponder, a retired black firefighter, recalled the way integration occurred between 1954 and 1956. On some of the Kelly days, they might rotate a white officer into Engine 8 or Engine 9, when they were still all-black; then they sent blacks, usually one, here and there, to white firehouses. He claimed that they did not know what to do with the black officers right away. They did not integrate everybody suddenly. They were slower in integrating black officers.[14]

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13 "Black firefighter William Adams dies at age 79," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 15 December 1991, B-11, col. 1.

14 Raymond Ponder interview, 15 May 1990, Louisville, Kentucky. Ponder personnel file, Louisville Division of Fire, Louisville, Kentucky. Kelly day was named after Edward Joseph Kelly, mayor of Chicago (1933-1947), who gave firefighters two days off a month with pay according to seniority; they could choose their days off.

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Mrs. Adams said the fire department was more reluctant to put black officers over whites quickly. She recalled that Ponder was promoted to lieutenant colonel not long before Adams retired. She thought that Ponder's experience and skill as a firefighter and ability to command should have earned him promotion long before it did. The department waited until he got close to retirement so he would not have a long tenure in the position. He got the promotion just before he retired as a major colonel on 1 September 1977 after twenty-three years of service.[15] Mrs. Adams believed that:

> Chief William J. Cummins (1970-1976)[16] really didn't want you to be what he was. Ponder should have been chief. But Cummins kept him from being chief so Ponder couldn't make him look so bad. Ponder moved up rapidly in rank and he was stopped by department politics or Cummins. That's exactly what he did. Cummins retired the year before Ponder moved up in rank.[17]

Adams, however, disagreed: "I wouldn't go so far as to say that"—"That's what happened," interjected Mrs. Adams—"because there were Lt. Colonel Theodore Funk and others who were qualified, and who made rank before me, and I think that they were qualified." Mrs. Adams said, "But they were white." Adams replied, "They were white, but I still say that they were qualified." Mrs. Adams said that some blacks "didn't want to be critical. That's definitely the way it was." Also, Mrs. Adams believed that her husband could have been a very important and high-profile black leader in Louisville, but he was too reticent to take on a public role. It was a role she wanted and encouraged him to assume.[18] Adams concluded:

> I'm not putting myself in a particular category or as an exceptional officer at that time because they accepted me. The white companies that I was working with, even if they felt any disregard for me, they kept it to themselves. I had the rank and they respected my rank. If any order was given to them, I had no problems. If I said something

15 Adams interview. Mrs. Adams sat in on the interview and contributed to the conversation from time to time.

16 Wright, *Louisville Fire Department History*, 13.

17 Mrs. Adams during Adams interview.

18 Ibid.

> that they didn't like, I never knew a thing about it. I went to white companies under integration, first in rotation to cover another firefighter.[19]

The black firefighters who remained in the department were gentlemen who were reluctant to protest or make racial charges about abuse. Also, whites were the same way. Adams said, "Cummins was chief when I made major. I was assistant chief under him. I had a record of performing my duties. That was it." Adams retired 3 March 1974 after thirty-six years and seven months in the Louisville Fire Department.[20]

William T. Adams came from a family where his father was a self-employed small businessman, a vegetable and fruit vender. Adams learned hard work and discipline from his father who died in 1967. Adams took these same traits into the Louisville Fire Department. He was also a very religious man who served as a deacon and treasurer at his church. He had both high professional and moral standards, characteristics which were noticed by his fellow firefighters, officers who rose in the ranks, and those at the Louisville Fire Department headquarters. As Adams stated, he rose up in rank because white officers liked him, but it was also true that his good character and professional ability as a firefighter were the main factors that led to his success. He was the first black officer to command white firefighters, and he became an assistant chief under chiefs Eugene Dotson and William J. Cummins.

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19 Adams interview.

20 Adams personnel file; "Black Firefighter William Adams Dies at Age 79."