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134-yr.-old favor repaid

S.C. students raise funds to aid FDNY

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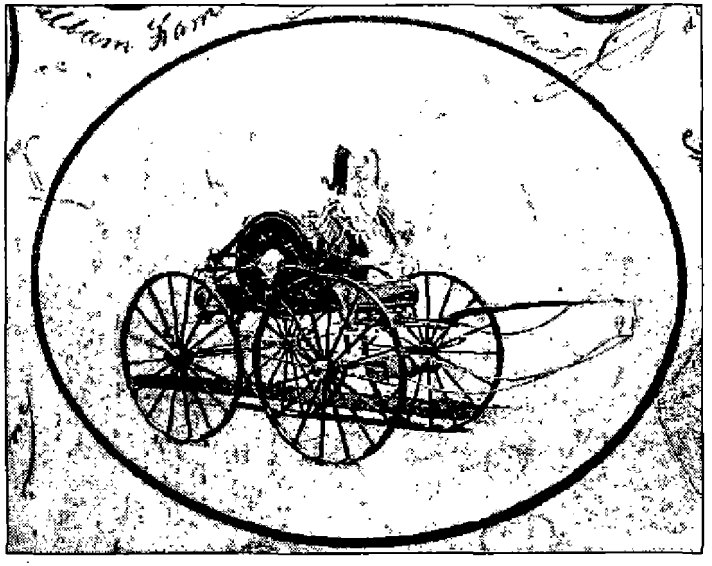
The students of a South Carolina middle school are repaying a 134-year-old debt to the firefighters of New York.

In 1867 — two years after the fires of the Civil War burned Columbia, S.C., to the ground — a group of New York City firefighters who were former Union soldiers raised money to buy the city a hose carriage.

After the Sept. 11 attack on the World Trade Center, "We were all determined to do something to try and help," said Nancy Turner, principal of White Knoll Middle School in West Columbia, 8 miles west of Columbia, the capital.

"We knew there were 50 fire trucks buried in all that rubble," she said. "We knew we were going to get them a new truck and return the debt of kindness the people of New York showed to us so long ago."

On Feb. 17, 1865, during the occupation of Union Gen. William Sherman on his march through the South, raging fires devoured entire city blocks of Columbia. One historian, Walder Edgar, described the wreckage in his book "South Carolina: A History."



GIFT Hose carriage New York gave to Columbia, S.C., in 1867.

"When dawn broke, Columbia could see nothing but a forest of broken chimneys and piles of rubble. The business district and portions of the best residential areas were gone," Edgar wrote.

Upon hearing of the city's plight, the New York Firemen's Association sent a hose carriage to Columbia. According to history books, New York City actually had to send two carriages, after the first, sent in March 1867, was lost at sea in a shipwreck.

And the people of Columbia have not forgotten the New Yorkers' generosity.

The collapse of the twin towers Sept. 11 killed 343 firefighters and destroyed 95 FDNY vehicles — five ambulances, 24 FDNY sedans, 19 chief's Suburbans, 14 specialized units, 19 engine trucks and 14 ladder rigs.

Each new truck will cost the city $354,000, an amount that students at the White Knoll Middle School already have surpassed through bake sales, car washes and other fund-raisers.

'We really need to help'

"I was really upset when everything happened. Me and my friends starting saying we really need to help our people," said one student, Jessica Mack, 13, who sent out more than 100 letters to her friends and relatives asking for donations.

"Every day I bring in more than $200," Mack said. "I knew we were going to be able to do it."

As of Thursday, the school had raised nearly half a million dollars. And the FDNY's new fire truck will be delivered — wrapped in a red-white-and-blue ribbon — sometime in the spring.

"On behalf of every firefighter in New York City, I offer our sincere appreciation to White Knoll Middle School students for their wonderfully generous and heartwarming gift," said FDNY Commissioner Thomas Von Essen. "We will remember the people of Columbia's kindness just as they remembered ours."

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