

Fireman James Houston
Savannah Fire Department

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During a historical research project conducted at the City of Savannah's Municipal Archives, evidence of a fallen firefighter surfaced from the records of 1825. The project, titled *Municipal Slavery - Phase II*, focused on the City's use of enslaved African Americans to support municipal work. During the first half of the nineteenth century, enslaved and free men of color constituted the vast majority of firemen in Savannah. Their participation was mandated in the City's fire ordinance, which also included incentives of pay and bonuses. Fire managers formed fire, axe, hose, and engine companies to organize the workforce and train the men with the best techniques for suppressing the city's fires.

The City Treasurers recorded in their cashbooks payments associated with structure fires. Entries for ringing the alarm bell, firemen's wages, bonuses to the first engine company on the scene, and refreshments provided for firemen were typical payouts from the treasury after each fire. However, in 1825, the City paid the funeral expenses, to include a coffin, burial and black crepe, for James Houston, a fireman of the Union Axe and Fire Company. This recently discovered event is currently the only known instance between the span of 1806 to 1865 where the City honored a fallen firefighter.

Synopsis:

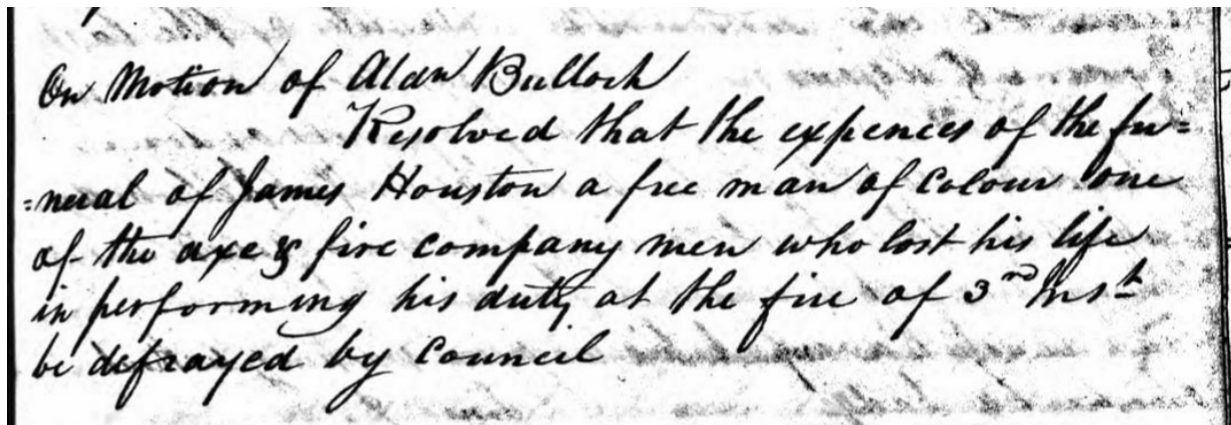
On January 3, 1825, James Houston and Peter Favard, members of the Union Axe and Fire Company, were among the firemen who responded to a fire at Worthington Gale's house on Johnson Square. As the blaze consumed the three-story brick building, it was decided that several smaller wooden buildings were to be pulled down in order to prevent the spread of the fire throughout the city. Both Houston and Favard were seriously injured when a portion of the brick building collapsed. Houston suffered from a skull fracture and crushed leg. The falling rubble broke Favard's thigh. Doctors called to the scene amputated Houston's leg in an attempt to save his life. However, he succumbed to his wounds within thirty minutes. Favard survived the fire, but suffered from long term disability. Savannah's City Council decided to pay for Houston's funeral expenses and to honor him with mourning vestiges. In November of that year, an ordinance was passed for the relief of Peter Favard, exempting him from taxes and duties.

Note: This evidence report is provided to the Savannah Fire Department to enable them to learn about James Houston prior to the Memorial Ceremony in October, 2023. The research pertaining to the death of James Houston at Gale's fire is thorough. In addition, an ongoing research project aimed at conveying the historical context of nineteenth century firefighting in Savannah is forthcoming.

Contents of Historical Evidence

- 1 Savannah City Council Meeting Minutes - January 10, 1825
- 2 Newspaper Article *Savannah Republican* - January 4, 1825
- 3 Entries from City of Savannah Treasurer's Cashbook, Vol 3-4
- 4 Newspaper Article *Savannah Republican* - November 3, 1825

Savannah City Council Meeting Minutes - January 10, 1825



On Motion of Aldm Bulloch
Resolved that the expences of the funeral of James Houston a free man of colour one of the axe & fire company men who lost his life in performing his duty at the fire of 3rd Inst be defrayed by Council

Transcription:

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We regret to add that several persons were hurt, by the falling of one of the gable ends of the brick building—Anthony Barclay, Esq. was considerably injured but we understand is not considered in a dangerous situation. A free colored man named James Houston, belonging to the Union Axe and Fire Company, had his skull fractured and his leg broken, and another free colored man, named Peter Favard belonging to the same company, had his thigh broken, and was otherwise very much injured—every assistance was immediately given them—Houston's head was dressed, and his leg amputated by Drs. Read, Fraser and Delaroche—but he died a short time after the operation. Favard was attended by Dr. Screven, his thigh set, and we learn is likely to recover.

Entries from City of Savannah Treasurer's Cash Book, Vol 3 and 4.

Expenses
paid I J M Predergasts bill for
crepe for funeral of Jas Houston
Col^d man. Killed at fire Gales House } 3 00

Transcription of April 1, 1825, Volume 3: Expenses
paid I J M Predergasts bill for
crepe for funeral of Jas Houston
Col^d [colored] man, killed at fire Gales House } \$3.00

Expenses
paid Jenny & Douglass' bill for refreshments
furnished Capt. Handy for fire at Mrs. LaFollet's } 1 00
paid June digging Grave for Jim
Houston. col^d man killed at fire Gales House } 1 00

Transcription of April 20, 1825, Volume 3: Expenses
[omitted]
paid June digging grave for Jim
Houston col^d [colored] man killed at fire Gales House } \$1.00

Expenses
paid Jas Taylor's bill coffin for Jas Houston fireman, killed at fire } 10 00

Transcription of April 20, 1825, Volume 4, page 10:
paid Jas Taylor's bill coffin for Jas Houston fireman, kill'd at fire \$10.00

Ordinance for the Relief of Peter Favard advertised in the *Savannah Republican*, November 3, 1825

NOV 3 1825

An Ordinance,

For the relief of Peter Favard.

WHEREAS it is the duty of Council to distinguish, by evidences of its approbation, those who suffer in the discharge of important public services.

And Whereas Peter Favard, a free man of colour, then attached to the Union Axe and Fire Company, on the 3d day of January, in the present year, during the fire that destroyed the dwelling of Mr. Worthington Gale, made commendable exertions to suppress the conflagration, and from the falling of the brick wall sustained great bodily injury.

Sec. 1. Be it therefore ordained, by the Mayor and Aldermen of the city of Savannah, and the Hamlets thereof, and it is hereby ordained by the authority of the same, that from and after the passage of this ordinance, the said Peter Favard, shall be and he is hereby declared to be, exempt from the performance of any and all public duty required of free persons of colour, within the city of Savannah.

Sec. 2. And be it further ordained as an additional mark of the approbation of council, and taking into consideration the circumstances of his being disabled from advantageously pursuing his trade, that the said Peter Favard be, and he is hereby declared, to be relieved from any tax which may now be standing against him upon the Books of the city Treasury; and that hereafter he shall not be held subject to pay the professional, nor the Poll tax, to which free persons of colour are liable by ordinance.

Passed in Council, this 18th August, 1825.

W. C. DANIELL; Mayor.

Attest, M. MYERS, c. c.

NOV 3 1825

An Ordinance

Sources

Savannah City Council Meeting Minutes:

5600CL-005, City of Savannah, Clerk of Council, Addenda in the Clerk of Council's Office, entry for January 10, 1825, page 116, City Hall, Savannah, Georgia; Savannah, Ga., City Council Minutes 1790 - 1900, Ancestry.com, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60565/> > City Council Minutes, 1822 – 1827 > Image 435, accessed September 1, 2023.

Events of the fire reported in the *Savannah Republican*, January 4, 1825:

“Fire!” *Savannah Republican*, January 4, 1825, page 2, <https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/> accessed on September 1, 2023.

City of Savannah, Treasurer's Cash Book entries:

5600CT-410, City of Savannah, Treasurer, Cash Books Vol. 3-4, City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

Ordinance for the Relief of Peter Favard advertised in the *Savannah Republican*, November 3, 1825:

“An Ordinance for the Relief of Peter Favard,” *Savannah Republican*, November 3, 1825, page 3, <https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/> accessed on September 1, 2023.