

**Wilmington High-Rise Fire, 1983**

12/09/09 451 W, 2 I - + 11 - 11

On Tuesday, February 15, 1983, a high-rise apartment fire in Wilmington killed three elderly residents, and displaced more than 160. The fire was reported around 10:40 p.m. on the top floor of the Harry M. Solomon Towers at [15 Castle Street](#). Built in 1971, Solomon Towers was operated by the Wilmington Housing Authority, and served as housing for low-income citizens ages 40 to 70. The building did not have sprinklers, but was equipped with standpipe stations on each floor.

When the first companies arrived about about 10:46 p.m., flames were showing in the upper southwest corner of the building. Second and third alarms were issued, which summoned all available manpower and equipment. Some off-duty personnel were also recalled, and several others reported to the scene on their own.



*Bing Maps photo*

Command posts were established for both firefighting and rescue (medical) operations. While evacuation procedures were being underway, other personnel began attacking the fire using the building's standpipe hose. Two fatalities were discovered on the 11th floor, where the fire originated in room 1003. The heat was intense enough to melt the plastic name tags on fire helmets. Thick smoke filled the 11th floor, and parts of the 10th floor.

Six people were rescued by passer-bys, including one woman in a wheelchair who was carried down six flights of stairs. Another was found in her room on the 11th floor, unconscious. She was revived. Seventeen others were transported and treated for smoke inhalation. Fourteen were released, and three remained in the hospital the following day. Some 80 residents were treated at the Rescue Command Post, and were transported by bus to a Red Cross shelter established at Hoggard High School.



*Wilmington Fire Department photo*

Evacuation of the building was completed in 40 minutes, with the assistance of police and bystanders. The fire was controlled in under an hour. The quick evacuation and low death rate were attributed to the pre-planning and regular fire escape drills conducted by the Wilmington Fire Department.

Two died of smoke inhalation, females aged 49 and 68. The former was a disabled resident, who lived in the apartment where the fire was believed to have started. She was found just outside her apartment, in the hall. The latter was found in her apartment. The third victim, a male aged 72, died later of an apparent heart attack.

Notes:

- How big was the Wilmington Fire Department in 1980? At least six stations? And thus six engines? One tiller, and maybe another ladder. Midi-pumper/QRV. Ambulance(s), too? Fireboat, also.
- Readers near and far, please add perspectives and remembrances.

Sources:

- *News & Observer*, February 17, 1983.
- [High-Rise Fire and Life Safety: Hazards and Education For Older Adults](#) by William F. Blackley, December 2006.
- *Wilmington Fire Department 1897-1895* by Wilmington Fire Department, 1985.

Name: (real name preferred)

E-mail: (optional)

Web Site: (optional)

Comment:

Remember personal info?

Yes

No

/ [Textile](#)