

Raleigh's Biggest Fires?

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For years, Mr. Blogger has been creating and expanding an extensive [history of the Raleigh Fire Department](#). That is, a web site with everything you wanted to know about RFD. That is, except for a list of fires. Though there are essays on the Yarborough House and early mutual aid calls, there are no special features about the city's biggest fires. No simple list. No annotated map. (However, the site has decade-by-decade timelines, and with extensive per-major fire information. It's just not compiled.)

The question of "what have been Raleigh's biggest fires" has been haunting History Boy for some years now. Sure, historical examples are easy enough to cite. In fact, he's added a decade-by-decade presentation on the topic to his History of the Raleigh Fire Department talk. That's the one delivered to new recruits, and at sundry historical appearances.

Why is a list of "big ones" so daunting? For starters, the big basket of information contains more than just apples. What's the criteria for a major fire? Metrics can include property loss, personnel on scene, apparatus on scene, hours on scene, and alarm levels. For fires in the last couple decades, alarm levels is a good starting point. Two alarms or higher is a good indication that the fire was probably a "big one." Such as:

- 2007 - Pine Knoll Townes - 6 alarms [Updated from 5 alarms]
- 1990 - Wake County Courthouse - 4 alarms
- 1993 - 2654 S. Saunders Street - Shelton's Furniture Co. - 4
- 1993 - 3114 Kings Court - Gorman Crossings Apartments - 4
- 1988 - Fairview Road - Piggly Wiggly - 3 alarms
- 1988 - Fairview Road - Hayes Barton Cleaners - 3
- 1991 - 3939 Colby Drive - Montecito Apartments - 3
- 1992 - 6205 Waterside Lane - 3
- 1992 - 600 S. Bloodworth Street - Institute for Cosmetology Building - 3
- 1992 - 206 Loft Lane - Apartments - 3
- 1992 - 718 N. Person Street - IGA Grocery Store - 3
- 1993 - 3911 Beryl Road - Martin Architectural Building Products - 3
- 1993 - 1300 Kirkland Road - Business - 3
- 1993 - Daniels Street - Bryan Building - 3
- 1994 - Crown Court - Crown Court Apartments - 3
- 1994 - 1600 S. Saunders Street - Caraleigh Furniture Warehouse - 3
- 1996 - 4004 Twickenham Court - Village of Pickwick Apartments - 3
- 1998 - Falls of Neuse Road - Quail Corners Shopping Center - 3
- 1999 - 601 Creekside Drive - 3
- 2000 - Wycliff Road - Meredith Village Apartments - 3
- 2002 - 115 Salem Circle - North Hills Terrace Apartments - 3
- 2003 - 2815 Capital Boulevard - Old Holiday Inn - 3
- 2003 - 201 Penmarc Drive - 3
- 2004 - 3101 Kings Court - 3
- 2004 - 214 E. Martin Street - Greenshields Pub - 3
- 2004 - 1400 Diggs Drive - 3
- 2006 - 2200 Banks Hill Row - 3
- 2006 - 544 Rose Lane - 3
- 2007 - 3833 Bonneville Court - 3
- 2007 - 1201 Trillium Circle - 3
- 2007 - 6904 River Run - 3
- 2008 - 1022 Hammel Drive - 3
- 2009 - 1316 S. Blount Street - 3

But go back farther, or perhaps further, and alarm levels then don't equal alarm levels now. In the 1960s and 1970s, structure fires might bring

as little as two engines and a ladder on the initial dispatch. Second alarms, as they might be called in news reports or even official records, might be just an extra engine, or another engine and ladder.

Thus, apples and oranges when trying to compare across eras. Five alarms at the Peebles Hotel in 1970 was a considerably smaller amount of personnel and apparatus than the five alarms at Pine Knoll in 2007! Some older "big ones" as measured by alarm levels:

- 1970 - Hargett Street - Peebles Hotel - 5 alarms
- 1981 - Fayetteville Street Mall - Mangel Building - 4? alarms
- 1959 - Hillsboro Street - Manmur Bowling Center - 4
- 1964 - W. Martin Street - Warren Restaurant - 3 alarms
- 1965 - E. Davie Street - Lucille Hunter School - 3
- 1970 - North Boulevard - Holiday Inn Restaurant - 3
- 1976 - West Street - Pine State Creamery - 3
- 1980 - McDowell Street - Hunt General Tire - 3?

Now, the next problem is that alarm levels are not recorded prior to the late 1950s. Nor were numbers of personnel or apparatus on scene recorded, or consistently recorded. What is available, however, from 1923 to 1954, are the number of lines used. So that becomes the metric. That's a pretty good, cross-decade measurement for the size of a fire. And another piece of fruit in the basket. Apples, oranges, pears. Some of those:

- 1926 - Insane Asylum - 15 lines
- 1928 - Yarborough Hotel - 15
- 1926 - Commercial Printing Co. - 9 lines
- 1931 - Sanders Motor Co. - 9
- 1939 - 235 Fayetteville St. - 9
- 1952 - K&W Motor - 9
- 1925 - _____ Theatre - 8
- 1927 - 112 W. Hargett St. - 8
- 1935 - 210 Fayetteville St. - 8
- 1943 - Quinn Furniture - 8
- 1943 - Bellas-Hess - 8
- 1948 - Farmers Co-Op Exchange - 8
- 1952 - A&P store - 8

When considering the number of lines used, we've hand-tallied those fires with three or more lines. Which totals some 146 fires between 1923 and 1954. What's the dividing line between major and non-major fire? Five lines used? Seven lines used? Don't know. Maybe we have to factor property damage in there, or time on scene. They also recorded total engine hours back then!

Are we making sense so far?

But what about before 1923? Don't have records for those that include "lines used." For those fires, total property loss might be the best metric. Or maybe just the amount of news coverage. If the fire was a "big one," it made a lot of news. Examples of newsworthy fires from 1831 to 1920:

- 1831 – State House at Union Square.
- 1839 – Methodist Church.
- 1848 – Raleigh & Gaston Railroad engine house.
- 1867 – Exchange Hotel.
- 1868 – City Market, two other buildings.
- 1883 – St. Augustine's Normal School buildings.
- 1890 – Raleigh & Gaston Railroad roundhouse.
- 1892 – Caraleigh Phosphate and Fertilizer Warehouse.
- 1900 – Fleming's Warehouse, two homes, stable.
- 1901 – Watagua Building at A&M College.
- 1903 – Infirmary at St. Mary's College.
- 1909 – St. Paul's A.M.E. Church.

1915 – News & Observer building and others.

- 1920 – Administration Building at State Prison.

Notice anything particular about the above list? They're all single structures, or a handful of structures. What about Raleigh's conflagrations? That's another list, though far shorter:

- 1816 – Destroys 51 buildings in first two blocks of Fayetteville Street.
- 1832 – Destroys 30 buildings. Starts on east side of Fayetteville Street.
- 1832 – Destroys several buildings on Fayetteville Street.
- 1833 – Destroys several buildings on east side of Fayetteville Street.
- 1851 – Destroys 17+ structures on Fayetteville, Hargett, and Wilmington Streets.

Apples, oranges, pears, and grapefruits. But we're slowly, steadily making sense of them.

And just last night a reader asked a question about big downtown fires. Maybe that's an equally good place to start. Listing or mapping how downtown Raleigh's been impacted by "big ones." Watch this space!

Updated minutes after posting, to add that our RFD history timelines have extensive per-major fire info. It's just not compiled anywhere. Wonder how many people read these the moment they're posted, and wouldn't catch a correction unless we comment about it?

Legeros - 12/28/09 - 09:29

Postscript #1. Research. Equally daunting in determining a list of Raleigh's biggest fires has been **learning** about them. How does one create a comprehensive list of all major fires for 200+ years in a city the size of Raleigh? In the beginning, around 2001, I started with newspapers. That is, newspaper indexes. Incomplete indexes are available for the News & Observer, for several decades of the 1900s. Found each index entry that referenced a fire, and consulted the microfilm copy. For nearly every notable fire, the article was printed and filed. That was the start.

Then came history books, which either added new fires, or information about already known fires. Then came fire department books, the 1984 yearbook and the 2002 yearbook. Then came history files, notably clippings and other materials at Olivia Raney Local History library. Later, when they added the personal notes of legendary Wake County historian Elizabeth Reid Murray, those were reviewed and added to the pool.

And, of course, fire department records. Large ledger books— think oversized paper versions of Excel spreadsheets— recorded fires and details therein from the 1920s to the 1950s. Slightly smaller ledgers, with fewer details per incident, continued into the 1980s. However, those records weren't all found at once. Some from the early 1980s were recently located, and have augmented that decade's information accordingly.

For the early 1990s to present, online archives of the News & Observer were utilized. That's a service formerly available from NCLIVE.org. I performed searches on keywords like "fire" and "fire department." Each article was printed and filed. This further added to the pool, though it wasn't a guaranteed resource. There were a couple major fires, if memory serves, that didn't receive reporting.

Other sources have been used as well. The Raleigh-Wake Emergency Communications Center has been helpful in mining CAD data for major fires. (I'm still working on finding data from earlier CAD systems.) The Raleigh Fire Department's original photo unit, started in the early 1990s, kept extensive records of their fires. Most were major fires that they attended. Mr. Lee Wilson, the fire department's present photographer, has been taking notes for over a decade. I've pulled information from his wee notebooks.

Further sources have included oral histories, which are the hardest to confirm as people's memories are horrible fallable. Each found major fire has been methodically added to the web site timelines, and is hopefully being vetted. More than once someone has asked "why isn't the fire from X listed" and that has resulted in research, and learning of one more major fire that I didn't know about before.

What's the current status of Mike's master list? It's lookin' pretty good, and is composed of two parts. First is 1923-1952, with 146 fires records that used 3 lines or more. Plus a mess of unique incidents from that time, like out-of-city mutual aid calls, plane trashes, train derailments, and such.

Second is 1950 to present, with 375+ fires recorded that are or might be major fires. They include 144 two-alarm fires, 33 three-almers, four four-almers, and two five-almers.

But research continues, and those numbers may change. As details are learned of more fires, their alarm levels might be corrected. And don't get me started on corrections. So much of this research involves handwritten and hand-entered data. So double and triple checking is part of the process. Errors happen, and thus the data is occasionally in flux. But that's a whole 'nother headache for whole 'nother day.

Legeros - 12/28/09 - 10:59

Mike, do you have access to any of the original Photo Units photos?

KC

gen3fire - 12/28/09 - 21:04

Yes, shoot me a private message for more information, KC.

Legeros - 12/28/09 - 21:29

Name: (real name preferred)

E-mail: (optional)

Web Site: (optional)

Remember personal info?

Yes

No

Comment:

/ [Textile](#)

Comment moderation is enabled on this site. This means that your comment will not be visible on this site until it has been approved by an editor.

To prevent spam we require you to answer this silly question

What are the FIRST TWO LETTERS of the word 'fire'?

[\(Register your username / Log in\)](#)

Notify: Yes, send me email when someone replies.

Hide email: Yes, hide my email address.

Small print: All html tags except and <i> will be removed from your comment. You can make links by just typing the url or mail-address.