

Carolina Country Club Fire, 1948

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What notable snow stories are recorded in the history of the Raleigh Fire Department? In 1948, an early morning snowstorm was part of the narrative of the Carolina Country Club fire that killed five people. It remains the deadliest fire in the city's history.¹

Fire and Snow

On Sunday, February 1, 1948, about 3:35 a.m., a resident at 2503 Glenwood Avenue telephoned the fire department. His mother had been awakened by a crackling noise that she thought was a machine clearing snow from the roadway. Finding her bedroom "as light as day," she looked out of the window and saw the clubhouse of the Carolina Country Club ablaze. The fire department was also notified by a taxi company, contacted by one of their drivers via two-way radio. The cruising taxing had also noticed the burning building.

The Raleigh Fire Department dispatched two engines and a ladder truck. The engines were likely dispatched from Station 6 on Fairview Road (0.7 miles away) and Station 4 on Jefferson Street (1.8 miles away). The responding ladder truck was likely the service ladder company from Station 2 at Memorial Auditorium (4.1 miles away). The newspaper account said the trucks traveled "more than two miles," which squares with Station 4. Maybe Engine 6 was out of service, and it was also Engine 5 on Park Drive (2.4 miles away).²

What was the fire apparatus that responded? The pumpers were American LaFrance triple combination pumpers of 1920s vintage. The ladder truck was a 1922 American LaFrance service ladder.

Ten Minutes

Fire Chief Alvin Lloyd later said that despite both the blinding snowstorm and icy roads, the fire trucks arrived in about 10 minutes. (Perhaps he meant the first units on scene.) They found the Carolina Country Club clubhouse fully involved, and the roof of the two-and-a-half story, wood-frame structure already collapsing. The crews had little difficulty getting their equipment into operation, news reports reported, and a hydrant located near the club building supplied sufficient water. Fire department records show that two lines and 1,200-feet of hose were used.

Soon after arriving, firefighters found the body of a woman who had apparently jumped from a second-story window. An apartment was located above the clubhouse. Some of the burning building had fallen on her, and she had burns on her head and back. A subsequent autopsy showed that she died of a concussion, sustained in the fall. Though she had breathed smoke and been burned, neither were severe enough to cause death. Two automobiles parked in front of the clubhouse building were also burning.

Crews poured water onto the fire through the morning and into the afternoon. By about 4:00 p.m., they were able to enter the remains of the structure and begin searching for other victims. They soon found the partial remains of a second person. Their search was suspended at nightfall, and resumed the next day. [Click to enlarge:](#)



Victims Identified

The woman was identified by her wedding band as Mrs. James E. Baker, wife of club manager James Baker, 40. Still to be accounted for were their two children, James Baker Jr., 14, and Jean Baker, 16. Mrs. Baker's mother, Carrie E. Lyndall, was also staying with them, in the apartment above the clubhouse.³

One week later, Coroner Irving Cheek confirmed that all five victims had been found. A team of doctors lead by Rex Hospital pathologist Dr. Thomas Wilson had identified the other and substantially smaller remains found in the fire. He issued death certificates for the Bakers and Mrs. Baker's mother. The remains were shipped to Norfolk, VA, for burial.

The fire followed a Saturday night dance at the club. The building was thoroughly checked for fires prior to the last waiters leaving just after 1 a.m. Recalled the head waiter, they "looked for cigarette stumps and checked the furnace and both fire fire places where there had been fires during the night." He said everything was "all right" when they left.

About 1:45 a.m., a patron who had attended the dance and whose escort's vehicle became stuck in a snow bank, returned to the club for assistance. She remembered smelling smoke, but was assured it was "only a green log smoldering in the fireplace."

Cause Undetermined

The cause of the fire was undetermined, as the destruction of the building was so complete. Only three chimneys and part of one wall were left standing. Chief Lloyd stated "in all probability it was caused by carelessness," and probably a cigarette. "But that's only a guess."

Another firefighter speculated that a cigarette could have been dropped onto a cushion or a rug during the "gay Saturday night dance." It would have smoldered for hours before "bursting into flames."

Firemen also recovered the clubhouse safe, which contained about \$200 in usable currency. Charred checks and melted silverware were also in the safe.

Official Statement

The clubhouse was the second to be destroyed by fire. The first burned in 1920 in a blaze reportedly caused by defective wire. Club officials stated that a new building would be erected as soon as possible. They issued the following statement:

"The board of directors and officers of the Carolina Country Club announces to its membership and to the public with sincerest regrets that the clubhouse was completely destroyed by fire and with it probably the life of Mr. James Baker, our club manager and steward, along with the lives of Mrs. Baker, their two children, James Jr., and Jean, and Mrs. Baker's mother, Mrs. Carrie E. Lyndell, who was visiting the Bakers at the time of the fire.

"The fire, of unknown origin, started between 2 and 4 a.m. Firemen and police served to the best of their ability in a hopeless situation, being severely handicapped by the deep snow and storm then raging. We express our deepest sympathy to the families of Mr. and Mrs. Baker and Mrs. Lyndell and to the loved ones."

In 1949, the city purchased the first new pumping engines since before World War II, a 1949 FWD and a 1950 Mack. The FWD was a four wheel-drive engine and ordered, as the unconfirmed story goes, to better travel through snow and thus prevent the longer response experienced at the Carolina Country Club fire. The new engine was placed in service at Station 4 on Jefferson Street, and replaced a few years later by a 1957 FWD.

Notes

¹The second deadliest fires: four people killed in a house fire on Jones Street on April 28, 1982, and four children killed in an apartment fire on Dorothea Drive on February 2, 1996.

²The aerial ladder truck was also stationed at Station 2, and staffed with the same firefighters. The fire companies numbered five or six people at that time, and perhaps two or three members stayed behind to staff the aerial ladder. Station 6 was old Station 6, located in a rented building at 2513 Fairview Road. Truck 6 would be placed in service when the new Station 6 was placed in service the following year.

³The first name of Mrs. James. E. Baker was never named in the newspapers. That was the practice at the time, to name a wife with her husband's full name.

Sources

- News & Observer, Feb. 2, Feb. 4, Feb. 6, 1948
- Raleigh Times, Feb. 2, 1948
- Spectator Magazine?, Mar. 26, 1981

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

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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.