

Remembering the Mitchell McDowell County Prison Camp Fire, 1976

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Reader James Harrison shares this historical account of one of the state's ([and the nation's](#)) worst correction facility fires at the McDowell County Prison on June 30, 1976. The facility was located on Highway 226 about three miles south of Marion. Eight inmates were killed and at least 26 others were injured. More importantly, many lessons were learned about the need for fire safety in such facilities. Mr. Harrison's first-person narrative below.

I was a firefighter in Rocky Mount in the mid 1970s, and then volunteered with several Nash County departments both fire and EMS/Rescue. I quit career firefighting as I had a family to raise and the money for the number of hours worked was not very good back then.

I went to the North Carolina Department of Correction, from which I retired as an Asst. Super./Captain. At one time or another, I managed three different prisons across the state. In 1976, I was sent to the McDowell County fire as member of the DOC Prison Emergency Response Team (PERT).

This fire was not at a jail but at a state-run prison camp. Back then, the state had one in just about every county. These facilities were built in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Constructed of cement, brick, and steel, it was believed there was little chance of a major fire.

After 10 o'clock at night, all inmates were locked in the dorms, no exceptions. All staff except two officers and one sergeant were sent home. The guard towers were not manned at night, because the all inmates were secured inside. If an emergency occurred, the inmate or inmates had to wait until staff could be called in from home and arrive at the facility to provide security and prevent escape.

Back then, this was accepted practice since inmates were just that, inmates. The night of this fire, a group of inmates decided to cause a disturbance/riot. They hoped the dorm doors would be opened and they would have a chance of escape.

Cardboard that had been hidden under mattresses, personal papers, letters, and other materials were piled up and ignited inside the dorm. Staff followed policy and did not open any doors to the dorm until staff arrived to provide security.

By that time, the paint on the walls of the dorms had begun to burn at extremely high temperatures. And this was something no one had ever had imagined could happen. The walls of the prison dorms were painted on average twice a year with oil based paint. Over the 25-plus, it had become really thick.

By the time the inmates were removed, four had been killed by the heat and fire. The temperatures were so high that the grease from the bodies cooked into the cement floor. Later efforts to remove the outlines of the bodies failed, and the floors were then torn out.

The oil-based paint on the walls actually intensified the fire, turning it into an inferno. And the policies back then would not allow the inmates to be removed, regardless of the circumstances until additional staff arrived to prevent escape.

As you can imagine, policies changed shortly after the fire. Staffing patterns were increased so that inmates could be removed from the dorm areas at night in an emergency. Oil-based paints were also removed from the walls, and latex paints were used from that point forward. And at night, a staff member was posted on the yard outside the dorms and with a key to the emergency exits so the doors could be opened in case of a fire. Guard towers also began being manned 24/7.

Inmates across the state also learned a lesson. Riots after that such, as the one at women's prison in Raleigh and one at the prison camp in Warrenton, became more about the destruction of property, fighting, and tearing out exposed plumbing, but not fire.

Today, prisons have air packs with staff are trained and recertified yearly in their use. Small fires are sometimes started in trash cans or in a segregation cell occupied by one inmate. But the inmates know they will be removed promptly before serious injury or death occurs.

Notes

Other multi-fatality correction facility fires in North Carolina, from Mike's [database of deadliest fires](#):

- Eleven inmates killed at a Kenansville prison camp on March 7, 1931.
- Eight inmates killed and 13 injured in a Bakersville jail on May 5, 2005.

Google News Archives provides some additional details about this incident:

- The minimum security facility held a total of 67 inmates.
- The fire occurred in one of two dormitory buildings that held 33 men.
- Five people were on duty at the time of the fire.
- The blaze was started by a group of 20 inmates for reasons cited as both protest for disciplinary actions and an escape attempt.
- Injured inmates were transported to McDowell General Hospital in Marion.
- At least one patient was transferred to Mission Memorial Hospital in Asheville.
- Four died after the fire. Total fatalities numbered eight. Total injured survivors numbered either 26 or 28.
- Damage to the facility included roof damage and furnishings.
- The Inmates subsequently testified that mattresses were set afire in Cell Block B, kindled with bed linen.
- State prisons used highly-flammable polyurethane mattresses.
- Less-flammable replacements were ordered system-wide after the fire.
- In September 1977, four inmates and the families of three others were ruled as entitled to up to \$30,000 each for injuries in the fire.
- Officials found three state prison officials negligent.

The fire in 1976 was in McDowell County, not Mitchell as the headline says. The jail fire in Bakersville occurred on May 3, 2002. Just FYI

BFD1151 - 07/05/11 - 13:16

I lost my older brother to this fire. I was a lot younger when this happened, but i remember hearing about the fire on 11pm news, the look om my mother face when they annouced what happen in Marion. My brother was taken to Mission Memorial Hospital in Ashville, we went there the next day, i was too young to see him,but my mother did. Well it's been over 30 years,but i still miss my older brother.

Anthony ([Email](#)) - 08/17/12 - 01:54

My uncle Steve Brazil died in this fire, our family never received a word of sympathy let alone any cash settlement.....EVER

Craig Brazil - 05/07/14 - 08:26

When I heard of my brothers death. I was devastated.My brother didn't deserve this

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Allen Denny - 07/07/17 - 16:20

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