

Firemen Confronted with Acts of Civil Disobedience - April 1968

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In the late 1960s and early 1970s, fire departments across North Carolina were confronted by intermittent episodes of civil unrest. This also happened in other cities and towns across the nation.

After assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, there were widespread incidents of rioting, arson, vandalism, and violence. Governor Han Moore dispatched National Guard troops to the major cities, beginning on April 5.

In Raleigh, riots erupted a few hours after the announcement of King's death. Store windows were smashed and cars were overturned on Fayetteville Street. In and south of downtown, other cars were set afire and businesses were hit with firebombs. Mayor Travis Tomlinson ordered a curfew for the entire city and between 500 and 700 guardsmen were called into Raleigh. Read about those events in [my timelines](#).

Two years later, Henderson firefighter Joseph Hicks died on duty, after his pistol discharged at the fire station on November 7, 1970. He was armed during a period of unrest related to school integration in town, and a shooting death in Oxford in May. [See prior blog posting](#).

The challenges faced by firefighters in Durham, Greensboro, Charlotte, and Wilmington after the death of Dr. King were highlighted in the May - June 1968 issue of *Hose & Nozzle* magazine. Here's the complete text:

Firemen Confronted with Acts of Civil Disobedience

Many firemen throughout the nation gained new experience in firefighting during the recent uprisings.

Charlotte

During the racial unrest Saturday night Charlotte firemen responded to 28 false alarms, 10 fire bombings, and 15 miscellaneous fires. Three or four police cars were present at every fire. The fires created a shortage of men that caused Chief Black to call men from inactive stations to man stations that had sent all personnel to combat fires. Fire damage losses were estimated between \$75,000 and \$100,000 during the disturbances.

Wilmington

Six fires, all set by arsonists, and over 20 false alarms were answered by Wilmington firemen from Friday night to Monday noon. All of the fires that were set involved groceries [grocery stores?]. Even though general disorder existed in areas where fires started, firemen were able to move swiftly and effectively in extinguishing the blazes, Chief Milnor said. He praised the assistance given by the police and National Guardsmen. "With a National Guard detachment assigned to each of our units, the men were able to do their job without being hampered or hassled by curfew violators."

Durham

Durham Firefighters were armed with automatic rifles [!] to provide protection to firemen fighting a furniture store blaze that was started with a firebomb.

Greensboro

Fire protection and extra police necessary in Greensboro from April 5 - 11 cost taxpayers at least \$58,670, according to figures released. Extra hours worked by firemen ran up a \$4,140 [cost]. Police worked an average of 55 to 66 hours each, cost[ing] \$54,281. Both groups were paid straight time rate for their extra hours. Meals for National Guardsmen who were stationed at firehouse[s] to protect the structures while firemen had gone to fires cost another \$249. Other expenses of more than 1,000 guardsmen called into service were paid by the state.

Total Fires

The following table shows the approximate number of weekend fires following the death of a civil rights leader.

Town - Fires

- Raleigh - 40
- Charlotte - 19
- Wilmington - 7
- Greensboro - 3
- Greenville - 1
- Durham - 18
- Goldsboro - 13
- Wilson - 3
- Kinston - 2
- Concord - 2
- Total 108

Note: These totals are apparently based on an Associated Press report that tallied fires over a five-day period. They also noted 873 arrests across the state during the same period.

References

Duke Chronicle, [Durham Burning](#), originally published April 5, 1998.

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Reported the Hose & Nozzle the following month, in the July-August 1968 issue, the state Insurance Commissioner approved an industry request for surcharges for fire and extended insurance coverage. Same was prompted by the insurance industry losses in the wake of the aforementioned riots. Damage to insured property was estimated at \$67 million in the nation and \$1.2 million in North Carolina. The surcharge was effective August 1, 1968, on new and renewed policies and would continue for two years.

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In the September-October 1968 issue of Hose & Nozzle, the magazine reported this story:

Training For Civil Disorders

The N. C. Department of Community Colleges recently released a teaching outline for firemen who may become involved in civil disorders. The outline covers items such as personal protection of the fireman and logistical planning. It is recommended the outline be used with the guidance of the Fire Service Training Section of the Department of Community Colleges.

Suggested length of course is a minimum of six hours.

The course objectives are to promote among fire personnel a sense of responsibility to acquire knowledge and develop the skills needed for the safe and orderly handling of civil disorders. It includes such topics as distribution and control of manpower and equipment, communication, and development of knowledge of types of people who may be involved in mob action.

Initial Planning

Initial planning is the subject for lesson one. It includes such topics as a coordinated program between fire and law enforcement officials, establishing a centralized command post, transportation of police and national guardsmen, communications system, protection to be given to the firemen, mobilization, and coordination of radio frequencies between fire, police and national guard.

The outline refers to notification of hospitals, ambulance and rescue squads; to determine how traffic will be controlled, and closing of roads or areas. A section is devoted on plans for feeding men in field, how distributed and type of food.

The outline touches on plans for quartering federal troops. Among places suggested are fairgrounds, ball parks, schools and fire houses.

Lesson two is based on fire department action. It provides the student an opportunity to gain knowledge of types of people who may be involved in mob action; sound fire fighting procedures, and understanding the importance of maintaining a good image.

Types of persons listed that may be involved in mob action could be animal-like, non-reasoning, or people who may use fire as their favorite weapon.

Personnel Problems

A section is devoted to consideration of personnel problems. Among the items are: rest, limit of active duty, and protection while riding apparatus. Complete protective clothing is recommended.

Firemen's family should be aware of total situation and encouraged to remain in their home.

The outline gives a resume of the importance of use and placement of equipment and potential of the communication system.

Among them are :

- Apparatus to remain in station or placed in strategic locations.
- Combine the efforts of several companies into one major force to achieve better utilization of manpower and equipment and greater mobility.
- Fuel for apparatus and adequate supplies must be located and maintained.
- Source of extra equipment.
- Locating power plants, portable lights, etc.
- Maps of water systems and streets.
- Quickest, safest and most flexible routes.
- Communication center must be adequately manned. All codes and methods of operation should be familiar to all officers.
- Movements must be coordinated with policing agencies to obtain maximum protection.

The recommended procedure is to hit the fire, confine and move on. Use of tankers or apparatus with large booster tanks is practical. Do not allow anyone, such as pump operators, to become isolated.

- Small fires in boxes or trash should be removed to safety and allowed to burn to prevent re-ignition.
- By allowing the roof or above floors to burn and fall in, confined fires may be easier to reach and quickly extinguished. Some equipment such as hose may have to be sacrificed.

Miscellaneous items to be considered are curfew, movement of off-duty firemen, closing of gasoline stations and traffic control.

The outline, which lists several organizations from which references may be obtained, was compiled by Area Consultants [and former Cary Fire Chief] Calvin Beck and Billy Saulter in conjunction with Keith Phillipe, Fire Service Director, Department of Community Colleges.

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To prevent spam we require you to answer this silly question

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