

Looking Back:

# Hotel Lafayette, Fayetteville, N.C.

The Hotel Lafayette was once a shining jewel in the crown of downtown and the center of life in a bustling downtown Fayetteville, N.C. until it suffered a third and catastrophic fire in the 1970s.

### About the Hotel Lafayette

The Hotel Lafayette had a proud history reaching back to the Revolutionary War era, with the original structure dating back to 1725. At the time, the towns of Cross Creek and Cambelton had not yet merged into present day Fayetteville. The structure was grand for the time, boasting guest rooms with fireplaces, drawing rooms, even individual apartments for traveling families. It was described in 1828 by Basil Hall of the British Royal Navy, as “one of the best hotels in the country.”

The hotel even hosted a ball for the Marquis De Lafayette, Fayetteville’s namesake, when he visited the city. Of all the cities named for the Revolutionary War hero across the country, Fayetteville, NC, holds the distinction of being the only city he actually visited.

Perhaps as an omen of things to come, the original structure burned to the ground in 1831. It was rebuilt at the corner of Hay and Donaldson Streets



© Photo courtesy The Fayetteville Observer

and reopened its doors in 1887. This time there were three full stories equipped with such up-to-date amenities as gas lighting, electricity, elevators, glass porches and modern bathroom facilities. There were 72 rooms; an office, bar room, billiard hall, two parlors and a 40’ x 50’ dining facility. There were also four retail stores on the ground floor.

Sadly, a second fire in 1939 caused extensive damage to the upper floor and tower, which were later torn down. Despite it all, the Hotel Lafayette remained an imposing figure on the downtown Fayetteville landscape for nearly a century and witnessed the city of Fayetteville grow from a small town to a major metropolitan area. In the 1970s, Fayetteville’s

downtown area began to decline because of competing business elsewhere, and the grand old Hotel Lafayette followed suit. In its latter years it became apartments for the elderly. The Salvation Army used the facility for emergency housing for women, children and families. The Hotel Lafayette permanently closed for business in 1972 after almost 85 years of

## NFPA Launches “Bring Safety Home” Campaign

In 1896 a meeting was held in New York City to discuss water, fire and sprinklers which signified the release of sprinkler installation rules entitled “Report of Committee on Automatic Sprinkler Protection” – eventually becoming NFPA 13. More than 100 years later, NFPA and fire safety advocates are still discussing water, fire and sprinklers. That’s because the mission of NFPA today, much like its early days, is to reduce the burden of fire and related hazards on the quality of life.

The newest discussion taking place is about NFPA’s new Sprinkler Initiative – Bringing Safety Home. The campaign will provide materials and resources to people and organizations working to encourage the adoption of requirements for automatic fire sprinklers in one and two family homes. Eighty percent of fire deaths occur in the home – nearly 3,000 people are killed each year. What’s more, homes that are equipped with sprinklers and working smoke alarms reduce the risk of dying in a fire by 82 percent.

The best part is that you don’t have to go to a meeting in New York City to learn more about the home fire sprinkler movement. A discussion forum will be hosted online, where fire sprinkler advocates can share helpful information and encourage adoption in their communities and states. The initiatives’ Web site is [www.firesprinklerinitiative.org](http://www.firesprinklerinitiative.org).

The goal is to spur public support and make home fire sprinklers a reality at last! Not only can this initiative save lives in families throughout the United States, but also increase safety for members of the fire service. Be sure to check out the numerous featured resources and related news stories online, and learn how you can save lives in your community by encouraging your local government to mandate home fire sprinklers in all new one and two family homes

For more information visit [www.firesprinklerinitiative.org](http://www.firesprinklerinitiative.org).

operation. Like a ghost, the vacant structure loomed over downtown. Eventually it began attracting members of Fayetteville's growing homeless population, until that fateful night of Feb. 8, 1995 when the Hotel Lafayette met its third and final, fiery end.

### The Fiery End

Feb. 8, 1995 was a bitterly cold winter night. At 6:29 p.m. the first alarm came in of a building fire at 200 Hay St. Chief Benjamin Nichols, then Assistant Chief in charge of Suppression, had been working late at City Hall a few blocks away and was on his way home when he noticed a city transit bus "disappear into a cloud of low lying smoke" at street level. "When I got down the street I saw heavy fire showing already from the second and third floor windows," recalled Chief Nichols of the incident. The first alarm consisted of Engine 1, Engine 8, Engine 2, Truck 1, Squad 1 and Battalion 1. Engine 1, led by retired Captain Millard Faircloth, was the first unit on the scene. They positioned in front of the building on Hay Street. After establishing a water supply at the nearest hydrant, Capt. Faircloth and his crew pulled attack lines and readied for an interior attack.

Six firefighters entered the building looking for people trapped inside. Lieutenant Robert Scoggins, a firefighter at that time, was one of those six. "We knew that vagrants used it, and there

was a possibility they were inside," Scoggins said. They made entry into the front of the building, but were quickly pushed back by the heat and smoke that had spread to the first floor in a matter of minutes. "It was burning all over, the room was just consumed with fire," Scoggins was later quoted as saying.

The crews of Engine 8 and Truck 1 positioned themselves at the corner of the building, out of the collapse zone, and with a vantage point to Divisions A and B sides of the structure. Now-deceased Battalion Commander Bobby Wilder assumed command and called for a second and third alarm after a few minutes of an aggressive, offensive attack.

I was working at Station 4 that evening as a firefighter. Our crew responded as part of the second alarm with Captain John Harold in charge, now a retired assistant chief. I remember that the fire was visible from Haymont Hill as we approached. It looked like all of downtown was on fire.

With the fire gaining momentum and interior operations proving ineffective, perhaps because the second floor had collapsed, flames were soon showing from all three floors and threatening adjacent buildings. At approximately 7 p.m. Chief Pete Piner ordered everyone out of the building and the decision was made to switch to a defensive position and contain the fire to

the building of origin. Crews were assigned to Divisions B and D side exposure. Truck 1 dumped a continuous flow of water onto the structure. Trucks 3 and 6 positioned themselves and soon were doing the same. At 7:30 p.m. the third floor collapsed. Chief Piner remarked shortly afterwards that it was "one of the worst fires I had ever faced."

Word of the fire soon spread to many off duty personnel and people began arriving at Fire Station 1 (Central Station) to assist in extinguishing the blaze. All in all, nearly 80 Fayetteville firefighters worked almost five hours to bring the blaze under control at 10:50 p.m. They worked well into the next day to completely put it out.

### After the Fire

The overhaul and investigation went on for days. With temperatures well below freezing, fire trucks froze in place and took days to remove. Chief Nichols reminisces that it was a testament to the quick thinking of Battalion Commander Wilder and Chief Piner to switch to defensive mode when they did.

"His actions not only may have saved the lives of firefighters, but saved the occupied business exposures next door," Nichols said.

The full scale of the operation was not totally visible until the light of the next day. The massive ice formations everywhere, frozen lines all over the place, and

frozen fire trucks were evidence of an immense job completed under terrible conditions. With great leadership, training, and by the grace of God, there were no reported injuries and no downtown business suffered any loss.

Assistant Chief Christina Morey and Captain Roger Sullivan assisted in the investigation of the blaze. "The official cause of the fire was never determined due to the extent of the damage. However, it was strongly suspected to have been caused by homeless people known to have occupied the building," Chief Morey remembers.

That frigid night is a distant memory to most. But for a few of us "old timers," we can still feel the numbing cold in our fingers from that night. The loss of the Lafayette Hotel was a blow to the burgeoning downtown restoration efforts, but did not destroy plans for the site. Today, the Fayetteville Public Works building stands on the site of the former hotel and is part of the downtown Fayetteville renaissance. There is a metal spire worked into the design of the new building in homage to the grand structure that stood there so many years before, and bears witness to the fateful night it came to an end.

*Battalion Commander Ronald G. Lewis is the Fire Marshal with the Fayetteville Fire Department.*

## North Carolina Association of Fire Chiefs 2009 Mid-Winter Conference

The weather was perfect for this year's Mid-Winter Conference in Wrightsville Beach, Feb. 5-8. On Friday North Carolina Association of Fire Chiefs (NCAFC) President Chief Marty Dailey called the conference to order and welcomed Fire Chief David Taylor of the City of High Point Fire Department, who gave the keynote address. During the rest of the conference, attendees participated in a Back-to-Basics course taught by retired Winston Salem Battalion Chief Larry Holliman. Along with this course, Phillip Davis of the Rocky Mount Fire Department taught a 2009 Fire Code continuing education course.

But the highlight of this year's conference was hearing from both Chief Gordon Routley, the lead

investigator on the Charleston Super Sofa Fire and Lauren Mulkey, the widow of Louis Mulkey of the Charleston 9.

Chief Routley took the attendees through the now famous Charleston Phase II Report, but his final conclusions point to the need for a "cultural change" within the fire service. An important takeaway from both Chief Routley's and the attendees' reactions is that the situation that arose in Charleston could easily play out in North Carolina or another state. After such a tragedy, little is gained from finger-pointing, but if we can learn from prior mistakes – careless or otherwise – we should apply the new knowledge toward preventing future tragedies.



(Above) Chief Gordon Routley gives a presentation on the Charleston Super Sofa fire. (Right) Lauren Mulkey, wife of South Carolina fallen firefighter Louis Mulkey of the Charleston 9, spoke at the NCAFC Mid-Winter Conference on Saturday, Feb. 7.

