

Looking Back:

R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company Building 256

If you looked back at the skylines of North Carolina's cities just 200 years ago, you'd find a very different sight than today. With an economy built on textiles and tobacco, North Carolina in the 1800s was a state of factories and the infrastructures that supplied them. Where now stand condos, office buildings and biotechnical companies, large factories and industrial facilities once dotted the landscape. You can still find their remnants among the modern buildings. It was in one such relic that the Winston-Salem Fire Department fought one of its largest fires, on a blustery day in August 1998.

Aug. 28, 1998: the day began with 25 mph wind gusts fed by a tropical storm battering the Carolina coastline. Just a month prior, construction crews began work to restore the historic R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company Building 256. The factory was built in the mid-1800s to accommodate the tobacco company's manufacturing operation. The structures that made up Building 256 were five stories high and 260 feet long by 300 feet wide, and were constructed out of masonry and oil-soaked timber floors.

The sprinkler system had been shut down to facilitate restoration operations. Construction crews discovered a

fire in a large rubbish pile adjacent to the building. Workers briefly attempted to extinguish the fire with buckets of water, but when they realized their efforts were not working, they called for help.

The first alarm at 10:37 a.m. went to Winston-Salem Fire Department's Engine 1, Engine 4 and Battalion 1. At the time of the first alarm, Aerial 2 was several blocks away delivering a ventilation fan to a business, so it responded to the scene after observing a large column of smoke.

Once on the scene, Aerial 2 advised that they had a large rubbish fire behind the 256 building that was extending through windowless openings. The officer requested a second alarm which brought to the scene Engines 3 and 5. Aerial 1 responded after finishing with an earlier alarm. Command staff then decided to initiate an attack from Patterson Street using master streams.

Within nine minutes of the first alarm, four engine companies, three aerial companies and two command units were on the scene. At 10:52 a.m., the third alarm went out and Engines 6 and 18 responded. Two minutes later Aerial 3 was requested to the scene as well. There were reports of chemicals and oxy acetylene tanks in the area, so Command requested that Hazmat 1 respond as well.

Personnel attempted a brief attack within Building 256, but they quickly abandoned their efforts after

meeting heavy fire conditions within. The fire quickly escalated and began to

move from floor to floor. At this point, Command decided to forsake offensive operations within Building 256 and concentrate on the other exposures.

Two other buildings were adjacent to 256; one of these was directly connected by causeways on each of the five floors. Crews were sent into this building, Building 12, to investigate and prevent any extension. When crews reached the causeways, they found heavy fire encroaching. The ability to trench the causeways was not feasible due to the conditions, but a stand was made with 2.5-inch lines to hold the fire at bay. Because of this no fire reached building 12.

The building to the south of the body of fire, Albert Hall, was occupied by a combination of residential and commercial tenants. Crews were sent in to cut off any extension there and were met with active fires, high heat and smoke. Master streams were placed between the two buildings in order to dampen some of the extreme fire conditions. Despite the heavy fire conditions the building was salvageable.

As the event unfolded a request was sent out to neighboring departments for assistance with personnel and equipment. A department-wide call-back was initiated for all off-duty personnel. The neighboring departments included Kernersville and other departments in Forsyth County. These departments brought a great deal of personnel and equipment that proved invaluable to the on-scene operations. In addition to the efforts on scene, these departments assisted in manning stations throughout the city.

As the day wore on and the fire expanded beyond Building 256, first responders were faced with a new and unique challenge in their response. The Forsyth County Jail was forced to evacuate due

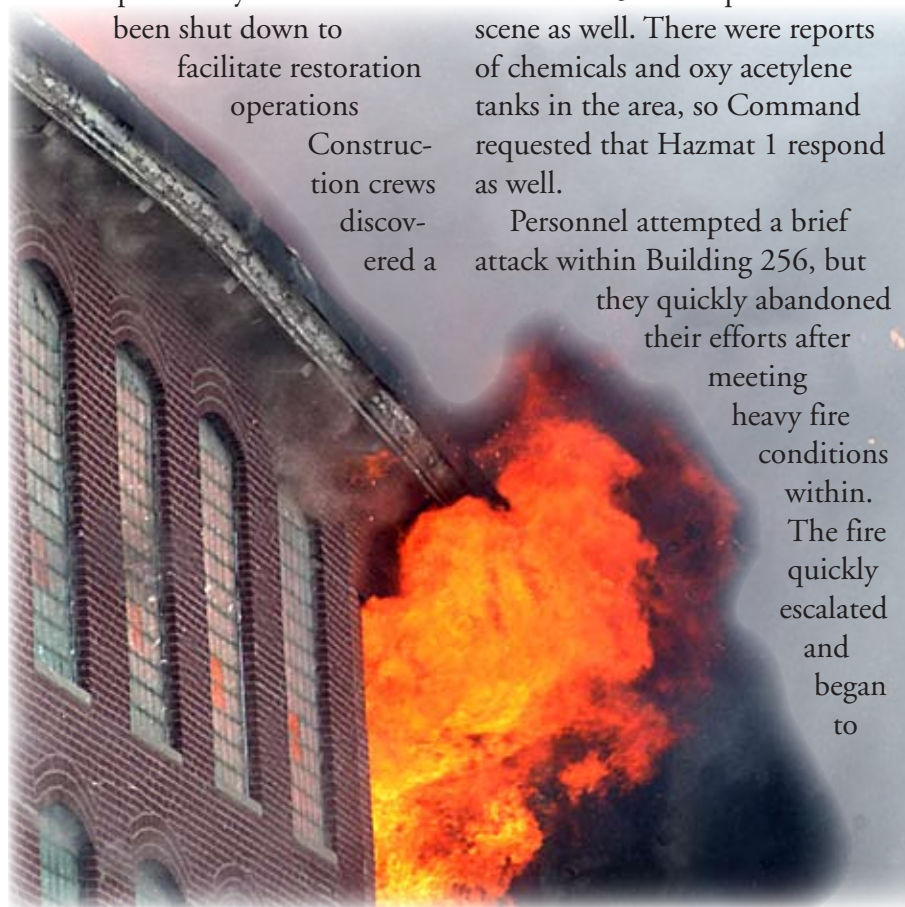
to its proximity to the growing fire. The Forsyth County Sheriffs Department coordinated with the LJVM Coliseum to hold its large population of prisoners until the incident was resolved.

As the 256 building became more and more involved,

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it became difficult to direct streams from aerial units into the building. The remaining intact windows throughout the building were constructed with glass bricks, and proved problematic for fire crews. Crews needed to vent the upper floors, and searched for some way to break the glass bricks that high up. At firefighters' request, Forsyth County Sheriff's deputies took position on the street below and fired round after round of shotgun blasts into the windows. Ironically enough, some 100 years ago a similar tactic was tried in a burning building across the street; unfortunately, this idea proved to be just as ineffective in 1998 as it did the first time.

As fire consumed more of the building, much of the upper floor became extremely unstable. Onlookers on the street below witnessed many dramatic collapses, and some equipment succumbed to the onslaught of falling bricks. A DH Griffith Company operating in the area on a demolition project volunteered their heavy equipment to bring down some of the unstable areas of the building. The tactic to utilize such a resource put operators of this equipment in unique situations not often faced in their daily operations. The equipment operator was briefed and equipped to operate in the hot zone. The large track hoe used to bring down some of the upper areas of the building was effective in gaining





access to master streams and making safe some of the areas under question.

As night fell the fire was brought to a point that some of the crews could be released. Despite the fact that most of the building had been destroyed and the forward movement stopped into the adjacent buildings, crews remained into the next day. Operating apparatus for prolonged periods required on-scene refueling and constant checking. Crews had to be rotated and the incoming shifts found their trucks already in operation wetting down the ashes of the day before.

As the smoke cleared, the scar in the Winston-Salem skyline became more apparent. The Reynolds 256 building was a total loss and the two adjacent buildings sustained some fire and water damage, though both were ultimately repairable.

Despite the large scale of the incident there were only a few injuries, none of which required hospitalization. The crews working that day operated valiantly and, if not for their actions, the incident could have had much different outcome. The incident command faced a great deal of

challenges that stretched the Winston-Salem Fire Department, but these challenges were faced and conquered to bring a positive outcome to the incident.

Following the fire the department began to look at how to better serve its citizens. In the last 10 years, staffing has been increased throughout the Winston-Salem Fire Department, and specialized companies such

as the rescue company and truck company concept have been added. To improve radio communications, which were a problem during the incident, Winston-Salem and Forsyth County have changed to an 800 MHz system.

As our cities grow and the skylines continue to change, we are going to be faced with new challenges not met before. We

hear the siren call of past fires and incidents that ring out the changes coming. On that one hot summer day 10 years ago, Winston-Salem was confronted with one of those calls — and the departments involved rose to battle the flames.

Jason D. Gore is with the Winston-Salem Fire and Rescue Historical Society and contributed to the bulk of this article.

