

Fires at Watson's

Research compiled by Mike Legeros

Let's travel back to the early Eighties, and the first of four fires at the future Watson's Flea Market, at 1436 Rock Quarry Road. The first major fire occurred on April 30, 1982, at a 4,400 square-foot feather processing plant. Bales of feathers were burning, and the smoke could be seen for 30 miles. And they stank. The second major fire on March 3, 1984, destroyed the center section of a 70,000 square-foot former seafood and poultry plant. The building was largely vacant. Crews returned to the scene for days.

The third major fire occurred on March 28, 1987 (below), in a 12,000 square-foot warehouse housing five businesses. That day, some 2,000 people were working and shopping there. Crews were on scene all day. The fourth major fire was on February 12, 1994. Two alarms in the former cold storage building attached to the rear of the main office and restaurant. The details of these four fires are listed below.



News & Observer photo

Date	Apr. 30, 1982	Mar. 3, 1984	Mar. 28, 1987	Feb. 12, 1994
Day	Friday	Saturday	Saturday	Wednesday
Shift	C shift	B shift	B shift	B shift
Time	5:26 p.m.	4:53 a.m.	11:39 a.m.	7:48 p.m.

Date	Apr. 30, 1982	Mar. 3, 1984	Mar. 28, 1987	Feb. 12, 1994
Address	1436 Rock Quarry Road	1436 Rock Quarry Road	1436 Rock Quarry Road	1436 Rock Quarry Road
Business	Feather Processing Inc.	Watson Seafood and Poultry Company, former	Watson's Market Place	Watson's Flea Market Restaurant
Building	One-story concrete	Two-story, concrete	Two-story, concrete	Two-story, concrete
Size	4,400 square-feet	70,000 square-feet	12,000 square feet	
Details	Processing plant connected to larger poultry and seafood plant. Plant processed feathers, usually for pillows.	Manufacturing plant vacant since April 1983, except portion leased to Keene Tire Service, which was connected to the rear of the building. Plant described as a maze of storage rooms, narrow hallways, and false ceilings.	Warehouse building housing five businesses: J's Memorabilia Furniture Stripping and Refurnishing Keene's Tire Company Keith's Restaurant United Screen Printers D&J Hauling offices.	Former cold storage building, vacant, attached to rear of main office and restaurant.
Arrival	Code 2, condition red on arrival. Building fully involved.	Flames through roof on arrival.	Flames through roof on arrival.	Code 3 on arrival. Automatic second alarm.
Fire		Flames reached 20 feet into air. Rear of building engulfed by the time second alarm companies arrived.	Fueled and fast-moving, helped by chemicals stored in furniture business. Crews would control the fire, enter to perform salvage, and the fire would flare up again. This happened a couple times.	
Smoke	Smoke visible as 30 miles, from some 100 bales of burning features weighing 600 pounds each. Stank to high heaven, recall those on scene.		Thick smoke from 600 burning tires.	

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Water Supply	E10 laid line 1,110 feet from hydrant			
Aerial Apparatus	Truck 1 operating	Truck 1 operating	Truck 1 operating	Truck 1operating
Truck 1	1977 Mack/Baker Aerialscope	1977 Mack/Baker Aerialscope	1977 Mack/Baker Aerialscope	1988 Pierce Snorkel
Controlled	40 minutes, within	Two hours, by 7:00 a.m.	Three hours, after	40 minutes, about
Afterward	Crews remained on scene into the afternoon, wetting down the remains to prevent rekindling.		Crews stayed on scene through evening and night	

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Next Days	<p>May 1 E10 standing by, 08:11 to 10:40.</p> <p>May 3 E10 for smoldering bales, 10:34.</p>	<p>Mar. 4 E1 until 12:22. T1 until 11:00. E13 returned 15:00 to 16:45. E10 returned four times, for a couple hours each.</p> <p>Mar. 5 E10, T12, Tanker 4 for rekindle on top of freezer compartment, 10:36. E10 for rekindle, 17:54. C52 with investigators. They return a couple more days. Light truck and trailer to scene from Station 1.</p> <p>Mar. 7 E10 for rekindle in cold storage room, 08:11.</p> <p>Mar. 9 E10 for rekindle in cold storage room, 14:29.</p>	<p>Mar. 29 E3 for relief, 08:00.</p>	<p>Feb. 13 E10 for overhaul, 08:00 to 12:00. E10 to check insulation for rekindle, 22:07</p>
Cause	<p>Electrical arc inside a drying machine.</p> <p>Employee saw smoke in the bailing room, and then fire erupted.</p>		<p>Boy playing with matches, that he dropped into a vat of flammable liquid used to strip furniture.</p>	

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Haz-Mat			Water also displaced 300 to 500 gallons of fuel oil from underground tank. Minimal contamination of Walnut Creek. Raleigh haz-mat team helped mitigate.	
Damage Estimate	\$100,000 (building) \$400,000 (contents)		\$175,000 (building) \$274,000 (contents)	
Condition	Building destroyed, with only one wall standing. Plant was not rebuilt.	Center-rear portion of building gutted. Storage area, formerly poultry processing center. Estimated 40 to 50 percent of building was destroyed. Tire store connected to building unharmed.	Furniture and tire stores gutted. The other businesses had severe water and smoke damage.	Heavy damage to rear storage area and minor fire damage to rear of second floor of main building.
Civilians	Ten employees evacuated safely.		Some 2,000 people were working or shopping when the fire started. Most at nearby flea market.	
Firefighters	30	30, about		40
FF Injuries		Ann Newton transported by R6 at 06:14 after a fall.	V. Tim Wall transported after falling from a ladder.	
First Alarm	E10, E3, T1, C5, R7 - 17:26	E10, E3, T12, C52 - 04:50	E1, E3, T1, C52 - 11:39	E10, E3, T1, R7, C52
Second Alarm	E1, T12, C2 - ????	E1, T1 - 4:53 R6 - 05:05	E10, others? - 11:47	E1, E13, T11, R6, C51, C5, C12
Third Alarm		E2, T5 third alarm? at 05:36	E13, others? - 12:12	

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Relief	E1 relief at 17:37 E11 relief at 19:09	E4 relief for E1 at 11:00. Cleared 15:20 E13 relief for E4? at 15:16	T15 - 14:21 for relief E7 - 14:30 for relief of E3 E12 - 15:30 for relief of E1 T11 - 18:30 for relief of T15 E11- 19:30 for relief of E1 T12 - 22:45 stand by E18 - ??:?? stand by Light truck took equipment from Station 1 to scene. Others?	E6 for relief - 23:40
Coverage			E7 to Sta 1 - 12:07 E5 to Sta 1 - 13:20, with calls including a working fire on Morgan Street with E4, T8, R6. T12 to Sta 1 - 14:05 to 16:08 E16 to Sta 1 - 14:23 E4 to Sta 1 - 18:00 to 19:30 Others?	

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Notes	<p>The 30-year-old operation was grossing \$4 million to \$5 million per year, estimated one of the two Watson brothers that owned the operation.</p>	<p>Truck 1 arrived in six minutes. Roof collapsed in center of structure and fully involved. Truck 1 set up and used 500 GPM nozzle. Cleared 07:13.</p> <p>Structure was built in 1942 (about 20%) and early 1960s (about 80%).</p> <p>Watson Seafood & Poultry Company was based in Rose Hill and went bankrupt in 1983.</p> <p>Recently leased to the former owner of the Fairgrounds Flea Market, and who was planning to open a new flea market on the 25 1/2-acre Rock Quarry Road site in several weeks.</p> <p>Several truckloads of flea market merchandise were inside building, but escaped damage.</p> <p>Auction was held two weeks ago, to see refrigeration and other plant equipment.</p>	<p>Not every engine or ladder served at the scene. Absent that day included E8, T8, E9, and E17.</p> <p>At least one apparatus sustained damage. Truck 1 reported damage to the top-left of the truck.</p>	

Sources

- *News & Observer*, May 1, 1982; March 4, 1984; March 29, 1987; February 12, 1994.
- *Raleigh Times*, May 1, 1982; March 3, 1984; March 30, 1987.
- Oral histories.
- Records.

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