



# Raleigh Fire Department Newsletter



Volume 11, Issue 2

Spring/Summer 2017

## Five Alarms at the Metropolitan



*Eric Debrah photo*

On Thursday, March 16, at 10:03 p.m., six words from “Headquarters” started a response of historic proportions: “structure fire 400 West North Street.”

That was the closest initial address that dispatchers could determine, from the first caller reporting a fire at the Metropolitan Apartments under construction on the northeast corner of Jones and Harrington streets.

Six blocks away, the “B” platoon companies at Central Fire Station—Engine 13, Engine 1, Ladder 4—were rolling out the door within seconds.

Less than a minute after dispatched, Engine 13 was the first to arrive. Company officer Captain Paul Wyatt saw heavy fire showing from the second floor, saw the scope of what was burning, and immediately requested a second alarm.

The block-long, five-story building was still under construction. The upper floors were framed but without walls, windows, or doors. The fire was moving quickly in the open spaces. Within a minute, it had spread the length of the second story.

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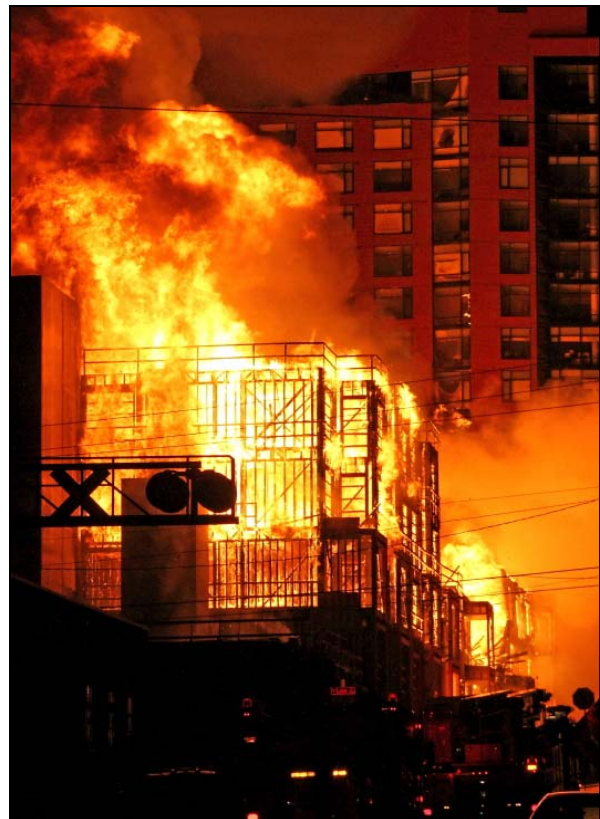
## Largest Fire in a Century

The Metropolitan fire brought 130 Raleigh firefighters to the scene that night, including 24 engines, seven ladders, one rescue, five battalion chiefs, two division chiefs, three assistant chiefs, and the Fire Chief.

The 274,959 square-foot, block-long apartment building was completely destroyed. Nine other buildings received significant damage, including two high-rise residential structures, where over 257 residents were displaced.

Ten hydrants supplied four aerial streams, five portable monitors, a deck gun, and numerous hand lines. Plus, connections to sprinkler systems in two neighboring high-rise buildings. The fire was controlled in three hours, and the fire department personnel remained on scene for several days.

All photographs are by Mike Legeros, unless otherwise noted. ■



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Three minutes after the second alarm, Wyatt requested a third alarm.

“This was a fire bigger than our capabilities,” Wyatt notes. “I knew we couldn’t save the building, and we had to focus on the buildings surrounding it. That made my job easier as incident commander. I could focus on evacuations and exposures.”

Parked at the southeast corner, Engine 13 pulled a portable monitor. They had a hydrant and began spraying the threatened buildings nearby—the exposures—first with a fog nozzle and then with a straight stream for greater reach.

Engine 1, farther east on Jones Street, took a second monitor into an alley, to protect the exposures on the east side of the fire building.

## Snorkel Goes Into Action



Ladder 4 was behind Engine 13 on Jones Street. They were riding the reserve 1988 Pierce Snorkel, a veteran war horse at downtown fires.

They repositioned further west, as the entire building face was soon burning, a

danger to the apparatus. Ladder 4 was supplied by Engine 3, which was boosted by Engine 2, both parked at a hydrant at Jones and West.



Another “blitz nozzle” at Harrington and Jones sprayed water on the high-rise Quorum Center across the street, which was being licked by the 200-foot flames.

As portable monitors and aerial streams were being deployed, arriving personnel headed into the Quorum Center, as well as the Link Apartments, across Harrington Street, to help evacuate those residents.

The fire was soon breaking windows in the Quorum Center and glass rained onto Jones Street. As the contents of rooms were ignited, sprinkler heads acti-

vated, and prevented the fire from spreading. Sprinklers also activated in the Link Apartments, as the heat ignited balcony materials, broke windows, and melted window blinds.

High-rise procedures were initiated in both buildings. Crews carried high rise packs—with hose, nozzles, couplings, and wrenches—into each, for use with the standpipe connections on each floor.



The command post was established at the corner of Jones and Harrington. Arriving Battalion Chief A.C. Rich (B3) took over from Captain Wyatt, and soon transferred command to arriving Assistant Chief of Operations Brad Harvey.

Division Chief John Fanning had also arrived. He was directed to the Link Apartments, to oversee that operation. Chief Rich oversaw the Quorum Center.



Other arriving chief officers took operation command on each side of the Metropolitan: Assistant Chief of Services Danny Poole (west), Battalion Chief David Whitley, B2 (north), Assistant Chief of Training Kendall Hocutt (east), and Battalion Chief Stephen Page, B5 (southeast),

Fire Marshal and Asst. Chief Keith Tessinear, meanwhile, reported to the city’s Emergency Operations Center, to provide remote support and assist the dispatchers with managing the incident, and other fire calls in the city.

*Continued on page 3*

## Tower Crane Collapsed



*Rob Tiller photo*

At 10:19 p.m., the construction crane at the site collapsed. It fell across Harrington Street, and onto a spot that Ladder 2 had vacated several minutes earlier. It snapped power lines, causing a local power outage, and landed on a small industrial building beside the Link. There were no injuries.

By this time, the intense heat had started burning parts of Engine 13. After the crane collapsed, and with their gear smoking and the pavement melting, the crew moved their apparatus.

By 10:45 p.m., five alarms had been dispatched. On Jones Street, Ladders 3 and 4 and a portable monitor protected the Quorum Center. Ladder 7 would soon join them. On Harrington Street, Ladder 2 and a portable monitor protected the Link Apartments.

On the east side, fires were burning at the League of Municipalities building and two others. Ladder 2 was soon relocated to that side, supplied by Engine 13, and with crews attacking those fires.

Spot fires had spread to other nearby buildings, as the fire fueled its own wind, and sent burning embers onto nearby roofs, including Edenton Street United Methodist Church.

## Links, Quorum Controlled

By midnight, the Link and Quorum incidents were under control. Searches were completed, and all spot fires extinguished. Much of the Metropolitan had burned away, and the threat to neighboring buildings was over. Crews turned their streams onto the fire building, pouring water into the site for the next several hours.

Five alarms had been dispatched, and additional personnel were still coming to the scene, including training staff and 27 firefighter recruits. Off-duty personnel had been recalled, and some 30 members

were used on scene and for staffing extra units.

At their stations, Battalion Chiefs Lowell Smith (B1) and Scott White (B3) handled the city's coverage needs, moving remaining fire companies closer to downtown, and using "county units" to staff vacated city fire stations.

Fifteen neighboring fire departments sent personnel and apparatus to assist, and coverage ranged from Swift Creek at Station 5 (shown below) to Wake Forest at Station 25.

At the Services Support Center on New Bern Avenue, on-call mechanic Jamie Powell came in to help address any apparatus needs, and assist Division Chief of Services Frankie Hobson with placing two reserve engines and a reserve ladder in service as special companies for the night.



Just over three hours after the original dispatch, the Metropolitan fire was reported under control at 1:10 a.m.

Most of the companies on scene were released over the next three hours. Southside units didn't get much rest, however, as a working house fire on Barwell Road was dispatched at 6:54 a.m.

## Morning After



On the morning after the fire, fresh resources were brought to the scene after shift change at 8:00 a.m.

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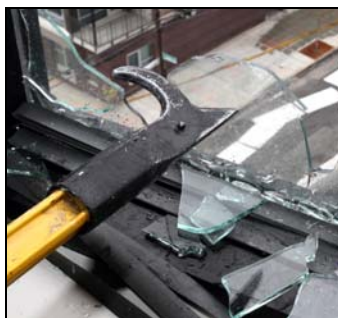
Incoming "C" platoon personnel continued flowing water on the fire building, while also assisting with other needs.

The Office of the Fire Marshal contacted the city's inspections department, and both groups met at 9:00 a.m. They created teams to assess structural integrity of each affected building. Later that day, they met with property owners, to share their findings, and help develop plans for reoccupying.



In the Quorum Center, broken and weakened window panes presented a hazard to firefighters and other workers on the street. Chief Hocutt oversaw the breaking of all remaining windows, and clearing glass from all window panes.

Crews went floor to floor and room to room, and were assisted by the returning firefighter recruits.



On the street, boards were laid over hoses to protect from the falling glass.

## Repairs and Restoration

On Saturday, the fire department prepared the scene for the team of arriving fire investigators, including erecting a tent shelter for canteen service. They also started assisting residents with retrieving personal belongings from their apartments and condos.

Repair and restoration crews had started their work in the damaged buildings. Street side, Public Utilities workers started clearing the streets of broken glass.

Raleigh Police remained on scene, to control access. Wake County EMS also stayed on site, for any medical needs during the extended operation. ❖

## Great Fires in Raleigh



*North Carolina State Archives photo*

The Metropolitan fire was the city's largest fire in at least a century, historic both in size (square-footage) and numbers of responding fire apparatus and firefighters.

Eighty-nine years ago, the Yarborough Hotel on Fayetteville Street burned in July 1928. Durham and Smithfield sent engines to assist the entire Raleigh Fire Department. It measured 46,500 square-feet.

Closer in scope, but not size, was the Pine Knoll Townes fire on February 22, 2007. Six alarms were struck in this fast-moving blaze. It consumed 32 townhomes, destroyed and heavily damaged some 45,600 square-feet, and used even more resources than the Metropolitan fire.

Each of these involved only about one-fifth of the area of the Metropolitan's 274,959 square-feet. ■



*Lee Wilson photo*

### ABOUT THIS NEWSLETTER

THE RALEIGH FIRE DEPARTMENT NEWSLETTER IS A PUBLICATION FOR PERSONNEL, RETIREES, AND CITIZENS. IT'S PUBLISHED THREE TIMES A YEAR. THE EDITOR IS HISTORIAN MIKE LEGEROS. BACK ISSUES ARE AVAILABLE AT [www.raleighfirenews.org](http://www.raleighfirenews.org). TO LEARN ABOUT THE RALEIGH FIRE DEPARTMENT, VISIT [www.raleigh-nc.org/fire](http://www.raleigh-nc.org/fire).

## Determining Cause



Fire Investigators Capt. Preston Gaster (left) and Capt. John Rasor (right) began their investigation after arriving at the fire.

Rasor had arrived with the first units and was initially assigned as Staging Officer. Gaster, the incoming investigator on “C” platoon, was requested by Rasor.

“We knew this fire would be more than one investigator could effectively handle,” said Gaster, head of the department’s fire investigation team, and who came from home.

Almost immediately, they started interviewing witnesses, taking pictures of the fire building, and collecting contact information of property owners. They also assisted with various fire suppression tasks over the next several hours.

By Friday morning, the investigation team had expanded with a Raleigh police detective assigned to the incident, and the local agent from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF).



“The ATF is notified for fires involving a half-million dollars in loss, among other criteria,” notes Gaster.

Due to the totality and magnitude of this fire, however, a timely investigation would not be possible without additional resources. Later on Friday, and after meeting with fire, police, and city officials, they decided to request the National Response Team (NRT).

The NRT is a federal team comprised of the ATF, the State Bureau of Investigation (SBI), and other local agencies. They assist with large-loss fires and explosions and can respond anywhere in the United States within 24 hours. They help the local investigating agency until the investigation is completed and/or is manageable with local resources.

“Though we were still the lead agency investigating the fire, the sheer size required many more resources for a timely completion,” says Gaster.

Some fifteen ATF agents from around the country starting arriving on Saturday. They joined SBI investigators deployed from around the state.

Over the next week, investigators did extensive work at the site, taking pictures, digging for physical evidence, and even using a canine to detect potential accelerants. They collected imagery of the fire, from surrounding surveillance cameras, to the phones of people in the area at the time of the fire.

Twice-daily meetings were held, before and after each operational period. The team occupied an office in the Dillon Building, across the hall from fire department administration.



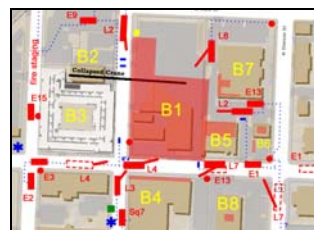
The NRT demobilized the following weekend, and handed over all pertinent information to the fire department.

Over 100 investigators participated in the investigation, which continued through May. Over 300 interviews were conducted. Multiple state search warrants were issued, and some 25 tons of debris were removed from the fire scene.

Though a number of potential ignition sources were identified and evaluated—including electrical sources, intentional acts, and possible heating fires by trespassing squatters—no definitive conclusion was reached. On June 2, officials announced that the fire cause had been classified as undetermined. ■

## Incident Map

See a map of the Metropolitan fire at [www.raleighfiremuseum.org/content/metropolitan](http://www.raleighfiremuseum.org/content/metropolitan).



## Photo Gallery



Ladder 2 on Harrington Street. Crews repositioned the ladder twice, as they progressively doused flames on the street side, protecting their apparatus and moving into position to reach the Link Apartments.



Little remained of the upper floors after the first hour. This view, facing the east side of the Metropolitan, shows the League of Municipalities building on the left, where fire spread to the upper floors.



By morning, the damage to surrounding structures was visible, such as the burned balconies and broken windows on Link Apartments, shown in this photo.



On Saturday, firefighters began escorting residents into the Link Apartments and Quorum Center to retrieve belongings. Two fire department passenger vans provided transportation from the Municipal Building on Saturday and Sunday.



Raleigh firefighters received dozens of letters at their fire stations—as well as numerous snacks and baked goods—by people and groups thanking them for their work at the Metropolitan fire.



On Thursday, March 23, Raleigh firefighters were recognized for their work at the fire by North Carolina Senate and North Carolina House of Representatives during their legislative sessions.

See more pictures and learn more about the fire at [www.raleighfiremuseum.org/content/metropolitan](http://www.raleighfiremuseum.org/content/metropolitan)

# Promotions

## June 3

Promoted to Captain:

Lt. Chatmon T. Houston

Promoted to Lieutenant:

Senior FF Jennifer K. Patterson

Senior FF Kevin A. Adcock

# Retirements

Capt. **R. Fred Noble** (E5-A) retired on June 1 with 28.3 years of service. He started in 1989 with Academy 13. He was promoted to First Class Firefighter in 1992, to Lieutenant in 1995, and to Captain in 2000.



Capt. **Emil D. Burriss Jr.** (L9-C) retired on June 1 with 27.3 years of service. He started in 1990 with Academy 14. He was promoted to First Class Firefighter in 1993, to Lieutenant in 1996, and to Captain in 2007.



# Facility Updates

Major facility projects are underway including the relocation and rebuilding of a number of fire stations.

**Station 1 relocation.** Site acquisition continues in the area of the convention center. Davis Kane Architects was awarded the design services, and programming for the facility is underway.

**Station 2 renovation.** Construction will be completed in September. The “down-to-the-walls” renovation will also add a drive-through apparatus bay.

**Station 6 rebuild.** On May 29, Station 6 closed and Engine 6 relocated to nearby Station 5. Demolition starts in July, and a new 14,000 square-foot building will be erected on the 0.58 acre site. The project will take 14 months. The contractor is Pro Construction.

**Station 11 renovation.** The project scope was changed, and now consists of a bay expansion and complete renovation of living areas. The city is in the process of selecting a designer, and the contracting process will commence after that.

**Station 12 relocation.** Construction continues at 807 Bus Way. When completed in November, it will house a relocated Engine 12 and Battalion 2, as well as Ladder 8 moved from Station 26, and Car 20, the Division Chief, from Station 8.

**Station 14 rebuild.** Fire and police have been using the abandoned houses at the Harden Road site for training. Demolition will start in July or August, with construction starting in December.

**Station 22 relocation.** This is a new project, in response to an NC DOT grade separation and rail corridor bridge project crossing Durant Road. Pending approval by the City Council, the project schedule and scope have yet to be determined.

Funding for design and construction of relocated **Station 3** and new **Station 30** have been pushed out one year, and will be requested in FY19. ❖

# Other News

Upgrades to the **Services Support Center** are planned, with a new service counter and pass-through window between the maintenance bay and parts storage, along with new interior and exterior light fixtures, and new HVAC equipment, including a large fan in the shop ceiling to help air circulation. Bids for a contractor have been solicited. Also, **new roofs** will be installed this summer at Station 3, Station 7, Station 8, and the modular buildings at the training center.

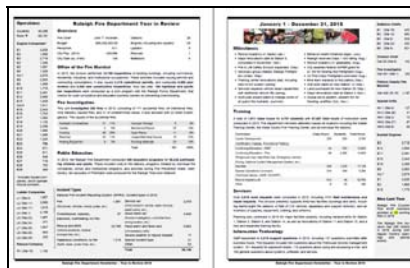
**New apparatus** was delivered in early June: two 2017 Pierce Enforcer pumpers, 500/1500, for Engine 10 and 17. Finishing production is a 2017 Pierce Arrow XT tiller, 300/1500/100'. It will be assigned to Ladder 4, with Ladder 4's tiller reassigned to Ladder 8.

Requested in the **proposed FY18 budget** are two more engines, a tiller (the city's fourth), and a heavy rescue truck. Two new mini-pumpers will also be purchased in FY18, replacing two 1986 Chevrolet brush trucks.

Also included in the FY18 budget are ten firefighter positions, a Deputy Fire Marshal position, and salary range increases for firefighters, part of changes to the compensation system for fire and police. ■

# Year in Review

Visit [www.raleighfirenews.org](http://www.raleighfirenews.org) to read a two-page summary of the Raleigh Fire Department in 2016.



Raleigh Fire Department  
310 West Martin Street, Suite 200  
Raleigh, NC 27602

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## Lessons Learned



On Monday evening, April 3, the first-alarm companies that responded to the Metropolitan fire attended a critique at the Keeter Training Center.

They were joined by the battalion chiefs, assistant fire chiefs, and Fire Chief John McGrath. Marcus Wells (above), the dispatcher working the fire console that night, also participated.

Each company officer and chief officer shared their experiences, personal observations, and lessons learned from the fire.

The fire reaffirmed the department's strategy to "go big and go early," by front-loading the responding resources, and by immediately requesting extra alarms

Division Chief John Fanning adds, "The critical piece was getting ahead of the fire. Our initial on-scene commanders made very good decisions, by sectioning off the fire and by employing big water on exposures."

Splitting the operations into branch commands, with a chief officer per branch, also proved useful, though they realize a need for expanded accountability. "We need more than one person handling that role, in a situation like this," notes Fanning. "Or by assigning one accountability role to each branch."

Chief McGrath concluded the critique with praise for all who worked at the fire, "We have been training for this kind of fire for eleven years, and they did a great job. They recognized the scope, and immediately went to large water. They knew that once the building got going, they weren't saving it. So they saved what they could, and protected the exposures. I'm proud of them. They did everything the way I would've wanted them to." ■