The Great Fire of 1922 in New Bern, North Carolina

Origin and Causes of the Fire

On the morning of December 1, 1922 (the day after Thanksgiving), New Bern was struck by a catastrophic blaze on a cold, windy day. In fact, two separate fires broke out almost simultaneously on opposite ends of town. The first ignited around 8:00 a.m. at the Rowland Lumber Company, the city's largest sawmill on the Neuse River waterfront. Contemporary reports blamed this mill fire on an accident: "The blaze is said to have originated from friction caused by a belt on the leg jack in the sawmill building… before an alarm could be sounded and water gotten to the fire; the building was a mass of flames." . While firefighters rushed to contain the inferno at the lumber yard, a second alarm sounded late that morning from New Bern's predominantly African American residential quarter. At about 10:45 a.m., a fire sparked in the chimney of a small house on Kilmarnock Street near the Five Points intersection. Fueled by high winds (estimated at 50–70 mph gusts), this residential fire quickly spread out of control through the surrounding neighborhood. The coincidence of two major fires at once – one in an industrial site and one in a crowded neighborhood – overwhelmed the city's resources and set the stage for a conflagration that locals would soon call "the Great Fire of New Bern."

Rapid Spread and Destruction

Aftermath of the Great Fire of 1922: an entire New Bern neighborhood was reduced to rubble and chimneys. Contemporary accounts described "row after row of ghostly chimneys" standing as the only remnants of homes amid the charred ruins.

Once the flames escaped the chimney on Kilmarnock Street, the fire stormed through tightly packed wooden houses with frightening speed. Gale-force winds drove burning embers far ahead, causing multiple structures to erupt in flames simultaneously. Panicked residents had little time to save their belongings; by the time fire crews managed to respond in the west side neighborhood, "three houses were already burned" and the blaze was leaping from roof to roof. The fire front raged northeast across blocks of homes, eventually even jumping a rail yard – sparks carried over the Atlantic & East Carolina railway depot ignited warehouses by the

riverfront. For nine hours the inferno tore through the city. By the time it was extinguished that night, an enormous swath of New Bern lay in ashes. Estimates of the burned zone ranged from 8 blocks long and up to 5 blocks wide, to over 40 city blocks decimated. In some places virtually nothing was left standing except brick chimney stacks, marking where whole rows of houses had stood.

The destruction was staggering. Approximately 500 to 1,000 buildings – including homes, churches, and businesses – were consumed. Entire streets of the African American quarter were erased, as the fire swept "nearly all" of New Bern's Black residential community. Two churches belonging to Black congregations (one a framed chapel and the other the substantial St. Peter's AME Zion Church) were burned to the ground. Several commercial structures were lost as well, such as the Dill and Farmer's tobacco warehouses and a former ice plant. Infrastructure suffered heavy damage: the intense heat warped railroad tracks passing through town, halting rail traffic, and telegraph lines were melted, leaving telephones as the only means to communicate with the outside. Property losses were estimated around $2 million to $2.5 million (1922 USD) – an enormous sum at the time – and yet only about one-third of these losses were covered by insurance.

Remarkably, the human toll in lives was very low despite the disaster's scale. Only one fatality was officially recorded: an elderly African American woman named Harriet Reeves, reportedly 105 years old, who was unable to escape the flames. (According to some accounts, she had initially been led to safety but went back to retrieve personal items and was overcome by smoke.) Injuries were also minimal; even those caught in exploding buildings (described below) survived with minor wounds. However, the lack of deaths belies the catastrophe's impact on people: by nightfall, roughly 3,000 residents were left homeless, amounting to one-quarter of New Bern's population at the time. Entire families lost everything but the clothes on their backs.

Firefighting Response and Emergency Efforts

New Bern's firefighting force in 1922 consisted of two volunteer companies (the Atlantic and Button companies), and they found themselves stretched past their limits on that tragic day. All firefighters and equipment were tied up battling the roaring lumber yard blaze on the east side when the second fire erupted in the west side neighborhood. As a result, there was a critical delay in response. When crews finally arrived at Kilmarnock Street around noon, they encountered a hellish scene – multiple houses already engulfed and flames spreading rapidly in winds reported at "70 miles an hour". Firefighters attempted to contain the perimeter, but the wooden shingle roofs and dry conditions meant each house was "just a fire waiting to happen".

The fire chief, realizing the blaze was out of control, made a drastic decision: to sacrifice structures ahead of the fire by blowing them up and create a firebreak.

Fire crews hastily placed explosive charges (dynamite or gunpowder) under a row of homes along Queen Street, just south of the burning zone. The idea was to knock down fuel in the fire's path in hopes of stopping the flames' advance. In practice, this desperate measure did little to halt the conflagration, and it nearly resulted in tragedy. As one Coast Guard sailor, crewman William Montague of the local cutter Pamlico, ran into a home to rescue a woman, firefighters detonated charges under the building without realizing he was still inside. The blast blew Montague and the woman straight through a wall and out into the yard, knocking him unconscious. Miraculously, both survived with only minor injuries. The fact that firefighters resorted to such measures illustrates how overwhelmed they were – the fire was simply too large and fast-moving for the city's resources.

Recognizing this, officials sent urgent calls for assistance to nearby cities. Neighboring towns dispatched help, but given the distances and 1920s transport, aid did not arrive quickly. Kinston, about 35 miles away, agreed to send a fire engine and crew, but they had to drive over miles of rough country roads. Washington (Little Washington, ~45 miles away) loaded a fire truck onto a railroad flatcar to speed to New Bern. These mutual aid companies only reached New Bern by mid-afternoon (Washington's unit around 3 PM and Kinston's around 4 PM) – many hours after the fire's peak intensity. By that point, much of the burning area had already been reduced to cinders. Local firefighters, soldiers from a nearby National Guard armory, Coast Guardsmen, and civilian volunteers all worked through the day to contain spot fires and protect the adjacent downtown from catching fire. After approximately nine hours of continuous destruction, the blaze was finally surrounded and subdued by early evening. By midnight on December 1, officials declared the fire fully under control. What had begun as an ordinary workday had become the worst fire in New Bern's history.

Immediate Aftermath: Short-Term Relief and Recovery

In the fire's aftermath, New Bern faced a humanitarian crisis: thousands of people were suddenly destitute and without shelter as winter approached. Help began to arrive almost immediately. The very next day, relief trains from the U.S. Army's Fort Bragg rolled into town carrying emergency supplies. The Army sent eight freight carloads of tents, cots, mattresses, and other equipment to house the displaced. At the same time, the American Red Cross, local churches, charities, and neighboring communities organized drives to collect food, clothing, bedding and funds for the fire victims. Civic groups set up field kitchens to feed those who had no means to cook. New Bern's fairgrounds and public spaces were quickly turned into relief centers.

One of the most visible responses was the establishment of a massive tent encampment for the homeless. A temporary “Tent City” sprang up on open ground around Cedar Grove Cemetery and the adjacent Greenwood Cemetery. Rows of canvas army tents provided rudimentary shelter amidst the ruins. Each displaced family was typically issued two tents – one for sleeping and another as a communal space for cooking and living. Despite the hardship, this tent city became a makeshift community of its own. “Tent City” housed many of the 3,000 victims through the winter of 1922–23. Relief workers and volunteers managed the camp, while local hospitals and aid societies tended to the sick or injured. The newspapers dubbed the tent encampment “Hotel de Greenwood” in a bittersweet nod to the cemetery grounds turned refuge. Those who could, moved in with relatives or friends outside the burned district – for example, eight-year-old Dorcas Carter (a survivor who later gave an oral history) recalled that her family of seven took refuge in a single room of an aunt’s house for nine months following the fire. For others, the tents and barracks-style emergency shelters remained home for weeks or even months until more permanent arrangements could be made.

Generous donations poured in from across the state and beyond. Churches as far away as Raleigh and Charlotte sent money; school children held penny drives; and the Red Cross coordinated relief on a large scale, just as it had for the Great War a few years prior. In the first weeks, New Bern’s citizens focused on basic survival: accounting for all families, burying the one victim, caring for the suddenly unemployed, and clearing debris. The charred remains of buildings were still smoking as crews worked to restore utilities and reopen roads. Thanks to these concerted relief efforts, there were no further deaths from exposure or disease in the aftermath – a notable achievement for such a large displacement. Nonetheless, the emotional shock was profound. One local paper reported scenes of dazed families “wandering among the ruins looking for the site of their former homes,” weeping at what was lost. As the Coastal Review later noted, the misery did not end on December 1st: a quarter of the city’s population was homeless, and many had “only the clothes on their backs”. Rebuilding lives would prove to be a long and difficult process.

Long-Term Impacts on the Community

The Great Fire of 1922 permanently altered the social and physical landscape of New Bern, especially for the Black community. The neighborhood that burned had been one of the most prosperous African American districts in North Carolina – a self-sufficient, middle-class Black community boasting homeowners, churches, and numerous Black-owned businesses and professionals. “All of George Street was so pretty and prosperous,” Dorcas Carter recalled, noting that before the fire her community had included butchers, tailors, carpenters, blacksmiths, shoemakers, barbers, morticians, doctors, lawyers, and more – “a very dedicated, family

neighborhood, until the fire came and destroyed it." The 1922 conflagration wiped out this thriving district in a single day, and its effects reverberated for decades.

In the immediate long-term, thousands of Black residents had to find new places to live. Many left New Bern entirely after losing their homes and jobs; some joined the Great Migration northward in search of work and a fresh start. Those who stayed often had to relocate to other parts of town or live in segregated rental housing. City authorities made a controversial decision in the fire's wake: rather than allow the predominantly Black neighborhood to be rebuilt as it was, the New Bern Board of Aldermen condemned the entire burned area. Officials designated the former Black residential blocks for public use – plans called for parks, playgrounds, cemeteries, wider streets and new government buildings on that land. In effect, the city seized the opportunity to remake the urban layout. This meant that many Black landowners were not permitted to rebuild their homes on their own property. They could only submit claims for compensation to an appraisal board and then had to move elsewhere. This policy, enacted under the guise of "modernizing" the city, caused lasting bitterness. Survivors like Dorcas Carter remembered painfully that "they did not allow the Blacks to rebuild on their home site… not returning to your birthplace" was deeply upsetting. Some residents did try to rebuild on the burned lots, only to be stopped by city orders and forced to tear down any new construction. Essentially, an entire Black neighborhood was erased not just by fire but by government fiat in the aftermath.

The demographic impact was stark. Before 1922, African Americans comprised the majority of New Bern's population (estimates around 60% Black to 40% white). In the decade after the fire, as displaced Black families relocated or left town, those proportions flipped – the city's population became majority white for the first time in memory. The loss of the Black housing district, combined with the closure of the lumber mill (which had employed many African Americans), forced a significant migration. It would take years, even generations, for New Bern's Black community to recover, and it never again resided in the same urban core neighborhood in such numbers. Some of the burned area eventually became public parks (e.g. Kafer Park and portions of Henderson Park), while other parts were used for civic buildings or simply left open as buffers. The city's street plan was also revamped – for example, Queen Street was widened after the fire, which today is a lasting physical legacy of the 1922 blaze.

Economically, New Bern suffered a setback but rebuilt in a new direction. The fire hastened the decline of the lumber industry in New Bern – the Rowland Lumber Company's mill, destroyed that morning, was never fully rebuilt. Instead, the city increasingly turned to other industries and to its historical heritage for revival. By the 1930s and 40s, efforts were underway to preserve historic buildings (the parts of downtown that didn't burn) and to establish Tryon Palace and a historic district, partly spurred by the awareness that so much had been lost in 1922. Thus, the Great Fire indirectly led New Bern to place greater emphasis on historic preservation and city

planning in later years. Culturally, the fire became a defining memory for the town's older generations – a shared trauma that also highlighted racial divisions in how recovery was managed.

Historical Significance and Lessons Learned

The New Bern fire of 1922 stands as a landmark event in North Carolina history. It remains the largest urban fire in North Carolina's recorded history in terms of area burned and people displaced. At least one quarter of the city went up in flames during that conflagration, a scale unmatched by any other single fire in the state. In the annals of American disasters, the Great Fire of New Bern is sometimes compared to other early 20th-century urban fires (though it was smaller than the great fires of Chicago or San Francisco, for example). For New Bern and North Carolina, it was a wake-up call for urban fire safety. Fire codes and building practices were re-examined in the aftermath. Observers noted that the hardest-hit areas were rows of wooden houses with cedar-shake roofs – highly combustible construction that city officials later discouraged. Over time, New Bern and other cities adopted stricter fire codes, such as requirements for fire breaks, limits on wood shingle roofing, and better access to water for firefighting. The volunteer fire companies also modernized: within a few years, New Bern acquired its first motorized fire trucks (including a motorized ladder truck by 1927) and improved training for firefighters, reducing the reliance on rival volunteer crews.

The disaster also illustrated the importance of regional mutual aid and emergency planning. Due to 1920s transportation limits, help from other towns arrived too slowly to stop the blaze. This led to discussions statewide about pre-positioning equipment and improving communication (for example, ensuring backup telephone lines since telegraph wires melted in the fire). In later decades, North Carolina's cities would develop mutual aid pacts so that firefighting assistance could be dispatched more efficiently in large emergencies.

Perhaps the most enduring lesson of the Great Fire of 1922 is a social one. The event highlighted racial and economic inequities in disaster response during the Jim Crow era. The fact that the entire "Negro district" was wiped out and then deliberately not rebuilt exposed the injustice faced by Black citizens. Historians have noted that New Bern's leaders used the fire as an excuse to carry out a form of early urban renewal that displaced Black residents. This has been a point of reflection and acknowledgment in recent years. In 2022, New Bern commemorated the centennial of the Great Fire with public lectures, exhibits, and memorial events, many of which recognized the resilience of the Black community, and the lessons learned about fairness in recovery efforts. One positive legacy is that New Bern's story has informed modern emergency

management to be more inclusive and equitable. Today, city officials emphasize that such an event should never again produce the kind of "bitter legacy" that 1922 did.

In sum, the Great Fire of New Bern in the 1920s was a calamitous event that destroyed a huge portion of the city, reshaped its demographics and urban layout, and left an indelible mark on its history. It prompted improvements in fire safety and gave future generations hard lessons in community planning and racial equity. As one local museum guide put it on the 100th anniversary: "They didn't have a lot of fire codes back in those days – the safety today is much better." The fire is remembered not only for its immense destruction but also for the way New Bern's people persevered in its aftermath. From the tent city that winter to the rebuilt homes' years later, the citizens of New Bern rebuilt their lives – and the town itself rose from those ashes with a renewed commitment to protecting its community for the future.

Sources:

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