

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: Bar Harbor Fire Sometimes referred to as the Mount Desert Island Fire	Incident Date & Time: 10/17/1947 @ 16:00
Incident Location: Mount Desert Island, Maine	Incident Size 17,188 acres
Types of resources involved: Local initial attack pumper trucks, military personnel, forestry school students, local volunteers, and finally National Park Service personnel from all over the east coast	# of Fatalities/injuries: 2 fatalities
Reason this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fire is historically significant 	
Conditions leading up to the event:	
<p>The fall of 1947 in New England was exceptionally dry. During the three month period from August to October, New England received only 56% of its normal amount of precipitation. In recognition of this critical situation the governors from the seven states between New York and Maine closed the woods to general travel by mid-October. It was dry enough in the Bar Harbor, Maine area that by October some small communities had to haul water in for daily consumption by local residents. The Bar Harbor Fire, sometimes referred to as the Mount Desert Island Fire, started on Friday, October 17, 1947. No one knows what started the fire...it could have been cranberry pickers smoking cigarettes in the bog or a trash fire at the dump. Whatever the cause, once ignited, the fire smoldered underground and in its first three days, the fire burned a relatively small area, blackening only 100 acres. It was from this quiet beginning that an inferno burned nearly half of the eastern side of Mount Desert Island and made international news.</p>	
Brief description of the event:	
<p>On October 17 at 16:00, the Bar Harbor Fire Department received a call from a local resident who reported smoke rising from a cranberry bog between their home and Acadia National Park. One pumper truck and four firefighters were dispatched to the fire. Arriving at 16:18, they found a rapidly spreading one acre fire. Direct attack was made, and the Bar Harbor Fire Chief called Acadia National Park for additional resources. The National Park Service responded with a pumper truck, a dump truck, two portable pumps, and additional firefighters. Winds at the time were from the southwest at less than 10 mph. The fire was burning across the bog and into the adjoining forestland. With these additional resources the fire was contained at about 100 acres by noon on October 18. Mop-up and active patrolling continued through the evening of October 20.</p>	
<p>A strong northeast wind picked up early in the morning of October 21 and the fire, which was still under patrol, escaped its control lines at about 07:45. A general alarm was then sounded for resources to fight the rapidly spreading flames. At 10:00 the Bar Harbor Fire Chief called Dow Army Air Base requesting assistance; they responded with 225 officers and soldiers. By 16:00 the fire was burning onto National Park Service lands. That evening, when the ordered resources began to arrive and tactical adjustments were made, the line construction efforts began to progress reasonably well. However, on the afternoon of October 22 a strong northwest wind began pushing the fire and the increased rate of spread soon outpaced the line construction efforts. At this point the Park Superintendent of Acadia National Park contacted his regional office and asked for assistance.</p>	
<p>By the morning of October 23, personnel and equipment from other national parks along the east coast were in route to assist with the effort. However, that morning the wind shifted again, and a southwest wind began to push the fire toward the town of Bar Harbor. Structures were already being lost in the outlying areas and evacuation efforts were underway when, at about 15:00, a frontal passage arrived earlier than predicted, bringing yet another wind shift with 40 to 50 mph winds from the northwest.</p>	
<p>Despite large numbers of soldiers from Dow Airfield, volunteers from neighboring towns, forestry students from the University of Maine, and even students from the Bangor Theological Seminary, these strong winds combined with the extremely dry fuels resulted in extreme fire behavior which defied all containment efforts. Once the winds shifted on October 23 and reached gale force, the evacuation of civilians and firefighters became the only priority.</p>	
<p>The fire escaped control in all sectors and pushed through the rolling hills outside of Bar Harbor where numerous hotels and mansions had been built. These summer homes and recreational facilities were almost exclusively built of wood and would be almost impossible to protect even with today's equipment. The fire then swept past the town, consuming the Jackson Laboratory facility at the south end of town as it ran unchecked to the sea. Three hundred dwellings were lost in Bar Harbor that day.</p>	
<p>Evacuation efforts began early on October 23 when the control lines failed. By 12:00 about 2,000 residents of Bar Harbor were assembled at the town's athletic field. Later these residents were moved to the town dock when the fire advanced to the edge of town. However, evacuation by boat would be prohibitive due to the small number of boats which were available and the rough seas being churned by the wind. Fortunately, as it swept past, the fire spared the downtown and dock area, evacuation by sea became unnecessary.</p>	

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Vehicle convoys were able to move evacuees to the mainland once the main threat passed. Despite all the structures destroyed and all the panic and displacement, only two lives were lost in the fire.

In all, over 17,000 acres burned, about half of which were in Acadia National Park. Property damage exceeded \$23 million in 1947 dollars. Statewide in 1947, more than 200,000 acres burned and nearly 1250 homes were destroyed in "the year Maine burned."

Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:

The fire season in Maine is generally recognized to run from late April to early September, with regular precipitation and fog expected by September. However, in 1947, the fire season was running well into the fall due drought conditions. Compounding the problem of the long-term drying trend was the autumn leaf fall from the deciduous trees which left the forest floor covered with a layer of readily available fine fuels. The primary fire weather problem during the incident was multiple wind shifts over the course of three days and a final dry cold front passage with gale forces winds that created havoc with containment efforts.

Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

Unusually dry bogs and duff layers figured heavily in the extensive mop-up required after the fire moved through an area and made it difficult to prevent breakouts and keep containment lines.

Despite a huge turnout of local resources, the lack of a cohesive plan and a robust incident management organization hampered efforts in the first few days of the fire.

A pre-arranged process for requesting assistance outside the local area would have been valuable given the fuels and weather conditions.

Notable impact or historical significance for the wildland fire service from this incident:

The Bar Harbor Fire was publicized in newspaper headlines around the world because the island was a renowned summer retreat for the wealthy.

This is an example that wildfire conflagrations can visit any geographic area, even ones not typically considered fire prone. The Bar Harbor Fire was just one of several large fires that devastated Maine in 1947...the Great Miramichi Fire also swept through Maine just a little over a century earlier in 1825.

The diverse mix of untrained personnel that were utilized on this fire was typical of the time and demonstrates how far the wildland fire service has progressed in terms of organization and resource capability.

One of most significant long-term outcomes of the Bar Harbor Fire is that it led to the formation of many cooperative firefighting agreements and the establishment of the first forest fire protection compact between states...the Northeastern Forest Fire Protection Compact.

Links to more information on this incident:

<https://www.nwcg.gov/wfldp/toolbox/staff-ride/library/bar-harbor-fire>
<https://lessons.wildfire.gov/incident/great-maine-fires-1947>
<https://www.nps.gov/acad/learn/historyculture/fireof1947.htm>
<https://newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/maine-fires-1947-year-state-burned/>
<https://www.nffpc.org/en>

Book:

- *Wildfire Loose - The Week Maine Burned* ~ by Joyce Butler

Videos:

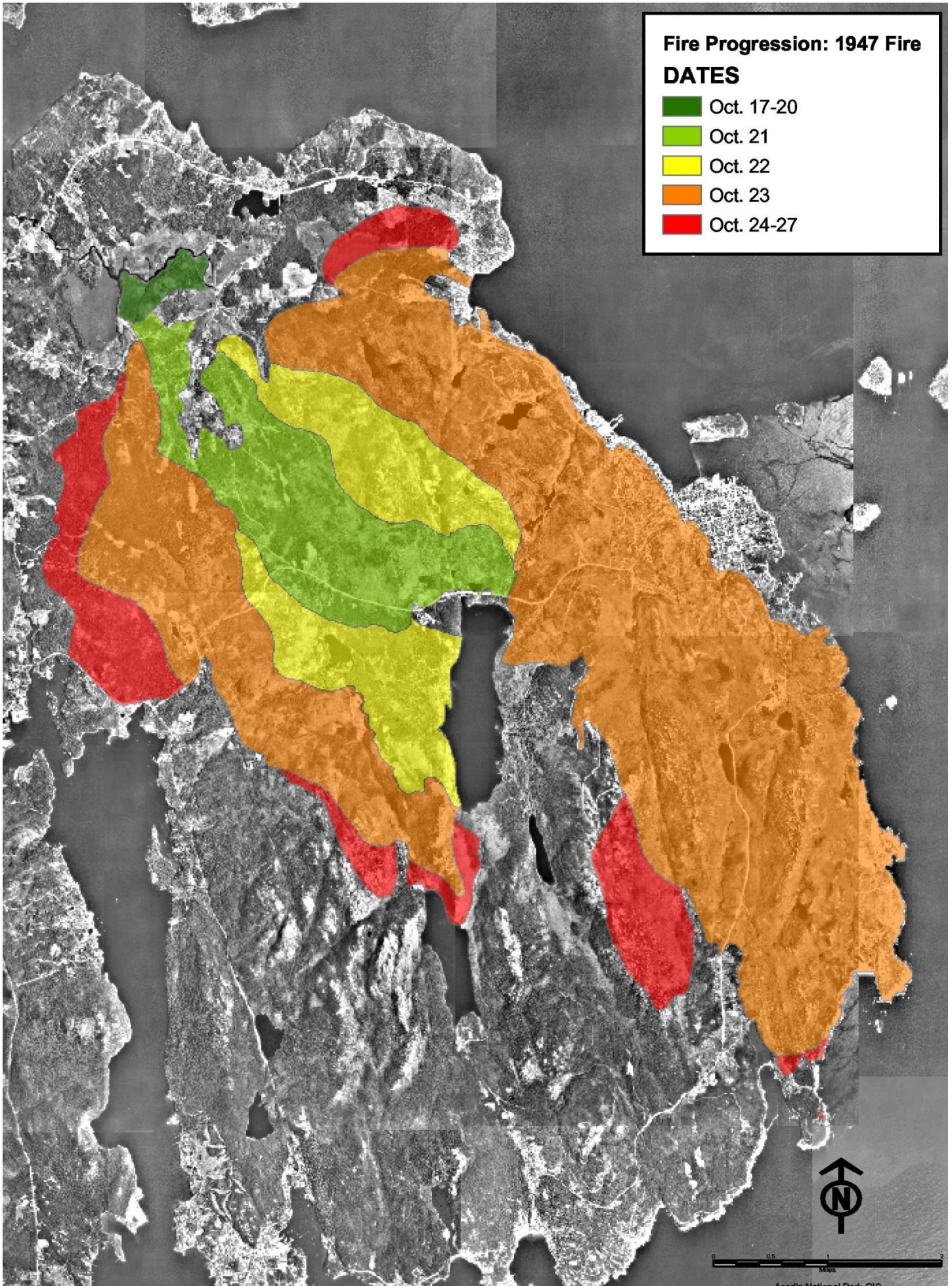
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=os60fpAEmMk&t=21s>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNZPhilG-rQ>

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Jim Cook & Kurt La Rue

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NEW YORK

18 DEAD, DAMAGE \$25,000,000, AS FOREST FIRES SWEEP ON IN WIDE NEW ENGLAND AREA

52 Are Crash

Fire Occurs to New Executi

NO RAINS IN SIGHT

Flames Racing Through Tinder-Dry Treetops to Menace Towns

900 TRAPPED IN A VILLAGE

Only Business Section Is Left at Bar Harbor as Fresh Blaze Nears Resort

By FRANK L. KLUCKHOHN
Special to The New York Times

Night of Terror Ends Safely For Bar Harbor's Refugees

3,000 Mothers and Children Find Haven in Neighboring Town After Rescue From Fire—Homes of Well-to-Do in Ruins

By IRVING SPIEGEL

Special to The New York Times

BAR HARBOR, Me., Oct. 24—Only a few hundred men remained tonight in this famed summer resort of 4,300 residents. The gale-swept forest fire—now under control here—had destroyed about seventy-five homes, including about a dozen palatial mansions.

yond Ellsworth unless on official business. Bar Harbor is one of several townships on Mount Desert Island.

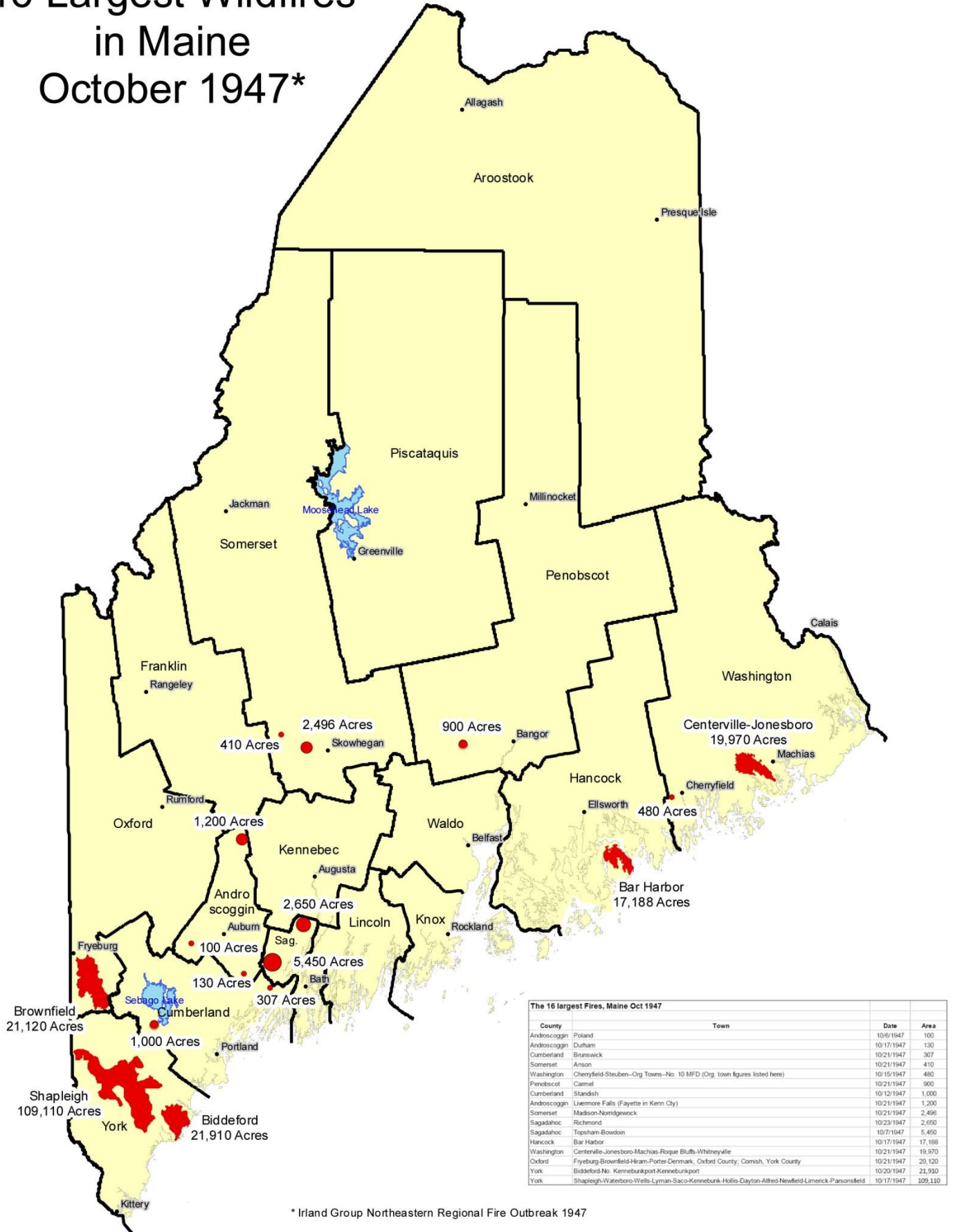
The mothers and children were faced with a frightening three hours late yesterday afternoon. The fire

BRUCE CANYON
—A United Air Lines plane, on its way from New York to Boston, crashed today on a hillside here, today killing all of those on board.

The four-engined plane, a Douglas DC-4, crashed before it could disintegrate. A large brush more than 100 and fifty yards wide

The four engines, twisted, were thrown feet beyond the bus. The largest piece of the section of the tail, twenty feet long, fell forward part of the plane. All the bodies were

16 Largest Wildfires in Maine October 1947*



* Irland Group Northeastern Regional Fire Outbreak 1947