

## Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

<b>Incident Name:</b> Black Saturday Fires	<b>Incident Date &amp; Time:</b> 04/20/1963
<b>Incident Location:</b> Multiple fires in locations throughout the state of New Jersey and Staten Island, New York	<b>Incident Size:</b> 183,000 acres total
<b>Types of resources involved:</b> A cross section of all state and municipal, paid and volunteer, within the state and surrounding areas.	<b># of Fatalities/injuries:</b> 7 fatalities (6 civilians & 1 firefighter) / Numerous injuries
<b>Reasons this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Fire is historically significant</li> <li>➤ Civilian mass casualty event</li> </ul>	
<b>Conditions leading up to the event:</b>	
<p>A severe drought began in the fall of 1962 and continued through the spring of 1963, leaving most of the East Coast dry and dusty. As Saturday April 20, 1963 dawned the area was dust-bowl dry, rainfall had been five inches below normal since March. In Burlington County that day, the winds were blowing 30 mph with gusts to 50 mph; the temperatures were in the 80s, and the relative humidity readings were in the 20-25% range. Under these conditions the New Jersey Forest Fire Service normally would restrict all burning, but farmers burning debris in the middle of a large cleared area were generally allowed to continue their burning.</p>	
<b>Brief description of the event:</b>	
<p>The Black Saturday fires started as a series of agriculture and debris burns. It is widely believed the smoldering embers of burned debris from Pemberton Township blueberry farms sparked the first fire on April 20 at about 09:00. Fanned by the blustery winds, the fires soon spread over State Routes 70 and 72 and into Woodland, Manchester, Lacey, Stafford and Barnegat Townships in the central part of the state. This was only the first of dozens of blazes; and as the New Jersey Forest Fire Service and local fire departments became overwhelmed, the call went out to crews across the state to send whatever manpower and equipment they had available to the worst fire zones.</p> <p>Later in the afternoon, more fires started in Medford and Evesham Townships. Although homes, businesses, sheds, cars, livestock and pets were destroyed by the blazes, only 36 people were treated at hospitals; five were admitted. As the embers cooled 10 hours later, residents crowded shelters and blasted the city for poor water pressure conditions. Throughout the blaze, firefighters often stood helplessly when no water came from the hydrants. <i>"Some firemen cried as the houses burned down."</i> one woman lamented <i>"There wasn't any water. The firemen stood by and couldn't do a thing."</i></p> <p>One example of the chaotic firefight is illustrated by a Burlington City fire engine company with Wesley Lorincz. His engine company tried to save a few houses in the community of Presidential Lakes, but the fire came right at them, preventing their entrance into the area. Flames roared beneath the truck. <i>"Everybody was huddled together on the truck."</i> Lorincz recalled <i>"Quite a few of us got singed."</i> These firefighters retreated to where State Routes 70 and 72 intersect in Woodland Township, and then went to the community of Chatsworth. After fighting fires for 11 hours straight the weary crew was then sent to Coyle Field in Woodland Township to protect the fuel tanks being used by air tankers working the fires.</p> <p>During this movement to the new assignment, the Burlington City fire truck, driving in dense smoke smashed into another state fire truck and was pushed down an embankment. Lorincz was injured as he fell off the truck, he stated <i>"There was a dent in my helmet."</i> In all about 10 men were injured. Frank Jacoby, the Burlington City Fire Chief, who was perched on the running board was thrown to the road and killed. <i>"I can still remember Frank Jacoby, too, because I stepped over him."</i> said Lorincz.</p> <p>Another example of the chaos was a family in Jackson Township that made a fatal error. They went back home down a long narrow driveway to rescue their dog, after being ordered to leave. Three people were consumed by flames.</p> <p>Meanwhile farther north, across the Arthur Kill waterway in nearby Staten Island, New York more large fires were raging. The largest began around 10:00, pushing from the community of Rossville into the communities of Annadale and Huguenot, fanned by westerly winds gusting at 50 mph. Another blaze began at almost the same time near the Tottenville beachfront community. It swept eastward, consuming homes, a restaurant, a filling station and a resort as it advanced. It stopped near Mount Loretto. These fires on Staten Island destroyed 100 houses and left more than 500 homeless.</p> <p>In the suburbs of Philadelphia and elsewhere in Pennsylvania homes were threatened by numerous wildfires. Fast moving fires were also reported in Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, and Kentucky.</p>	

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The Black Saturday fires ended up killing seven people and destroying over 400 structures. In a single day these fires burned about 183,000 acres of land, 4 percent of New Jersey's land base. Of the 127 wildfires started that day, 31 reached "major" status, meaning they exceeded 100 acres in size. The largest fire burned 69,077 acres in Ocean and Burlington counties.

#### Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:

Extreme drought  
Strong sustained winds  
Multiple ignitions

#### Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

The conditions which led to this event were forecast and the New Jersey Forest Fire Service had restrictions in place for many areas. However, the common practice of "allowing" agricultural burning to take place at the landowners discretion regardless of conditions, coupled with no coordination in place for how many agricultural locations were being lit simultaneously, quickly overwhelmed the rural fire resources in the areas affected. These factors led to limited if any perimeter control actions on many of the fires and they ran free until weather conditions moderated their spread.

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

This is an example which demonstrates wildfire conflagrations can visit any geographic area. The Black Saturday Fires event was just one of many significant fires that have impacted the Pine Barrens region of New Jersey over time; other notable fatality fires in this area include the Chatsworth Fire in 1936, the Dutchtown Road Fire in 1943, and the Bass River Fire in 1977.

#### Links to more information on this incident:

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/c4d0b9e8d8f44e31b04b95966a92aa61>  
<https://www.burlingtoncountytimes.com/story/news/2013/04/22/remembering-black-saturday-50-years/17452184007/>  
[https://www.nj.com/burlington/2017/07/nj\\_forest\\_fires\\_through\\_the\\_years.html](https://www.nj.com/burlington/2017/07/nj_forest_fires_through_the_years.html)  
<https://www.nj.gov/pinelands/infor/educational/curriculum/pinecur/art2.htm>

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February 2025



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**Black Saturday fire suppression operations**



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