

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: The Great Fire of 1898	Incident Date & Time: 02/16/1898
Incident Location: Aikin County, South Carolina to Chatham County, North Carolina	Incident Size: 3,000,000 acres (estimated)
Type of resources involved: Civilians	# of Fatalities/injuries: 14 fatalities
Reasons this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fire is historically significant ➤ Civilian mass casualty event 	
Conditions leading up to the event:	
<p>North Carolina and South Carolina were at the center of the naval stores industry in the 19th century due to the extensive Longleaf pine forest stands in that region. Naval stores include tar, turpentine, and rosin...in the 1800s the production of these products was local and many flammable tar kilns and turpentine stills dotted the countryside. Additionally, the poor logging practices of the time left heavy accumulations of slash fuels in the woods.</p> <p>In the summer of 1897 a drought descended on the region and no significant moisture was recorded through the fall and into the winter of 1898. An excerpt from the Chatham Record newspaper read <i>“the oldest inhabitant does not remember so little rain between Christmas and February as this winter.”</i></p>	
Brief description of the event:	
<p>On February 15, a dry cold front swept into the region, pushing strong warm southwest winds in advance of the front. These advance winds triggered several fires in different locations from various sources including coals blown out from under a turpentine still, sparks from a train, and a spark from hunter’s rifle. As these fires grew, local residents accustomed to the threat of wildfire, began lighting their own “counter fires” to protect their property. When the cold front hit with its full force of 40-50 mph winds, all these ignition sources merged into a conflagration the following day that covered several counties in two states.</p> <p>The fire caused extensive damage to the timber, naval stores, and livestock industries of the region. Significant stand replacement occurred, with some Longleaf pine forest lands eventually being replaced by scrub oak. Many wild animals and livestock were killed by the flames. The Fayetteville Observer newspaper noted <i>“Numerous instances are told where wild animals, possums, squirrels, rabbits, etc. sought refuge in residences, many with their hair singed off.”</i> Most of the large towns were spared, however 14 individuals lost their lives during the two day conflagration.</p>	
Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:	
<p>Heavy accumulation of dead and down fuels. Drought conditions. Cold front passage with 40-50 mph winds.</p>	
Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:	
Not applicable	
Notable impact or historical significance for the wildland fire service from this incident:	
<p>The Great Fire of 1898 is one of the ten largest wildfires to ever occur in the United States and as such is a significant historical event. Like many of the other mega-fires of this era, poor forestry practices were a primary cause of this event. In the aftermath of the fire, the newly founded North Carolina Geologic Survey agency assigned a young employee, William Ashe, to do a follow-up report. In 1905, William Ashe became the first North Carolina state employee assigned as a forestry professional.</p>	
Links to more information on this incident:	
<p>https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/our-state/1054382?item=10544395 https://www.scfc.gov/protection/fire-burning/fire-resources/wildfire-history/</p>	
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LOSS BY FOREST FIRES

REPORT BY MR. W. W. ASHE TO THE
GEOLOGICAL SURVEY.

Fire Swept Area Approximates 3,000,000
Acres--Fourteen Lives Were Lost--
Property Loss Exceeds \$700,000.

The following summary of the loss occasioned by the forest fires of last week is furnished us by Mr. W. W. Ashe, and is taken from a report in regard to them that Mr. Ashe has just made to the Geological Survey after spending the past week in examining in the burned areas to secure exact information in regard to the loss.

The burned section extends from Aiken county, S. C., north to Chatham county, N. C., and east to Marlboro county, S. C., and the fire swept area, or rather areas, will approximate in extent 3,000,000 acres. There were probably a dozen fires raging at the same time, driven forward, toward the southeast, by a forty-mile-an-hour wind. Four of these fires were confessedly escapes from fires set to burn fire-guards around dwellings. It is probable that most of them were due to like carelessness; none of them are known to have been intentionally started, and none are known to have been set by sparks from locomotives.

There are supposed to have been fourteen lives lost. Those burned in North Carolina, five so far as known, were John Leverett and wife of Cumberland county, John Richardson, of Moore county, — Lennon, of Bladen county, and one unknown.

The loss from the destruction of property will amount to \$700,000 or more. The damage to timber alone amounts to between ten and fifteen cents an acre of woodland or about \$250,000; the damage to fencing will amount to half stock, twellings, feed, saw-mills, twenty of which are burned, turpentine distilleries and other miscellaneous property will reach an amount that is considerably as much more, while the loss of live-ly greater than that done to timber land. Between 150,000 and 250,000 turpentine boxes are estimated to have been burned out.

The fire burned fiercest on the open lands where the grass was thickest and there was least timber. A repetition of this fire can be expected every few years, in the region from which the timber has been removed, in North and South Carolina unless some more efficient system is adopted to prevent and check fires than the one now relied upon: counter-firing, left to individual discretion. It is proposed to discuss such methods of checking fires in other States and in other countries in connection with this present fire, at the forestry meeting at Newbern on March first.