

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: Pepper Hill Fire Sometimes referred to as the Pepper Run Fire	Incident Date & Time: 10/19/1938 @ 15:30
Incident Location: Lick Island, Grove Township, Cameron County, Pennsylvania	Incident Size: 134 acres
Types of resources involved: Civilian Conservation Corps crew	# of Fatalities/injuries: 8 fatalities / 1 serious injury
Reason this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fire is historically significant ➤ 3 or more firefighter fatalities by entrapment 	
Conditions leading up to the event:	
<p>The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) crews of the 1930s were formed under Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal in the hopes of relieving unemployment during the Great Depression by providing conservation work across the nation. The CCC was run by the War Department and the organization was modeled after the military. Each camp had a camp commander, an assistant commander, a lieutenant, a doctor, and an education advisor; all these positions were U.S. Army personnel. However, when working in the field, the enrollees were usually trained and supervised by employees of government land management agencies. Crews generally consisted of 20-25 people. Enrollees wore denim jeans, a full brim felt hat, and simple flat soled boots. The knowledge of how to fight wildland fires was very elementary at this time, so training provided to the CCC crews for firefighting was cursory at best.</p> <p>On October 19, 1938, at least four fires of suspicious origin were started, all in a period of a few hours from 09:30 until 13:00, on Pepper Hill Mountain near Lick Island, Pennsylvania. The call went out to Cameron CCC Camp S-132 for crews to respond to the fire. The camp sent two crews; Crew #1 under Foreman Adolph Kammrath and Crew #2 under Foreman Gilbert Mohny.</p> <p>The Foreman for Cameron Crew #2 had very little fire experience and most of the teenage crewmembers lacked firefighter training. The crew had been dispatched to another local fire the evening prior to the Pepper Hill Fire; this assignment was the first time Foreman Mohny had worked together with his crew. The crew left their camp for this fire the evening of October 18 at 18:00 and returned to camp the morning of October 19 at 05:30. Later that day they were called out to the new Pepper Hill Fire, leaving their camp at 13:00 on October 19. This new fire was located in a densely wooded area of approximately 800 acres, about three miles north of the town of Sinnamahoning, Pennsylvania. Most of the acreage was dense second-growth timber.</p>	
Brief description of the event:	
<p>When Cameron Crew #2 arrived at approximately 14:00, they began working the fire’s bottom edge burning out along a road. Soon the crew was redirected by the Camp Forester to proceed to the top of the mountain and construct a line downhill. After giving this assignment the Forester left to go to another fire. At approximately 14:45, the Cameron #2 crew began walking up the mountain. Because of the steepness and fatigue from the previous day’s fire, the crew became separated as some individuals stopped often to rest. Some of the crewmembers noticed the fire below them but were not alarmed at first. At about 15:30, a frontal system approached; the winds increased and were aligned with the slope causing the fire to advance rapidly up the mountain. As the fire overtook the crew, nine crewmembers were overrun while other crewmembers sought refuge behind large rock features or were able to escape away from the head of the fire. The fire was extinguished by rain at around 20:30 that night.</p> <p>Investigations conducted by the U.S. Army, State Police, Coroner’s Juries and the Department of Forests and Waters pointed to a lack of training in fire fighting for most of the men as a pivotal factor in this entrapment. The combination of tired, untrained crewmembers and fast-moving fires in steep terrain was fatal. The fires were believed to be intentionally started; though no Point of Origin, motive or suspect was ever identified.</p> <p>Gilbert Mohny (Crew Foreman), 38, and crewmembers Basil Bogush, 19, John Boring, 19, Howard May, 18, and Andrew Stefphanic, 18, all perished in the fire. Crewmembers Ross Hollobaugh, 18, and Stephen Jacofsky, 17 died the next day; George Vogel, 16, died November 2. One other crewmember was hospitalized for several months with severe burns and survived.</p>	
Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:	
<p>The Pepper Hill Fire occurred in mountainous terrain on a 70-degree slope. Weather conditions at mid-day on October 19 were clear sky, temperatures in the 80’s, and relative humidity of 25-28%. Forest fuels were extremely dry from an extended drought and an early frost on October 7 had killed some foliage.</p> <p>The fire was pushed uphill by frontal winds which occurred in the fire area at around 15:30. The fire was in a leaf litter fuel type. Investigators found the trees in the densely wooded area were merely scorched around their trunks. At no place within the burned area did they find evidence of trees torching; only the leaf litter and underbrush were consumed. However, one of the young CCC firefighters reported 25 foot flames in his testimony.</p>	

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

The lessons from this fire revolve around training, proper rest, physical conditioning, crew cohesion and tactics. Many of the locals interviewed by investigators were outspoken in their condemnation of the way the forest fires were fought by the CCC. They believed these crews were too young, were not properly equipped, and were poorly led.

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

The 1938 Pepper Hill is the third fire in a string four major CCC crew fatality fires that occurred in a four-year span from 1936 to 1939 (the other three are the 1936 Chatsworth Fire in New Jersey; the 1937 Blackwater Fire in Wyoming; and the 1939 Rock Creek Fire in Nevada). This incident began pushing the CCC administration to be more restrictive with how federal and state firefighting organizations utilized the CCC crews.

Links to more information on this incident:

<https://lessons.wildfire.gov/incident/pepper-hill-fatality-fire-1938>
<https://www.nwccg.gov/6mfs/day-in-history/the-pepper-hill-fire-pennsylvania-october-19-1938>
<http://www.rootsweb.com/~pacamero/CCC/ccchist.htm>
<https://centralpahistory.blogspot.com/2020/10/pepper-hill-fire-cameron-county.html>
<https://www.iframeapps.dcnr.state.pa.us/stateparks/ccc/docs/183.pdf>
[PDFProvider.ashx \(pa.gov\)](#)

Video:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7czg9mlIIQ> ~ Song written by Chris LaRose in 2017 about the Pepper Hill Fire

This summary page was proudly provided by:

Dan Buckley, former Superintendent Arrowhead Hotshot Crew
Mark Taylor, NPS Regional Assistant Fire Management Officer
Shawn Turner, former Pennsylvania DCNR Forest Fire Supervisor

October 2024



Memorial along State Route 120 in Cameron County, Pennsylvania

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

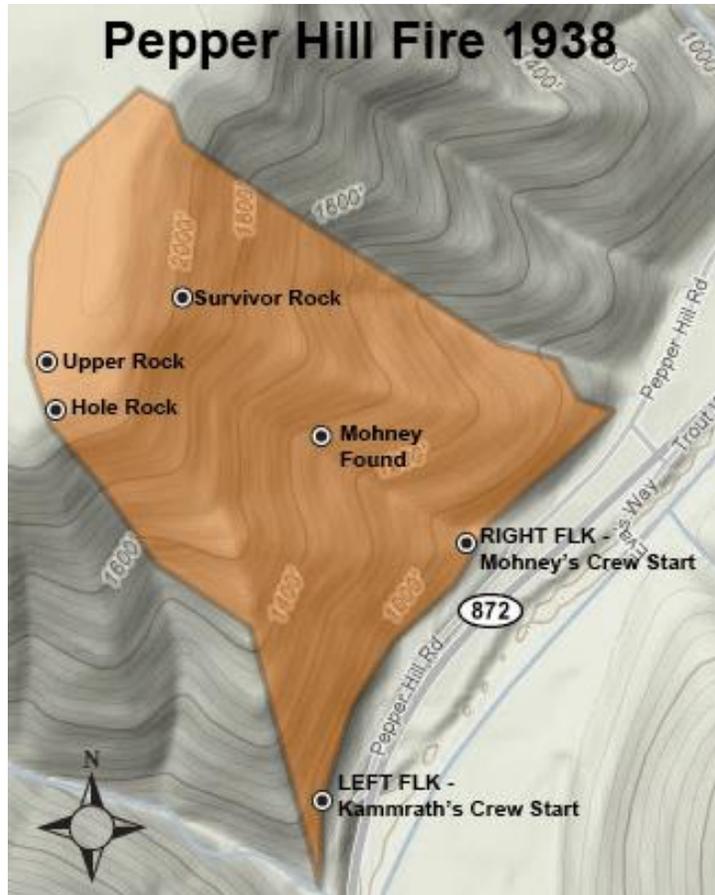
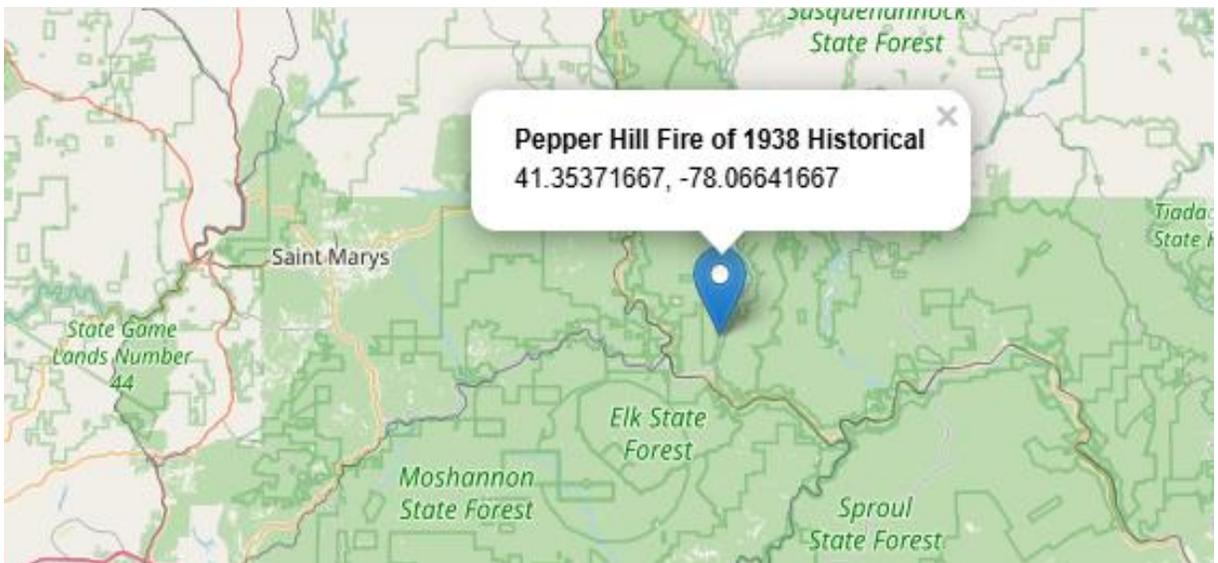


Diagram map from NWCG 6 Minutes for Safety lesson plan



Coordinates for the historical marker site