

The Week Maine Burned

When most people think of large forest fires, they typically think of past fires that took place in the Western sections of the United States. But it has not always been so. New England, and specifically Maine, has experienced two major forest fire disasters in the history of the state. In 1825, a forest fire called the “Miramichi Fire”, burned approximately three million acres in the State of Maine and the Providence of New Brunswick. One hundred and sixty were killed during that fire. (Idaho) In October 1947, during an extremely dry autumn, hundreds of wildfires began all over the State of Maine. The resulting catastrophic disaster was called the Fire of ‘47 and is nicknamed “The Week Maine Burned”. (Butler)

On October 7, 1947, the Maine Forest Service began to receive reports of small woods fires in York and Cumberland counties. These fires were extinguished, but the Service was becoming very concerned. By October 13th, small fires began to pop up in other counties around the state. By October 16th, 25 major fires were burning. (Butler) The 16th of October began “The Week Maine Burned”. All told, however, the fires would burn for several weeks.

As the fires began to pop up around the State because of the extreme drought conditions, high winds also moved into Maine during that timeframe. The forest conditions, species of trees and the age of those trees also contributed to the expansion of the forest fire threat. But the total lack of forest fire prevention and fire control systems in Maine was considered to be a leading cause of why the event became catastrophic. In 1947, 90% of the State was forested.

Volunteer firefighters with little training or experience in fighting forest fires would fight the fires that had started in their community. Once the fire spread to another community, they would turn around at the town line and go home. No warnings were given to the communities that the fires were spreading into. There were no mutual aid agreements and no warning systems in place for forest fires. The majority of Maine communities did not even have a fire department.

In the Town of Kennebunkport, “the fire burned in an unbroken front that was over eight miles long.” (Kennebunkport). As the fires began to grow, communities began to help one another, however, they had no command and control structure in place and there was no radio communications available. Many times, residents and firefighters were trapped by the flames, because there was no way to warn them. “Meanwhile, almost three score residents and volunteers trapped for more than an hour behind a wall of fire in North Waterboro managed to escape. Confusion reigned as workers and residents fled from the flames fanned by winds nearing hurricane proportions.” (Waterboro).

Within days, volunteers came from all over the state and from neighboring states of New Hampshire and Massachusetts. However, most had no firefighting experience, only a willing determination and hard labor. “Personnel from the Army, Air Corps, Navy, Coast Guard, University of Maine forestry program, and Bangor Theological Seminary joined local fire fighting crews. National Park Service employees flew in from parks throughout the East and additional experts in the West were put on standby.” (GORP). But there was no centralized command and coordination effort. The State government did not have the authority to assume command, nor did the State have a function that had the ability to assume command.

Additionally, there were no communications systems in place to coordinate the effort. “Fish and Game Department planes were brought in to plot the movement of the fire from the air, but

communication with the men on the ground was a problem. Neither the planes nor the firefighters had two-way radios.” (Butler). There was no leadership, no organization, no planning, no logistics system and no communications.

Over thirty five communities experienced fires of over 100 acres in size and the fires burned major sections of seventeen of those communities. Nine of those communities were completely leveled. Many more towns experienced fires smaller than 100 acres. All told, 205,678 acres burned in the State of Maine over a three week period. (Butler). There were sixteen fatalities; a mixture of firefighters and residents. (Colorado State). Nearly 10,000 people were injured and required medical treatment or basic first aid. (Idaho). The Fire of '47 destroyed 1,182 homes, 280 barns and 1,193 other buildings, for a total of 2,655 structures. The financial losses were estimated to be between \$25 and \$30 million in 1947 dollars. Converted to 2006 dollars, the Fires of '47 caused an estimated \$230 to \$280 million in damages. (Fobes). The American Red Cross spent over \$2,400,000 in 1947 currency on disaster relief. (Idaho). In 2006, that figure would amount to nearly \$23 million.

On Mount Desert Island, “The fire swept down Millionaires' Row, an impressive collection of majestic summer cottages on the shore of Frenchman Bay. Sixty-seven of these seasonal estates were destroyed. The fire skirted the business district, but razed 170 permanent homes and five large historic hotels in the area surrounding downtown Bar Harbor.” (GORP). Additionally, the world famous Jackson Laboratory, which today still carries out genetic research, was totally destroyed. “At one point all roads from the town were blocked by flames, so fishermen from nearby Winter Harbor, Gouldsboro, and Lamoine prepared to help with a mass exodus by boat. At least 400 people left by sea.” (GORP).

Once the fires were extinguished and while those devastated by the fires began to rebuild their lives, the State of Maine took a hard look at itself. “On the call of Governor Horace A. Hildreth, a Statewide fire prevention conference was held at Augusta on January 13, 1948. This conference distributed an action program covering things deemed essential for better fire prevention and protection in that State.” (White House)

A large number of volunteer municipal fire departments in Maine were born in the 1947 to 1949 time period; a direct result of the acknowledgement that each community needed to be prepared for fires. To this day, the only state grant for fire protection purposes that exists today is provided for forest fire protection equipment to rural Maine towns. “The 1947 Fire called attention to the need to modernize Kennebunkport's fire fighting capabilities. The Kittredge family led a fundraising effort that purchased 4 new trucks, hose and other equipment. Shortly thereafter, Kennebunkport became one of the first small towns in the nation to implement a two-way radio system to alert firefighters and provide communications between stations and apparatus. Since then, several generations of firefighters have dealt swiftly with any forest fire threat to our community.” (Kennebunkport). For the first time in Maine’s history, volunteer firefighters started the process of training to national standards and used standardized equipment.

Organized as a result of Maine’s 1947 fires, the Northeastern Forest Fire Protection Compact, which serves New England and the Canadian Maritimes, became law in 1949. (Butler). To improve radio communications interoperability, the State of Maine acquired the license for a two-way public safety radio net called “State Fire.” Every fire department in Maine is authorized to use this tactical frequency. To this day, State Fire is the backbone of Maine’s emergency communications system.

Less than two years after the Fire, the State Legislature enacted the “Maine Civil Defense and Public Safety Act of 1949. This act created the Maine Bureau of Civil Defense. In 1987, the Bureau would become the present day Maine Emergency Management Agency. (MEMA). “It was recognized, so it is said, that greater State coordination was needed in times of major emergencies.” (MEMA).

Other legislation in 1949 gave a great deal more authority to the State Forest Commissioner. Until this law was passed, the Commissioner had the authority to oversee forest firefighting only in the unorganized territories of Maine. With this legislation, the Commissioner was given the authority over the entire state response to forest fires.

The final corrective measure that was taken to improve the ability of the state to reduce the forest fire threat was to create a public education program for fire prevention. Along with the efforts of the U.S. Forest Service, this program has helped to reduce the number of man-made fires.

Impacts from the Fires of 1947 are still evident today. In recent years, written mutual aid agreements between municipal fire departments have become more numerous. In nearly all cases, the example used for why it is necessary is the Fires of 1947. In 2006 the State of Maine developed the State Communications Concept of Operations Plan. This plan identifies five tactical radio frequencies that all state, county and municipal emergency management and public safety agencies should maintain on their radios in order to insure a statewide communications interoperable capability. State Fire, the radio interoperable network created following the Fires of 1947 is the foundation of this new plan. Finally, as emergency managers and public safety leaders stress the importance of incorporating the National Incident Management System into their programs and policies, the Fires of 1947 is a primary catalyst to selling this to their

personnel and political leaders. Time and time again, this natural disaster is used as the example in the State of Maine for improved emergency management and response activities.

Sixty years ago, the State of Maine experienced a terrible catastrophe that changed the State in many ways. The massive loss of lives and property caused new ways of thinking about disaster preparedness. The Fires of 1947 will always be a major note in Maine's history. Mainers were put to a test of character and as they have always done and always will, they passed that test. Today, they are still learning from this experience.

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