

Looking Back:

# The Draper Inn Fire of 2006

**B**roken glass and shattered screen windows told a frightening story on the morning of March 28, 2006, at the Draper Inn Boarding House in Eden. Tenants living on the second floor dangled out of windows before jumping to safety as a fire in the building raged out of control. The blaze left more than 25 people homeless, several injured and one woman dead.

Jada Nicholson was among the first residents to get out of the boarding house after she heard another resident yelling from the lobby at approximately 8:30 a.m. When Nicholson opened her door she saw a couch on fire in the lobby, and by the time she got out of the building, the fire had blocked the stairwell to the second floor. "I just knew there wasn't any way anybody upstairs was going to get down that hall," Nicholson said.

Once outside, Nicholson's fears were realized as six or more tenants hung out of windows and some began jumping. "I held on to the ledge and he sat in the window," Amy Hooker said, describing how she and Billy Agee hung out of an apartment window trying to escape the fire. "There was just so much smoke, you couldn't do anything," Agee said. Hooker and Agee were lucky, neighbors and employees at Draper Lumber Company, directly across from the apartments, grabbed ladders and rushed to their aid.

Witnesses said others weren't as lucky. By 8:30 a.m. 15 calls to 911



*Two colors of smoke indicate the two levels of fire progression during the Draper Inn Boarding House Fire. The brown smoke indicates structural components are involved on the first floor, while the dark black smoke tells crews that contents were involved on the second floor. Smoke analysis aided firefighters in establishing an operation strategy.*

had come into the Eden Police Department, some from neighbors but others from frantic tenants inside, Eden Police Captain Reece Pyrtle said.

The first firefighters on scene were faced with heavy fire and dense, blinding smoke conditions, but they began rescue operations by placing a ladder to a second floor window to rescue occupants seeking escape and fresh air at upstairs windows. They also launched an aggressive interior

search for known victims trapped. Entering the house on the first floor, fire attack and search crews were met with the same heavy smoke and heat conditions.

While initial crews sought out residents and battled the blaze, the Eden Communications Center dispatched a second and third alarm bringing surrounding departments to the scene. As other crews and equipment from the Leaksville, Draper, Oregon Hill, Reidsville and Rockingham County fire departments along with the Eden Rescue Squad and Rockingham County Emergency Services arrived on scene, multi-level operations began with entry made from the exterior to the second floor. Crews searched for victims while navigating not only blinding smoke and intense heat, but also the complicated layout of 29 different apartments. Helping the search and rescue mission, attack crews placed a mechanical

exhaust fan in the building's stairway window.

Determining how many victims remained inside the burning boarding house proved difficult since several jumped from windows, others were scattered throughout the scene and an occupant list was not forthcoming immediately. When emergency personnel arrived, Pyrtle said there were already several "walking wounded," and the building was fully engulfed with pushing smoke and visible flames.

Wayne Dunn was inside Draper Lumber Company when he saw a woman hanging from a blanket outside a second floor window. Dunn said a few people had gathered underneath to catch the woman but when she let go of the blanket she bounced off of an awning and hit the ground. "She hit the ground hard, I mean hard," Dunn said. Officials said the woman was rushed to Morehead Memorial Hospital in Eden.

According to Shirley Barber, the apartment manager, tenants had two exits — the front door and a side door. There were no fire



*Crews first on the scene faced blinding smoke conditions in the rush to begin rescue operations, while others attacking the fire itself found conditions to be no better.*

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## Warrenton Rural VFD Holds Dedication Ceremony

On Oct. 22, 2006, Warrenton Rural Volunteer Fire Department's Chief Walter Gardner dedicated the department's new fire station to "the loyal volunteers that have given their time and energy for the past 50 years as well as to our community and the citizens that we serve."

In addition to remarks made by Warrenton's members, the following state and local officials also participated in the ceremony: North Carolina Senator Doug Berger, on behalf of Senate Leader Marc Basnight; North Carolina Representative Michael Wray; Dollie Burwell, on behalf of Congressman G. K. Butterfield; the Town of Warrenton's Mayor Pro-Tem, Margaret Brit; Commissioner Barry Richardson, who also serves as Fire Commissioner; Pat Leroy, the American Red Cross; and Larry Hughes from the Office of State Fire Marshal.

Soon after the ceremony's opening remarks and dedication, people in attendance toured the facility for a firsthand look. More than just offices and storage rooms, the fire station houses a kitchen, bunk room and recreation room for firefighters' use while on duty. The facility also has a conference room that is available for any organization to use. And while the engine companies and impressive state-of-the-art bays command attention, anyone who drives past the station after dark is sure to be inspired by the stained glass window made and donated by Warrenton artist David Guarducci.

To defray some of the \$1.6 million spent building the new facility, Warrenton's Capital Campaign Committee plans to raise some \$500,000, according to Dr. James E. Crenshaw, Jr., the committee's leader. Although \$1.6 million is a considerable amount



Photo courtesy of The Warren Record.

of debt, the new station could have cost more — the furniture, equipment and other necessities were all donated.

Warrenton Rural Volunteer Fire Department responded to 274 emergency calls in 2005. The department has 30 volunteer members who respond to incidents in the district's 70-mile radius.

*Information excerpted from "Warrenton Rural VFD Holds Dedication Ceremony" by Peggy R. Shearin, Littleton Observer.*

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escapes outside of the building. Search crews were able to rescue four residents, while an additional eight residents jumped from second floor windows to safety.

Tragically, after the primary search concluded and the residents were believed to be accounted for, the fire and smoke claimed the life of one resident. According to family members, Dorothy Grogan Southern moved into the apartment about three weeks prior to the fire. She lived in a first floor apartment, but according to survivors, the fire chased her up the stairwell into a second story apartment. Another victim in the apartment with Southern was able to jump to safety, but despite attempts to convince her to follow suit, Southern was too scared to jump.

Casualties were not limited to residents. As the operation continued and support services arrived from the Eden Rescue Squad, Rockingham County Emergency Medical Services, Rockingham County Emergency Management and the Eden Fire Department Auxiliary,

a rehabilitation and medical evaluation center was set up in the Rockingham County's mobile rehab unit. Because the initial firefighters executed multiple entries into the structure before relief arrived from the second and third alarm companies, four firefighters required medical care beyond what they received on scene.

Even before the flames were extinguished the City of Eden's Police Department began its investigation into the fire by interviewing residents on scene — before information could be shared and/or tainted. Because of the extent of the fire and the fatality involved, the Arson Task Force Investigation Team was called in to assist. In conjunction with the State Bureau of Investigation, a thorough investigation was completed, and the probable cause of the blaze was determined to be improperly discarded smoking materials. The couch inside the main hallway was identified as the point of origin.

*At least nine residents of the home jumped from windows to safety, while rescuers found four others. Sadly, one resident perished in the blaze.*

The Draper Inn Boarding House fire taught the fire service several valuable lessons including the need for a more advanced accountability system and the importance of established automatic mutual aid. Although responders to the Draper Inn fire were well-trained and prepared, for many it was their first experience responding to a large scale fire, the magnitude of which highlighted the need for aggressive and specialized training for all departments, not just those

located in a large city. The need for specialized equipment was also realized, including thermal imaging cameras to aid with searches in low- or no-visibility areas.

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