

Historical Fire: 1983 Planters Oil Mill Fire

At 8:04 p.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 12, 1983, a large explosion shattered the peace in downtown Rocky Mount. Fire department personnel were dispatched to the Planters Oil Mill at 1004 Cokey Road and, upon arrival, found a destroyed extraction tower and numerous facility structures engulfed in flames. Fire Chief John Sykes realized the severity of the incident and promptly requested mutual aid from Stony Creek and West Edgecombe Volunteer Fire Departments. Approximately 145 firefighters, seven pumper trucks and an elevated platform battled the blaze through the night despite sub-freezing temperatures and gusting winds. Planters Oil Mill and fire department officials were able to confirm no plant personnel were inside the structure.

Hexane, a highly flammable and unstable gas used in the extraction of oil from cotton seeds, escaped from a 38,000 gallon storage tank underneath the extrication tower and severely hampered firefighting efforts. Hexane displaces oxygen in the body and is highly sensitive to atmospheric changes (similar to gasoline). Once initial suppression was complete, focus shifted to the hexane-fed vapor fires. The incident commander determined since the Hexane could not be capped off, efforts would be directed at containing the vapor and preventing the fires from spreading. This method of controlled burning allowed the vapor to expand and burn and also kept the fire from reaching an additional 10,000 gallon hexane tank located closer to Cokey Road.

When the incident was terminated Thursday, Jan. 13 at 5:00 p.m., five firemen had been transported to the hospital for injuries ranging from smoke inhalation to exposure, to bruised ribs. An investigative team made up of local fire department officials, State Bureau of Investigation staff and members of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms were unable to officially determine the cause and origin of the fire.

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(Top) Rocky Mount Fire Department's Platform 10 was the only aerial apparatus on scene during the incident. It was vital in helping contain the vapor fires from spreading and engulfing other structures. (Middle) RMFD requested mutual aid early in the incident. Stony Creek and numerous other volunteer fire departments from Edgecombe County assisted in controlling the blaze. (Bottom) The initial explosion of the extrication tower contributed to the release of hexane gas and exposure fires of nearby structures.