

The Bar Harbor Fire



On Friday, October 17, 1947, at 4 p.m., the Bar Harbor, Maine Fire Department received a call from a Mrs. Gilbert. She reported smoke rising from a cranberry bog between her home and Acadia National Park. No one knows what started the fire. It could have been cranberry pickers smoking cigarettes in the bog or a trash fire at the dump. Whatever the cause, once ignited, the fire smoldered underground. From this quiet beginning arose an inferno that burned nearly half of the eastern side of Mount Desert Island and made international news.

In its first three days, the fire burned a relatively small area, blackening only 169 acres. But on October 21, strong winds fanned the flames. The blaze spread rapidly and raged out of control, engulfing over 2,000 acres. Personnel from the Army, Air Force, Navy, Coast Guard, University of Maine forestry program, and Bangor Theological Seminary joined local firefighting crews. National Park Service employees flew in from parks throughout the eastern United States.

Evacuation of the residents quickly became an issue. At one point all roads from the town were blocked by flames and local fisherman prepared to help with a mass exodus by boat as gale force winds fanned the inferno. Finally, bulldozers opened a pathway through the flames and smoldering remains of homes and a caravan of 700 cars and 2,000 people made it to safety.

In all, some 17,188 acres burned. More than 8,000 acres were burned in Acadia National Park. Property damage exceeded \$23 million in 1947 dollars. State-wide, more than 200,000 acres, 851 permanent homes, and 397 seasonal cottages were destroyed in "the year Maine burned."

The fire on Mount Desert Island was publicized in newspaper headlines around the world because the island was a renowned summer retreat for the wealthy. Additionally the fires of 1947 eventually led to the formation of many cooperative firefighting agreements and the establishment of the first forest fire protection compact, the [Northeastern Forest Fire Protection Compact](#).

The Bar Harbor Fire of 1947 staff ride resource is a product of the NWCG Leadership Committee. Project team members were:

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