

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: Adirondack Fire	Incident Date & Time: April 1903
Incident Location: New York State	Incident Size: More than 640 fires burned over 640,000 acres
Types of resources involved: Civilians	# of Fatalities/injuries: Not applicable
Reason this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list: ➤ Fire is historically significant	
Conditions leading up to the event:	
<p>The Adirondack Mountain region in northeast New York has two primary fire seasons, one in the spring and the other in the fall. The spring fire season typically stretches from the time that the snow melts until green leaves start to appear, usually from April until late May. During this time there is an abundance of dead leaves and other dry vegetation on the ground from the previous autumn.</p> <p>In the winter of 1902-1903, the Adirondacks experienced a significant drought. Twelve weather stations located in the Adirondacks recorded an average snowfall 8 inches below the previous ten-year average. The drought continued into the spring, with just 2.2 inches of rainfall in early April and approximately 0.2 inches of rain in May. This represented the lowest rainfall for the month of May ever recorded. Over a span of 51 days, from April 16 to June 7, only 0.2 inches of rainfall was recorded. Strong winds often occur in the spring, but at least two especially significant wind events occurred in the spring of 1903. One occurred on April 30 and the other from May 29 to June 3. As a result of the drought and wind, the area was like a powder keg.</p> <p>A combination of poor timber management practices and extremely dry vegetation resulted in unprecedented fuel conditions for the forest. To make matters worse, during the early 1900s, timber operations tended to follow railroad tracks for easier transportation of logs. This practice left a trail of slash along the railroad tracks. Both logging and railroad companies relied on steam locomotives, which tended to send off sparks. Although there was a law requiring engines used in the woods to be equipped with steel netting to prevent these sparks from escaping, very few companies complied. The \$100 fine for failure to comply with the law was a minor annoyance to wealthy companies and did little to ensure that locomotives had screens or netting.</p>	
Brief description of the event:	
<p>During a two month period, starting in late April, over 640 fires were ignited because of human carelessness, with half of them directly linked to railroad operations. The Fire Warden on the Delaware and Hudson Railroad reported that fires started almost every day along the tracks. One example occurred on May 5, when two locomotives pulling a heavy load set almost continuous fires for 10 miles near the town of Fine, New York. Another big contributor was intentionally set fires by farmers clearing land and arsonists. It was estimated that those intentionally set fires burned almost 75,000 acres.</p> <p>Large fires burned at Schroon Lake, Lake George, Olmsteadville, Newcomb, AuSable Forks, Saranac Lake and Clintonville, although the center of the most severe action was the Lake Placid area. The fires were so significant that there were reports of ash falling as far away as Albany, New York, 150 miles south of Lake Placid. The smoke from the fires even caused concern in Washington, D.C.</p> <p>From May 28 to June 3, with the worst day occurring on June 3, strong winds swept through the Adirondacks. Firefighting efforts became ineffective, as the forest became intensely hot and filled with smoke. The dense smoke sometimes made it impossible to see the fires, though in some places, it was reported that the fires could be heard. Firefighters had to seek safety in open areas and focused on protecting threatened cottages, camps, hotels, and farm buildings.</p> <p>On June 7, heavy rains began falling, checking the fire spread throughout the area. Reports say that hundreds of men just dropped their tools that day and slept due to physical exhaustion.</p> <p>Losses from the fires were estimated at \$3,500,000 (\$122,000,000 in 2024 dollars). According to one source nearly 7,000 men and women were conscripted to fight the fires. The cost of fighting the fires was estimated at \$175,000 (\$6,100,000 in 2024 dollars).</p>	
Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:	
<p>A 1903 report described the fire behavior as surface, ground, and crown fires that varied with the character of the forest and the strength of the wind.</p> <p>In April, a farmer near Lake Placid, New York, lost control of a fire he set to clear his land for planting. It spread to the duff and smoldered until the wind event on June 3. The strong wind fanned it into a surface fire and then a crown fire, which traveled 8 miles in 2-1/2 hours, jumping across clearings and streams. The fire burned a tract of land 6 miles long by 3 miles wide. On one of the larger fires out of Newcomb, New York, it was reported that a fire warden and several men ran for 2 miles, chased by the fire. They escaped only by placing a lake between themselves and the flames.</p>	

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Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

Not applicable

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

The report *Forest Fires in the Adirondacks* in 1903 by H. M. Suter, Agent from the Bureau of Forestry, identified a weakness in their fire detection systems; the need to form a fire organization; and increase public awareness of the wildfire threat. However, it wasn't until the destructive 1908 Adirondack fires that reforms and initiatives were finally created to prevent, patrol and better fight fires, including installation of the iconic Adirondack fire towers.

This is a historical example that wildfire conflagrations can visit any geographic area...the Great Miramichi Fire swept through the nearby state of Maine less than 80 years earlier in 1825.

Links to more information on this incident:

- <https://ia803201.us.archive.org/2/items/forestfiresinadi26sute/forestfiresinadi26sute.pdf>
- <https://www.adirondackalmanack.com/2012/04/lost-brook-dispatches-the-fires-of-1903.html>
- <https://www.adirondackalmanack.com/2022/09/fire-in-the-adirondacks.html>
- <https://www.theadkx.org/the-adirondacks-are-burning-a-brief-history-of-forest-fires/>

The Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center offers an excellent site which provides information on many wildland incidents:

[Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center's Incident Review Database \(IRDB\) \(wildfire.gov\)](https://www.wildfire.gov/wildfire-lessons-learned-center/incident-review-database)

This summary page was proudly provided by:
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**Giant Mountain, Round Mountain, and Rocky Peak Ridge viewed from Noonmark Mountain in the Adirondacks
(photo taken after the 1903 fire, William Joplin)**

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Circular No. 26, Bureau of Forestry.

MAP I.

BUREAU OF FORESTRY U.S. DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE ADIRONDACK MOUNTAIN REGION STATE OF NEW YORK

SHOWING APPROXIMATELY THE AREAS BURNED
BY FOREST FIRES DURING THE SPRING OF 1903

