

Wind-whipped fire tears through landmark conference center

By PAT GROSSMITH AND ROGER AMSDEN
Union Leader Correspondent
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ALTON – Fire investigators are at the Alton Bay Christian Conference Center (ABCCC) today where "chimneys and charred trees" are all that's left after an 11-alarm blaze tore through 45 unoccupied cottages.

Brian Boyers, the town's building code enforcement officer, said the 45 cottages were about two to three feet apart from each other.

"They're right on top of each other," he said. The cottages, all more than 100 years old, "were very, very old and very, very dry," according to Boyers who photographed the damaged camps this morning.

All that's left, he said, are a "bunch of chimneys and charred trees."

An Alton firefighter was injured yesterday when a propane tank exploded and the hose he was holding hit him in the face. He was taken to the hospital for treatment.

John Southworth, an investigator with the state Fire Marshal's Office, said as many as 15 to 20 homes were destroyed by the fire and as many as two dozen others were damaged.

Strong winds whipping in straight from the north at 20 mph-plus pushed the flames rapidly through the closely packed buildings at the summer campground, he said. It took six hours to get the fire under control.

"The wind had dried everything out and once it got going, it really pushed it along," said Southworth.

About 200 firefighters from 40 communities, as far away as the Seacoast and greater Manchester area, battled the 11-alarm blaze that forced the closing of Route 11 from Gilford to Alton.

Fire Marshal William Degnan said no injuries to civilians were reported.

"Fortunately, it was at this time of year," he said. "During the summer, it's full."

Ed Miller of Portsmouth, who spent the day fishing on Lake Winnepesaukee with two of his friends, was sitting in a window seat at J.P. China Restaurant on Alton Mountain Road, just across from the center, when he first saw smoke.

"We just looked out the front window and saw all the smoke coming through the trees. A few minutes later, there were ashes and embers falling and setting the leaves and pine needles on fire," said Miller.

"Our waitress ran across the road to tell people in a house there that they should get out and we saw them come running out and across the road. As far as I'm concerned, she's a real hero," said Miller.

Watching the fire with apprehension was Peter Sylvester of Loudon, who owns one of the nearly

500 cabins at the center.

"We own a place up on the hill and spend our summers here. We got a call from a friend about the fire and drove up here to see if the camp was OK," said Sylvester.

He said that the water was not yet turned on in the seasonal cottages.

"It was a huge red inferno," said Emmy Pijoan, who has worked at the conference center along with her son, Jimmy. "The fire people were dwarfed by the fire. The fire trucks looked like toys compared to the fire."



Carolyn Schaeffner, a former staff member for the (ROGER AMSDEN) Christian Conference

Center, said 45 cottages, owned individually by members of the Alton Bay Campmeeting Assn., d/b/a as ABCCC, were heavily damaged or destroyed. The association owns all of the 78 acres where the center is situated.

The camp began in 1863 when about 10,000 people gathered for the Second Advent Campmeeting at the site overlooking Lake Winnepesaukee. According to a history of the center on winnepesaukee.com/forums, four acres of land was leased from the Boston and Maine Railroad at first and participants lived on the grounds in tents.

As the years went by, the development expanded to 78 acres and cottages replaced tents on the same sites, built within feet of each other.

In 1945, when another wind-swept blaze swept through the campground, there were 400 cottages on the grounds that included a tabernacle, bakery, boarding house and store.

Fire investigators determined that 1945 blaze started in a malfunctioning oil stove. It destroyed 250 cottages, the tabernacle and book store, and left more than 1,000 people homeless.

Steve Hatch of Wolfeboro, who watched Sunday's fire, said he remembers the earlier campground fire.



"I was 17 at the time and we all came down to watch it," said Hatch.

Another major blaze at the center in 1967 was the work of an arsonist and destroyed a large lodging house, administration building and store, according to Schaeffner.

This morning, the extent of the devastation was clear. (TOWN OF ALTON PHOTO)

Boyers said there have been several more fires since 1997 with six to seven cottages burned down. All but one was rebuilt but to higher standards set by the town, he said.

He said it is too early to know what position the town will take regarding cottages being rebuilt after Sunday's blaze.

ABCCC also has a 70-room lodging house on the site and a park for recreational vehicles in addition to the cottages. Schaeffner said no other building was damaged.

Schaeffner said flames did not damage two restaurants bordering the campground: Shibley's Soft & Hard Ice Cream or J.P. China Restaurant.

- ▶ [Updated local weather advisories](#)
- ▶ [Click here for a map of the Alton Bay area.](#)
- ▶ [Alton Bay Christian Conference Center Web site](#)
- ▶ [YouTube: Flames destroy a building](#)
- ▶ [YouTube: An explosion during the blaze](#)
- ▶ [Discussion, photos from a Winnepesaukee.com forum](#)

YOUR COMMENTS

The person carrying the child is actually a police officer, not a fire fighter.

- **Jay, Alton**

You can bet that if restrictions are put on the rebuilding of the structures so closely together, someone will scream that this constitutes a 'taking' of the land and demand compensation.

- **Texter, Newfields**

Inspiring picture of the Firefighter carrying the baby...Thank goodness for men/women like him who become selfless!

- **Douglas, Hudson**

At least the UL coverage is a little less sensational than the "quality" coverage at WMUR. They lead off with a headline of 40 Homes Destroyed!...which is a lot different than 40 unoccupied sumemr cottages burn.... Reality check people

- **John, Manchester**

The Alton Bay region burns regularly due to the fact that the forest ecosystem in which inhabitants live was (before people lived there) traditionally experiencing low intensity fires. They occurred naturally and played a vital role in helping to promote regeneration and maintaining balance within this system. All of the tree species that exist in this region (white pine, red oak, red pine, pitch pine) all thrive under periodic low intensity fires. However over the last 175 years buildings and various other structures have all been built within the middle of this ecosystem and all forest fires have been suppressed. The end result is that when a forest fire does take place (usually in the early spring) it rages with a vengeance.

- **stuart, meriden**

I frankly cannot believe that the owners of the Center continue building these homes so close together. It is a recipe for disaster. There should be strict codes enforced for any future building on this parcel of land to ensure that the next time, the whole complex is not destroyed.

- **Diane, Alton Bay**

Pure speculation on my part Tom, but since there have been no reports of suspicion yet I assume the fires in Alton are related to the following:

The age of the homes, the newest fire retardant materials were not always added to older buildings.

The fact that the buildings were right on top of each other combined with the dry and windy

conditions in the surrounding woods carried the flames from building to building.
It could also be a problem with the propane that is attached to these summer homes but propane/gas is generally safe and probably exploded AFTER the fire approached the tanks.

None of these reasons indicate that Alton is any more susceptible than another older seasonal community.

- **Catherine, Exeter, NH**

Let's hope those people all had insurance. It isn't surprising a fire like this happened yesterday, the winds were high all day.

To - anonamous, alton nh .. Take it easy on the UL, I imagine they print what they are told. Run a spell-checker next time, it's spelled anonymous.

- **Jay, Londonderry**

Why does Alton Bay always burn?

Seriously, there's a big fire there every year or so.

- **Tom, Alton, NH**

actually no fire fighter was air lifted... he was releaed about an hour after he was broughtin... get the facts straight before you go and make a huge story on something that didnt happen....

- **anonamous, alton nh**

On the Alton NH fire of state route 11 E/W Channel 9 tv has more comments then Union Leader. As of 12AM.

I spend my days as a kid going to Wolfeboro, Alton, Belmont, Gilford. for Skiing at Gunstock and spend my time at my summer home in Wolfeboro near Kingswood High school.

I also spent time on my boat in Alton Bay parking near the town docks where I spent eatting and walking where the fires were. Most of the resturants I don't think is open yet.

- **Rob Siebert, Merrimack**

actually the firefighter was taken by ambulance to lrg h and he was treated and released

- **mike, alton**

WMUR.com has more of the story, pics and video. What a mess!

- **R, Raymond**

God Bless all of the emergency personnel and I pray that the firefighter airlifted to DHMC is okay.

- **Tricia, Lebanon**

wow

- **Phil, Copenhagen Denmark**

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