

# Settlers and Saviors of this Sacred Spot...

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The first recorded fire sighted on Roanoke Island's north end occurred on 15 August 1590. In the early evening, English ships had come-to-anchor three miles offshore near Port Ferdinando—modern Bodie Island. John White, hapless Governor of the 1587 colony, was on board, returning to his settlement after a three-year absence. As the ships twisted in the turbulent waves, he and the mariners saw a great smoke rise in the Ile of Raonoak—some twenty miles distant—*near the place where [he] left our Colony in the yeere 1587*. White's spirits soared!

To White, signal fires along the shore or atop ridges were common communication devices. Logically enough, he interpreted the smoke as good news, thinking some of his colonists were still on Roanoke Island awaiting his return. Hampered by stormy weather and false searches, it was not until late evening two days later, when White and eighteen others finally arrived at Roanoke Island. As their boats moved slowly through the sound, *they espied towards the North end of the Iland the light of a great fire thorow the woods, to the which [they] presently rowed*.

After sounding trumpet calls, singing English tunes, calling to the settlers and receiving no answer, White and his men decided to wait until sunrise to go ashore and look for the colony. During that sleepless night, cramped with eight others in the everrocking ship's boat, staring at the uncontrolled blazing fire on shore, White must have realized the flame was no beacon of hope.

The next day, he discovered what he had thought a signal, was in reality a brush fire. Investigating further, he found the settlement abandoned. Subsequent search proved impossible. Because of an intensifying northeast storm, the English abandoned the Outer Banks and returned to England, taking John White with them.

For the rest of his life, in England and Ireland, whenever and wherever John White saw a signal fire, it must have triggered his memory of the great blaze he sighted on Roanoke Island, and deepened the tragedy of losing his colony.

In the modern world, a fire in the forest is neither a warning nor an alert; it is almost always the harbinger of immediate tragedy. Outer Bankers, John White would be pleased to know, are ever protective of the Waterside Theatre on Roanoke Island where the story of his now famous colony is dramatized. Outer Bankers helped fight a devastating fire that destroyed the theatre in 1947; helped rebuild it in less than a week so the season could be completed; helped re-build it again in 1960 after Hurricane Donna whipped the main-stage loose from the pilings and cast several buildings into the sound; and were standing sentinel on 11 September 2008 when fire struck again.

Shortly after midnight, Carolyn Nicodemus, an Outer Banks' resident, looked across the Roanoke Sound and saw a fire on the sparsely populated north end of Roanoke Island. Her view was similar to that of John White in 1590, as he rowed up the sound in search of his colony. The sounding of her trumpet at 12:35 AM, however, elicited an immediate response. She called 911. *I'm looking across the sound to Roanoke Island in Manteo, she said. It looks like there is a fire over there...like towards The Lost Colony.*

The emergency operator responded: *I'll send someone in that area and see if they can find anything.* They did.

The Roanoke Island Volunteer Fire Department and Dare County EMS were first on the scene. Flames were shooting out the top windows in the two-story Irene Rains Costume Shop at Waterside Theatre. The nearby maintenance building and storage shed were already mostly destroyed. The men's dressing room and main stage of the theatre were in danger. Additional help was needed.

Additional help came. Seven Dare County Fire Departments drove their trucks and tenders along the winding narrow paths of Fort Raleigh and joined the fight to save the theatre.

Realizing the costume shop could not be saved, RIVFD Captain Kenny Peckrun concentrated on saving the theatre by setting up a water curtain between the raging fire and the men's dressing room—the only structure \ separating the blaze from the theatre itself.

It was impossible to save the Costume Shop, but with its loss most of the wardrobe needed for the production of *The Lost Colony* and most of the vintage costumes from earlier years were also destroyed—as were all wardrobe supplies, equipment and reference materials.

After battling flames for about an hour and a half, the firemen brought the fire under control, leaving a few men to stand guard on site throughout the night and next morning. No lives were lost. There were no serious injuries, but several of the brave fire fighters suffered from heat exhaustion.

The water curtain strategy was effective; the men's dressing room building held; the theatre was saved.