

Carter, Dorcas E.: The Great Fire Of '22 ^[1]

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Dorcas E. Carter: The Great Fire Of '22

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 1/14/2001. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

The great fire of 1922 burned 40 city blocks in New Bern and left thousands of people homeless. It was the most destructive fire in the state's history. Dorcas E. Carter, one of the few people who can still recall the blaze, was 8 years old when the flames reduced her neighborhood to ashes. It had been one of the most prosperous black communities in the South. I interviewed her at her home, where she was surrounded by photographs of her family, including a grandmother who had been a fisher-woman on Portsmouth Island, one of the Outer Banks.

Hers has been a life of triumph against many hardships. Born in New Bern in 1913, Miss Carter said that the fire was the turning point in her life. Since then, "it looks like it has been one struggle after another," she said. Despite all the hard times, she became a legendary teacher in the local public schools, bringing wisdom, charity, and dauntingly high expectations to her students for 39 years.

Above all, she gave her students the example of her own deep faith and unshakable will. "I would ask God, don't move the mountain, just give me the strength to climb it," she told me.

In **Dorcas E. Carter's** words:



Dorcas E. Carter. Photo by Chris Seward, 2001. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the *News & Observer*.

The fire took place on Dec. 1, 1922, the day after Thanksgiving. On Fridays it was always my mother's day to dust and get the house ready for Sunday. But this morning, when we were in the midst of dusting upstairs, in our bedroom, the fire about noon another fire broke out on Kilmorock Street. When the fire engines finally left Roper's mill and got there, three houses were already burned. The homes all had wooden shingles, and it was dry. The wind was high that day, 70 miles. The fire whistles just kept blowing. You could see the blaze and the smoke just covering the sky. The fire leaped over West Street and caught Bern Street, and it burned there awhile. When the fire caught Louis Ward's house, that's when it lo. My mama said, "I'm going into the house and collect some of our belongings." When she started taking clothes from the line, I ran into my playhouse that my father had built and packed all my dolls and toys in a box. They were going to be sa. The fire kept spreading. Finally, I could see it coming up George Street. The fire had leaped over Howard Street and was coming around Pasture Street, too. We were going to be encircled. On Pasture Street was the Presbyterian church, so I had heard people say that on Judgment Day the world would be all afire, and I'm thinking, this is Judgment Day.

When Mama finally arrived, we kept going and going until we reached Dunn's field. This is where people were taking refuge -- in Dunn's field, and in the cemeteries, Greenwood and Cedar Grove. Sparks were flying, and sometimes the spark. The Red Cross put up Tent City, so many people were homeless. I really wanted to stay in Tent City, because I had a lot of friends there. But my grandmother didn't want my mother to go, because she was kind of frail and had a young baby. That fire left 3,000 people homeless, all black people. Some of them became so disheartened that they went north, and some of them never returned. Because what happened is -- and they don't like me to tell this -- the city of New Bern once. My community had beautiful homes that looked just like the historic New Bern homes right now. All of George Street was so pretty, and prosperous. The people always dressed so modest, so cultured. You could see the men escorting the lac. The next morning after the fire, my brothers and I wanted to go back and find our home. We went down George Street and we knew we lived the third house down. We didn't find anything but cinders. Everything was leveled, nothing but chum. Being an 8-year-old, I wouldn't know my mother's distress. With five children and no place to go, she had to be distraught. And then living with somebody else, you know it was hard. For a child, it could be an adventure. My uncle had a horse. But in my mother's heart and mind and soul, I know she was distressed. I'm sure she had a lot of days that she thought about a lot of things, but you wouldn't know. Sometimes I just sit, I look at her picture and I wonder what went through her

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[Audio Recording](#) ^[3]: Interview with Dorcas Elizabeth Carter by Angela Hornsby-Gutting, 25 June 1999, K-0235, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/15260> ^[3]

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