

# Man, woman, dog, rabbit, duck escape burning apartment building

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An elderly man, a woman and her dog, rabbit and duck were among those who escaped a raging apartment house fire in North Wilkesboro on Monday afternoon. Officials with the North Wilkesboro Fire Department were investigating the cause of the blaze at 720 Kensington Drive on Tuesday morning. North Wilkesboro Fire Chief Niki Hamby wasn't sure what caused the blaze in which six residents lost their homes. The building, owned by Dr. Ron Cohn, was condemned by North Wilkesboro Building Inspector David Felts because of the extensive damage. Dozens of onlookers lined the sidewalks on Main Street in North Wilkesboro as more than 40 firefighters from North Wilkesboro and Wilkesboro battled the fire. Near the burning building, Richard Freeman sat and watched as firefighters sprayed water on the roof. Freeman's father, Clarence, 75, who had been home at the time of the fire, had climbed out an upstairs window and made his way down off a porch roof with the help of fellow resident Walter Jones. The elderly man was taken to Wilkes Regional Medical Center where he was released after being treated for smoke inhalation, Hamby said. Opal Neely, 71, lived in a ground-level apartment and was also home when the fire started. "I heard somebody holler and I saw the smoke," Neely said.

When the woman walked out of the burning structure her attention then turned to her pets — her dog, Scooby; rabbit, Boots; and duck, Dillard. Firefighters pulled the animals from the building safe and sound. "I wasn't going anywhere without my pets," Neely said. As far as displaced residents, this is the worst fire in North Wilkesboro since the Wilkes Towers blaze in December 2001, Hamby said. Samples of debris from the burned apartment building will be sent to the SBI Crime Lab in Raleigh for analysis, said Hamby, who is also fire inspector for the Wilkes Fire Marshal's Office. Results from those tests could take several weeks, he said.

"We're not calling it an accident yet," Hamby told *The Record* at the scene on Tuesday. "We treat all fires as suspicious until we determine the cause." Sources said that the blaze might have begun by someone cooking inside the home. Hamby said, however, he was sure that the fire did not start in the kitchen area of the upstairs apartment. The fire was reported at 4:02 p.m. North Wilkesboro Fire Department Captain

Jimmy Martin, who is also supervisor of the sewer plant, was leaving Smoot Park when he saw smoke coming from the hill above Main Street. A woman had also gone into the North Wilkesboro Police Department and reported the blaze. In minutes, 24 firefighters from North Wilkesboro were joined by 15 others from Wilkesboro, who assisted at the scene. Cricket and Broadway volunteer fire departments were also on standby, Hamby said.

Hamby and Felts walked out of the blackened smoke-scented structure shortly around 11 a.m. on Tuesday. Felts said the walls of the burned home are unstable and that he didn't believe the building could ever again be used as a dwelling. "There's no way I'm going to let anyone move back in there the way it is," Felts said. Hamby said that the residents lost most of their possession due to fire, smoke, heat or water damage. The Wilkes Alleghany Chapter of the American Red Cross has assisted with lodging, food and clothing for the residents of 720 Kensington Drive.

Clarence Freeman and his sons, Richard, 46, and Danny 48, who lived in the upstairs apartment, are staying at the Red Carpet Inn in Wilkesboro for now, said Russ Pearson, executive director of the local Red Cross chapter. William Jackson, 56, and Walter Jones, 43, who lived in two other apartments, are also staying at the Red Carpet Inn, Pearson said. He added that Neely is staying with her daughter. Red Cross members went into action soon after the fire was reported. Disaster Services Director Melanie Shepherd and volunteers Jenny Hix, Bobbi Taylor, Charles Macemore and Jim Kiger went to the site of the burned apartment building. Pearson worked the phones at the office and helped coordinate efforts. When asked how long the Red Cross would be able to assist the residents, Pearson said, "We're trying to do this on a day-to-day basis. Donations are down 30 to 35 percent to what we normally bring in."

He said that anyone wanting to help these particular victims can call his office at 838-4563 or sent checks to PO Box 258, Wilkesboro, or come to the office at 104 West Street in Wilkesboro behind the Wilkes Board of Education Building. Pearson said that if checks are designated for Kensington Fire Victims, that's what the money would be used for. As for other donations, Pearson said, "We accept, but don't solicit, used clothing. Because of the dignity factor, if we can give them (fire victims) a voucher for new clothes that are the right size, they feel a whole lot better about it."