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National Personnel Records Center fire

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(October 2013)

The **National Personnel Records Center fire** of 1973,^[1] also referred to as the **1973 National Archives fire** was a fire that occurred at the United States **National Personnel Records Center** (NPRC) in **Overland, Missouri**, a suburb of **St. Louis**, on July 12, 1973, striking a severe blow to the **National Archives and Records Administration** of the **United States**.^[1] NPRC, the custodian of military service records, lost approximately 16-18 million official



Conflagration underway 1973



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military personnel records as a result of the fire.^[2]

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Demolition underway, 1970,
Aerial View of MILPERCEN, National
Archives (Now Human Resources
Command, Fort Knox, KY.)

Background [\[edit\]](#)

National Personnel Records Center [\[edit\]](#)

The [National Personnel Records Center](#) (NPRC) was created in 1956 as the result of a series of mergers of predecessor agencies beginning after [World War II](#), including the **Demobilized Personnel Records Center** (DPRC) and the [Military Personnel Records Center](#) (MILPERCEN,

pronounced "mil'-per-cen") of the [Department of Defense](#) along with the [Federal Records Center](#) of the [General Services Administration](#). In final form, the NPRC handled the service records of persons in Federal [civil service](#) or American military service, overseen by the [National Archives and Records Administration](#) of the General Services Administration.^[1]

Needs analysis and study [\[edit\]](#)

In 1951, the Department of Defense retained the St. Louis firm of [Hellmuth, Yamasaki, and Leinweber, architects](#), to design a new facility for its Demobilized Personnel Records Center. The firm visited several similar operations, including a [U.S. Navy](#) records center at [Garden City, New York](#) and a Department of Defense facility in [Alexandria, Virginia](#). They studied the functions of each facility and the nature of the storage systems employed. Their report, submitted in February 1952, detailed different approaches used to achieve the respective center's mission. Particularly relevant in light of future events were the findings with regard to [fire prevention, detection, and suppression](#) systems. The Naval records center in Garden City, New York, for example, was outfitted with a full [fire sprinkler system](#), while the Department of Defense facility in Alexandria, Virginia was not.^[1]

This reflected an ongoing debate at the time among [archivists](#) and [librarians](#) about the relative merits of sprinkler systems: Some felt that there was a greater chance for [water damage](#) from the activation of one or more [sprinkler heads](#), whether in a fire or accidentally, than the chance of [fire damage](#) without sprinklers to suppress it, while others were of the opposite opinion.^[1]

Design and construction [\[edit\]](#)

The architects proceeded with the selected plan for a six-story structure set on a 70 acres (28 ha) site, with each floor measuring 728 ft × 282 ft (222 m × 86 m) and encompassing 205,296 sq ft (19,072.6 m²) for a total of 1,231,776 sq ft (114,435.7 m²). The building was constructed of

[prestressed concrete](#) floors and roof supported by concrete interior columns and surrounded by a [curtain wall](#) of [aluminum](#) and [glass](#). Construction was completed in 1956 by the [United States Army Corps of Engineers](#) at a cost of \$12.5 million, \$108 million in today's dollars, an economical \$10.15 per square foot (\$110.51 per square meter).^[1]

Fire protection [\[edit\]](#)

On each of the floors were large spaces for records storage, stretching hundreds of feet and containing no [firewalls](#) or other [firestopping](#) to limit the spread of fire. Along the north side of each floor were offices, separated from the records storage area by a [concrete block](#) wall. The entire facility lacked heat or smoke detectors to automatically detect fire or a fire sprinkler system to automatically extinguish fire.^[1]

Operation [\[edit\]](#)

When the facility opened in 1956, it housed some 38 million military personnel records. By the time of the 1973 fire, their ranks had swelled to over 52 million records. Additionally, 500,000 cu ft (14,000 m³) of military unit records were added to the collection of the center. The staff of the center as of 1973 consisted of more than 2,200 personnel, including [GSA](#) management and staff as well as military and civilian personnel from the [Army](#), Navy [Air Force](#), [Marines](#), the [Army Reserve](#), the [FBI](#), and others.^[1]

Fire [\[edit\]](#)

Initial actions [\[edit\]](#)

At 12:16:15 AM on July 12, 1973, the [Olivette](#) Fire Department reported to their dispatcher that the NPRC building was on fire. At 12:16:35, 20 seconds later, a building [security guard](#) picked up the

fire phone and relayed the report of a passing motorcyclist who also observed the fire. By 12:17:25, the first **fire trucks** were dispatched, three **pumpers** and two other **emergency vehicles** from the Community Fire Protection District had been dispatched, arriving at 12:20:35. 42 fire districts eventually contributed to the effort to put out the fire.

Ultimately, the fire burned out of control for 22 hours, being fought from the exterior of the building because heat and smoke within compelled firefighters to withdraw at 03:15:00. Insufficient water pressure plagued efforts and a pumper broke down mechanically in its 40th continuous hour of operation. Crews entered the building again on July 14 while the fire continued to smolder for another two days. The fire was declared out on the morning of July 16 but crews continued using spray to suppress rekindling until the end of the month.

Cause [\[edit\]](#)

The exact cause of the fire was never fully determined. An investigation in 1975 suggested embers of cigarettes, which were present in several trash cans as a possible cause, and at least one local newspaper reported that an employee had started the fire by smoking in the records area. Such reports were never confirmed, however, and to this day the cause of the fire remains a mystery.

Affected records [\[edit\]](#)

The losses to Federal military records collection included:

- 80% loss to records of U.S. Army personnel discharged November 1, 1912, to January 1, 1960^[2]
- 75% loss to records of U.S. Air Force personnel discharged September 25, 1947, to January 1, 1964, with names alphabetically after Hubbard, James E.^[2]
- Some U.S. Army Reserve personnel who performed their initial **active duty** for training in the

late 1950s but who received final discharge as late as 1964.

None of the records that were destroyed in the fire had duplicate copies made, nor had they been copied to [microfilm](#). No index of these records was made prior to the fire, and millions of records were on loan to the [Veterans Administration](#) at the time of the fire. This made it difficult to precisely determine which records were lost.^[2]

Navy and Marine Corps records [\[edit\]](#)

On the morning of the National Archives Fire, a very small number of U.S. Navy, [Coast Guard](#), and Marine Corps records were out of their normal file area being worked on as active requests by employees of the National Archives and Records Administration who maintained their offices on the 6th floor of the building. When the NPRC fire began, these Navy and Marine Corps records were caught in the section of the building which experienced the most damage in the fire.

The exact number of Navy and Marine Corps records destroyed in the fire is unknown, since such records were being removed only for a few days while information was retrieved from the record and were not normally stored in the area of the building which experienced the fire. Estimates indicate that the number of affected records was no more than two to three dozen. Such records are considered "special cases", and no accounting could be made of which records were affected, so the present policy of NPRC is to state that there were no Navy and Marine Corps records destroyed in the fire and to treat these records as records that had been lost in ordinary circumstances.

Damage and reconstruction [\[edit\]](#)

The 1973 fire destroyed the entire 6th floor of the National Personnel Records Center and greatly affected the 5th floor with water damage. Signs of the fire can still be seen today. A massive effort

to restore destroyed service records began in 1974. In most cases where a military record has been presumed destroyed, NPRC is able to reconstruct basic service information, such as military date of entry, date of discharge, character of service, and final rank.

Notes [\[edit\]](#)

- [^] [a b c d e f g h](#) Stender, Walter W.; Evans Walker (October 1974). "The National Personnel Records Center Fire: A Study in Disaster" . *The American Archivist* (Society of American Archivists) **37** (4). Retrieved 2009-01-31.
- [^] [a b c d](#) "The 1973 Fire at the National Personnel Records Center (St. Louis, MO)" . *Archives.gov*. College Park, Maryland: National Personnel Records Center, National Archives and Records Administration. 2007-06-19. Retrieved 2009-01-31.

References [\[edit\]](#)

- Case Reference Guide (CRG) of the [Military Personnel Records Center](#)
- "The 1973 Fire" - Public information pamphlet published by the [National Personnel Records Center](#)
- "How to obtain Veteran Records" - Instruction sheet from the office of Senator [Ted Kennedy](#) which mentions the 1973 fire

See also [\[edit\]](#)

- [1836 U.S. Patent Office fire](#)
- [1877 U.S. Patent Office fire](#)

External links [\[edit\]](#)

- [National Archives 1973 NPRC Fire Information Page](#) 
- [An essay regarding the 1973 NPRC Fire](#) 
- ww2enlistment.org - salvaged records archive 

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