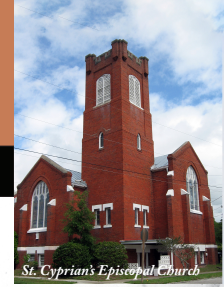


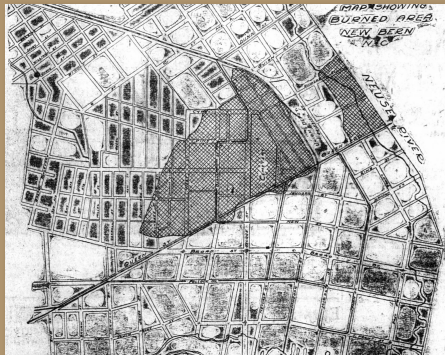
## NEW BERN AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE TRAIL



In 1922, New Bern's African American community was decimated by a major fire. More than three thousand people were displaced as hundreds of structures were consumed in a blaze that caused over two million dollars in damage. The fire changed the face of New Bern.

## Disaster

Early on the morning of December 1, sparks from equipment ignited saw dust at the Rowland Lumber Company, located on the banks of the Neuse River. Within minutes, the largest lumber mill in North Carolina was ablaze. Fueled by high winds off the channel, the fire jumped the train tracks at Pasteur Street and quickly spread south to nearby wooden clapboard and shingle-roofed homes. A few hours later, a faulty chimney at a house at 30 Kilmarnock Street, north of Five Points, started a second fire that converged with the blaze from the mill. Residents fled. Those unable to escape sought refuge in Cedar Grove Cemetery. Adding to the tragedy, Fire Chief James Bryan was forced to call for assistance from nearby Kingston and Washington because local fire fighters were away in Raleigh to watch New Bern play in the Eastern North Carolina state football championship.

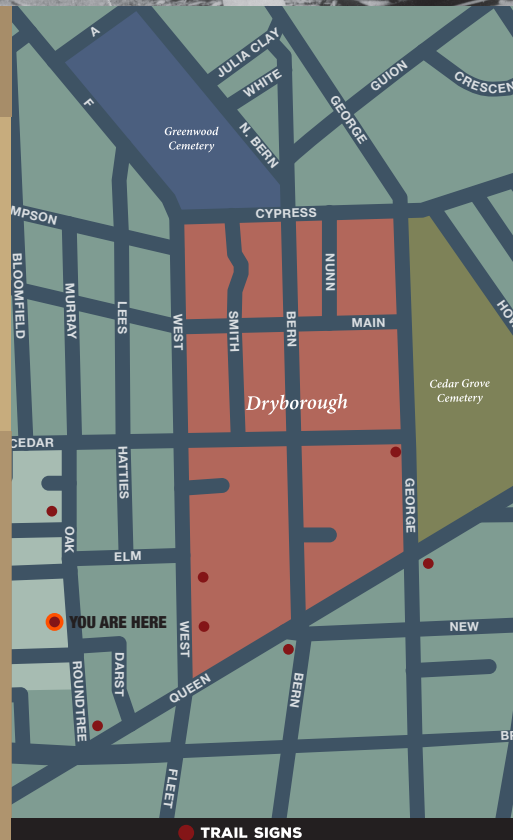


*Shaded detail shows the area burned in the Great Fire*

To create a fire break, approximately one hundred homes along Queen and Metcalf streets were dynamited. Six more houses were pulled down using a Norfolk and Southern steam engine. Neither strategy worked. The fire was finally contained late in the afternoon. What remained were rows of charred chimneys dotting the smoldering Dryborough landscape. In the days that followed, the Red Cross set up a refugee camp along George Street using 1,000 tents donated by Fort Bragg. Other survivors found shelter at St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church.



*West Street Graded School was spared. The school can be seen in the back center of this 1922 photograph.*



## Rebuilding

Almost forty blocks were consumed by the Great Fire. From the ashes, an industrious group of Black middle-class New Bernians began to rebuild. They constructed new homes and new sanctuaries. The majority of survivors, however, struggled. As a testament to the level of devastation, the majority of lots in Smithtown remained vacant for decades. Other properties were not redeveloped until after World War II. Some lots sit empty today.

The fire also added to New Bern's racial divisions. Spurred by a combination of the Great Depression, the inability to rebuild, and life in the Jim Crow South, seven percent of New Bern's Black population relocated to cities outside the region in the 1920s and '30s. On lots along George Street, where African American homes once stood, eminent domain was used to acquire properties and establish Kafer Park in 1928. A few years later, a National Guard Armory was constructed within the park boundaries. These projects, and others created, for the first time, physical impediments between the city's White and Black communities.