

## Department of Historic Resources

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**For Immediate Release**

March 8, 2018

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### STATE HISTORICAL HIGHWAY MARKER "FEDERAL TRANSIENT BUREAU FIRE" TO BE DEDICATED IN LYNCHBURG

*—New marker recalls deadliest fire in Lynchburg history; the 1934 fire focused national attention on Lynchburg and resulted in improved federal guidelines for homeless shelters—*

*—The marker text is reproduced below—*

RICHMOND – A state historical marker issued by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources will be dedicated this month in Lynchburg that recalls a deadly fire at a Federal Transient Bureau shelter in 1934 that claimed the lives of 19 homeless men, making it the deadliest fire in the city's history.

The ceremony to dedicate and unveil the marker will be held at 2 p.m., March 24, on the 84<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fire. Open to the public, the dedication will be hosted at the Lynchburg Visitor Center, on the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> and Church Streets, the site of the bureau building fire.

Speakers at the dedication will include Lynchburg city council member Sterling Wilder; Ted Delaney, director emeritus of Old City Cemetery; Captain Robert Lipscomb of the Lynchburg Fire Department; and Jim Hare of the Department of Historic Resources. Chris Evans will perform a dramatic monologue in the role of Frank Wells, a victim of the fire, from "The Bureau" by Matthew Kellen Burgos.

The Federal Transient Bureau was opened by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration as part of the New Deal during the Great Depression of the 1930s and housed out-of-work men passing through town, the marker notes.

Intended to hold no more than 100 men, the shelter was occupied by about 190 people the night of the fire, according a March 27, 1934, Lynchburg *News* article. “The two-story building was overcrowded,” the marker reads, “when an early morning kitchen fire spread rapidly and claimed the lives of at least 19 inhabitants; about 70 others were injured.”

The federal government returned many bodies of those who died to their families although seven of the dead were buried in Lynchburg’s Old City Cemetery.

The fire brought national attention to Lynchburg and resulted in improved federal guidelines for homeless shelters, according to the marker.

The “Federal Transient Bureau Fire” marker was approved for manufacture and installation in 2017 by the Virginia Board of Historic Resources, which has the authority to designate new historical markers. The manufacturing cost of the sign has been covered by its sponsor the City of Lynchburg Department of Economic Development and Tourism and Old City Cemetery.

Virginia’s historical highway marker program, which began in 1927 with the installation of the first historical markers along U.S. Route 1, is considered the oldest such program in the nation. Currently there are more than 2,500 official state markers, most maintained by the Virginia Department of Transportation, as well as by local partners in jurisdictions outside of VDOT’s authority such as Lynchburg.

Text of marker:

### **Federal Transient Bureau Fire**

The deadliest fire in Lynchburg history occurred here at a Federal Transient Bureau shelter on 24 March 1934. The Bureau, opened by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration as part of the New Deal, housed out-of-work men passing through town during the Great Depression. The two-

story building was overcrowded when an early morning kitchen fire spread rapidly and claimed the lives of at least 19 inhabitants; about 70 others were injured. The federal government returned many bodies to their families, but seven were buried locally in the Old City Cemetery. National attention was focused on Lynchburg, and federal guidelines for homeless shelters were improved as a result of this disaster.

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