

The dust cloud generated by the collapse of WTC 1 further blocked views of the WTC site, and the second collapse created additional confusion and panic as people continued to stream away from the site. The collapses of the towers created extremely difficult conditions around the WTC site. Large amounts of tower steel and façade debris were on the ground; several buildings were heavily damaged; numerous fires were ignited in debris piles, vehicles, and nearby buildings; and a large number of people, including emergency responders, had been killed. As a result of these conditions, very little imagery taken from near WTC 7 has been identified for roughly an hour following the collapse of WTC 1, even though some long range imagery showing the upper floors of WTC 7 is available.

Smoke Obscuration

The earliest views of the south face available following the collapse of WTC 1 show large amounts of smoke obscuring the face. This smoke was present at later times as well. It was not clear whether the smoke was coming from lower locations within WTC 7 or was from fires near WTC 7 whose smoke was being drawn into a low pressure area formed on the face due to the flow of the prevailing wind from the north around the building. (Similar effects of the wind caused partial obscuration of the east and south faces of WTC 1 prior to its collapse, as discussed in NIST NCSTAR 1-5A.) The presence of this smoke further limited clear views of the south face.

Limited Site Access

During this first hour following the collapse of WTC 1, emergency responders, some ordinary citizens, and professional photographers and film crews began to work their way slowly back to the WTC site. As a result, starting around 11:00 a.m., limited imagery of the lower floors of WTC 7 was taken. Also starting around this time, police helicopters with photographers aboard approached the site, and some photographs were taken showing the lower floors of WTC 7 from above. Television news helicopters were an extremely valuable source of footage of the towers, but they provided only limited helpful imagery of the lower floors of WTC 7 after the towers collapsed. Even before WTC 1 collapsed, news helicopters had been ordered to hover several miles from the WTC site. From this distance, they could not observe the lower floors of WTC 7. A no-fly policy was being implemented across the nation, and early in the afternoon, most news helicopters were required to land. The last helicopter news footage of the site was recorded from across the Hudson River at around 3:23 p.m.

During the early period following the tower collapses, the area in the immediate vicinity of the WTC site was not secured, and photographers were apparently able to approach relatively freely. However, as time passed and emergency responders became better organized, a perimeter was established several blocks from the site, and access was controlled. Many people within the perimeter without a clear reason for being there were asked to leave.

FDNY communications from the early afternoon of September 11 show that commanders were concerned about a possible collapse of WTC 7 due to damage that it suffered from falling debris and the fires that were beginning to grow within the building. (See Chapter 6.) Orders were given for FDNY personnel to pull back from the immediate vicinity around mid-afternoon.