

For 45 years, it has generated speculation and wild rumors of missile silos, UFOs and odd columns of smoke.

Now one of the nation's most secretive Cold War installations - a giant underground bunker built into a hilltop now flanked by some of fast-growing northern Chatham County's most genteel subdivisions - has apparently closed.

The department-store-size bunker was built and buried in the early and mid-1960s. From its massive steel and concrete blast doors down to its spring-mounted urinals, the AT&T facility was designed to survive a nearby atomic blast.

Neighbors of the site said traffic to and from it had slowed to a trickle in recent months and stopped altogether last week after a stream of trucks hauled away sensitive equipment. The owner of a Pittsboro trucking company said he hauled out what was apparently the last load about two weeks ago, taking some of the equipment to other AT&T sites.

At the end of privately owned Big Hole Road, named for the huge pit dug in the early 1960s, is the heavily secured entrance to what county tax records show as 194 acres of AT&T property. The hydraulically deployed steel roadblock is still up, and closed-circuit television cameras still aim at the approach. But the traffic light over the barrier is dead, and an intercom system and phone to contact those inside have been disconnected. No one mans the guard booth, and a security team that once quickly emerged to chase off gawkers has vanished.

Mum's the word

Locals who worked inside couldn't talk then, and still can't.

"I can't talk about nothing," said Charles DeVinney, a former Pittsboro who worked at the bunker.

Did he sign an agreement not to talk?

"I can't tell you nothing."

An AT&T spokeswoman also declined to discuss the site.

"For security purposes we can't comment in relation to your inquiry," said Della Bowling.

But former Superior Court judge Wade Barber helped build the installation when he was in college and didn't sign any oath of silence. Turns out that even the toilets in the bunker were protected from atomic bombs: They were mounted on springs and fitted with rubber plumbing, Barber said.

Even Barber, though, didn't know why he and other workers were building the underground bunker or the two weird concrete cubes that are just about the only part of the complex above ground.

Those two cubes, each about 40 feet square, are a clue to the reason the bunker was built, said an expert on U.S. Cold War infrastructure.

5 'Project Offices'

Although AT&T had dozens of similar communications bunkers across the country, the one in Chatham was part of a heavily armored and heavily guarded group of just five that went by the deceptively bland name of "Project Offices," said Albert LaFrance, who runs two Web sites dedicated to Cold War infrastructure.

Unlike the more common AT&T communications bunkers, the Project Offices were apparently designed to shelter high-level government and military officials as part of a plan to preserve at least a skeletal national government in the event of a nuclear attack, LaFrance said. These "Continuance of Government" facilities would need communications capability, but communications wasn't their main mission, he said.

The communications gear would have to survive nuclear blasts, too, which is where the monolithic concrete cubes come in. Each has one side angled gently inward with a shallow, 30-foot dish molded into that side. The dishes, LaFrance said, were the antennas for an expensive but robust communications system known as troposcatter, and the concrete was to protect it from blasts.

Three of the other "Project Offices" are located around Washington. The other, by far the smallest, was in Virginia and built solely to link the Chatham bunker with the others. The Chatham site, adjacent to farm-themed Fearrington Village and The Preserve golfing community, was the farthest from Washington.

“One of the mysteries about that whole network is why that facility is there,” LaFrance said. “It’s so special that not only did they build that one, but they also built 1 / 8 the smaller one 3 / 8 to support it.”

Mission: classified

A logical answer might be that the government wanted one near Fort Bragg for top military leaders, but perhaps far enough away to survive if the base was attacked.

Underlining the importance of the site is a communications switch in the massive Greenbrier bunker in West Virginia built to shelter the U.S. Congress in an attack. It’s mislabeled “Chatam”

Barber, now a Pittsboro lawyer, remembers the huge cubes with built-in dishes vividly. “We knew when we were building them that one of them was aimed at Virginia,” he said.

Other things that distinguish the Project Office sites, LaFrance said, include helipads, large parking areas and much tougher security, including armed guards, the steel roadblock and special fences that triggered an alarm if someone even got close to them.

Workers in the Project Offices had to sign nondisclosure agreements, while those at other AT&T Cold War sites didn’t. Also, Project Office missions were classified, LaFrance said.

Generally, the bunkers were similar to those in AT&T’s civilian and military communications networks, like that in the tiny town of Stanfield near Charlotte.

Dexter McIntyre of Stanfield worked in the bunker there from its opening in 1967 until it closed in 1991. Among other tasks, he was assigned to a radio that linked Air Force One with ground communications when it was aloft in the area, and did the same for aircraft kept in the air to serve as command headquarters for the government in an attack.

The bottom floor of the bunkers was typically mounted on huge springs to cushion equipment from the shock of a nearby explosion, he said. The springs were so large that only four would fit on a railroad flatcar, McIntyre said. Delicate communications gear and other equipment was suspended from springs, and even urinals and lights were on shock mounts.

There was a kitchen, bunks, dining and lounge areas, and 100,000 gallons of drinking water, and a similar supply of fuel for two giant turbine generators.

The concrete walls were several feet thick, and two steel blast entry doors weighed 20,000 pounds each. The inner door wouldn’t open until the outer one was closed, McIntyre said.

Buried 30 feet down

Barber had similar memories about the Chatham site. The walls were several feet thick, and it was buried under as much as 30 feet of soil, Barber said, adding that his memory might be off a little.

“Chatham was more about, let’s say, surveillance. More CIA, military, FBI-type things,” he said.

The Chatham site’s purpose may have changed after government officials decided there might not be enough warning of an attack to get VIPs to such sites, said David F. Krugler, a historian and author of several books, including “This Is Only a Test: How Washington D.C. Prepared for Nuclear War.”

It may also have had lesser uses. For example, though it probably wasn’t among several sites designated as primary shelters for the president, it likely would have been a backup if the president was nearby during an attack, he said.

Nowadays, people might make fun of the bunkers, McIntyre said, because the blasts they were designed to face never came.

They need to do a little research into things like the Cuban Missile Crisis, he said.

“The older you get, the more you realize how delicate these situations can be,” he said. “Back then, the fingers were on the buttons pretty much all the time.”

In Chatham, meanwhile, locals have something new to speculate about: Who would buy a giant, bombproof underground bunker? And what would they do with it?

Barber said he had joked with friends about possible uses.

“You could have the biggest, safest wine cellar around,” he said.

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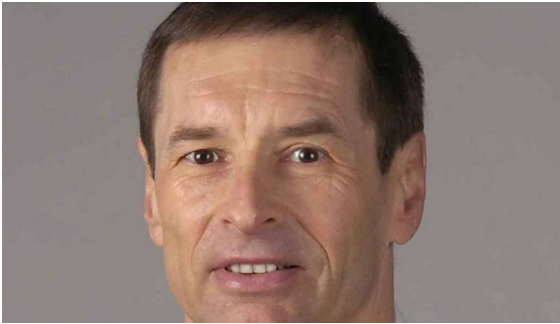
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