

Fire damages historic building

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GREENSBORO -- A historic downtown building where elaborate mantels for fireplaces were once manufactured became a fireplace itself early Friday morning.

More than 100 firefighters from stations across the city battled flames for more than two hours before bringing the fire under control. The fire gutted the upper floors and the rear of the three-story, vacant and uninsured 19th century building at 324 S. Elm St.

Many Greensboro residents remember the location best as the site of the Mantelworks Restaurant from 1974 to 1986. The restaurant drew its name from McClamroch Mantel and Tile Co., which opened in 1908 after buying a mantel company that had occupied the building since 1896.

The presence of a fire wall and action by firefighters prevented the blaze from spreading next door to a building occupied by Heroy-Cutroneo Photography on the first floor and apartments on the second and third.

A passer-by spotted the fire and called the fire department at 2:07 a.m.

"I was awakened by police coming down the hall yelling 'fire.' They did a great job," said Mark Norman, a resident of the adjoining building. He took time to throw on trousers and a sweat shirt -- long enough for police to knock on his door again to urge him to hurry.

He and the other tenants shivered on the street, stunned by the enormity of the fire in the building next to their own. The owner of the Green Bean, a coffee shop across the street, opened his business and served them coffee.

The photography studio and apartments sustained water damage. Norman was unsure how long tenants will be displaced.

Assistant Chief David Douglas said the first unit from Engine Co. No. 4 on nearby Gorrell Street could see flames in the rear of the building, which stretches almost to South Greene Street from South Elm.

The firefighters attacked the rear while other arriving units entered the front. Douglas said storage items on stairwells blocked the firefighters as they tried to make their way from front to rear. By then, the fire was spreading rapidly across the top floor toward the front. Firefighters had to back out, fearing the roof and ceilings would collapse.

"Any time you get a fire burning in an old building you have a tremendous fire load because of the materials," Douglas said. "You have lots of wood in old buildings. We worried about structural collapse."

He said investigators wouldn't begin determining the fire's origin until a structural engineer determines whether the building is safe to enter.

The Mantelworks building is owned by Bob Williams of Summerfield, who also operated the former restaurant there.

Another building that Williams owned in the same block, the Grissom building, built in 1899, was gutted by a July 13, 2000, fire that the fire department blamed on a faulty electrical system. Williams

had no insurance on the Grissom, and he said Friday that he also lacked coverage on the Mantelworks building.

He said he had a policy until a few months ago, but the insurer canceled because the building was unoccupied and considered a greater risk for fire.

Williams said he used the building to store antiques, all of which were destroyed. He said he had no idea the extent of his losses. The first thing he did after the fire department called him at 3 a.m. was throw up, he said.

"It's interesting that these fires keep happening," he said, referring to the Grissom-building blaze and another several months ago in the same block that heavily damaged a building owned by someone else at South Elm and McGee streets. "I sure would like to know what's causing them."

He said he doesn't believe vagrants are responsible for the Mantelworks fire. He said the building was locked securely.

The building not only had historical value -- a mantel maker, who later sold his business to James R. McClamroch, had occupied the building as early as 1896 -- but served as a symbol of downtown renewal. In 1975, Williams and others formed the Old Greensborough Preservation Society to promote preservation and new uses of late-19th and early-20th century commercial buildings from the 300 to 600 blocks of South Elm. They also started the Fun Fourth Festival that remains an important event each July 4th downtown.

The first successful business that arose from the preservation group's effort was Mantelworks Restaurant. Williams became such a vocal booster along South Elm that he became known as "the mayor of south Greensboro." In an upstairs office, the Hamburger Square Post was started to report news about the south side. It took its name from the nearby intersection of South Elm and McGee, which once had hamburger joints on each corner.

The Mantelworks Restaurant became a fashionable place to dine. Even though it wasn't designed for theater, Williams said, various theatrical groups staged plays there for diners. He said the N.C. Shakespeare Festival, now in High Point, had its start at Mantelworks.

Douglas said firefighters doused the fire before it destroyed the façade and exterior walls. After the Grissom fire, contractor Milton Kern bought the property, and using the surviving facade, rebuilt the structure, with retail space on the first floor and apartments above.

Douglas said he believes the same could happen to the Mantelworks building.

"We didn't create a parking lot," he said. "We're glad of that."

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