

4-alarm fire that raced through Northbridge historic home not considered suspicious, officials say

by Adam Sennott, Boston Globe, April 30 at 5:20 PM

The cause of the 4-alarm fire that broke out at a historic Victorian home in Northbridge remains under investigation but does not appear to be suspicious, the town's fire chief said Saturday.

A person walking past the large home at 573 Linwood Ave. spotted smoke coming from the building and called the fire in around 4 p.m. Friday, Fire Chief David White said in a press release.

The blaze moved quickly and multiple alarms were sounded, drawing fire crews from 11 communities, White said.

There were "heavy fire conditions" on the second and third floor, and at the rear of the building, when firefighters arrived, he said.

Crews tried to fight the fire from inside, but were unable to contain it, and the fire quickly spread throughout the building, the statement said. Crews were pulled from the building and continued fighting the blaze from outside.

"Because of the type of construction of these buildings, when they catch fire, they are extremely difficult to fight," White said.

The roof collapsed and crews were forced to fight the fire externally, White told reporters at the scene Friday.

"The fire raced through . . . We just couldn't keep up with it," White said, according to video broadcast by WCVB.

A firefighter was injured when the roof collapsed and taken to a hospital. The firefighter was treated and released from the hospital, White said.

Firefighters had the blaze under control by about midnight. A fire watch continued to extinguish hot spots through early Saturday morning.

State police fire investigators assigned to the state fire marshal's office responded to the scene Friday evening, spokesman Jake Wark said in an e-mail.

A rehab truck, equipped with resources to help firefighters, was also sent to the scene, Wark said. A drone was also deployed to assist firefighters.

According to town property records, the privately-owned home was built in 1871. It has an assessed value of \$871,800.

The home was built for industrialist James F. Whitin, who built the nearby Linwood Cotton Mill in 1866, according to the **Northbridge Historical Society**. **"Its scale and design reflected James Whitin's prosperity and social status as owner and manager of the Linwood Mill,"** according to the Society.

Carol H. Brouwer, clerk for the society, called the property a "**grand old house**," and its loss to the community is "**tremendous**."

"It was one of the few remaining mansions from Whitinsville," Brouwer said, referring to the historic mill area of town. **"Most of them are gone...some burned down."**

The Victorian was a three-story home with a carriage house in the back, Brouwer said. The home had a grand staircase, high ceilings, and big windows. It once also operated as an inn.

"I actually went by it today, but I was looking at the swans next door," Brouwer said.

Brouwer said that she and her husband once provided a stay at the Victorian Inn as a wedding gift to their friends.

"That was really the only hotel, or nice place in town to go," Brouwer said.

Shelley J. Buma, also of the Northbridge Historical Society, said that the home had at least one well known guest. **"In the past, actor Paul Newman was a known frequent guest at the Victorian Inn,"** Buma said.