

Cabildo ravaged by flames



With scores of firefighters on the scene, aerial hoses spray water onto the Cabildo's roof as the seven-alarm blaze burns out of control.

STAFF PHOTO BY ELIOT KAMENETZ

Late call puzzles fire chief

By SUSAN FINCH
Staff writer

Any major fire in the French Quarter poses problems for New Orleans firefighters that most fire departments never face.

The French Quarter buildings are close together; it is hard to leave the bulky firefighting equipment through its narrow streets, and interiors of the buildings are labyrinths of very old, dry wood, which practically guarantees that furnishings will be lost. New Orleans Firefighters Association President Billy Sanchez said Wednesday.

But those weren't the major problems firemen faced in a fire that caused heavy damage to the historic Cabildo Wednesday afternoon. Fire Superintendent William McCrossen said.

In the Cabildo fire, McCrossen said, the biggest problem was the delay in getting word to his department that the building was on fire. He said the blaze had a big head start, with the building's attic space "completely involved in fire" by the time firefighters were called. "If we had been playing football, if (the score) would have been 96-0," he said.

Aaron Montgomery, a New Orleans policeman who made the first call to firefighters at 3:44 p.m., said he found the Cabildo already evacuated when he went inside. McCrossen verified that. At least six people were in the building when the fire started, Cabildo workers said.

McCrossen said he couldn't explain the delay, and neither could Louisiana State Museum Director James Sefcik, who said he thought fire and smoke detectors inside the old building alerted the Fire Department.



The building's cupola collapses in a burst of flames.

STAFF PHOTO BY TED JACKSON

More than 100 firemen fought the seven-alarm blaze, pouring 3,200 to 4,000 gallons of water a minute on the building before bringing the fire under control at 6:20 p.m. The effort involved 18 of the city's 33 fire engine companies.

McCrossen said if a major fire had broken out elsewhere in New Orleans, fire departments could have been called from neighboring parishes.

But by that time the fire was raging, he said.

Top floor, roof burn; torch spark blamed

Fire apparently sparked by a renovation worker's soldering torch engulfed the top floor of the historic Cabildo Wednesday, heavily damaging one of New Orleans' most precious landmarks, the site of the 1803 signing of the Louisiana Purchase.

The seven-alarm blaze on Jackson Square raged for more than 90 minutes, bringing down the mansard roof and damaging a storehouse of historic furniture on the museum's third floor. The

This story was based on reporting by staff writers John Pope, Walt Duhon and Chris Rose and was written by John McQuaid.

Repairing a treasure is a long, costly road

By ALEX MARTIN
Staff writer

Remaking the Cabildo will take patience, expertise and money. Plenty of each.

Only hours after the building's third floor was gutted by fire Wednesday, architects said they couldn't make detailed assessments of what it will take to recreate history, but they gave some idea of what the state will have to do to save one of the brightest gemstones in the crown of French Quarter buildings.

"It can be done," said architect Samuel Wilson, the building's historian and restorer. "It will take a lot of money. It will take a lot of time."

flames didn't reach the lower floors but water did, damaging the interior and the museum's collection of historic artifacts.

The fire sent thick smoke billowing over the French Quarter, blotting out the sun, and drew hundreds of onlookers into Jackson Square, who watched as the third floor erupted in smoke and flame. Surrounded by tourists snapping pictures, museum employees and volunteers looked on in shock. Around the square, artists went on sketching caricatures, and on Decatur Street, a jazz band played as flames leapt into the sky.

No one was hurt. Police and fire sources said a

worker told fire investigators he had been soldering a gutter pipe on the front of the building near the Cathedral. The investigators think a spark from the solder torch may have been drawn into a triangular air space that surrounds the third floor between the sloped, mansard roof and the building's frame.

Air flow drew the flames toward the cupola, the sources said. By the time the flames broke through the cupola, the inside of the entire roof already was engulfed, they said.

The blaze was reported at 3:44 p.m., but Fire Superintendent

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of the damage has yet to be made, the cost probably will run into the millions, said Henry Krozier, who worked with Wilson on a 1960s restoration of the building.

The state has insurance on the building that will cover all but the first million dollars of damage, which the state must pay. It could take two or three years to complete the rebuilding, said Frank Masson, another architect specializing in restorations. Masson said the road to saving the building would begin with an inspection by a structural engineer to determine what would have to be done immediately to save it from further collapse.

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Fair skies

Mostly sunny. North winds 5 to 10 mph. High Thursday in mid-80s; low in 60s. High Wednesday, 87; low, 61. More weather, B-8

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