



Firefighters (L) worked to put out the blaze yesterday at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain. The church, damaged in 1975 in a string of arsons, was built between 1856 and 1859. Fire officials were trying to determine what caused the fire. (Globe Staff Photos/ John Bohn)

Blaze damages historic church

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By Paysha Stockton and Beth Daley, Globe Correspondent and Globe Staff | January 19, 2005

A fire tore through First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain last night, severely damaging the pre-Civil War landmark and possibly destroying a treasured pipe organ that was spared in an earlier blaze almost 30 years ago.

No one was hurt in the 5:30 p.m. fire that started in the basement and was shooting through the roof within an hour, sending tall flames into the frigid night sky.

More than 100 firefighters battled the fire, and despite concerns about the biting cold on their equipment, they contained the fire in about three hours. One firefighter suffered a sprained ankle.

Fire officials estimated damage to the church at \$2.5 million last night and said it might be declared a total loss today. They were doubtful the organ was salvageable, but said they would not know until they sift through rubble. Officials were expected to stay on the scene through this morning.

"This is a huge blow," said an exhausted Ashlee Wiest-Laird, the pastor of the church who has been credited with bringing membership from about 20 to about 70 in her 17-month tenure. "Things have been going very well. But we're not going anywhere. We'll start again."

It will be the second rebuilding in 30 years. The church was one of several targeted in a string of arsons in 1975.

"I was baptized in the church," said a shaken Phyllis Meserlian, 77, of West Roxbury, a member of the church since 1940, who went to the scene after friends called her about the fire. "It's hard to see the memories of a lifetime go up in smoke," she said.

Fire officials were trying last night to determine what caused the fast-moving blaze. A church member was in the kitchen of the building at 633 Centre St., preparing to open the church's new food pantry, when the fire broke out. He escaped and warned Wiest-Laird, who lives in the parsonage next door.

"And he just said, 'Get out!'" Wiest-Laird said.

Church members, some crying and hugging one another, watched as firefighters doused the blaze.

Thomas Griffith, pastor of River of Life Church nearby, called First Baptist the "most visible church in Jamaica Plain. It was a very significant church historically; it's been there [about] 150 years. It's my hope that their tragedy will bring churches together to be of help to them."

In 1975, a string of church arsons nearly destroyed the stucco-covered church. Then, the treasured E.G. Hook tracker organ, installed in 1859 and one of the oldest of its kind in use, was damaged but spared. Last night, Wiest-Laird said a fire had also struck the building in the 1800s.

Fire Department spokesman Scott Salman said officials hoped the building could be saved.

The cold prompted officials to bring in a bus for firefighters to warm up in. A temporary post office in front of the church that opened for the first time yesterday was not damaged.

Meserlian said yesterday's blaze "brought back memories of the first fire."

In the 1975 blaze, two boys from Jamaica Plain were arrested, according to news reports at the time. That fire caused an estimated \$200,000 damage. Flames destroyed the organ's keyboard, but the instrument was repaired.

The 1975 fire sparked community spirit that made headlines. Local businesses and other churches took up a collection to rebuild the church. The Knights of Columbus offered its hall as a temporary meeting place for the church, and people of all denominations donated funds. The three-alarm blaze was one of 10 church fires in a small swath of Boston west and south of Massachusetts Avenue in a year and the third in a single week, according to published reports.

The 1975 fire closed the church for two years and set the stage for a popular thrift store on the first floor.

Church members held bake sales to raise money to rebuild the church, which had been organized in 1842 and built between 1856 and 1859.

Globe Correspondents Justin Rebello and Emma Stickgold contributed to this report. ■