Breaux Bridge blaze being probed

Lightning suspected as cause

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BREAUX BRIDGE — Authorities here Thursday began investigating the fire which destroyed a huge mansion, one of the city’s most well-known landmarks.

The fire, which started Wednesday night shortly before 8 p.m., raged out of control until pre-dawn hours, when most of the front of the structure collapsed. Debris continued to burn Thursday morning, and it’s expected to smolder for several days.

Two large spiral staircases and the eight white columns in the front of the building remained intact.

Investigators with the state Fire Marshal’s Office are examining the possibility that a lightning storm Wednesday may have been the cause of the fire. Bolts of lightning struck several trees in front of the house, and strips of bark were torn away by the blasts. A squirrel, apparently killed from the lightning, was found under the trees.

Assistant Fire Marshal Larry Cassard of Crowley said the investigation will be hampered by the degree of damage. It’s routine to investigate a fire of this magnitude, even if the cause is apparent, according to Cassard.

“We’re just going to dot our I’s and cross our T’s,” he said.

He said an electrical engineer would be called to assist with the probe.

Firefighters, weary from a night of fighting the raging flames, rolled up their hoses late Thursday morning.

Burton Dupuis, Breaux Bridge fire chief, said his department arrived at the scene at 8:15 p.m. He said efforts were made by his all-volunteer force to cut off flames from the main portion of the three-story home.

“We attacked what we saw,” he recalled.

But firemen entering the house soon discovered that the fire had engulfed the rear of the structure.

“It was too far gone. The whole backside was gone,” the chief said. “It was too great, too large. We did what we could.”

“Once we realized the severity of the fire, we made sure no one took any chances,” the chief said.

Efforts then were directed at preventing flying debris from the fire from spreading to nearby residences in a subdivision across Bayou Teche, Dupuis said.

Several nearby fire departments responded to the fire, including Lafayette, Cecilia, Parks, Henderson and Catahoula.

Henderson firefighters stood by in case another fire broke out elsewhere, he said. The Lafayette Fire Department provided its aerial unit to attack the flames from above.

Approximately 75 firefighters were involved and no one was injured, the chief said. He estimated they sprayed somewhere in the neighborhood of 700,000 gallons of water on the house, and pumpers consumed at least 400 gallons of fuel.

At 2 a.m., many of the firefighters were sent home and the watering stopped at 2:30 a.m., he said, but spraying restarted at 4 a.m. for another 90 minutes, he said.

The home was owned by P. Grant Kennedy of Baton Rouge, who said he had been at the mansion until approximately 6 p.m. Wednesday. A family friend living in the south wing of the mansion noticed lights flickering in the residence just before the fire was noticed and she managed to escape without injury, Kennedy said.

Kennedy returned to the home Wednesday night, after getting a call about the fire, and he watched the blaze along with a crowd of approximately 500 people who gathered in the street.

Kennedy acquired the 15-year-old home in June 1985 at a court-ordered bankruptcy auction.

The home’s owners have had a string of misfortune.

It was previously owned by Oklahoma oilman Robert Sutton. Sutton was convicted of obstructing justice and sentenced to five years in jail, and the Internal Revenue Service said he owed $50 million in taxes and penalties, which led to the bankruptcy court sale.

Sutton acquired the mansion in 1981 for approximately $500,000, several times less than it cost to build.

It was built in 1975 by Dr. Carleton Griffin of Lafayette who died of a heart attack before the home was completed. Griffin bought the 5.74-acre site from the Conrad family and he bulldozed a stately home on the property to construct the mansion.

Federal officials said an officer with American Bank and Trust of Lafayette gave Griffin carte blanche to write checks on the bank’s account to fund construction of the home, with hopes that Griffin could later arrange financing to repay the bank for the money spent on the project.

The American Bank official was convicted in federal court of misapplication of bank funds, and the financial institution ultimately swallowed a $1.5 million loss on the loan.

American Bank was closed in September 1986 and later acquired by Whitney National Bank of New Orleans.