Fire consumes the 147-year-old Tezcuco plantation house on La. 44 early Sunday morning. Two women were sleeping inside the building, a bed and breakfast, when the blaze began. They escaped uninjured. Investigators don't know what caused the fire.

Early morning fire destroys Tezcuco house

By JOSH NOEL
Advocate staff writer

DARROW — As word spread that the 147-year-old Tezcuco plantation home near the banks of the Mississippi River was destroyed by fire early Sunday morning, the calls began pouring in. It was hard to know what to say:

"It's the kind of thing that, until you see it, it just can't be described," Jan Clyburn, Tezcuco's operations manager, said Sunday afternoon.

Moments later, one of the people who had called — Clyburn's 27-year-old daughter, a former Tezcuco employee — walked up. She gasped, cried a little and hugged another former employee.

"Once you've worked here, it just becomes a part of your heart," said Clyburn as her 7-year-old grandson picked up pieces of slate from what used to be the building's roof.

The 4,500-square-foot house, the centerpiece of a former plantation that is now a bed and breakfast, was just a blackened skeleton after burning for more than 2½ hours Sunday.

The rest of the 20-acre plantation — including a dozen small cottages, two museums, a gift shop, a gazebo, a restaurant — was destroyed.

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Members of the state fire marshal's investigative team rest Sunday afternoon in front of the ruins of the Tezcuco plantation home.

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Plantation

Paige and Paul Robinson of Lutcher look at the ruins of the Tezcuco plantation home, where they had been married a year ago Sunday.

The property's owner, Annette Harland, who bought the plantation in 1991, was visiting her mother Sunday in Michigan but has booked a flight to return home early, Clyburn said.

The Greek revival plantation house was completed in 1855 for Benjamin Tuneaud, a veteran of the Mexican wars. It was named after a lake near Mexico City, where the Aztec ruler Montezuma fled to escape the Spanish conquistador Cortez, according to The Pelican Guide Plantation Homes of Louisiana. Tezcuco means "resting place" in the Aztec language.

The plantation was opened to the public and became a bed-and-breakfast in 1983, Clyburn said.

Nancy Jensen, 56, is a member of the last family that lived in the home. She moved in the early 1950s when she was 5 and left when she was 24. She now lives in Baton Rouge.

Her father was a country doctor whose office, which stood between the house and La. 44, burned in the spring of 1969. As firefighters battled that blaze, she said, they also kept the trees wet so the house wouldn't also catch. She said the cause of the fire was never determined.

The last time Jensen saw Tezcuco was a year before her parents sold the building in the late 1970s. She said she never wanted to visit — and she certainly won't now. "I've always just wanted to remember it as it was," she said.