Fire inquiry put on hold

East Bay Street structure deemed unsafe for investigators to enter

P&C 4/4/2013

PHOTOS BY BRAD NETTLES/STAFF

The roof on 213 East Bay St. collapsed onto the second floor during the early morning fire Tuesday.

BY GLENN SMITH
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Throngs of tourists walked past Mac's Place on East Bay Street, the front doors of the Irish pub thrown open wide to greet the masses on a day of crystal blue skies.

But the barstools sat empty, the taps dry. The usual banter of the barroom had been replaced Wednesday by the drone of fans and air sanitizers working to clear the musty smell of smoke and charred wood from the premises.

The previous morning, a fast-moving fire did a number on the next-door neighbors at 213 East Bay, a two-story building housing four bars.

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Pedestrians were kept from getting too close to 213 East Bay St. on Wednesday, out of concern that the building still was unsafe after Tuesday's fire.

East Bay structure deemed unsafe

FIRE, from B1

Mac's Place suffered collateral damage from smoke and water, but Assistant Manager Ann Mangum didn't expect to be out of commission nearly as long as her friends at 213's clubs — Light, Squeeze, The Brick and The Speakeasy.

"We should be open by (today) or the weekend at the latest," Mangum said.

Not so at 213 East Bay. The fire gutted the top floor and sent the roof cascading down into the belly of the building, exposing the innards to the elements, with hunks of charred timber and twisted metal framing the scorched mess.

Signs plastered on the building's front windows announced that the city has declared the building unsafe.

So much so, in fact, that Charleston fire officials have suspended their probe into what caused the fire, not wishing to place investigators in jeopardy.

Fire officials plan to work with insurance adjusters and investigators to determine the best way to stabilize the structure and continue their inquiry, Charleston Fire Marshal Mike Julazadeh said.

That process could take weeks, he said.

Officials plan to gather today to further evaluate the scene, Julazadeh said.

A fenced walkway has been erected outside the banged-up building, giving pedestrians passage around the facade and its grungy sidewalk.

"What do you suppose happened here?" one visitor inquired Wednesday, snapping a picture with her iPhone.

> "We should be open by (today) or the weekend at the latest."
>
> **Ann Mangum, Mac's Place assistant manager**

Locals already were well aware of the blaze, word spreading rapidly over social media, with patrons and competitors alike offering condolences and support to the shuttered clubs.

A host of people changed their Facebook profile pictures to a pink square containing "213 east bay" in a show of solidarity.

The fire broke out around 1 a.m. Tuesday and sent brilliant flames leaping into the darkness.

Firefighters won praise for keeping the fire from spreading to neighboring buildings, but smoke, water and structural concerns still kept neighboring tenants from their offices, apartments and businesses for many hours.

Wet Willie's, at 209 East Bay, was back in business Wednesday morning, and the apartment dwellers upstairs had returned to their quarters as well.

Down the way, at 215, tenants in the Maritime Building also were back in their offices, though fans and air purifiers remained a necessity.

Amanda Ward, who works in a fourth-floor law office, said the lingering smoke made her eyes sting so badly that she had to run out at lunch to grab a new pair of contact lenses. "My eyes were watering," she said.

Christina Elmore contributed to this report. Reach **Glenn Smith** at 937-5556 or Twitter.com/glennsmith5.

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Post & Courier

TEXTBOOK FIREFIGHTING

East Bay Street blaze contained using lessons learned from 2007

PROVIDED BY THE BRICK

PAUL ZOELLER/STAFF

Charleston Fire Department personnel post a sign deeming the building unsafe after a fire (top) tore through 213 East Bay St. early Tuesday. The building housed four bars — Light, Squeeze, The Brick and The Speakeasy.

BY GLENN SMITH
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"I don't know what to think right now. You lose your bar, your job — everything — all in one shot."

Clint Gaskins, owner of Squeeze

In many respects, the Charleston Fire Department has been preparing for more than a century to battle the blaze that ripped through a historic East Bay Street building early Tuesday.

The department honed its training over decades to meet the challenge of containing fast-moving fires in a densely built downtown packed with unique buildings that sit snug up against one another.

Get in quick. Throw wet stuff on the red stuff. And keep that fire from spreading and taking out a whole block or two of prized real estate.

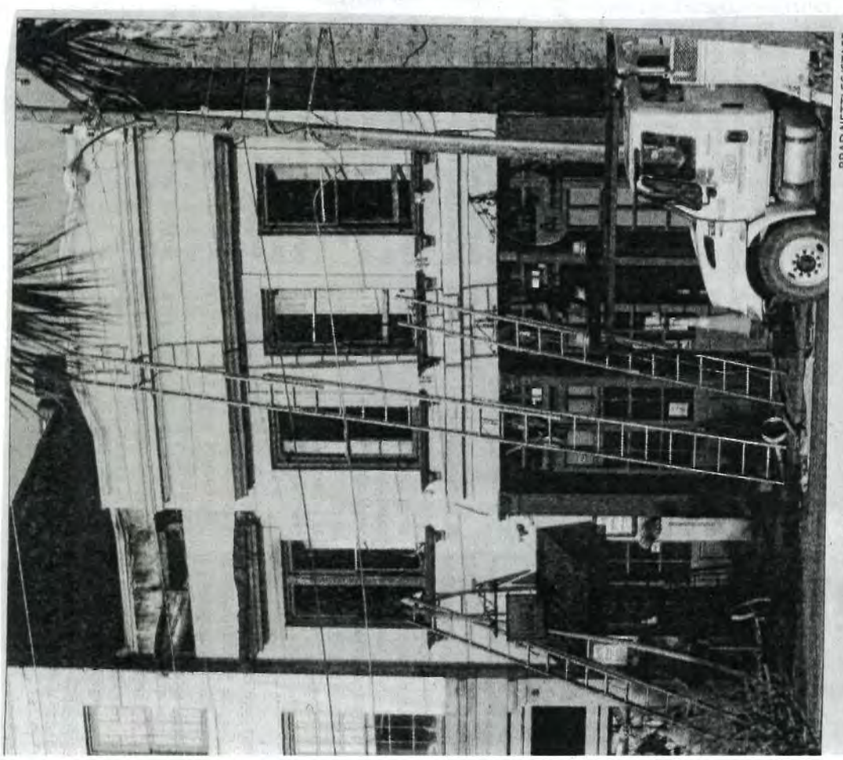
But look closer and you'll see the department's attack on the fire at 213 East Bay St. also demonstrated the fruits of hard lessons learned in the aftermath of the June 2007 Sofa Super Store blaze that killed nine city firefighters.

While firefighters hit the building fast and hard Tuesday, they did so with a coordinated plan, with the aid of other area departments and with an eye toward safety that resulted in everyone getting out before things got bad, officials said.

"We always try to strike a balance," Charleston Fire Chief Karen Brack said. "And this was a very well-run fire."

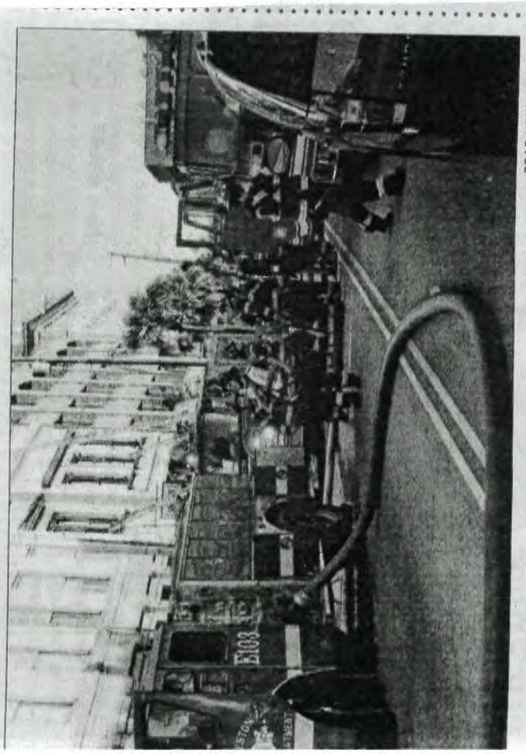
Please see **FIRE,** Page A4

GALLERY: Go to **postandcourier.com/galleries** for more photos from the fire on East Bay Street.



BRAD NETTLES/STAFF

ton Mayor Joe Riley said the joint fire department approach was able to save a f the downtown's rich fabric.



BRAD NETTLES/STAFF

at 213 East Bay St. early Tuesday shut down a stretch of the street in the heart of st district for much of the day.

'Terrible fire' contained using lessons from 2007

FIRE, from A1

Mayor Joe Riley was even more effusive, saying fire crews did an excellent job saving a piece of downtown's rich fabric without incurring a single injury or allowing the fire to spread to neighboring properties.

"It was a terrible fire," Riley said. "They really did an amazing job."

The fire shut down a stretch of East Bay Street in the heart of the tourist district for much of the day. It also kept neighboring tenants out of their offices, apartments and businesses.

Its cause remains a mystery for now. Fire officials suspended their investigation in the afternoon due to safety and structural concerns with the building, Fire Marshal Mike Julazadeh said.

Flames in the dark

The call came in around 1 a.m., with smoke curling from the salmon-colored, two-story building that houses four clubs — Light, Squeeze, The Brick and The Speakeasy.

Fire crews were on the scene within four minutes and were soon joined by a small army of reinforcements, Brack said.

Automatic mutual aid was one of the improvements introduced after the Sofa Super Store fire, and crews from area fire departments now regularly train together and respond to each other's calls as a matter of course, with all operating from the same playbook.

On Tuesday, that meant some 25 trucks arrived on the scene, with as many as 75 firefighters from Charleston, North Charleston, James Island and St. Andrews on hand to extinguish the blaze, Brack said,

The initial crews raced to the second floor to find the source of the fire while other arriving crews set up strategically around the building. Battalion Chief Jimmy Neilson, a veteran who was very familiar with the building, coordinated the attack, Brack said.

The interior crews battled the fire as long as they could before evacuating for safety reasons around 1:44 a.m., Brack said. Those early efforts helped keep the fire in check, she said.

Onlookers watched in awe as flames chewed through the roof and shot into the darkened sky. In time the roof collapsed, but all crews were at safe distance by then, fighting the blaze from a defensive posture, officials said.

Hard-charging culture

The department's aggressive approach can be traced to the city's early days, when fires could sweep through blocks of downtown, claiming hundreds of homes and outbuildings. A large fire in 1861, for example, tore through 540 acres on the peninsula, destroying 575 homes, churches and stores along a mile from East Bay to Gibbes streets.

With buildings butting up against one another, often with shared walls, it became imperative for these "smoke eaters" to get on the scene quickly and knock down a blaze before it could become a conflagration.

The hard-charging ethic, however, came under intense scrutiny after the Sofa Super Store fire, in which nine men were trapped inside when the roof collapsed at the West Ashley furniture outlet. A city-appointed panel of fire experts cited command failures and tactical missteps that exposed firefighters to "excessive and avoidable risks."

The department has worked hard in recent years to honor its traditions while continuously improving its response and capabilities, as evidenced by Tuesday's effort, officials said.

"That was good, smart firefighting," Brack said.

Still, the blaze was a shock for those in and around the building.

John Chandler, 26, awoke to the shrill sound of a fire alarm ringing throughout his apartment over Wet Willie's bar in the building next door.

Eager to go back to sleep, he said he convinced himself the alarm was only a drill. The urgent pounding on his front door moments later said otherwise.

Firefighters yelled for residents to get out of bed and leave the building. Chandler saw the heavy smoke, roused his roommate and joined other residents evacuating the building,

"It happened really fast," Chandler said. "I didn't know what to do. I've never experienced anything like that."

Later in the morning, Chandler peered up at the damage from a sidewalk at the corner of East Bay and Cumberland streets.

He stood disheveled, dressed in a dark blue sweatshirt, ripped pajama bottoms and only one shoe. He lost the other in the rush to escape.

Clint Gaskins, owner of Squeeze, watched the action from the steps of the U.S. Customhouse across the street. He had been up all night pondering the demise of his club right before the Cooper River Bridge Run and the start of the busy tourist season.

"I don't know what to think right now," he said. "You lose your bar, your job — everything — all in one shot."

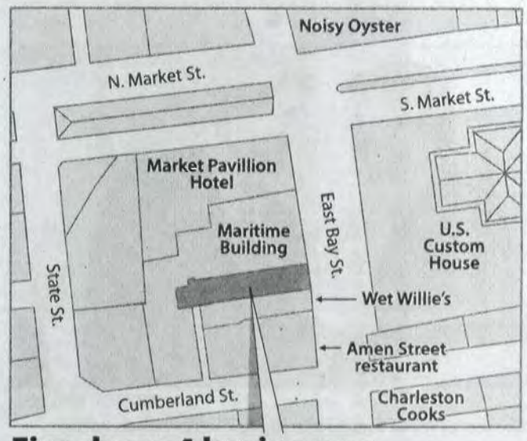
Fire crews remained on the scene for much of the day, dousing hot spots and assessing the damage.

The city also brought in a structural engineer, who determined that the facade of the building, constructed in the 1800s, was structurally sound and will not require demolition, Brack said. The interior appeared to be heavily damaged.

The building, valued in county records at $2.2 million, started out as a three-story structure with a two-story piazza, and the property also included a washhouse and smokehouse, according to Paul Saylors, public programs and research manager for the Preservation Society of Charleston.

The main building, which housed a grocery, was brought down to two stories after the earthquake of 1886, he said.

Reach **Glenn Smith** at 937-5556 or Twitter.com/glennsmith5.



Fire closes 4 businesses

A fire early Tuesday at 213 East Bay St. destroyed or seriously damaged all 4 establishments there. The fire shuttered Light, The Brick, Squeeze and the Speakeasy. Fire crews stopped the blaze from spreading to neighboring buildings.

PROVIDED BY MARK PELEKAKIS

A total of about 75 firefighters from four jurisdictions battled the East Bay Street on Tuesday.