

North Wilkesboro Man Dies In Fire



Damage to the house at 1107 E St. was estimated at more than \$350,000 the fire chief said. A flag still flies from the second floor.

An open fireplace or a Christmas tree may have started a fire in North Wilkesboro early Sunday that killed the homeowner and gutted his Queen Anne-style house built in 1907, according to fire officials and historic-preservation records.

"The fire started on the main level of the house in an area where the Christmas tree was still standing," said Nick Hamby, the North Wilkesboro fire chief. "We don't know if the electrical lights were on the tree, but we do know that the area where the tree was — was the origin, and we know that the open fireplace was still in use."

The house is at 1107 E St.

The damage was estimated at more than \$350,000, Hamby said.

"Nothing that the fire department or the police department found suggests that the fire was suspicious," he said.

Two men were in the house when the fire started, Hamby said. The owner, Mark Settle, was found on the kitchen floor. The other man survived without major injuries, he said. North Wilkesboro police were not immediately available to provide the other man's name or their ages.

Settle, a former organist at North Wilkesboro Presbyterian Church, had owned the house for several years, according to friends. On Christmas Eve, he told guests that he still had work to do on the upper floors.

"He had a very good eye for beauty," said Jacque Lyn, a friend of Settle's. "He loved the house and had done quite a bit of work on it."

The house is one of several built around the turn of the 20th century by a member of North Wilkesboro's enterprising Finley family. For example, about a block away at 1014 E St. is the Thomas B. Finley House, which is on the National Register of Historic Places.

The house that burned was originally owned by J. Robert Finley.

In a 25-page description provided by the State Historic Preservation Office of the Thomas B. Finley House, there is a brief reference to the J. Robert Finley house, noting that E Street has some of the best examples of houses in North Wilkesboro from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Hamby said the roof collapsed onto the second-floor ceiling as firefighters were putting out the blaze; he said he believes that they kept the fire from destroying the whole house.

The North Wilkesboro Fire Department got a call about the fire at 4:22 a.m. Sunday from a neighbor, Hamby said. Fire departments from Cricket, Mulberry-Fairplains and Broadway also responded, he said.

It took more than an hour to extinguish the blaze.

Hamby could only guess why Settle was found in the kitchen.

"I'm not sure if he was trying to get out or not. It's possible he was trying to get out. I just don't know for sure," he said.

Lyn said the back door was by the kitchen.