

\$250,000 Hyde School Blaze Termed 'Highly Suspicious'

BATH — Fire Chief Norman C. Kenney said Tuesday that an early-morning fire which badly damaged the main building at Hyde School was "of a highly suspicious nature."

Several first-floor rooms of the former Hyde Mansion were severely damaged in the 3 a.m. fire, which apparently started under a large table in the old library of the mansion.

Kenney and state Fire Inspector Charles Hooper of Augusta spent several hours Tuesday examining the scene and questioning students and faculty members.

Further study will be given to the blaze today before a conclusion is reached as to the exact cause. Among the reasons for questioning the cause of the fire was the location of the starting point, under a table where there was no wiring or other normal cause of a fire, the chief said.

HE TERMED IT "very fortunate" that the 25 students sleeping on the second floor escaped the fast-moving fire. They evacuated the building on fire escapes without incident after being awakened by an automatic heat alarm.

Fire doors at the head of an open stairway "were the only thing that saved them," Kenney said.

Alerted by the horns activated by the alarm system, the students started to open the fire doors to descend the large double staircase. They fled to the fire escapes when they discovered that the metal doors were hot to the touch and let in smoke when opened.

Spreading rapidly along paneled walls and ceilings, the fire apparently had a considerable start before the alarm system sounded. "I don't understand why it didn't kick in sooner," Kenney said.

He plans to call in an engineer from the alarm system manufacturer to see if there could have been a malfunction. Previously, Kenney said, that system has proved to be very sensitive to unusual rises in temperature and would respond

quickly to a smoldering upholstered chair.

"I THOUGHT WE had lost the whole building when we arrived, from the amount of smoke that was pouring out," Kenney said. The evacuation was completed by the time firemen arrived in response to the alarm.

The first-floor corridor was an inferno when firemen entered, Kenney said.

Headmaster Joseph W. Gauld estimated the damage at nearly \$250,000, much of it represented by the loss of paneling made of teakwood and other expensive materials, all reflecting exquisite workmanship of a bygone age.

The building is insured, but it was not immediately known if the insurance would fully cover the loss.

Fire damage was confined largely to the library and hallway, but intense heat blistered paint in other rooms and smoke damage occurred throughout much of the 65-room brick mansion.

THE BUILDING, WHICH was a home for handicapped children for many years before becoming a private secondary school, is equipped with alarm wiring on which the covering melts at about 160 degrees, setting off alarm horns in the building and registering at the fire station.

Two firemen suffered minor injuries in the fire. Call man George Pushard was treated for smoke inhalation at a local hospital and Assistant Chief Muriyn Greenleaf slipped and injured an elbow.

"It was a mean fire," Kenney commented. "The smoke — acid or something in it — would cut the eyes right out of you unless you had a mask on."

Along with the fire doors, another factor which prevented the fire from spreading beyond the accessible first-floor rooms was the unusual fire protection built into the structure.

Hyde Windlass Co. owner John Hyde had been burned out once, it is

said, before he built the two-and-a-half-story mansion on a 145-acre site on High Street in 1913. Not only was it built of brick, but each interior partition has a core of fire-stopping terra cotta tile, which was also laid under the elaborate parquet floors.

THE ORIGINAL MANSION now consists of about 50 rooms, some of them made by partitioning off the third-floor ballroom. A 15-room wing, added in 1960, escaped with light smoke damage when an automatic fire door closed.

Here for the school's summer program, required of all new students, are 125 male and female students. Most were sleeping in other buildings on the grounds. All but one of the boys sleeping in the mansion were on the second floor. The third floor is unused in summer.

One student, who had chosen to bed down in a sleeping bag in the basement of the building, apparently slept through all the excitement overhead. Chief Kenney said the boy was awakened by firemen who were inspecting the building after the main fire had been extinguished.

The blaze took about an hour to bring under control, with additional time needed to search for and extinguish any smoldering spots.

Some fire damage was caused to the lounge or "living room" adjoining the library, with the connecting sliding glass doors burned through, but most of the destruction in that room was blistering from intense heat.

HEAT AND SMOKE damage also occurred in the headmaster's office, across the burned corridor from the living room.

In the library itself, the paneling on all the walls and ceiling — which had recently been revarnished — was deeply charred, and the books on the built-in shelves were destroyed. Gauld said the books there were ordinary library materials of no unusual value.



PROBING THE RUINS — State Fire Inspector Charles Hooper, right, prepares to take photographs of the damaged Hyde Mansion library, while Bath Fire Chief Norman Kenney, left, and Hyde School maintenance

man David Hodgdon stand ready to assist. The men are standing at the table under which the fire is believed to have started. (Downing Photo)

Most of the school's library books are contained in a new library room, across the hall and toward the rear of the building. That room was affected primarily by smoke and soot, with some fire damage around the corridor door.

Concern was expressed for the inlaid floors in the library and hall. While fire inspections were going on, the floors remained covered by water-soaked carpets and embers from the

fire. With no chance for water to drain through the underlying fire tiles, there appeared to be danger that the parquet floors would be ruined by swelling and buckling.

Gauld said the summer program will continue without interruption, except for that caused by the fire itself. The badly-damaged areas are not considered vital to the school program.

Steps were begun immediately to

see what can be done to restore the interior of the building as nearly as possible to what it was before the fire.

A Brunswick design and carpentry consultant talked briefly with Gauld Tuesday afternoon about such possibilities as planing the char from the paneling and reversing it to expose the unburned side.

By Paul Downing

HYDE SCHOOL. BATH.

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(Photo)

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