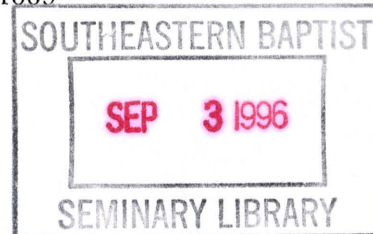


Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

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SUNDAY MORNING FIRE DESTROYS SEMINARY'S PHYSICAL PLANT Damages estimated at \$1 million

By Lee Weeks

WAKE FOREST, N.C. -- Emotions were bittersweet Monday on the campus of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary where administrators and staff began to regroup in the wake of an early Sunday morning fire that gutted the school's physical plant.

The losses were great, totalling about \$1 million in damages to the two-story brick building constructed in the early 1940s. Portions of the building, which were built in 1923 were destroyed as well.

Offices and storage rooms filled with computers, records, paper, tools, janitorial supplies and an array of spare parts for house repairs top the list of casualties.

No one, however, was hurt in the blaze that took firefighters from eight area fire departments nearly six hours to finally snuff out.

Firefighters eventually extinguished the blaze by extending a ladder high above the now roof-less building, pouring hundreds of gallons of water on the fire.

The school's boiler room, the seminary's primary source for heating campus buildings, which adjoins the physical plant was salvaged despite receiving water damage.

But it was the loss of a new professor's personal library being stored at the physical plant until his office was ready for use that left the greatest void for Paige Patterson, president of the Wake Forest, N.C. school.

"To me that's the most devastating part of it because anybody that has ever had a large library and learned to be dependent upon it knows that it becomes almost like one of your members of your household," Patterson said.

Patterson has initiated a fund drive by donating \$500 to help restore Greg Lawson's 3,000-volume library which is valued at about \$90,000.

Lawson, who is on vacation and unavailable for comment, is scheduled to officially join Southeastern's faculty August 1 as assistant professor of Christian education.

Federal, state and local investigators determined that the fire started when water from a galvanized pipe leaked onto an electrical box causing a short in the wiring thus igniting the blaze.

Ken Street, a security guard who patrols the seminary campus,

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said firefighters responded shortly after 4 a.m. Sunday after he reported seeing smoke hovering over the back of the building.

For more than an hour, Street said, firefighters braved the dark billowing smoke in search of flames.

"They did not see the flames until it burst through the roof," Street said.

Residents of seminary housing across the street from the physical plant said flames were shooting 40 feet to 60 feet in the air as the fire erupted through the building's roof.

"You could feel the heat from where we were standing (just off the front porch)," said Dawn Jones who lives directly across the street from the physical plant.

Jones said that small, red-glowing embers of debris rained on her and her neighbors' front lawns while firefighters fought the blaze. Residents were not asked to evacuate their homes for safety.

Dan Taylor, director of the physical plant, said he saw flames shooting from the building from several miles away as he drove to the campus before 6 a.m. Sunday.

"As I was approaching Wake Forest, possibly four to five miles out I could see the illumination of the city and then I just saw flames shoot up," Taylor said. "I knew then how serious it really was and I expected the worst when I got here and it was the worst."

Paul Fletcher, vice president for administration, said the fire could have been much more destructive. Fletcher said the building's hard pine wood walls and floors quickly accelerated the fire into nearly a raging inferno.

"We were very fortunate that flammable liquids stored in the warehouse were not damaged," Fletcher said. "Tons of coal stored in the coal bin were not ignited."

As for the days ahead, seminary officials will begin putting the pieces back together.

"The building is only 60 percent insured," Fletcher said. "It is an irreplaceable loss, a financial loss to the seminary that will be very difficult to make up."

Fletcher said the seminary will continue to operate its plant services operation out of an existing metal building and part of the boiler room. Offices will be relocated to other buildings where space is available.

Fletcher said the seminary will decide what action to take after studying an architectural plan due out this summer outlining future development of seminary facilities.

Joyce Pearce, an administrative assistant in the physical plant, appeared shocked Monday as she looked into the blackened and charred shell of the building where she worked for years handling shipping and receiving orders for the seminary.

"That's 32 years of my life," she said sorrowfully as she dropped her gaze to the ground while shaking her head in disbelief.

Together, Joyce and her husband, Clarence, have worked a combined total of 75 years at the physical plant building. Clarence retired in 1989 as director of plant services.

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"It's like a part of you is missing," Joyce said.

As for Patterson, his immediate burden is to see Lawson's library restored.

"I know that others will be generous also and we'll rebuild Dr. Lawson a first-class library," Patterson said.

Those desiring to contribute to Lawson's library fund can make a check payable to SEBTS (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary) and note "Lawson Book Fund" on the check.

