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Fire rips through historic Barre home

By David Delcore Staff Writer Mar 1, 2019



A fire inspector looks over the remains of Paul and Alyson Flint's home Friday on Averill Street in Barre. The historic building, the childhood home of local luminary Don Milne, was destroyed by a blaze Thursday night. The Flints were not home when the fire started, and no one was injured in the blaze.

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BARRE — The fate of his fire-damaged home is uncertain, but Paul Flint's well-documented sense of humor is still intact.

Flint and his wife, Alyson, weren't at their Averill Street home when a fire that started with an explosion. The blaze lit the Thursday night sky over Barre; it was phoned in by a friend — David Lafreniere — who lives across the street.

That isn't a chuckle-worthy chain of events, but Flint sought to squeeze a smile out of it

anyway.

"When the explosion occurred ... Aly and I were at the Vermont Technical College pool in Randolph ... so under no circumstances are you ever to suggest that swimming isn't good for your health," he joked before suddenly getting serious.

"I would have been in that room," he said, nodding at what little was left of an attached barn that was gutted by the fire, and in the process of being toppled by an excavator on Friday. "I would be dead now."

Instead, Flint lamented the loss of his library, and vowed to restore the two-and-a-half-story New England Cape that was built in 1893.

"We will rebuild it," Flint said, while standing in his ice-covered driveway that was filled with firefighters most of Thursday night and into Friday morning.

Flint will have his work cut out for him because while Fire Chief Doug Brent wasn't willing to write off the home, he said the fire, smoke and water damage could be boiled down to one word.

"Extreme," he said.

Brent and state police fire investigators spent Friday morning and part of the afternoon attempting to pinpoint the precise cause of the fire before giving up.

"It's not anything suspicious," he said, noting investigators will never know for certain what caused what they quickly concluded was an "accidental" fire.

"There's no one thing we can pin it on," he said.

Flint has a theory.

"I think it might have been a 20-pound propane tank," he said, noting he was using one of the tanks to heat the barn where, if he hadn't been swimming in Randolph on Thursday, he would have been puttering in his ground-floor "workshop," or upstairs in the library.

Flint said a defective tank "off-gassing" could have created the climate for an explosion ignited by his pellet stove.

While plausible, Brent said investigators reached that conclusion, but noted the presence of propane inside an enclosed structure is an incredibly bad idea.

"Let's just say that wouldn't help things," he said, explaining it is illegal to store propane tanks in rental and commercial buildings.

"There's a reason," he said.

Flint said it is a mistake he won't make again, while surveying the damage done by the fire.

"My whole library is gone," he said.

The 726-square-foot, two-story barn that was attached to the home — the one that had housed Flint's prized collection of books — is now a mix of ice, ashes and charred wooden debris.

"We'll rebuild that too," Flint said, noting he and his wife had been restoring the property since they bought it in 2006.

"It's a gorgeous damn house," he said. "I see no reason not to rebuild."

Owned by the politically active Milne family for nearly 55 years, Flint said Scott Milne, who was the Republican candidate for governor in 2014 and ran for U.S. Senate two years later, swung by the home where his now-deceased father, Donald, was raised and he lived for a time as a child.

"He said he always loved this house," Flint said of Milne, whose parents founded Milne Travel and were well known and influential central Vermonters.

Brent said firefighters were summoned to the scene shortly before 7:30 p.m. Thursday following a report of an explosion. When the first firefighters arrived moments later, he said the fire, which was heaviest in the barn, had spread into the house.

According to Brent, it took several hours and assistance from five neighboring fire departments to bring the blaze under control at approximately 1:30 a.m. Friday. Firefighters from Montpelier and members of volunteer departments in Barre Town, Berlin, East Montpelier and Williamstown all responded to the fire.

Once the fire was out, Brent said Barre firefighters remained on scene throughout the early morning hours to make sure it didn't rekindle.

The house is uninhabitable, and most of its contents were damaged or destroyed. Flint said he and his wife are staying with friends.

In addition, a precautionary "boil water" notice affecting roughly 175 customers on 10 predominantly residential streets will remain in place through the weekend.

The compulsory notice was issued by city officials Friday after it was determined that the high volume of water used to fight Thursday night's house fire on Averill Street could have led to the possible depressurization in the distribution system in isolated areas. If that happened bacteria and other harmful organisms could have have been sucked into the distribution system triggering the need to issue a "boil water" notice until system tests conducted on successive days confirm the water meets all state and federal drinking waters

standards.

Most city's water customers are not subject to the notice. However, those on Academy, Averill, Church, Cliff, Elm, Jefferson, Merchant and North streets, as well as Eastern and Highland avenues, all are.

Water customers in those areas are advised not to drink the water without boiling it first until the notice is lifted. Assuming favorable test results that is expected to happen by noon on Monday.

Water that is boiled for one minute and then cooled is safe to for consumption and bottled water is also an option.

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