

FIRE DESTROYS MASONIC HALL



Icicles hang from the charred ruins of the Litchfield Masonic Hall after Wednesday's fire.

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A piece of Litchfield's history goes up in flames

By KARLENE K. HALE
Staff Writer

LITCHFIELD — When Bette Hilton's telephone rang at 6:30 Wednesday morning, the news was bad.

The Litchfield Masonic Hall, built the same year that Maine became a state, was gone, destroyed in an early morning fire that tore through the two-and-a-half story wooden building leaving nothing but charred wood.

"We feel terrible, terrible," said Hilton, 72, who twice served as Worthy

Matron of the Order of the Eastern Star in the hall, and recalled being in charge of bean suppers back when she was an officer.

Two other Eastern Star members came to Hilton's home Wednesday morning and the three women all cried together, Hilton said.

"We had a lot of fun in our old hall," she said of the 1820 building that was used by the Masons and the Star for their rituals and ceremonies.

The fire took with it every vestige of those rituals, including an altar

cloth crocheted by a long-time Eastern Star member, pictures in antique frames of past masters of the Masonic lodge, eight deacons chairs and other furniture, most of it oak, and all the regalia that went with installations and special ceremonies.

Also lost were Grand Lodge annual publications dating back to 1822.

Litchfield Fire Chief Stanley Labbe said the cause of the fire could not be determined.

"We're going to list the cause as unknown," he said.

"It's a complete loss. It's flat,"

said Labbe. "There's some people who are pretty upset."

Labbe said the fire broke out at 3:45 a.m. Wednesday, just hours after the Morning Star Lodge 41 Masonic Order held a meeting there.

The hall, located on the Hallowell-Litchfield Road in an older part of town, was near the fire station and close to other houses.

During the fire, Labbe said, embers

See: PIECE
Page 10

Piece of Litchfield's history goes up in flames

► FROM PAGE ONE

blew 1,000 feet from the hall, igniting small fires at two nearby houses, one only 40 feet away. The small fires were quickly extinguished, and there were no injuries reported, Labbe said.

"We had to wet down my house," said Labbe, who also lives nearby. "We definitely had our hands full."

Aid was called in from West Gardiner, Wales, Monmouth, Richmond, and Sabattus, said Labbe, who noted the building carried some insurance.

Wednesday afternoon, everyone was talking about the blaze, and what the building meant to the town.

"First we lost the Grange Hall, to a fire, years ago. And now the Masonic Hall," said Dennis Tilton, owner of the Litchfield Country Store. "All these town landmarks. That's what makes it so sad," he said.

David Byras, Litchfield town manager and District Deputy for the 11th Masonic Lodge, said the executive board and officers will hold a

special meeting Friday night at the town office to decide where to go from here.

The building was insured, he and others said.

On Wednesday, the lodge received an outpouring of generosity from other Masonic orders offering furniture, temporary places to meet, and the use of lodge regalia until the Litchfield order gets back on its feet, Byras said.

Byras, who joined the lodge in 1969, was notified of the fire by the Gardiner dispatcher about 4 a.m. Wednesday morning.

"I went down immediately," he said.

"It's a blow. Everything is wiped out completely," said William Astbury, lodge secretary. He said about 92 men from Litchfield and sur-

rounding towns belonged to the lodge, which he joined here in 1968.

Byras said most of the suppers held by the Masons and Star were held in the summer to raise funds for scholarship and drug awareness programs.

"It's the people that made it so important," Hilton said.

"It was a nice hall," Labbe said. "They could build 50 of them and they wouldn't be anywhere near as nice as that."