

J. Robinson House

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Maureen Lariviere—Journal Messenger

Stonewall Jackson Co. 11 volunteer firefighters battle the blaze that engulfed the Robinson House Monday night.

Suspicious fire mars Battlefield landmark

By the Associated Press

Portions of a historic landmark at the Manassas National Battlefield Park were destroyed in a suspicious blaze, fire officials said.

The fire Monday night swept through the Robinson House, built on the site of the original home and tavern of James Robinson, or Gentleman Jim, a freed slave whose descendants still live in the area.

"It's a real tragedy," park Superintendent Kenneth E. Apschnikat said. "You can't put a value on history."

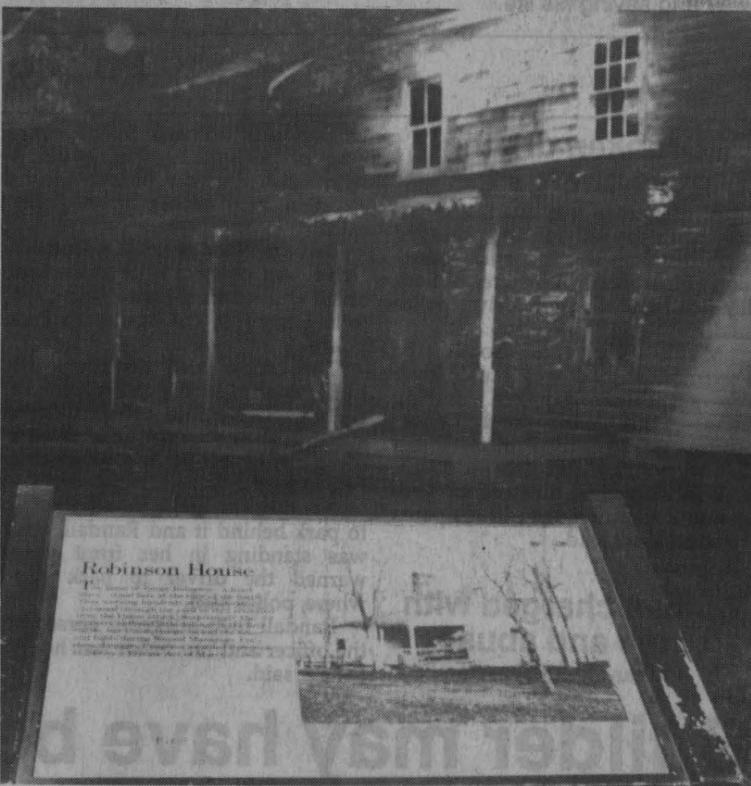
The fire started in a first-floor room, which had the only unlocked window in the house, said Prince William County fire Lt. Tim Hattwick. He said he was unable to determine if the heat from the blaze broke the window from inside, or if someone broke it to enter the home before the fire.

Hattwick said he found no apparent accidental cause of the blaze, which was reported shortly before 8 p.m. He estimated damage at a minimum of \$100,000.

A group of Park Service officials were scheduled to visit the house to assess historical and architectural damage. Repairs will be costly because the home would have to be reconstructed to match its pre-fire appearance, Apschnikat said.

Robinson's great-grandson, Bladen Oswald Robinson, was stunned Monday night after the fire at his childhood home. The 83-year-old Manassas resident planned to use the old house and its grounds for a family reunion in mid-August.

"Oh, I had many a meal in that house, all of us did," Robinson said. "It's all history now. That's all it is. It's a shame. The family will be devastated."



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Park rangers had arranged for special tours inside the old home for the reunion, and planned to spruce up the place for the event.

Confederate troops passed by the site during the Battle of First Manassas in July 1861. But hundreds of Union troops pillaged the home

during the Battle of Second Manassas in August 1862. In 1873, Congress gave \$2,080 to the Robinson family to compensate for the damage, Robinson said.

The park service purchased the home and land from the Robinsons more than 50 years ago.