

Historic house blaze was arson, say police

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The fire that gutted nearly half of a 67-year-old house at Manassas National Battlefield Park last week was deliberately set, officials said Friday.

Special agents with the state police and federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms are investigating the arson that tore through the Robinson House off U.S. 29 around 8 p.m. last Monday.

Scientists at the ATF National Laboratory in Rockville, Md., analyzed evidence collected from the house by ATF agents and Prince William County fire investigators, ATF Special Agent John P. Limbach said.

Their tests confirmed investigators' preliminary suspicions that the fire was set, he said.

Though he declined to identify what they found, Limbach said it is routine for investigators to take samples that remain in the

ashes of a burnt structure and look at them for traces of accelerants such as gasoline or other flammable material.

Investigators also routinely analyze evidence that may tell them how a structure was entered, where it was entered and who had access, Limbach said.

The morning after the fire, a Prince William fire official noted that a ground floor window either had been broken into before the fire or blown out by the heat after it started. All other windows and doors to the building were secure.

The 67-year-old, two-story farmhouse, built partially on the foundation of a freedman's cabin that stood at the time of the Manassas Civil War battles, was heavily damaged in the fire.

A Manassas National Battlefield Park official estimated it would cost \$250,000 to rebuild the house — a financial burden that may be prohibitive and lead the service to tear it down.

VIRGINIANA FILE

Prince William Public Library
Manassas, Va.

J. Robinson House