

Blaze claims historic building



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KENNEBUNKPORT — In a quick-burning blaze this morning, 350 years of history was reduced to ashes and charred timber. The Grist Mill restaurant, a Kennebunkport landmark, was deemed an irreplaceable loss by owner David Lombard.

Sixty firefighters from the town were on the scene soon after the first call at about 2:15 a.m. "It was in rough shape when we got here," Fire Chief John Meserve said. "The front of the building was up in flames. There was nothing saveable."

The fire was contained 40 minutes later, Meserve added, and no firefighters were injured.

No one was in the building at the time the fire broke out, Meserve said, and he had no idea what caused the fire; it did not look suspicious.

A state fire marshal was expected to visit the site later today to determine the cause.

According to Meserve, the building contained no alarm or security system. Except for standard fire prevention equipment in the kitchen, there were no sprinklers in the building. Onlookers who witnessed the blaze said the fire appeared to start in the mill display area, near the tidal basin that the restaurant sits on. There was a report of an explosion when the fire was exposed to the open air, but that could not be confirmed by firefighters.

By sunrise, employees and neighbors crossed the police line at the corner of Mill Lane and North Street to take a last look at the structure, which was built in 1747. Lombard arrived just after 7 a.m. after driving from his home in Dalton, Mass. Ellenberg Gerhardt, chef at the restaurant who was called to the fire at 2:30 a.m., said he left work last night at about 10:15 p.m. "There was nothing wrong," he said. "And now look, there is nothing left. It's unbelievable."

The building has always been in the hands of the Lombard-Perkins family. The last miller at the site was Lombard's grandfather. Lombard's parents, Arthur and Louise Perkins Lombard, opened a tea house in the mill in 1940. David Lombard assumed ownership of the restaurant in 1965.

"Imagine the hundreds of kids that got through college working here," John Lombard, David's brother, said. "This restaurant was such a part of the community for so long. Even the fire chief, John Meserve, remembers buying penny candy from my father."

Employees mourned the loss of a community institution rather than the loss of their jobs. "It's not going to be the same coming around the corner," said Pat Wiczorek, tears welling in her eyes. Wiczorek worked at the restaurant for 18 years.

"This place was like our second home," said Karen Ellenberg, a nine-year employee at the restaurant. "Who knew when we signed out last night that we'd never be coming back?"

The restaurant had been busy on Tuesday night, and Gerhardt said that there were a number of bookings in the upcoming month. "There was to be a wedding party here on Saturday," he said. "We had a number of buses booked to come in."

The mill building was on the National Register of Historic Places. It was believed to be the only tidewater grist mill in the country.

"This building was so unusual," David Lombard said. "You just don't put that kind of building back up again. You can't replace it."

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Tidewater mill one of a kind

By **JACK BEAUDOIN**
Journal Tribune Staff Writer

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■ FIRE

Continued on Page 12

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From Page 1

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