

Battling a towering blaze



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Firefighters were unable to save the historic wooden structure built in 1893 on Washington Street.

Historic Buildings - Spectacular inferno levels historic building

By STEVE PEREZ
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — A spectacular fire roared through a historic building on Washington Street on Monday night as onlookers gathered to watch it burn.

City firefighters rushed to the fire at 123 Washington St. around 7 p.m., initially having been told that people might be trapped inside.

No one was found during a quick, early search. Shortly after the fire was contained, Santa Cruz City Battalion Chief Pat Brown said a more extensive search would be necessary before he would be "100 percent satisfied" that no one was inside.

"We were told the building was occupied and that people had set a fire there to warm themselves, when the fire got out of control," Brown said.

The stubborn blaze reigned unchecked for at least a half-hour, consuming the wooden structure built in 1893.

While firefighters battled, onlookers gathered to watch the flames shoot up to 100 feet in the

air, the thick clouds of dark smoke billow over the surrounding neighborhood and fire hoses aimed from elevated ladders and tanker trucks. By 10 p.m. firefighters had abandoned any thought of searching the building until this morning, when they could use heavy equipment in the daylight.

The building, now owned by Union Pacific Railroad, was at one time a Santa Cruz landmark as the railway depot, built in 1893.

In the 1980s and 1990s, it housed a succession of restaurants and nightclubs, including Gandy Dancers and Jose's Cantina.

In recent years, the Union Depot has fallen on hard times. At the scene of the fire, bystanders said they saw teen-agers, possibly homeless, smoking and hanging out in the building.

In the early 1990s, Jose's owner, Jose Espinosa, did brisk business at the location near Center Street. He moved there after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake had temporarily knocked his down-

town El Palomar restaurant out of business.

But Espinosa moved back to a refurbished location downtown in 1993, and the building has been vacant since, according to real estate agent Arnoldo Gil-Osorio.

Gil-Osorio bought the single-acre property in 1986, but returned it to the railroad company in 1995. His last attempt to develop the property failed when the city refused to approve an all-night, alcohol-free teen dance club and restaurant.

He said Monday night he'd lost \$750,000 on the property.

Gil-Osorio envisioned live performances, along with computerized music and light shows.

But the plan died when the City Council declined to lift a section of the city code that banned dancing in commercial establishments after 2 a.m.

"I wish the city had allowed me to do my club," Gil-Osorio said, upon learning the building was in flames. "It became an eye-sore and now look at what's happened. I'm sorry, that's sad."

Ross Eric Gibson, a member of the city's Historic Preservation Commission, called the fire "a completely avoidable tragedy."

He said the building was listed in a Santa Cruz survey of historic buildings. It was meant to be the centerpiece of a revitalized beach area, either at that site, or moved to another location, Gibson said.

An architectural consultant, Gibson said the building was the scene of at least one other small fire set by trespassers at least a year ago.

The commission tried to convince the building's owners to light the building at night, assign a watchman and ensure the fire sprinklers operated, Gibson said.

Railroad officials were unavailable for comment.

Gibson recalled a number of fires in abandoned buildings during the 1990s, including the St. George Hotel and Trust building fires after the 1989 quake that would not have happened, had they been properly secured.

"We've lost an awful lot of our heritage because of this," he said.