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Fierce Fire in Landmark New York Cathedral

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By Daniel Bases



Reuters Photo

NEW YORK (Reuters) - A fierce fire broke out in New York's landmark St. John the Divine Cathedral, one of the world's largest, early on Tuesday, but firefighters managed to keep the blaze from damaging its massive sanctuary.

Officials said there were no reports of casualties. The cause was not immediately known and was under investigation.

The blaze, occurring as the cathedral was being prepared for Christmas celebrations, destroyed the north transept that housed the gift shop in the huge, cross-shaped building. The main sanctuary suffered smoke and water damage.

The fire burned about four hours before it was declared under control at about 10:34 a.m., according to officials.

"It broke out in the gift shop," said New York Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen. "It was a tremendous fire in the beginning. But it was held back from the inside of the church."

About 200 firefighters and 48 units fought the five-alarm blaze, the most serious category of fire. Flames shot up several stories, while smoke filled the church and billowed out its massive front doors.

The Episcopal cathedral, still under construction and about two-thirds finished, would be the world's largest when completed.

The fire was discovered by a maintenance worker, who arrived at work early. The first alarm came in at 6:42 a.m., fire officials said.

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HOLIDAY SERVICES LIKELY TO GO AHEAD

Church officials said they were optimistic that holiday services would be held next week. "Thus far, we are confident of what we have been told -- we'll be able to continue services in a few days," said Henry King, president of the board of trustees of the cathedral.

Fire officials said there was expected to be minimal fire damage, although the church suffered water and smoke damage, especially in the basement.

Construction of the cathedral, located in the Morningside Heights section of Manhattan near Columbia University, began in 1892.

King said the gift shop does about \$1.5 million in business each year, with about 500,000 tourists visiting annually.

Nicholas Hurwitz, 12, a student at the Cathedral School next door to the church, said, "This place is so meaningful to me. I've been running around here and growing up here since I was born. I was baptized here."

The original design called for the church to be 525 feet in length, emphasizing features of both Romanesque and Byzantine architecture.

The cathedral has suffered numerous construction problems since the cornerstone was laid in December 1892.

Originally, builders had trouble laying the foundation when, after two years of digging, they failed to reach bedrock. With the help of a donation from financier J.P Morgan, they eventually hit bedrock 72 feet below ground.

The cathedral's nave with its interior arches is 124 feet high. Its bronze doors were cast by Ferdinand Barbedienne, who also cast the Statue of Liberty.

Its Great Rose Window is 40 feet in diameter and is composed of more than 10,000 pieces of glass.

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