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## *Assessing the character and systems of historic buildings*

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Obviously when a disaster has occurred, it will be too late to conduct the assessment of the historic character and fabric of a building. The following case study is about an event that occurred about thirteen years ago while I was in a previous job in Boston.

I received a phone call at four o'clock in the morning from one of my employees who was working at the Roosevelt Historic Site in Hyde Park, New York, and also supervising a project crew at Fire Island, New York. He had begun his Park Service career at that park and had worked there for about fifteen years before I hired him for the Charlestown Navy Yard. He called me, on the verge of tears, to say that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's home at Hyde Park was on fire. This was something that was very difficult for him as he had put a great deal of his life into maintaining and preserving this site. I asked about the crew in Fire Island and he said that he would contact them and get them to come up to Hyde Park. I said that I would drive over as quickly as possible from Boston.

By the time I got there, the fire was out, much of the contents had been dealt with and were out of the house, and the crew was starting to put a temporary roof on the house. What the park had done in the past was very important in terms of minimizing the damage resulting from the fire. Specifically, the park had planned and exercised foresight in disaster planning and preparedness. Many of the volunteer firemen from the Hyde Park fire department were also employees of the Park Service. During the previous years, the park had many meetings with the fire department. There had also been tours for the volunteer

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firemen of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Site and the nearby the Vanderbilt Historic Site. The fire department had been taken through the building and there had been many useful exchanges of information between the park staff and the fire department. The fire department volunteers and the park staff knew each other and the fire department volunteers knew what was important about the buildings and their contents. In addition, the park staff had set aside tarpaulins for use in the event of an emergency.

Thus, when the fire occurred, the park staff and the volunteer fire department were able to work well together. This was one of the few times where I have observed a fire department allowing non-fire department staff to go into a house during a fire. The park curators were allowed to go into the house and remove the paintings, artwork and other moveable items and put tarpaulins over the bigger pieces that could not be moved. All this happened while the fire department was still fighting the fire on the roof. The fire was extinguished without causing much additional damage to what the fire had caused. The fire department minimized the amount of water that was used and also minimized the number of holes that were cut into the roof. The Fire Island crew was able to begin working on the roof repairs and a temporary roof was installed by the end of that same day; the rains came, but the inside stayed dry without taking on any more water. The park staff began drying things out and started cleaning the inside. In the long run, the house survived with minimal damage.

What was interesting was the process of estimating what it would cost to undertake the repairs. I managed to have the Fire Island crew leader and the chief of maintenance of the park, who usually fought like ‘cats and dogs’, to sit down with me to develop the estimate, which ended up being about US\$1 million. We contracted out the structural work on the roof as quickly as possible; the park service crews did the cleaning of the finishes and painting on the first and second floors; the roof was done by a contractor; and, in the end, it all came together quite easily. One important element that was on hand before any of the repair work commenced were the Historic American Building Survey drawings which had been completed many years before. These were available to the architectural firm we hired to develop the drawing for the roof work.

The fire at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Mansion is a good example of a disaster where the planning and disaster preparedness work accomplished beforehand really paid off.