

Six die in New Year's Day house fire in Washington DC

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An early morning house fire claimed the lives of six people on New Year's Day when flames shot through a two-story frame house on Jackson Street in the northeast part of the nation's capital city.

All of those killed were family and friends of homeowners Oscar Wilson (44) and Michelle Smith Wilson (41). Their 11-year-old son, Oscar Wilson III, died on Friday afternoon from injuries sustained in the fire. Also killed were the couple's 10-year-old nephew, Joseph Wilson, and Michelle Wilson's father, Charles Smith, 72.

Tawana Gant, 22, her boyfriend Keith Nelson, 23, and their four-year-old daughter Kaniya also perished in the blaze. A 15-year-old boy, a family friend, was injured and hospitalized, but was expected to survive.

The fire came less than a week after a house fire claimed seven lives on December 26 in a working class neighborhood in Philadelphia when a kerosene heater caught fire in the basement of their building. Utilities had most likely been cut off from the unit, forcing residents to use an unsafe means of heating.

Fire department spokesman said Thursday's fire in DC began with "a catastrophic electrical failure" in the wiring between the basement ceiling and the first floor of the house. Electrical engineers will be investigating the reasons for this failure.

Family and friends of the Wilsons had gathered at their two-story frame house on the 1000 block of Jackson Street NE to celebrate the New Year the evening before. When the fire broke out around 7 a.m., Oscar Wilson was able to escape. Later that day, the back of his hands showed bruising sustained from trying to reenter the house in an attempt to save those still inside. Michelle Wilson had left an hour before the fire broke out.

The night before, on New Year's Eve, the couple had attended a candlelight vigil at a nearby youth center for juvenile murder victims. These victims included their own daughter, Taleshia Ford, who was killed at the age of 17 when a stray bullet struck her outside a Northwest Washington club on January 20, 2007.

The family's tragedy was compounded in Thursday's fire. The Wilsons lost another child, one of their parents, and a nephew. Tawana Gant, another victim, was the daughter of one of Oscar Wilson's best friends. She and her boyfriend and their young daughter had moved earlier into the Wilson home; they never made it out of the basement where they were living.

It is believed that construction of the house was the major factor in the rapid speed and ferocity of the fire. The home was built with so-called balloon frame construction that does not usually include firestops, a passive fire protection system used to seal openings and joints in walls and floors.

Illegal today, such construction was common in the 1930s and 1940s. It allows for more efficient circulation of heating, but also conducts smoke and fire with deadly speed. Homes of this type are common in the Brookland neighborhood in DC where the fire took place, and in countless older working class neighborhoods across the country.

Firefighters responded to the fire at the Wilson home within a minute, according to authorities, but it was already too late. The speed and intensity of the blaze were overwhelming, and the heat from the fire had already begun to warp and melt the house next door.

Two charred smoke detectors were found in the home, but it was unclear whether they were functioning at the time. According to DC Fire Department spokesman Alan Etter, recent budget cuts have depleted the District's supply of free smoke detectors. The fire

department from nearby Montgomery County, Maryland donated 130 smoke detectors, and the DCFD planned to distribute the devices to homes in the area of the fire on Friday.

Another early morning fire New Year's Day at an apartment house in Philadelphia killed a 70-year-old woman, who died of burns and smoke inhalation. Firefighters were able to rescue many others from the burning three-story building.

On New Year's afternoon, firefighters in Canton, Ohio battled a fire that began in a vacant home and spread to two adjoining houses. Nine firefighters were injured fighting the blaze. Officials reported that several firefighters fell through a floor, and then others suffered electrical shocks when wires contacted aluminum gutter spouts near their ladders.

Three residents were evacuated, but no one was injured. Six of the firefighters were taken to the hospital but their injuries were not believed to be serious.

As the cold winter months wear on, more danger of fire is certain in working class neighborhoods in cities across America. This is due to the prevalence of older and unsafe housing construction and electrical wiring, vacant houses, as well as the cutoff of utilities, forcing families to utilize unsafe methods of obtaining gas and electric service.

These conditions will be exacerbated by the deepening economic crisis, leaving more and more households unable to pay their gas and electric bills, and with cities scrapped for cash cutting their budgets for firefighting. More residents and firefighters are sure to fall victim.



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