135-year-old house destroyed by fire

BY RICHARD WALKER
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ANACORTES FIRE DEPARTMENT / CONTRIBUTED

Above: Firefighters battle the blaze on H Avenue Dec. 22. Right: The house at 3903 H Ave. was built in 1885 and was one of the oldest structures in Anacortes.

ANACORTES MUSEUM / CONTRIBUTED

There was a lot of history in the three-story house at 3903 H Ave. in Anacortes.

On Dec. 22, the once grand house and its 135 years of history were reduced by fire to a pile of wood and brick.

It was built in 1885 and was one of the oldest structures in Anacortes. When its builder and first occupant, Scottish-born rancher William Gray, homesteaded 160 acres here in 1882, the fledgling town had only a hotel on Second Street near Cap Sante, used as a lodging home by early settlers; and the Bowman Store and Post Office.

Only 30 years earlier, the region's Indigenous leaders signed the Treaty of Point Elliott, making land available for newcomers. Washington wouldn't become a state for four years after Gray's house was completed, and Anacortes wouldn't become a city for six.

Gray built the house for his new bride, Maggie, "solicitous of his wife's happiness and thoughtful of her comfort," according to his 1891 obituary. At 3,000 square feet, with four bedrooms, two fireplaces, a second-floor balcony and covered porch, it was considered at the time one of the finest homes on Fidalgo Island.

Gray died in 1891. Subsequent owners included J.H. Havekost, whose uncle operated a mill at what is now Skyline; and L.K. Smith, an early city clerk of Anacortes. The homestead would be subdivided and sold off to accommodate new neighborhoods. Ace of Hearts Dog Park is next door; a ball field is behind.

Photographs at the Anacortes Museum show the house in good shape in the 1950s, painted white and apparently well-tended. For several years of late, however, the house was unoccupied — "the coolest abandoned house in Anacortes," a photographer wrote on social media — and windows were boarded up.

According to Skagit County assessor's records available online, the property is owned by a couple in La Conner. They were not available for comment.

Anacortes Fire Marshal Jack Kennedy said Dec. 24 that the cause of the fire may never be known. No one was in the house when firefighters arrived, and there were no injuries.

The empty house was periodically occupied by squatters, and firefighters extinguished a fire a few years ago in a third-floor room. That fire was caused by someone cooking, he said.

Kennedy said a power line to the house's meter was live, though electricity into the home had been turned off.

Firefighters were sent about 10:15 p.m. Dec. 22 and, upon arrival, found the house well-involved in fire.

"Crews initiated defensive tactics, fighting the fire from outside the structure which was unsafe to enter and a total loss on arrival," the Anacortes Fire Department reported. "Dramatic flames illuminated the nighttime sky as firefighters deployed hose streams, both from the ground and the department's ladder truck, to attack fire and protect surrounding structures."

Anacortes firefighters were assisted by fire districts 11 and 13. The blaze was under control within 90 minutes, though crews remained into the morning to clean up and stand watch.

Suspect arrested in Anacortes Cannabis robbery

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An 18-year-old Anacortes man was arrested Dec. 22 on suspicion of robbing Anacortes Cannabis two days earlier.

Austin Carter Thomas, 18, is in Skagit County Jail on $100,000 bail; his name appeared on the jail roster Monday. He is scheduled to be arraigned on a charge of first-degree robbery at 1:30 p.m. Jan. 8 in Superior Court.

Thomas' lawyer. Nick Henry, said Tuesday he had no comment, other-than his client would plead not guilty.

On Dec. 23, Superior Court Judge Dave Needy issued a no-contact order, barring Thomas from approaching Anacortes Cannabis employees.

Anacortes police were sent to the store just before 9 p.m. Dec. 20 to investigate a report of a robbery. Employees said a man entered with a long gun and demanded product from the store, according to a police report. Employees complied. The robber reportedly fired a round into the ceiling and left.

No one was hurt.

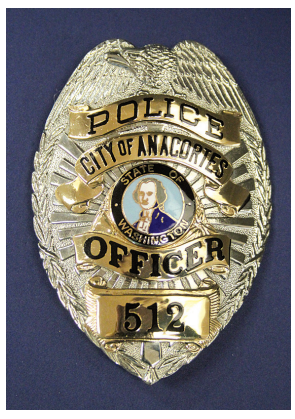
Officers arrived within minutes but did not find a suspect. Officers arrested Thomas without incident shortly before 8 a.m. Dec. 22 and booked him into the Skagit County jail.

Police Blotter

The Anacortes Police Department reported responding to more than 100 dispatches Dec. 20-27. Here are some of them.

Sunday, Dec. 20

• An officer patrolling on D Avenue just after midnight pulled over a pickup that he saw go over the fog line multiple times in a few blocks. The 42-year-old Coupeville driver told the officer that the truck, borrowed from a family member, was larger than what she was used to driving. She did not show any signs of impairment, but a routine check showed a suspended license. She was cited and released.



Monday, Dec. 21

• An officer was sent to R Avenue on a report of a pickup that drove over the curb and possibly hit a sign. Investigation revealed that the driver, a local 71-year-old man, was not impaired and there was no damage. However, he a suspended license and was told he would be cited for that. He was given a ride to an appointment within city limits.

• A 15th Street resident reported that a package she left on her porch for pickup and delivery was stolen.

Tuesday, Dec. 22

• A Sugarloaf Street resident reported that someone had been ringing her doorbell about 11 p.m. the past two nights. She was encouraged to call police the next time it occurred so officers could talk with the perpetrator.

• An officer checked on the occupant of a car parked on South March's Point Road just after 5 p.m. The woman in the car was hunched over and had a syringe in her hand. The woman was startled by the officer's presence and was asked to step out of the car before she was arrested for possession of a controlled substance and possession of drug paraphernalia. K-9 T-Bone arrived and indicated the presence of illegal narcotics. A car search showed syringes and glass pipes with drug residue. The woman was later released and faces possible drug charges.

Wednesday, Dec. 23

• A local woman reported someone claiming to be a police sergeant called her, soliciting information about her business. The woman was told that no one from the Anacortes Police Department was attempting to call her.

Thursday, Dec. 24

• Highway 20 near Reservation Road was the scene of two collisions Christmas Eve. In the first crash, a sports car slid off the roadway just before 4 a.m. and went into a ditch. The driver was uninjured, but the car had to be towed. The driver was given a ticket for driving with wheels off the roadway. Later, a driver reported that another motorist cut him off near the same intersection, causing him to slam on his brakes and lose control of his car, which rolled and crashed into a ditch. The driver sustained possible injury.

• A valuable electronic device was delivered to a 14th Street home but never made it to the rightful owner's hands. The resident told police that the theft occurred sometime between Dec. 21 and 24.

— Sources: Anacortes Police Department; Skagit 911

Port

Continued from page A1

The port received two county Economic Development Grants this year: $250,000 for A Dock and $500,000 for Curtis Wharf, two of the Big Four projects.

The construction projects are moving forward so well that many are months ahead of schedule, Worra said.

"We're spending money and that's helping the economy here," Worra said.

The port also received $42,000 in CARES Act funding from the Federal Aviation Administration and $98,000 in Airport Improvement Program funding for work at the Anacortes Airport.

One of the biggest financial reductions this year was in raw materials through its marine terminal, Worra said. There was a 43% reduction in petroleum coke and a 54% reduction in sulfur moving through the terminal. The cruise season was also canceled, so there were no cruise ships docked in Anacortes.

Roughly 100 events were also canceled at the port properties this year due to the pandemic, and there was a 22% reduction in the gallons of fuel sold. However, expenses were also lower.

The port set a new record in number of boater nights at the marina thanks to visitors who docked their boats at Cap Sante Marina, Worra said.

The port had 16,759 guest boater nights in 2020, compared to 16,510 in 2019 and 15,714 in 2018.

The Port of Anacortes went through an audit process like normal and added another clean audit to those it has been getting for more than 25 years, Worra said.

During his presentation, Worra also talked about what's to come in 2021, including more work on the A Dock project, scheduled to cost several million dollars and be done in the spring.

The port is also looking at an RV park near its marina.

For the port staff and commissioners, 2021 is a scoring year. That means the commissioners will look at several capital improvement projects presented by staff and prioritize them. The commissioners do this every two years, so the port is only spending money on projects deemed most important, Worra said.

Port board names new officers

The Port of Anacortes Board of Commissioners appointed new leaders at its Dec. 17 meeting.

The new leaders take office effective Jan. 1.

Jon Petrich is the new president, Bonnie Bowers is the new vice president and Joe Verdoes is the new secretary.