Fire that destroyed dormitory of Buddhist temple in Berks caused over $1 million damage

A state police fire marshal said the fire that gutted the dormitory in Mituo Village originated outside the building, and the cause was accidental.

Hereford Township Buddhist temple fire Saturday, Nov. 13, 2021. (David Mekeel — Reading Eagle)

The three-alarm blaze that ripped through the 6,000-square-foot dormitory of a Buddhist temple in eastern Berks County on Saturday started accidentally, and the updated damage estimate puts the loss at more than $1 million, a state police fire marshal said Monday.

The blaze at the dormitory building of Mituo Village, located in the sprawling Hereford Township complex that is home to the Amitabha Buddhist Society of Philadelphia, was first reported at 10:12 a.m. with multiple 9-1-1 calls.

Smoke poured from the sprawling building, which sits in a clearing on a hill in the 300 block of Conrad Road. It could be seen from miles away.

Trooper Corey Heimbach, a fire marshal with Reading-based Troop L., said investigators pinpointed the origin of the fire outside the dormitory. It was sparked by fireplace debris.

Roughly 100 firefighters from Berks, Lehigh and Montgomery counties responded. Crews needed more than an hour to bring the flames under control. Crews used an estimated 60,000 gallons of water that was shuttled by tanker trucks from a nearby farm pond.

About half of the building was gutted by fire, with little more than a charred frame and blackened rubble left by early afternoon.

People were in the temple when the fire began, but everyone escaped without injuries prior to firefighters' arrival. One firefighter was transported to the hospital for a medical emergency and kept overnight for observation.

The complex on 140 acres was formerly a longtime United Church of Christ retreat known as Camp Mensch Mill. For 84 years, the mostly wooded area was home to summer youth camps, workshops and retreats and was operated and supported by congregations in the Pennsylvania Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ, or PSEC.

In 2014, PSEC sold the retreat in 2014 to the Amitabha Buddhist Society of Philadelphia.
"We have an exciting and extraordinary opportunity to continue our connection with what is for many in the PSEC sacred ground, and to do so in partnership with new friends whose stewardship of the earth, quest of spiritual wellness and respect for tradition mirrors our own," the Rev. William P. Worley, PSEC conference minister, told the Reading Eagle in 2014.

In a written statement at the time, an Amitabha spokesman said there was a strong desire to not disturb the land and to honor the spiritual traditions that preceded the purchase.

"The society's first and foremost mission is to establish The Pure Land Learning Center in the holy ground," he said. "Secondly, the society will earnestly seek to work with PSEC to continue the retreat and leadership training programming on the Mensch Mill property in the near future; and thirdly we will seek to partner with other interested parties to create the next Multi-Faith Multi-Cultural Center as a model city of peace and harmony."

An Amitabha Society spokesman could not be reached for comment on the fire.