

FIRE DAMAGES HISTORIC GOVERNOR'S MANSION

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A fire believed to have been started by a 25-foot Christmas tree in the rotunda of the Governor's Mansion raged through the historic building late Wednesday morning, causing extensive damage and no serious injuries.

Gov. Mike Leavitt's wife, Jacalyn, and their youngest son, Westin, 3, were home when the fire broke out shortly after 11 a.m., along with two of three staff members assigned to the mansion. Bonnie Stephens, director of the Utah Arts Council, said Carol Bench, Mrs. Leavitt's executive assistant, heard the explosion and tried to put it out with a fire extinguisher.

``She just screamed, `Everybody out!' " Stephens said.

Mrs. Leavitt had to run and get Westin, she reported. They tried to get out the back door but it was jammed. She said the family was frightened for a minute because the house was filling with smoke, but they got out and are safe, Stephens said.

``Mrs. Leavitt is a fantastic woman. The rest of the staff was in tears and she was just fine," Bench said.

The governor's family is regrouping inside the Utah Arts Council building, which is on the east side of the Governor's Mansion.

The governor left the state Capitol for the mansion after being told of the fire. He postponed a 12:15 p.m. budget address before a joint session of the Legislature until 2 p.m.

A couple who reported the fire, Carl and Pam Baumeister, described seeing a huge ball of flames shoot up and burst a second-floor balcony window that faces South Temple.

``The whole thing just exploded 25 feet up," Carl Baumeister said.

Firefighters on the scene said the three-alarm fire caused extensive damage to all three floors of the mansion, including a collapse of the rotunda. No estimate of the damage was available.

The state is self-insured for damage to the mansion, but taxpayers will likely have to pick up the deductible, estimated at about \$1 million. The governor has leased his private home in the Yalecrest area so if the mansion is not inhabitable, the family will have to find new quarters.

Two firefighters sustained minor injuries fighting the blaze.

Built in 1902 at an estimated cost of \$250,000, Utah's Governor's Mansion never has suffered the type of possibly irreparable damage it suffered Wednesday.

Considered a historical treasure, it contains an art collection of significance but no historical documents.

Thomas Kearns, a local mining magnate, commissioned an architect to build the **house** in 1899 on what then was fashionable Brig-ham Street (now South Temple). Kearns later was elected to the Senate, and he was co-owner of the Salt Lake Tribune.