

Fire destroys landmark



The Natchez Democrat/Ben Hillier

Daniel Haire and Emmitt Kelly sift through what remains of Varnado's grocery store after a fire destroyed the popular Union Church gathering spot Wednesday afternoon. Above, the old metal cash register that was a fixture of the old store sits dented and fire damaged in the back of the family pickup truck. Below is a file photo of the pre-civil war building that stood as a landmark for passersby on Mississippi 28.

Store served as meeting place

By KERRY WHIPPLE

The Natchez Democrat

UNION CHURCH — Residents of this small Jefferson County community often gathered for coffee in the morning at Varnado's grocery store, sharing the latest news.

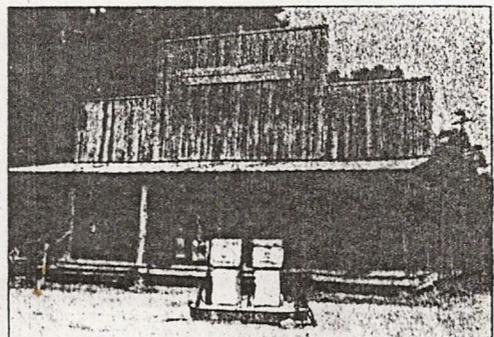
On Wednesday afternoon, they gathered at the same site to see smoldering remains of the antebellum wooden building, sharing

words of comfort with the family that has owned the store for three decades.

"It happened so quick," store owner Rayford Varnado said. "In 45 minutes it was down."

Varnado was called to the store by an employee who saw smoke; he began spraying the back of the building to protect the gas tanks

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Fire

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behind it.

A second firefighter, Mark Stietenroth, arrived next and began spraying the gas pumps in front of the building. He said the chief concern at first was protecting those gas sources. Eventually about six or seven firefighters arrived to help put out the flames.

"We battled it for three hours," Stietenroth said. "We had to refill the truck several times.

"It makes you want to well up," he said, watching as smoke continued to rise from the pile of ashes and twisted pieces of roof.

"I felt like I was having a bad nightmare," he said. "It was a powerless feeling when I saw those flames. Something made out of this heart pine — it just goes so fast."

Varnado believes the fire started near the bathroom, possibly when a customer left a burning cigarette in a trash can. "It wasn't instant," he said of the fire. "It might have been smoking all morning."

No one was injured in the fire, said Wanda Haire, Varnado's daughter, who managed the store.

Haire, who was not at the store when the fire began, watched the beginning of the cleanup effort with tears in her eyes.

"There's a lot of old history here," she said, twisting a soot-covered set of store keys in her hand. "A lot of good people, a lot of good friends."

The store was not just a family business, it was a community institution, with regular customers from

Union Church as well as passers-by traveling between Natchez and Jackson.

"You got to talk to a lot of interesting and good people," Haire said. "That's what made all that hard work at an old country store worth it."

Varnado's was also a morning gathering place for locals.

"You'd come up here early, and you'd know if anybody had a problem," Varnado said. "You'd help them if you could."

The store has been in the family for nearly three decades, with children and grandchildren working after school and summers there.

The small building has always been some kind of general store, Varnado said.

Truly Smith, who grew up in Union Church but lives in Brookhaven, drove over when he heard of the fire.

"This is history gone," he said, recalling the days he and his friends played at the old store, before the Varnados bought it.

What happens next? Varnado wants to leave the question of rebuilding up to his family.

"We'll go to my house and sit on the front porch and talk," Varnado said. "Whatever the girls want to do, we'll do."

But rest assured, if the family does rebuild, Varnado has a standing offer for customers.

"Stop by and have a soda with us," he said.