

Fatal fire: Beth Fox (left) and Mary Bahr go through damaged artwork and personal belongings of their mother, Florence Bahr, 88, who died in a fire at her split-level home in Elkridge. "You just can't sum up her life in one moment," said Mary Bahr.

Artist dies in Elkridge fire

Sun 1/13/98

Florence Bahr's home destroyed in 2-alarm blaze; cause unknown

By DEL QUENTIN WILBER
SUN STAFF

Two daughters sorted through their mother's paintings and sketchbooks — their brown, brittle pages blackened with soot, their titles smeared by water — only yards from a smoldering Elkridge home.

The daughters were trying to salvage a life's work of art.

Their mother, Florence Riefle Bahr, 88, whose sketches, watercolors and prints chronicled some of history's most dramatic moments as well as her own joys and sorrows, died yesterday morning when her split-level home was consumed by a two-alarm fire.

"You just can't sum up her life in one moment," said Mary Bahr, a daughter who lives in Pikesville, as she flipped through a photograph album. "She did so much. She was an artist."

The cause of the fire and of Bahr's death are under investigation.

The fire started sometime after 7:30 a.m. and spread quickly, authorities said.

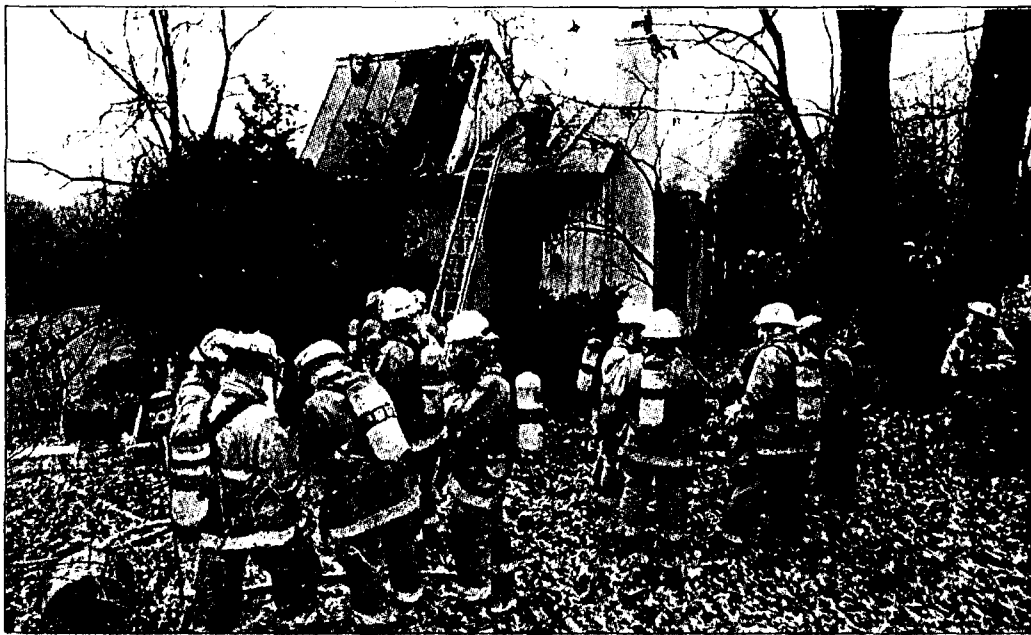
A neighbor called 911 about 7:50 a.m., and Howard County firefighters arrived minutes later to find flames shooting from the roof and rolling out the windows.

Units from Baltimore and Anne Arundel counties also responded.

Firefighters, who knew Bahr was trapped in the home, entered the basement door leading to her bedroom, but were driven back by flames.

Yesterday morning, as water dripped from the charred structure, art books floated in puddles, and trinkets were melted beyond recognition.

Beth Fox, [See Fire, 8B]



On the scene: Firefighters gather at the home on Old Lawyers Hill Road where Florence Riefle Bahr died yesterday morning. The cause of the two-alarm fire was being investigated.

Artist, 88, dies in fire in Elkridge

[Fire, from Page 1B]

60, another daughter, said her mother loved to collect things — particularly antique dolls, which she enjoyed depicting in hundreds of watercolor paintings.

Elizabeth Schaaf, archivist for the Peabody Institute, said Bahr chronicled several marches on Washington during the 1960s, sketching a moving portrayal of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.

Last January, the Peabody showed a retrospective of Florence Bahr's work.

Bahr's most memorable images may be of historic events, including courtroom sketches of the trial of the Catonsville Nine in 1968 and the mid-1970s trials of Gov. Marvin Mandel.

"Her prints, watercolors, her sketches that were done in the heat of the moment, that's what will survive," said Schaaf, who was helping Bahr organize hundreds of pieces still at her Elkridge home. "She could capture the intensity of a crowd, the color."

The Maryland State Archives holds about 300 to 400 of her sketches depicting moments from 1957 to 1992, said Edward C. Papenfuse, archivist for the state.

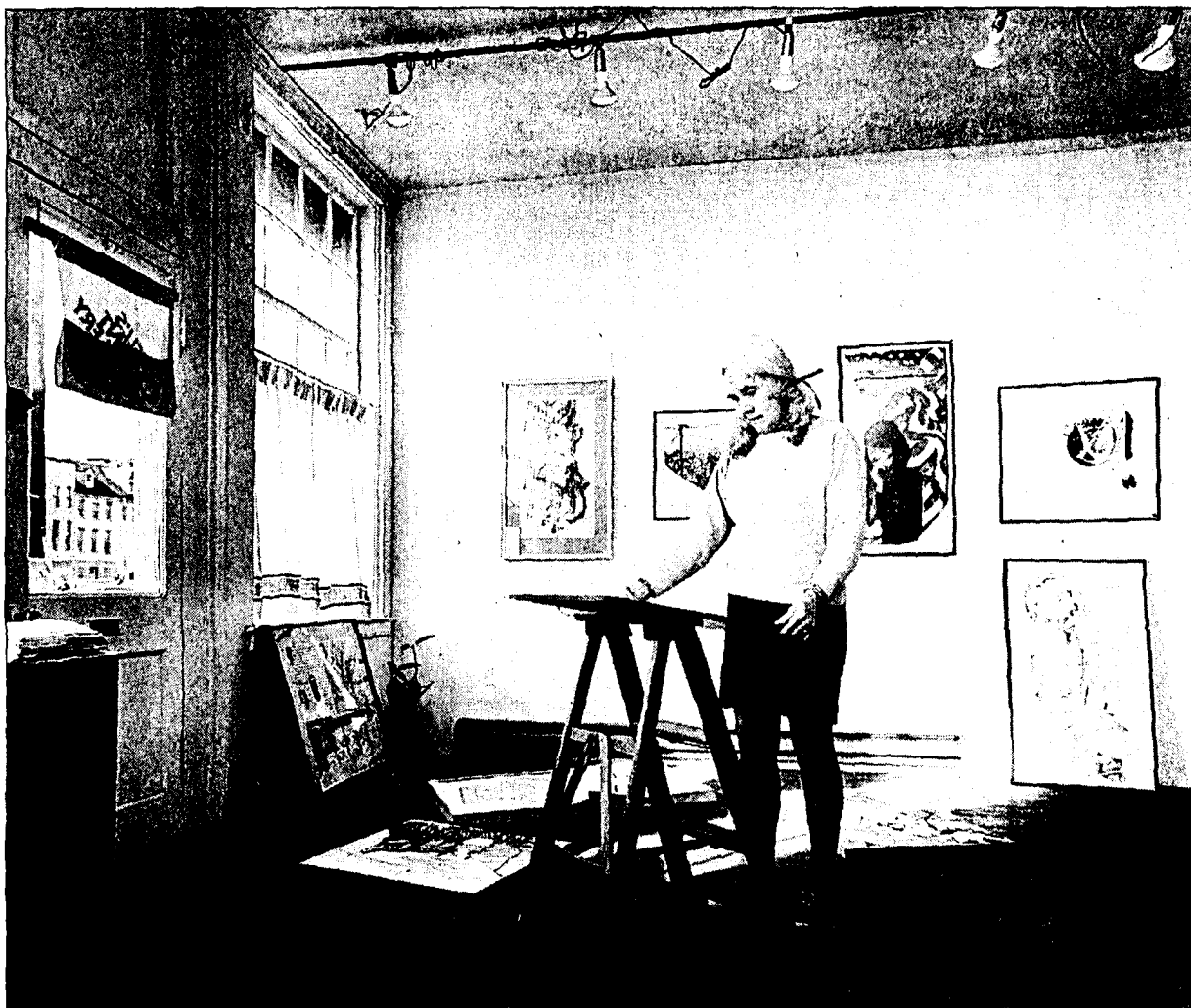
"If more is lost in the fire, that's just a terrible loss," Papenfuse said.

One of Bahr's pieces hangs prominently in the lobby of the headquarters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Baltimore. The collage, "Homage to Martin Luther King," attempts to capture the pain and violence surrounding the riots that followed the civil rights leader's death in 1968.

Friends and family members said Bahr marched in Washington numerous times, getting arrested at a protest outside the Pentagon.

Bahr met her husband, Leonard Bahr, who died in 1990, when they were students at the Maryland Institute, College of Art in the 1930s.

Florence Bahr, a graduate of Western High School who grew up in Forest Park and Homeland, received a bachelor of fine arts and



Working: In 1974, Florence Bahr checks a painting in her gallery at Fells Point. Several pieces of her art hang on the walls. Her sketches, watercolors and prints chronicled dramatic moments in history.

master's degrees from the institute.

Her work appeared in numerous shows, including one at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 1935.

Many of Leonard Bahr's portraits and landscapes also were lost in yesterday's blaze.

Bahr's love of dolls led her to open Humpty Dumpty Dolls and Toys in Ellicott City — part shop and part museum.

She closed the store several years ago, family members said.

"She loved her dolls," Beth Fox said. "She loved painting them, too."

Five months ago, Bahr fell and was injured while raking leaves. Family members persuaded her to wear a device that could summon help at the push of the button.

She pushed that button yesterday, but Pamela Dillon, 58, the neighbor summoned by the service, was already at the scene after she saw white smoke billowing from Bahr's roof.

Dillon said she tried to open the front door, but couldn't because of smoke and fumes.

"It was so thick I couldn't see the key in my hand," said Dillon.

She alerted a neighbor, who called 911.

The firefighters who arrived a few minutes later remembered the house — they had helped Bahr five months earlier when she had fallen.

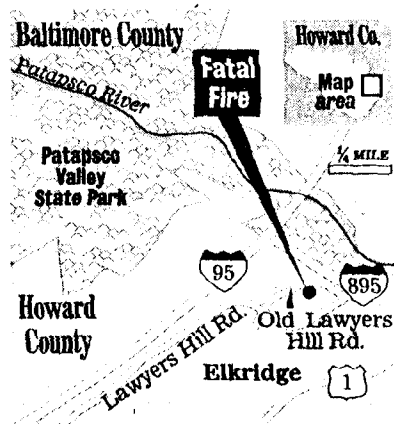
Knowing that she lived alone and slept in a basement bedroom, Capt. Kevin Aftung and two men lugged a large hose to the basement sliding glass door. The door exploded as they reached it, and flames jumped outside.

Aftung and his men raced into the room, but after 10 minutes of searching, flames raced across the ceiling, engulfing Aftung's helmet and hitting Sgt. John Sheehan in his mask.

"I couldn't even see the captain's helmet anymore," Sheehan said.

Standing outside the back door, Aftung studied his singed helmet. A new white captain's shield was blackened.

"I felt like I went into a knife fight with a cannon and lost," Aftung said, referring to the large hose and intense fire. "I've been doing this a long time. It's not often a fire forces me out."



EMILY HOLMES : SUN STAFF

The firefighters learned later that Bahr was found on an upper level, about 10 feet from the front door.

Two months ago, firefighters installed new batteries in Bahr's smoke detector near her kitchen, and gave her extra batteries. Authorities were unsure if the device worked yesterday.

"I knew she was a great artist," Aftung said, as he studied several art books in a pile of debris outside the back door. "She was really talented."