

FIRE INVESTIGATION REPORT

INCIDENT NO: 20-02862/20-02863      DATE: 01/22/2020      TIME: 2115/2134 HOURS

ADDRESS: 535 FOREST STREET      INSURANCE CO: UNKNOWN

DAMAGE ESTIMATE: \$2,500      POLICE CN#: 20-015-175

**SYNOPSIS:** On Wednesday, January 22, 2020, at approximately 2115 hours, the Saint Paul Fire Department was called to a report of a rubbish fire. The location of the incident was 535 Forest Street. Upon the fire department's arrival, Ladder #7's crew found what appeared to be an extinguished box spring in the side yard of a registered vacant home. The fire crew verified the box spring was extinguished and cleared the scene. Saint Paul Police then called the fire department back to this address at approximately 2134 hours after they checked the interior of the vacant home and found the remains of multiple fires. Investigation revealed the cold remains of multiple small fires on all three levels of the home in what appeared to be an attempt by squatters to cook and/or stay warm. The first materials ignited were most likely the box spring cloth material and wood and/or paper. The ignition source is undetermined. The action that brought these items together is undetermined. The classification of this fire is undetermined.

**PEOPLE:** Property Owner, VANNA YEAN and MALIKA N. KEO, PO Box 25463, Woodbury, MN 55125-2841, 651-699-6190.

Possible Suspect, OTIS ELLIOT WOODSON, No known address, DOB 01/12/1982.

**BACKGROUND:** I received notification of the fire via the Communications Center at approximately 2146 hours. I responded to the incident scene and arrived at approximately 2157 hours. Fire extinguishment was complete and crews were finishing up verification of no remaining hot spots. Saint Paul Police had one person in custody, there were no other occupants, and there were no reports of any injuries. Weather conditions were light snow with a slight accumulation and winds out of the north at approximately 9 mph. The air temperature was approximately 30° Fahrenheit.

**PROPERTY DESCRIPTION:** The structure is a two story, single-family dwelling of wood framed construction with exterior siding that appears to be asbestos tile of a cedar tile appearance. The roof is a gambrel style (barn) roof and is covered in asphalt shingles. The house measures approximately 20 feet wide by 60 feet deep with an additional 5 foot wide by 12 foot deep screened-in porch added on the south wall at the west end. The address side faces east and the house runs east to west. A vehicle driveway runs along the southern property line from Forest Street to the west wall of the home. A charred and fire damaged box spring was found along the southern property line, in the side yard, just west of the end of the driveway. The area around the box spring was examined and nothing was found.

This building is posted as a vacant structure. The property is listed as owned by the individuals listed in the PEOPLE section above per the City of Saint Paul STAMP Property Information.

**EXTERIOR EXAMINATION:** Visual inspection of the exterior of the structure showed no signs of fire or smoke damage along any of the four sides. The east side of the structure is the address side along Forest Street and showed no indication of a problem. The south side of the structure includes a bumped out screened-in porch located in the southwest corner. Access into the structure is through a screen door on the east end of the porch. On the north wall, inside the porch, there is a solid core insulated door allowing entry into the main structure. The exterior screened-in porch contained a screen door at one point in time. At the time of this investigation, the doorway was found open and the remains of a screen door were found hinged to the doorframe. The door was broken off and no longer there.

The western wall of the structure was located in the back yard. It included overhead electrical power lines, which ran down a mast into the electrical meter. The north wall is located in close proximity to the property line and an adjacent home. No indications of any problems were visible to the north wall.

The charred and burned remains of what appears to be full sized box spring were found along the southern property line, in the side yard, just west of the end of the driveway. The box spring was constructed of a wood base with springs on top and covered in a quilted cloth covering. The wood base largely looked unaffected by fire. The springs appeared to have retained their tension, indicating they were not exposed to a large or intense fire. The quilted cloth covering was burned completely off one long side and across a portion of the top. The area around the box spring was examined and nothing notable was found.

**INTERIOR EXAMINATION:** Visual inspection of the interior started at the entry into the screened in porch. As described earlier, the screen door was damaged and only a small portion was still attached at the hinges. Inside, the porch was found empty, with the main solid core insulated door on the north wall. This door was in place but contained an unlocked numerical key code deadbolt with a passage doorknob handle, which was unlockable.

The main floor contained an enclosed side porch, which was used to gain entry into the main floor as well as the kitchen, two living rooms, and a front porch along Forest Street. Containers holding what appeared to be urine were found throughout the first floor. The baseboard heaters had been disassembled, with their copper components missing, resulting in them being inoperable. Kitchen appliances were unplugged and inoperable. The oven was missing the lower drawer.

The remains of one fire took up the open floor area of one main floor living room. The fire debris in that location was verified to be cold to the touch, indicating there was no recent fire in this location. The debris contained remnants of sticks, twigs, aluminum and tin cans, cigarettes and cigarette butts. Also, found in the area were multiple aluminum cans, unopened, full, and empty, bottles of spices, used aluminum foil, 1 gallon plastic jugs (which appeared empty), an empty 5 gallon bucket, socks, Takis brand snack wrappers, and an open flame lighter.

The stairwell upstairs was located roughly in the center of the structure on the north side and a couple sealed cans of food were found on the steps.

The second floor included three bedrooms, one bathroom, and a centrally located open sitting room. The bathroom contained a 5-gallon bucket almost full of what appeared to be a mix of feces and urine. The kitchen oven drawer was in the northwest bedroom raised up on a small makeshift table with fire debris inside. The remains of the fire debris was cold, indicating there had not been a recent fire. A couple of fire damaged trim boards were placed across the top of the drawer as if being set aside to be used for the next fire. Also, located in this room were a mattress with blankets, some clothing and boots, and some food products such as instant potatoes, peanut butter, and candy canes.

The eastern bedroom, which faced Forest Street, contained three separate and distinct fires, all of which were set directly on the room's floor. Items located in and around these fires included empty plastic food containers, 2 liter bottles of pop, the wire rack from the oven, a disposable aluminum pan, a pineapple top, cigarettes and cigarette butts, orange peels, and gallon and quart paint cans. Soot staining was obvious on the walls of this bedroom indicating fires of incomplete combustion with large production of smoke.

Throughout the upper level, baseboard heaters were found disassembled with their copper components missing, rendering them inoperable. Smoke detectors were found removed from their mounting plates and their batteries removed and laying on top of furniture. Numerous half-gallon plastic bottles were found in various upper level rooms.

The basement layout included two rooms; one large mechanical room running east/west and one smaller room located to the west of the first. The smoke detector remained mounted to the ceiling in the basement but was rendered inoperable with the battery removed. The cold remains of a fire were found adjacent to the washer/dryer on the east end of the basement. Items located in this area included aluminum cans, a 1-liter glass bottle, and a couple of empty 1-gallon plastic bottles, an empty 2-liter bottle, and cigarette butts. The main electrical panel was found on the basement west wall with the cover removed. Multiple wires had been disconnected and pulled out and were left hanging loosely into the room.

**INTERVIEWS:** Possible Suspect, OTIS ELLIOT WOODSON, was not interviewed on scene but taken into custody by Saint Paul Police.

**PHOTOGRAPHS/SKETCH:** Digital photographs were taken.

**EVIDENCE:** No evidence was collected. All possible evidence was left on scene for examination by an insurance company representative.

**CONCLUSION:** After examination of the box spring fire scene and fire patterns of both movement and intensity observed, it is my opinion the fire began on the box spring. The 9-1-1 caller reported seeing a male remove the box spring from the building. The ignition source is undetermined but most likely a piloted flame or careless smoking.

The first fuel/material ignited was the cloth covering on the box spring. The action that brought these items together is undetermined. The classification of fire cause is undetermined.

After examination of the vacant home fire scene and fire patterns of both movement and intensity observed, it is my opinion several fires were started in multiple locations on the floor and in the oven drawer, which was placed on top of a stand. The ignition source was most likely a piloted flame. The first fuel/material ignited was most likely wood and/or paper. The action that brought these items together was an intentional human act. The classification of fire cause is undetermined. This report will be forwarded to the Saint Paul Police Department for further investigation. This concludes my investigation and report.

B. Riewe, Back-Up Fire Investigator, C Shift, 02/04/2020

BR/su