

Devastating blaze leaves four dead

Cigarette was likely cause of fire that also injured eight

By Kimberly Mollo —
*Published in The Ocean Star,
March 28, 2014*

POINT PLEASANT BEACH — What was likely a carelessly placed cigarette resulted in the death of four, injuries to eight others, and the destruction of a motel, here, last Friday.

All that is left of the second floor of the Mariner's Cove Motor Inn, located at 50 Broadway, after the massive fire is the charred framing of rooms that last Thursday night had housed approximately 40 guests.

The investigation into the blaze is still ongoing, but officials from the Ocean County Prosecutor's Office have stated the fire was found to have originated in the second floor designated motel smoking area, and was allegedly caused by an improperly discarded cigarette, preliminary investigation findings have revealed.

More specifically, the fire's origin was located along the east wall of the smoking area, in a stuffed chair.

LIVES LOST, BUILDING DESTROYED

A call reporting a fire at the motel first came in at 5:33 a.m. on Friday, March 21, according to Ocean County Prosecutor Joseph D. Coronato.

Approximately 15 calls came in to the local police department and to 9-1-1 when the fire started, he said.

Firefighters from Point Pleasant Beach, Point Pleasant Borough, South Wall, Brielle, Bay Head and Mantoloking — all volunteer departments — responded to the blaze.

Point Pleasant Beach and Point Pleasant Borough's first aid squads, as well as paramedics from the Monmouth Ocean Hospital Service Corporation [MONOC], also responded.

The motel building was already totally engulfed in flames by the time first responders arrived on scene. The fire was declared under control at approximately 7:04 a.m., but the roof had collapsed and the building had been destroyed.



Photo by Andy Mills/The Star-Ledger

The Mariner's Cove Motor Inn did not have a sprinkler system in place at the time of the fire, according to Detective Thomas Haskell, of the Ocean County Prosecutor's Office.

New Jersey Department of Community Affairs [DCA] communications director Lisa Ryan said the motel would not have been required to have sprinklers because it was built in 1984, before state fire code required such construction to include fire sprinklers. There are no retrofit requirements for sprinkler systems in buildings of that type, she said.

The New Jersey Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board believes the presence of sprinklers could have limited the destructive blaze to a small, one-room fire [see related story].

The motel fire resulted in four deaths. Eight people, including one law enforcement officer, also suffered injuries in the fire.

To date, the one victim positively identified is John Alberti, 45, of Keansburg. The three others have been tentatively identified by officials as Paulo Martins, 20, of South River; Harold Ford, 52, of Neptune; and Albert Sutton, 66, of Mount Laurel.

Autopsies of the four victims have concluded that the cause of death was due to smoke inhalation and the manner was accidental for all four victims.

The medical examiner is continuing the forensic investigation to definitively achieve positive identifications, according to the Prosecutor's Office. All next of kin have been notified.

Those injured in the fire were Killol Shah, 25, who had cuts to the hands and face, was treated at Jersey Shore University Medical Center, Neptune, and released; Karl Green, 60, who had burns to the left arm and neck, was treated at Jersey Shore University Medical Center and released; and Melanie Deieso, 22, who had second degree burns to the legs, and was treated at Jersey Shore and transferred to St. Barnabas Burn Center in stable condition.

Also, Alexis Scarpone, 20, who was also injured, but the prosecutor's office did not have information on his injuries. He was treated and released from Ocean Medical Center. James Gianuzzi, 51, was also treated and released from Ocean Medical Center. There was no information on his injuries available. Keri Anderson, 42, was treated at Jersey Shore University Medical Center and transferred to St. Barnabas Burn Center. Frank Smith, 51, had a scalp burn and first degree burns to shoulder and back. He was treated and released at the scene.

Ocean County Prosecutor's Office spokesperson Al Della Fave said the hometowns of the injured victims were not available.

Although several motels in the area are used as part of the state's Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program during the winter, Ms. Ryan, of the DCA, said no Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers were allocated from the DCA to Mariner's Cove Motor Inn.

In addition to the seven injured civilians, one member of the Ocean County Sheriff's Office Criminalistics Investigations Unit suffered injuries during the

incident. The officer was transported to Jersey Shore University Medical Center, Neptune, with multiple broken bones, Mr. Coronato said.

A HEROIC RESCUE

Despite the fatal toll the fire took on several lives, one rescue did take place.

Point Pleasant Beach Fire Department Chief A.J. Fox said one victim, a female, was on the second floor of the motel as it lit up in flames. The woman was in the shower, and remained there to protect herself from the blaze.

“She was smart enough to stay down” in the tub with the water running, Chief Fox said.

Point Pleasant Beach firefighter Mike Ryan went through the window and got to the victim, and Point Pleasant Beach firefighter Justin Leach brought her down the ladder, where she was assessed by EMS personnel and brought to the hospital [see related story].

Chief Fox said people were mostly outside the motel by the time firefighters arrived on scene. As the structure was fully engulfed by that time, with fire “blowing right through the windows,” firefighters were unable to fight the blaze from the inside.

“There was no way we could get through the windows,” Chief Fox said. “The only rescue we could make was that one woman. Everything just came together right for her.”

The chief said he had never experienced a fire with such a high death toll during his tenure with the fire department.

“I’ve seen some big fires, [but] I have not had that many fatalities in one single fire like this,” he said. “Our response was right on, timely. Our fire department and our mutual aid companies did a fantastic job.”

AN ONGOING INVESTIGATION

The motel had the capacity for 100 people, with 25 units, officials said. There were approximately 40 people staying in the motel last Thursday night into Friday morning.

The fire caused extensive damage to the Mariner’s Cove Motor Inn office — among all other rooms in the building — and destroyed many records, Mr. Coronato said. Because of this, law enforcement officials worked with hotel management last Friday morning, trying to piece together information — from memory — on exactly how many individuals were in the hotel at the time of the fire.

Officials were able to narrow it down to 40 motel guests, but 10 of those guests were unaccounted for as law enforcement entered a search-and-recovery phase last Friday morning. By late that afternoon, all 10 had been accounted for, according to the prosecutor’s office.

After all motel guests had been accounted for, officials moved into the next phase of the fire investigation.

A team of investigators from federal, state, county, and local departments arrived at their preliminary findings with forensic assistance from the Ocean

County High Tech Crime Unit. The unit recovered critical video from the severely damaged motel surveillance system, Mr. Della Fave said.

As the investigation moves forward, the investigative team will continue to analyze the recovered video, pre- and post-scene photos, along with interviews of motel guests and management, according to Mr. Della Fave.

“This is only the beginning of an intensive investigation aimed at answering the many questions surrounding all the circumstances that contributed to the tragic deaths, injuries and loss of property,” Mr. Coronato said. “This release comes as investigators meet with local code officials, representatives of the medical examiner’s office, and surviving motel guests to secure a comprehensive final report.”

The investigation is ongoing and anyone with information regarding the fire is asked to contact Detective Haskell, of the Ocean County Prosecutor’s Office, at 732-929-2027, or the confidential tip line at www.oceancountyprosecutor.org.

The local community has come together to give aid to the surviving victims of the fire. St. Mary’s by-the-Sea Church, on Bay Avenue, is hosting a memorial service this afternoon at 2 p.m., and St. Gregory’s Pantry is supplying victims with needed assistance [see related story].