

5 ALARM FIRE, DOWNTOWN AYER MA by Captain Timothy P. Johnston, Ayer Fire

Another multiple alarm fire has hit the downtown district of Ayer MA, the third one since 1997. The town of Ayer is located in north central Massachusetts about 15 miles south of the New Hampshire border. The fire department protects just fewer than 8,000 residents with a full time staff of 13 and a 30 man call department. There are 3 firefighters on duty per shift.

The fire building is located at the corner of Main and West streets. It's a 50x70, 3 story wood frame, with a small attached 1 story building on the B side. The basement was being renovated into a bar and was schedule to open soon. The 1st floor was a subway shop in the front and the kitchen for the bar was in the rear. Both floors 2 and 3 were occupied apartments.

On June 19th at 00:25 hours the fire department received a call for a commercial fire alarm at 63 Main Street and dispatched Engine-2 and Ladder-1. As E-2 arrived they pulled up on the D side of the building which is located on West Street. At this point Captain Taylor observed smoke coming from the rear of the building. The Captain called for a working fire filling out the 1st alarm assignment for Ayer and Engine from Shirley and Devens. They were also met by people telling them there were people still in the building unaccounted for. Chief Pedrazzi arrived on scene shortly after the Engine and assumed Command.

Engine-2 crew completed a primary and secondary search and found no occupants left in the building. The Chief completed a walk around of the building and found fire coming out of the basement window on the B side. Several attack lines were stretched to all levels of the building for an aggressive interior attack. At 00:40 hours the Chief ordered a second alarm bring in a Lunenburg ladder and a Littleton engine. With limited progress being made on the fire he struck the 3rd alarm bringing in a Westford and Harvard engine to the fire and Groton to cover.

The Chief was faced with exposure problems on the B and C sides and continued fire extension. He ordered the building evacuated. At 00:57 the 4th and 5th alarms were struck for defensive operations. Fitchburg and Leominster both sent engines to the fire. Shirley ladder-1 set up on West Street for the C side exposure. The Westford tower set up over the B side exposure which was separated by a 4 foot alley.

With a good water supply the exterior fire attack was on. Several aerial streams along with deck guns and 2.5 hand lines were used. Within an hour the bulk of the heavy fire had been knocked down. Crews returned inside the building where they found several pockets of fire still burning in the walls. Around 05:00 the Chief declared the fire under control and started to release the mutual aid company's. It is no doubt without the extensive mutual aid and substantial water supply the fire would not have been kept to the building of origin.

The Ayer fire and police departments along with the State Fire marshal's office began their investigation. It was determined by the fire marshal's office that dirty rags used to stain furniture in the bar area the night before started the fire. The stained soak rags spontaneously combusted spreading flames quickly through the 3 story building.

