This Report does not necessarily contain all information known to Police.

Fatal Fire Investigation, 19 Lafayette Road, Ipswich, Ma.

Case Closed/Inconclusive.
MASSACHUSETTS STATE POLICE

INVESTIGATIVE SYNOPSIS

Officer: Tpr. Patrick R. Silva #2576    FMO Case #: 2001-117-0109
Controlling Case #: 2001-106-0033

NOTIFICATION/RESPONSE:

1. On Tuesday January 23, 2001 at approximately 1857 hours the Ipswich Police Department received numerous 911 calls reporting a fire at 19 Lafayette Road in Ipswich. The Ipswich Police notified the Fire Department and the Fire Department responded under the command of Lt. George who later transferred command to Fire Chief Henry Michelski. It took three alarms and sixty firefighters from four communities to extinguish this fire.

2. On Tuesday January 23, 2001 at approximately 1930 hours I, Tpr. Patrick R. Silva, was notified by Tpr. Elkin Arrendondo of a multiple alarm, multiple fatal fire in Ipswich and that Chief Michelski had requested the Fire Marshal’s Office to the scene. I responded directly to the scene and arrived at approximately 2015 hours. The Fire Department was still in the process of bringing the fire under control. At this time a joint investigation into the origin and cause of this fire was begun by members of the Ipswich Fire Department, Ipswich Police Department, State Police Detectives assigned to the Fire Marshal’s Office and State Police Detective’s assigned to the Essex County District Attorney’s Office.

INJURIES/FATALITIES:

3. There were three fatalities associated with this fire. Lisa Collum and her two children, Lindsey and Carly, all perished during the fire. Lisa was located in the third floor kitchen by the window which she had dropped her infant Carly out of. Lindsey was located in the third floor living room near the front of the structure. Carly was dropped out of the window by her mother and was Med-Flighted to Mass General where she later died. The State Medical Examiner conducted post-mortem examinations on all three victims. Dr. Chirkov examined Lisa Collum and determined the cause of death to be smoke inhalation. Dr. Zane examined Lindsey Collum and determined the cause of death to be smoke inhalation. Dr. Evans examined Carly Collum and determined the cause of death to be smoke inhalation.

STRUCTURE/UTILITIES:

4. The building is a three-story, wood framed, three family home of open/balloon construction which faces East onto Lafayette Road. The structure sits on a concrete block foundation some of which is skim coated with mortar. The home has a full basement where all of the utilities are located. The home is sided with Brown Wooden shingles and features a gabled roof running from East to West protected by asphalt shingles.

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5. The hot water for the home is supplied by three natural gas powered hot water heaters located in the basement. The heat for the home is supplied by a single oil powered forced hot water boiler with three separate zones for each floor which is located in the basement. The heat of the forced hot water is transferred through baseboards located throughout the home. The natural gas meters for the home are located on the exterior Delta side of the home.

6. The electric service for the home is located in the basement A/D corner. There are three separate electric panels. The panel for the first floor is a 100-amp panel protected by circuit breakers. The Electric panels for the second and third floor spaces both 60-amp services also with circuit breakers as overcurrent protection.

FIRST ARRIVING POLICE/FIRE OBSERVATIONS:

7. Ipswich Detective Charlie Cooper was to arrive on scene and observed fire extending from the rear first floor window on the Bravo side of the structure as well as heavy smoke coming out of the front door. Det. Cooper attempted to gain entry into the front door however there was too much heat and smoke to enter the structure. Det. Cooper went around the back of the building where neighbors had extended a 24’ aluminum ladder to assist an occupant out of the third floor. The fire at this time was extending out of the rear sliding glass doors up the exterior of the building.

8. The first firefighter on scene was Lt. John Morris who arrived in his personal car and walked up the street. He observed smoke coming down the street from the building. There were numerous people advising Lt. Morris that there were people trapped in the building. They directed Lt. Morris to the back of the building and there was fire coming from the first floor middle and right sides (Living Room). The second floor windows were still intact and looked darkened down. They put a ladder to the second floor between the left and middle window on the right. He opened the window on the right and fire came out of the first floor window and up towards him. He then backed down the ladder and awaited the Fire Apparatus.

9. Firefighter Chris Gregory also arrived on scene in his personal vehicle. The Fire Pump was not on scene yet. When he left his office he could hear a woman screaming. He observed several people around the building. The back window on the Bravo side popped out and fire extended out of the window. There was fire in the front door at the top of the door which was a Blue flame. Gregory opened the door and there was no debris. The fire was coming from the back of the building towards the front. He was at the door with F/F Bob Bohan with a line. They got 3’ inside and flames came down the hall and from the right front room through the door. At that point the flames were almost all the way to the floor. They could not make it further then 3’ inside. They needed two lines for the fire in the hall and on the right.

OCCUPANT INTERVIEWS:

10. Michelle L. Collum stated that she had called Lisa Collum on the phone about 10 minutes before she went over there. Michelle was going over to pick up Lindsey and bring Lindsey to her house to play with her children. When she spoke to Lisa she did not say anything was wrong. Michelle drove over to Lisa’s and arrived at about the same time as Dick Collum. She did not see anything when she first got there. Dick and Michelle talked outside for a minute and she told him that she was only there to pick up Lindsey. Michelle went SP-349A
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in the front door and it was hazy. She does not remember hearing the fire alarm. She heard the fire not the alarm. The fire was so loud.

Michelle walked into the first floor kitchen and turned around and told Dick not to come in, there was a fire. It was smoky and hazy in the kitchen but there was not fire in the kitchen. When she was inside the kitchen she could see inside the living room and saw fire in the living room. Michelle saw an easy chair on fire in the living room. She saw the back corner of the chair on fire and the flames were tall, reaching to the ceiling and curtains. That chair would be the only thing that she would be able to see in the living room from where she was standing.

Michelle ran out the kitchen door and up the front stairs. She was screaming fire at this point. She opened up the door and it was eerily dark in there. She screamed to Pam that there was a fire and to get the kids out. Michelle could also hear Dick downstairs yelling to call 911. She saw Pam with her baby in her arms run down to the first floor. Michelle was going to go upstairs to get the family and run down the back stairs. Michelle went up to the third floor and when she saw Lisa she was on the couch breastfeeding the baby. Michelle told Lisa that there was a fire and Lisa said What. By the time she said what there was Black smoke, soot and heat. Michelle went to the bathroom to get towels. She crawled to the bathroom. She was thinking that if she could get breath then she could get to Lindsey. Michelle got disoriented and made it to the bathroom but could not make it out. By that point the fire was on the third floor. The fire was in the third floor bedroom where Lisa and Mark slept. Michelle was yelling to Lisa and she was yelling for Lindsey. Michelle heard nothing from Lisa after that. Lisa was no longer screaming and Michelle thought what she should do. She knew if she went back into the kitchen she was not going to come out.

Michelle hung out the bathroom window and was getting scared because the flames were on the third floor. This could not have been more than five minutes after she had gone into the house. Eventually someone got Michelle with a ladder. While Michelle was in Lisa's apartment she tried to go to the back door and the door knob was hot and she could not do the latch.

11. Richard E. Collum Jr. stated that he was coming from the St. Lawrence Club around 6:15 PM and parked in the driveway. He entered the front door and it was unlocked. He sees the smoke and is not sure of the color. He yelled for people to get out and to call the Fire Department. He went down the hall and into the kitchen and there was a lot of smoke and then a flame. There was too much smoke and heat to put it out. He yelled for everyone to get out and for someone to call the Fire Department. He went back out to the front porch. He tried to go back onto the kitchen a second time but could not go back in. He saw his neighbor Bob DiPiola put a ladder to get the baby out.

Around 4:10 PM the cable company came and stayed about fifteen minutes and he switched cable boxes. Richard was the only one home. His wife was at the St. Lawrence Club having a few drinks. Richard left the apartment about five minutes after the cable guy left. Richard stated that he had not had a cigarette in ten days because he quit. The cable guy did not smoke and his wife has not smoked in fifteen years. Richard has had no problems with the home. About 15-20 years ago he had his electric service converted to circuit breakers. Richard never heard the smoke detectors go off.

12. Pam Collum stated that she lives on the second floor and has lived there for about three years with her husband Gary and two children. She was home with her husband and children from 1 PM on. Her husband left at 603 PM to go bowling and she was in her bedroom with her son. Her daughter was in her bedroom. Pam had the TV on and was almost asleep. She smelled what she thought was toast burning. She got up and went into her kitchen and saw gray smoke. It was kind of medium. She ran to her front door and began to pull on it to open it.
She forgot to open the deadbolt and was only able to pull it open slightly. She could see thick Black smoke filtering through the air. Pam heard screaming and she thinks it was Dick saying to get the kids out. She ran over and grabbed the children and went out the back door. The whole hallway was filled with Black smoke. She turned the hall light on and is not sure if it went on. She pushed the kids ahead of her feeling her way down the stairs and they got out to the back deck. She saw her sister in law Michelle hanging out the third floor bathroom window screaming and crying. She also remembers seeing flames shooting out Dicks kitchen windows (rear driveway side).

13. Carol-Ann Collum stated that she usually had candles burning but did not have any burning today because she was not going to be around. She left the house a little after 3 PM and went to the Post Office and the bank. She went to the Club a little after 4 PM and Dick got to the club about five past five. Dick finished a beer and left at about 6:15 PM. She got a call about the fire while at the club. Carol-Ann stated that she does not smoke and her husband has a breathing problem. He is a cigar smoker. She has not had any problems with the home and has no idea what started this fire.

NEIGHBOR INTERVIEWS:

14. Everett Reed stated that someone banged on his door yelled fire outside and ran to his backyard and saw the B/C corner room of the home fully engulfed. The window was not breached at that time. He observed no other fire at that time.

15. Kevin Miller stated that he heard the fire alarm tone go out on the scanner. He went outside and saw smoke coming out of the building. He approached the building and saw fire on the first floor B/C corner window and the windows had not broken yet. He asked Mr. Collum to close the front door and he didn’t. The smoke was banking down and he could see embers. In the back of the building a woman was hanging out of the third floor. The fire was then all the way into the third floor B/C corner. They grabbed aluminum ladder and put it on the back deck to the third floor and she started climbing down. When she was 1/4 way down the ladder the rear sliding doors collapse and fire rolled over her.

16. Mark Walker heard the fire reported on the scanner and ran up the street. He saw Dick in the doorway and he said that there were kids still on the third floor. Dick was attempting to enter the front door. Mark saw flames shooting up from the middle of the house (pointed to Kitchen window).

17. Rob DePaula stated he saw flames in the kitchen windows on the first floor and there was smoke in the whole house. He put a ladder up to the rear window for a female who was hanging from a window. Gary Collum tried to enter the rear door.

18. Wendy Viator stated that she was eating dinner around 7 PM and heard screaming and commotion. She went to her front door and opened it and could see people running up the street. She could see flames coming from the driveway side of the home. It was the middle window. She heard screaming that there were babies in the house and she yelled to her husband and he went running out. The smoke detectors were not going off, she did not hear them.

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19. Ted Viator stated that he was having dinner around 7 PM and heard screaming. His wife said that there is a fire and kids in the house. He went with Kevin Miller and put an extension ladder up in the back of the house. They got Michelle Collum down from the third floor. He heard no smoke detectors going off.

SCENE EXAMINATION:

20. The scene was examined from the exterior to the interior and from the areas of least damage to the areas of most damage. The Alpha side of the home sustained light smoke and heat damage above the front door and first floor windows. The second floor of the Alpha side had moderate amount of smoke and fire damage extending out of the porch door. The third floor had severe fire damage at the peak of the gabled roof but a minimal amount of smoke and heat damage above the two third floor windows on this side. The Bravo side of the home has smoke and heat damage above all of the windows on this side. The heaviest of this damage was extending from the first floor living room window at B/C corner of the structure. This fire damage had traveled up the exterior of the home and across the eves. The damage to this side of the home indicated that the fire was traveling from the back of the home towards the front of the home as it traveled upwards and outwards.

21. The Charlie side of the structure sustained the heaviest exterior fire damage to the building. There was heavy fire damage that extended from the first floor living room sliding glass doors up the exterior of the home to the roof. The second floor bedroom window that was above the sliding glass door also had a large amount of fire damage extending above to the roof. The rear door to the porch had a large amount of fire damage which extended out of the door all the way up to the roof. The heaviest damage on this side of the home was extending from the first floor living room up to the roof.

22. The Delta side of the building had a heavy amount of fire damage traveling up the exterior of the home from the first floor kitchen and first floor front bedroom windows. This fire traveled all the way to the eves but did not extend laterally.

23. The building was then entered and a walk through of the building was conducted to familiarize myself with the building's layout, construction, fire damage, and fire spread. The first floor had sustained a heavy amount of fire, smoke and heat damage throughout the floor. The heaviest of this damage was in the living room in the B/C corner of the home. This was consistent with the exterior damage to the building. The majority of fire damage sustained on the first floor was in the living room and kitchen.

24. The second floor was accessed by the front stairs because the rear stairs had collapsed during fire. This floor had sustained a moderate amount of smoke and heat damage. The only substantial fire damage sustained on this second floor was to the rear bedroom and stairway in the B/C corner of the building above the first floor living room. Some of the support beams for this area of the structure had failed during the fire causing a bedroom closet to collapse into the first floor living room. The heaviest of the fire damage to the second floor was in the rear of the building in the B/C corner.

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25. The third floor of the home was then examined. There was a substantial amount of structural collapse on this floor in the rear of the building. The rear bedroom, stairs and bathroom could not be accessed due to heavy amount of structural damage. The kitchen floor had also partially collapsed into the second floor. There was a heavy amount of fire damage on this floor in the rear. The damage to the front of the building appeared to have happened after the collapse of the roof. There were two victims of the fire located on this floor. Lisa Collum was located on the floor of the kitchen next to the rear dormer windows. A search was made for her daughter Lindsay and she was located on the floor of the living room in the front of the home next to the couch. Both victims were removed by the Office of the Medical Examiner.

26. All fire damage was emanating from the first floor living room of the structure. At this point a more detailed examination of this room was conducted. The room had been heavily damaged by the fire which consumed all of the furniture which was in the room with the exception of the TV stand and electronic equipment located therein. We systematically removed the debris in a layering process attempting to locate any and all potential heat sources which could have caused this fire. During this removal of debris an extension cord was located which ran from a wall outlet on the Bravo side of the room, along the floor and around a corner and ended on the Alpha side of the room near the doorway. This wire showed a heavy amount of damage in the corner of the room and had beading on both ends of the wire. Fire Marshal Electrician Dennis Toto was on scene and examined all of the electrical wiring and was unable to eliminate this extension cord as causing this fire. (Refer to Toto's report)

27. The excavation continued and a wicker trash basket was located stuck to the floor. There were still combustible items left on the bottom of this basket. We also located discarded cigarettes both smoked and unsmoked in this basket. There was also a burnt book of matches in this basket. This basket would have been under a table and next to an upholstered chair.

28. The excavation was completed and Tpr. Horgan worked his accelerant detection canine Lucy through the scene with no alerts. We then cleared the floor of all debris and cleaned the floor with a fire line. The floor showed a heavy amount of charring in the area of the upholstered chair and the couch protected the floor under the couch.

**FIRE ALARM SYSTEM:**

29. An examination of the fire alarm system was conducted by Fire Marshal Electrician Dennis Toto, Fire Marshal Code Enforcement members and myself. There was a hard-wired fire alarm system in the building. The hard-wired detectors were located in both the front and rear stairwells on each floor and one in the basement. We did locate physical evidence of detectors in those locations.

30. The hard-wired systems wires were traced into the basement. The wires were further traced to a junction box on the main carrying beam of the home just outside the room where the electric services are located. The wire for the hard-wired system had been disconnected from its power source in this junction box at some point since it's installation. The other wires inside of this junction box were traced to the third floor but due to the structural failure we could not trace them further.

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31. The Black power wire for the hard-wired system was further traced back from the junction box to the Main Service Panel for the home. This Black power wire entered into the 100 Amp panel for the first floor and was not connected to a breaker. The wire was coiled up and hung freely in the area of the bottom breaker on the left side of the panel. The Black power wire that was in the lower left breaker was traced to see what is supplied power to. It was traced along the ceiling through the basement and went up through a hole in the ceiling in the area of the first floor kitchen. This was the power supply for the dishwasher in the first floor kitchen.

RE-INTERVIEW OF DICK AND CAROLANN COLLUM:

32. On Wednesday January 24, 2001 at approximately 1730 hours Dick and Carol Ann Collum arrived at the Ipswich Police Department with a family friend. Dick and Carol Ann were interviewed together in Det. Cooper’s office by Det. Cooper, Tpr. O’Conner and myself. The friend was also allowed to sit in on this interview. We were trying to get a history of the building, a detailed diagram of the Collum’s Living Room and also share with them the results of the investigation up to this point.

They informed us that the kitchen had been remodeled 12-13 years ago by a General Contractor named Jim Welch. A new stove was added to their kitchen two years ago and a new fridge four years ago. The dishwasher in the kitchen was added when they remodeled 12-13 years ago and that is the same dishwasher that they have today. The electrical work was sub-contacted by Welch to an electrician Jon Gonovic. They have added nothing to the kitchen since it was remodeled. About 4-5 years ago a new stove and fridge for the second floor was added but there were no renovations. About 2 years ago a new stove was put on the third floor.

The home has always been a three family. They purchased the home thirty-seven years ago and prior to purchasing the home they lived on the third floor as renters. The Fire Alarms were added when the law changed and they were put in the stairways and cellar. Jon Gonowicz installed the system. The system was inspected by the fire department after it was put in. They did not think the fire department had ever been back since the inspection. They stated that the battery-operated smoke detectors were left in the hallways of each floor when the new system was added. There was also battery smoke detectors in Dick’s bedroom, the back hall of the first floor, Carol Ann’s front room just outside her bedroom. He knows he put battery smoke detectors in the second and third floor but could not remember where. He thinks he bought eight of them eight or so years ago. Dick replaced his batteries three months ago because they were going off all the time and getting dead. He did not know if or when the other batteries would have been changed.

I then informed Mr. and Mrs. Collum of the findings of our investigation in regards to the Fire Alarm system and the potential causes of the fire. The Collum’s became upset and the interview was concluded.

ORIGIN AND CAUSE:

33. Based on witness statements, physical evidence, and a scene examination it is my opinion that this fire originated in the first floor living room located at the B/C corner of the home. All of the fire damage in the interior and exterior of the building can be traced back to this room. The fire traveled upwards and outwards from this room consistent with normal fire behavior. The fire also was able to spread into the open walls and travel into the second and third floor rear bedrooms.

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34. During the investigation three potential accidental causes of this fire were uncovered and could not be eliminated. There was an extension cord located in the area of origin, evidence of smoking material and statements about candles in this room which had allegedly been blown out. All three of these heat sources have the potential for starting this fire. Due to the amount of damage and the inability to eliminate several potential causes I cannot come to an opinion in regards to what caused this fire. At this time there is no evidence that this fire was an intentional or deliberate act.

35. Case Closed/Inconclusive.

Respectfully submitted,

Tpr. Patrick R. Silva #2376
Trooper, Mass. State Police
State Fire Marshal’s Office

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Lafayette Rd 2nd Floors

Not to Scale
No Measurements

- Hard wired smoke detector
- Lines for hard wired system field.
19 Lafayette Rd 3rd Floor

Jaffre, MA

Not to Scale

No measurements

Bedroom

(balcony)

Dormer

Dormer

Dormer

Landing

Bed

Closet

Living Room

Bathroom

Shower

Fridge

Mudroom

Laundry

00 - hard wired smoke detectors

Lafayette Road