

Fires

Update: Suspect named in Duluth synagogue fire

Matthew James Amiot was arrested in connection with the fire that destroyed Duluth's Adas Israel synagogue Sept. 9

Written By: [Adelle Whitefoot](#) | Sep 15th 2019 - 11am.



Adas Israel Synagogue lay leader Phillip Sher speaks during a press conference Sunday at Duluth City Hall updating the investigation of the Adas Israel Synagogue fire. (Clint Austin / caustin@duluthnews.com)

City of Duluth officials announced Sunday the name of the man arrested in connection with the fire that destroyed Adas Israel Congregation synagogue.

Matthew James Amiot, 36, of Duluth was arrested Friday and is being held at St. Louis County Jail on a felony charge of first-degree arson. The News Tribune does not generally name suspects who have not yet been charged but did so due to the high profile nature of the crime.

The city of Duluth held a Sunday morning news conference regarding the arrest of Adas Israel Synagogue fire suspect and fire investigation. Duluth Police Chief Mike Tusken said it is not believed at this time to be a bias or hate crime but stressed "this is an open and ongoing investigation" and that may change as the investigation progresses.

Tusken laid out the timeline of events during the news conference. Firefighters were called to the synagogue at 2:23 a.m. Sept. 9 on a report of a fire in an outbuilding. The fire started on the northeast side of the building and was extinguished, but had spread to the synagogue.

Tusken said Amiot was identified as a person of interest on the afternoon of Sept. 9 after police canvassed the area, located as much surveillance video as possible and followed up on leads. Police interviewed two other people last week who happened upon the fire in the morning. Neither are considered suspects.

On Friday, investigators met with assistant St. Louis County Attorney Victoria Wanta to review the investigation, at which time a probable cause warrant for arrest was issued, Tusken said. Amiot was located, arrested and interviewed on Friday afternoon.

Tusken would not comment further on Amiot's motives and directed people to the criminal complaint that is expected to be filed mid-week with the State District Court in Duluth.

Adas Israel lay leader Phillip Sher spoke at the news conference thanking everyone involved in the investigation as well as all of those who have reached out to him and the congregation with support.

"I've gone there my whole life and the first thing you think of is an image of where you're going to go now. We'll forge ahead. Right now we are making arrangements to begin services again," Sher said. "True Judaism is in the heart, it's not in the building and our legacy will go on with our hearts."

News of the synagogue burning to the ground has spread throughout the world and drawn lots of attention on social media.

A large and intense investigation into the cause of the fire stretched throughout last week, drawing on an estimated 20 investigators with the Duluth police and fire departments, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. That particular federal agency gets involved when a house of worship is burned.

A Duluth fireman, identified as Ben Gasner, was injured during the fire. Duluth Fire Chief Shawn Krizaj said Gasner, who has been with the department for 19 years, is recovering at home from a concussion sustained while battling the fire.

The Adas Israel Congregation synagogue is home to a "shul" of Modern Orthodox Jewish families. Built in 1901, the synagogue was the last of its kind in the Northland. To worship in the Modern Orthodox Jewish faith is to practice Jewish law while living out modern lives.

New York author Sarah Rose is a descendant of one of the synagogue's founders and told the News Tribune this week, "We hope it's not our worst nightmare."

Rose called Duluth her ancestral home. She visited relatives and the synagogue often on trips from her childhood home in Chicago.

The Jewish community in Duluth has dwindled since its historic roots. According to "Stories and Legacies of Some Jewish Immigrants to the Twin Ports," the late Bob Goldish wrote that Jews began to populate the Twin Ports in 1871, coming from mostly Germany and Eastern Europe. Their population grew to roughly 4,000 people and by the time of his writing in 2011 had fallen to under 1,000.

According to sources, Adas Israel Congregation was founded by Modern Orthodox Jewish immigrants from Lithuania, some looking to avoid conscription into the army. Goldish wrote that conscription for Jewish boys, at that time and in that part of the world, could start at 14 or 15 years old and last for 25 years.

"Most were never seen again," he wrote in his nearly 100-page report, which was used as the basis of a lecture at the Duluth Art Institute.

The synagogue was home to roughly 40 families. Leaders have said the shul faces an uncertain future without its place of worship.

This is a developing story. Check back for updates.



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Matthew James Amiot



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Rabbi Mendy Ross with Chabad of Duluth listens to the speakers during a press conference Sunday at Duluth City Hall updating the investigation of the Adas Israel Synagogue fire. (Clint Austin / caustin@duluthnews.com)



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City of Duluth police chief Mike Tusken speaks during a press conference Sunday at Duluth City Hall updating the investigation of the Adas Israel Synagogue fire. (Clint Austin / caustin@duluthnews.com)

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