

Charges: Homeless man tried to put synagogue fire out after starting it

The fire caused more than \$350,000-worth of damage.

ADAM UREN · 1 HOUR AGO

The man accused of setting the fire that destroyed a synagogue in Duluth told police he tried to put it out by spitting on it, before walking away as it took hold.

Matthew Amiot, 36, whose address is listed as a homeless shelter in Duluth, has been charged with negligent fires

Israel Congregation Synagogue at 302 East Third Street on Sept. 9.

According to the complaint against him, he set the fire between the synagogue and the sukkah, a specially-constructed structure where people commune during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot.

The gap between the two structures creates a "small outdoor alcove space" about two feet wide, and it was in this space that Amiot allegedly used a lighter to set fire to a "variety of combustible materials" around 2:13 a.m. Monday, Sept. 9.

He was seen walking away from it two minutes later, "looking back at the flickering flames."

By the time firefighters arrived at the scene at 2:22 a.m., the flames were already three feet tall in the alcove area, before spreading to destroy the entire synagogue.

The complaint says that while damage estimates are still being tabulated, the destroyed building is worth \$117,000, while \$250,000-worth of religious antiquities were lost.

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A firefighter was also injured during the building collapse when he was hit by falling debris, knocking him unconscious. He was taken to a hospital for treatment on a concussion.

In a statement to police following his arrest on Friday, Amiot admitted to setting the fire but said he "tried to spit on the fire to put it out, and when it would not go out, he walked away."

He's now facing up to three years in jail for the incident.

Police said at a press conference on Sunday that the investigation continues, but that there doesn't appear at this stage to be any bias motivation behind the fire.