

# No charges filed against suspect in hotel fire

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SANTA CRUZ — A transient suspected of starting the fire at the St. George Hotel has been released from jail.

Despite finding a St. George Hotel matchbook in his pocket, investigators said they have been unable to prove the man arrested at the scene of Sunday's fire intentionally started the blaze.

Because of the lack of evidence, District Attorney Art Danner said Wednesday that no arson charges were filed against the man, who identified himself to police as John Robert Miller, 27.

Police released Miller from jail Wednesday afternoon.

Miller was arrested Sunday night after he tried to break into a police car and then panhandled a deputy chief at the scene, said officers.

As Miller was being arrested, witnesses came up to police and said they had seen him running from an alcove on the Front Street side of the hotel just as the fire began.

Detective Sgt. Joe Haebe said another witness, a downtown business manager, later said he had chased Miller out of his business after catching Miller trying to wash ashes from his hands and out of his hair.

That information, plus the matchbook with several matches missing, leads Haebe to believe that Miller "was involved in the fire."

"We have determined that he had been in town just a short time. We do not believe he would have come across those matches on the street," Haebe said.

But, Haebe said, investigators have not

been able to determine whether the blaze was intentionally set or was accidental.

City Fire Marshal George Lopes said evidence of several fires having been started in corners of rooms and in closets at the hotel are indications of arson.

Lopes said there was evidence that at least one fire in the building had been accidental. He said a fire extinguisher had been used on that fire. The problem, Lopes said, is that investigators cannot determine whether any of those fires, accidental or otherwise, were started on Sunday or perhaps days or weeks earlier.

And, he said, demolition necessary to finally extinguish the blaze has now erased evidence on the third floor where firefighters suspect the blaze really began. The earthquake-damaged building was too dangerous for firefighters to enter so they had to have walls torn down to get at the stubborn fire.

A wrecking crew continued to remove the debris from the huge hole opened up in the historic building. About one-third of the Pacific Avenue side of the building — from the lobby to the corner of the old County Bank Building — has been demolished.

Fire Chief Ed Ekers has said that no further demolition is warranted because of the fire.

The fate of the building was in the courts before the fire began, and that is likely where it finally will be decided.

Representatives of local, state and national preservation groups are expected to tour the remains on Friday to determine whether to continue their appeal of a local judge's ruling that would allow owner Barry Swenson to demolish the hotel.