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Fatal Fire Is 4th in 6 Months at Store in Long Island Mall

By SARAH LYALL, Published: May 18, 1991

A fire that killed two people and destroyed a McCrory's store in a rush of black smoke and 10-foot flames at the Walt Whitman Mall here on Thursday night was the fourth suspicious fire at the store in six months, officials said today.

The officials said it was too early to establish the cause of the fire, which had apparently begun in the artificial-flower section of McCrory's and then raced through the store as it was fueled by flammable merchandise. But they said they were looking for evidence of arson and for any connection with the previous fires.

We've determined this fire to be suspicious in nature due to the fact that it was a large-volume fire," said Detective Sgt. Kevin Cronin of the Suffolk County Homicide Squad. The Roof Caves In

The fire in the store began about 8:25 P.M., with just over an hour left before closing, and raged until after midnight. It gutted the 62,000-square-foot building, caused much of the roof to cave in, killed at least two people and injured 36. About 250 firefighters put out the fire an hour later, the authorities said.

Both of those killed were store employees. One victim, who apparently died of smoke inhalation and whose body was found in the basement, was identified as Wayne Mortak, 20 years old, of West Babylon. The badly burned body of the second victim, identified as Eileen Aylward, 27, of East Northport, was found near an escalator on the first floor.

Officials said that until they could walk through and examine the caved-in building, still smoldering today, they would be unable to rule out the possibility that more bodies were buried in the rubble.

The fire broke out suddenly and seemed to engulf the store in a matter of minutes, people working in the 110-store mall said. Witnesses in several nearby boutiques, connected to McCrory's but separate from Macy's and most of the other stores in the spread-out mall, said they had heard alarms and then looked out to see a cloud of black smoke billowing toward them.

"I thought there was a blackout in the mall, because all you could see was black," said Christa Casciglia, a 16-year-old clerk at the Children's Place, a clothing store across the hall from McCrory's, recalling how she peered out into the hall after she heard customers screaming. "You couldn't see one inch in front of your face."

As she struggled to shuttle children and their parents out through the back of her store, Miss Casciglia said, a manager from McCrory's ran in and picked up the telephone. "He notified his boss that he had lost his store, that it had just gone up in flames," she said.

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guard shouted for everyone to leave. "There was total panic," she said. "Those people who got out last night, I don't know how they did it." 'She Was Just Panicking'

Miss Casciglia's best friend, she said, was working in McCrory's T-shirt department, which is next to the artificial flowers, when the fire broke out. The friend, Christina Fitzpatrick, also 16, ran through the exit, only to look behind her and see that half her department was in flames. "She was just panicking," Miss Casciglia said.

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Sergeant Cronin said the fire had apparently started in the flower area, which was filled with flammable items like artificial plants sprayed with chemicals, wicker baskets and the like. Just below, the basement was filled with housewares and they, too, might have helped the fire spread faster, he said. Some store employees told Fire Department officials that the fire started after someone threw a cigarette into a display of plastic and silk flowers and wicker furniture.

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Huntington town officials said McCrory's had a sprinkler system in the basement, as required under the building code. But because of its size and because it had ready access to the outdoors, it was not required to have sprinklers on the main floor, said Patricia Reiss, a town spokeswoman.

Ms. Reiss said the basement sprinkler system had gone off in one of the earlier fires, extinguishing it. But Sergeant Cronin said he did not know whether the sprinkler system had worked this time. Building Is Unstable

He said the full sequence of events would not be known until the investigation was completed. Because the building was still unstable, he said, it might be some time before investigators could go in and examine it thoroughly.

Meanwhile, the mall remained closed today, its power shut off by the Long Island Lighting Company so as not to endanger firefighters or investigators. Some stores near McCrory's had apparently suffered some smoke and water damage, although none appeared to have been burned.

John Werthessen, the district manager for McCrory's, a chain based in York, Pa. that has 1,000 stores across the United States, said the company would try to offer jobs in other McCrory's branches to the store's 30 full-time and 30 part-time workers. He would not comment on the three earlier fires, which caused no injuries and which the police said occurred in November 1990 and in February and March of this year.

Walt Whitman Mall, spread out over several acres to one side of the busy Route 110 corridor, has been open since 1962. In 1984 a fire in a nearby store destroyed much of the mall. McCrory's was slightly damaged in that fire. Its origin was never discovered.

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