

[back to article](#)



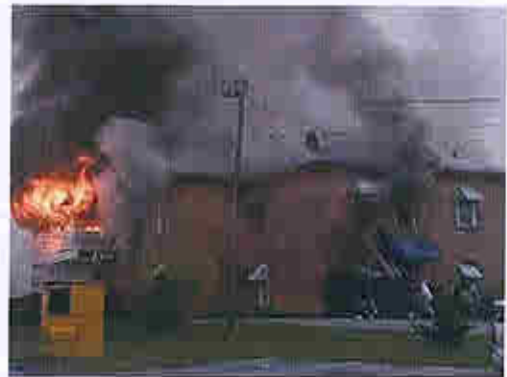
Hotel fire still under investigation

By John Harbin Times-News Staff Writer

Published: Friday, September 25, 2009 at 4:30 a.m.

With flames at their backs, residents forced out onto the balcony of the Caldwell Inn jumped to the ground Thursday morning as the historic building and all of their possessions went up in smoke.

At least seven people were hurt when they jumped from the second-floor balcony to the sidewalk below. They were treated at Pardee Hospital for a variety of injuries, including hip and head injuries and broken legs, said Lt. Mike Vesely of the Hendersonville Police Department.



Fire at the Caldwell Inn Thursday morning. (Photo Courtesy John Powers)

The investigation into the cause of the fire is ongoing, said Robert Henderson, fire chief for Hendersonville.

A few hours after the blaze, investigators said they were seeking someone they wanted to question about the cause of the fire, and Vesely confirmed Thursday night that arson is suspected.

By nightfall, investigators were working to determine the cause of the blaze, which residents say started in a first-floor room. Witnesses saw the bed on fire, and tenants said the man who lived in the room had been evicted the day before for not paying rent.

Law enforcement officials say they have a person of interest, but are not releasing a name.

"Nothing has been narrowed down at this point," Vesely said. "We are still investigating cause and origin."

City police, arson investigators and the SBI are investigating the cause of the blaze.

'END OF A MILESTONE'

Firefighters attacked the fire from the ground and the roof as the blaze sent thick, gray smoke into the sky for most of the morning.

"We are just starting to get inside the hotel," Hendersonville Fire Department Chief Beau Lovelace said Thursday afternoon. "Everyone we knew that was staying here has been accounted for."

Mayor Greg Newman walked along Seventh Avenue on Thursday morning surveying the damage.

"I hate it," he said. "This building was almost 100 years old. It provided housing for low-income families here in Hendersonville. I am glad that no one has died. This is the end of a milestone."

L.J. Jennings, who was sleeping in a first-floor room, said, "The room next door was on fire."

He got out in time to see the second-floor residents jumping to the sidewalk below.

Jennings thinks about 12 people lived in the hotel, which had been in decline and had rooms available for rent to transients.

"Five of them came off that balcony," Jennings said.

At one point, a passer-by heard residents' cries for help, found a ladder at a construction site and stood it up against the balcony.

"We had to climb down the ladder," said Perry Ware, 65.

A Hispanic man heard their cries for help, found a nearby ladder and leaned it up to the balcony, he said. "We were lucky to be out of there," Ware said.

Henderson County sheriff's deputy Steve Pedersen was one of the first on the scene. He looked down at his computer Thursday morning and saw the call come in for a fully involved fire.

"I came in just behind Lt. Vesely," he said. "We saw how bad it was and saw people attempting to jump to safety. We acquired a ladder, and we began placing the ladder on the building so people could climb down. Lt. Vesely had to catch one person who fell as they were attempting to escape the fire."

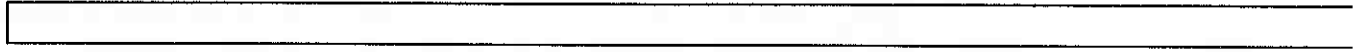
Firefighters from Hendersonville, Valley Hill, Blue Ridge, Dana, Little River and Saluda responded, along with Henderson County EMS and Rescue Squad.

Several nonprofit organizations also responded quickly to the fire. The Rescue Mission two blocks away provided blankets, orange juice and sausage-and-egg biscuits to the hotel tenants who had congregated outside the burning building.

Anthony McMinn, Rescue Mission director, said the mission was prepared to house the tenants and provide them help.

"This has been a real community effort," Vesely said. "Agencies from all over the county have come out to provide assistance."

Built between 1912 and 1922 as the old Station Hotel on Maple Street, the hotel in its early days served passengers from the nearby train depot.



[back to article](#)



Crews demolish Caldwell Inn

Blaze shatters lives of residents as investigators seek evidence from ashes of historic building

By [James Shea](#)
Times-News Staff Writer

Published: Tuesday, September 29, 2009 at 4:30 a.m.

Sam Angram sifted through the remnants of his life Monday as a crew prepared to demolish his home, the former Caldwell Inn, which has become a safety hazard since it burned early Thursday morning.

Police confirmed they were conducting an arson investigation. They said all evidence had been removed from the partially collapsed building.

Angram and 21 other residents' lives were changed forever Thursday after the blaze.

"I have been petrified," said Angram, who owned the inn. "I can't hardly believe it happened."

Hendersonville Police Lt. Mike Vesley said the burned-out building is now a hazard. The second floor had caved in, and some of the former residents were entering the building, trying to recover personal belongings.

"That puts first responders at risk if somebody falls through," Vesley said.

Henderson County arson investigators, the N.C. State Bureau of Investigation and the Hendersonville Police Department are conducting the investigation. They have gathered evidence, but no charges have been filed.

After the blaze was extinguished, attention shifted to a Caldwell Inn resident. Angram had evicted the individual, and the blaze was suspected to have started in the resident's room. Police said they have identified a person of interest in the case, but the investigation is ongoing.



MIKE DIRKS/TIMES-NEWS

Workers with Pace Construction and Excavation Inc. and the Hendersonville Police Department bring items salvaged from the Caldwell Inn out to the owner, Sam Angram, left, after a fire at the building on Thursday.

Angram said he had planned to renovate the building and restore it to some of its former glory. The Caldwell Inn was once a grand hotel that housed people who rode the railroad at the turn of the 20th century. In recent years, the building had become rundown and was a boarding house for low-income individuals.

"I thought I was going to do so much good with that building," Angram said.

He was living at the inn with his wife, two grandchildren and the children's mother. He and his family are living in another house he owns and trying to figure out their next move.

The inn "used to bring finances for (our) support," Angram said.

Todd Andrews and his longtime girlfriend, Lisa Smith, had lived at the inn for two months before the blaze. He pulled a cooler, trunk and some clothes out of the rubble Monday, the smell of smoke permeating everything.

"I don't know how much of it will clean up," he said.

Smith had left for work a couple minutes before Andrews smelled smoke and fled the building with just the clothes on his back.

"It's pretty rough," Andrews said. "We have been staying at the Rescue Mission trying to maintain our jobs."

Angram has not thought much about his plans once the building is demolished. He's been working too hard and is still recovering from the trauma.

"I don't know what to do," he said. "I'm racking my brain. Just clean it off and put in dirt and grass and make it look presentable."

Crews used backhoes to demolish the building. They picked up the waste and placed it into the bed of a semi-truck. Work was scheduled to resume at 7:30 this morning.

Vesley and the demolition crew recovered some money and other valuables from Angram's room before the demolition began. But they could not reach deep into the inn.

"I'm not going back in there," Vesley said. "The roof is into the hallway."

"It's bad," Angram added.

Andrews said losing his personal possessions was hard to take, but he was glad he escaped unharmed.

"We're alive," he said. "We'll pull through."