

White Hall picking up pieces after Tuesday's historic fire

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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WHITE HALL - Three buildings are completely destroyed in the wake of a devastating fire, which struck **Downtown White Hall** just after 9 a.m. on Tuesday, Jan. 31.

White Hall Fire Chief Gary Sheppard said the fire is being ruled as an undetermined accidental fire, but said it was most likely due to an electrical incident. He said the

occupant of the fire's origin at 119 Main St. said he had plugged two electrical heating devices into an outlet and reported hearing a small "pop" upon the second heater being plugged into the outlet.

Sheppard said the man exited the small apartment he built inside the two-story building, and returned to the smell of smoke. In a written testimony submitted to Sheppard, the man said he found the source of the smoke behind a ceiling tile, which fell on him, slightly burning the back of his neck. Sheppard then said the man attempted to attack the small blaze with a fire extinguisher - a move Sheppard described as impossible - before exiting the building.

"By the time he went in one more time, a police officer and a deputy sheriff pulled him out, because there was too much smoke," Sheppard said Thursday afternoon.

The occupant signed his testimony after being interviewed by Sheppard around noon on Wednesday, Feb. 1, 2017.

While Sheppard said it was too early to know the full extent of the damage done by Tuesday's raging inferno, he estimated the loss of three historic buildings to be more than \$350,000 alone. He said three buildings were completely destroyed in the conflagration - each one being as old as 160 years. Only one of them housed a retail location, however. Sheppard said **Pack Mule Antiques** was completely annihilated by the fire. That business's inventory list is still being compiled for the complete cost of the disaster to be calculated.

In his 38 years of being a firefighter in White Hall, Sheppard said he has not seen a larger fire. However, there have only been a handful of major fires in that town. He said he could recount only three.

Perhaps because of its rural location and lack of large fires, White Hall was unprepared to fight the blaze. Sheppard said the town's water tower went completely dry within the first few hours of combating the flames. Water was hauled from **Kane, Roodhouse** and several other fire departments. Sheppard said as many as nine departments from as far away as **South Jacksonville** and **Northern Scott County** offered assistance in the way of engines, ladder trucks and water tankers.

After the call came into his department at 9:01 a.m. Tuesday morning, Sheppard said firefighters worked for up to four hours to get the blaze under control, and it took another two hours from that for him to be sure smoldering embers would not spread to nearby businesses. By 6:30 p.m. Tuesday evening, however, Sheppard said he was able to reopen Highway 67 - the main thoroughfare through town.

For that highway to be opened Sheppard had to have an excavator topple the unsafe portions of the destroyed buildings still standing, which leaves a glaring vacancy in the small town's downtown district. When asked about possible future structures or rebuilding efforts, Sheppard was hopeful, but not optimistic.

"It's a small town," he said. "It's hard to keep businesses in them as is. With retirements and events like this fire, it's hard to say. I would hope someone would come up here and rebuild. It will leave a pretty big hole in our downtown."

On a brighter note, Sheppard said several members of the community and businesses have combined their efforts to provide financial assistance as well as food and drinks to the situation, including keeping the firefighters who worked tirelessly to stop the spread of the inferno hydrated and well-fed as they went above and beyond their calls of duty Tuesday.

