



CONTRA COSTA COUNTY FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT

BACKGROUND

December 6, 2018

CON FIRE INVESTIGATION LEADS TO CONVICTION OF SERIAL ARSONIST

James Bishop III Guilty on 31 Counts Related to 2017 Fires in Antioch, Martinez, Pleasant Hill, Concord, Pittsburg, Walnut Creek, Lafayette, Brentwood and Benicia

In the early months of 2017, the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Fire Investigation Unit (FIU) began noticing similarities in separate, unexplained vehicle fires it was investigating throughout the County. The FIU, comprised of four fulltime sworn fire/arson investigators, quickly determined the fires were likely the work of a serial arsonist.

In the ensuing months, investigators continued to routinely process fire scenes and look for evidence but initially did not identify a suspect. In late April, and into early May, the frequency of suspicious vehicle fires began to increase from one or two a week, to one every night, then to several separate vehicle fires on the same nights.

Several of these fires spread from the parked vehicles to occupied residences including one with sleeping children in a bedroom just above. All of the fires occurred during hours of darkness, late at night or in the early morning hours.

Early investigation revealed partial images of a vehicle entering and or leaving the fire areas and, while all images seemed to depict the same vehicle, none captured a license plate.

However, on May 12, 2017 at 2:17 a.m., video surveillance systems from a neighboring business and residences captured a partial license plate image on a vehicle departing the scene of a vehicle fire in the City of Lafayette. With assistance of the Lafayette Police Department and the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office Crime lab, the image was enhanced, revealing the entire license plate number to investigators.

1-1-1

Serial Arsonist James Bishop III Convicted on 31 Counts/2-2-2

Armed with suspect vehicle license plate information, FIU assembled a surveillance task force comprised of the Contra Costa County DA's Office, Concord Police, California Highway Patrol, and FIU investigators.

On May 12, investigators located and followed the vehicle for almost four hours in and around the City of Benicia. At 11:45 p.m., the vehicle pulled over in a Benicia residential neighborhood. Changing from vehicle surveillance to on foot investigators sought to get closer to the suspect and as they moved in on the parked vehicle they saw it speed out of the area. At the same moment, investigators saw a car parked in a nearby driveway on fire.

Investigator alerted residents and summoned the Benicia Fire Department while updating other investigators in the area of the situation and direction taken by the fleeing vehicle.

The suspect vehicle was located within minutes as it pulled into the McDonald's parking lot at 1602 East 2nd in Benicia. The driver, James Bishop III (DOB 11/14/80), resident of Pittsburg, was detained and arrested. Search warrants were obtained for Bishop's vehicle and residence where evidence supporting his involvement in the fires was obtained.

A jury trial began in early November, 2018 in Contra Costa County Superior Court. Bishop was charged with 33 felony counts involving arson of an inhabited structure, arson of property, and possession and use of an accelerant. Of the more than 40 fires investigated in Antioch, Martinez, Pleasant Hill, Concord, Pittsburg, Walnut Creek, Lafayette, Brentwood and Benicia, 14 were used as the basis for the charges.

On December 4, 2018 the jury reached a verdict and found Bishop guilty of 31 of 33 charged felony counts. Sentencing is scheduled for late January 2019.

The successful investigation, prosecution, and conviction of James Bishop III is a result of allied agencies working together on a complex case. The coordination and cooperation of Con Fire, law enforcement agencies within the county, the District Attorney's Office, Sheriff's Office Crime Lab, and support from agencies in adjacent counties were essential to the outcome. Together, these professional men and women work together every day to protect the residents of this county and bring individuals who threaten the safety and well-being of the public to justice.

2-2-2

Serial Arsonist James Bishop III Convicted on 31 Counts/3-3-3

This case is one of several serial arsonist investigations the FIU has conducted over the past 15 years. However, this case is believed to be the largest serial arson investigation in District history, and one of the largest in the State, based upon the number of charges filed and convictions.

Case information: People v. James Bishop III, Docket Number 05-171999-6.

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About Contra Costa County Fire Protection District

Contra Costa County Fire Protection District is a recognized fire service leader providing fire and emergency medical services to more than a million people across a 304 square-mile area, in and around the 20 cities of Contra Costa County, California. In 2017, the District responded to nearly 74,000 fire and EMS emergencies and provided expert medical care in the conduct of more than 75,000 ambulance transports. The District with 25 fire stations and nearly 400 employees is dedicated to the preservation of life, property and the environment.

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