

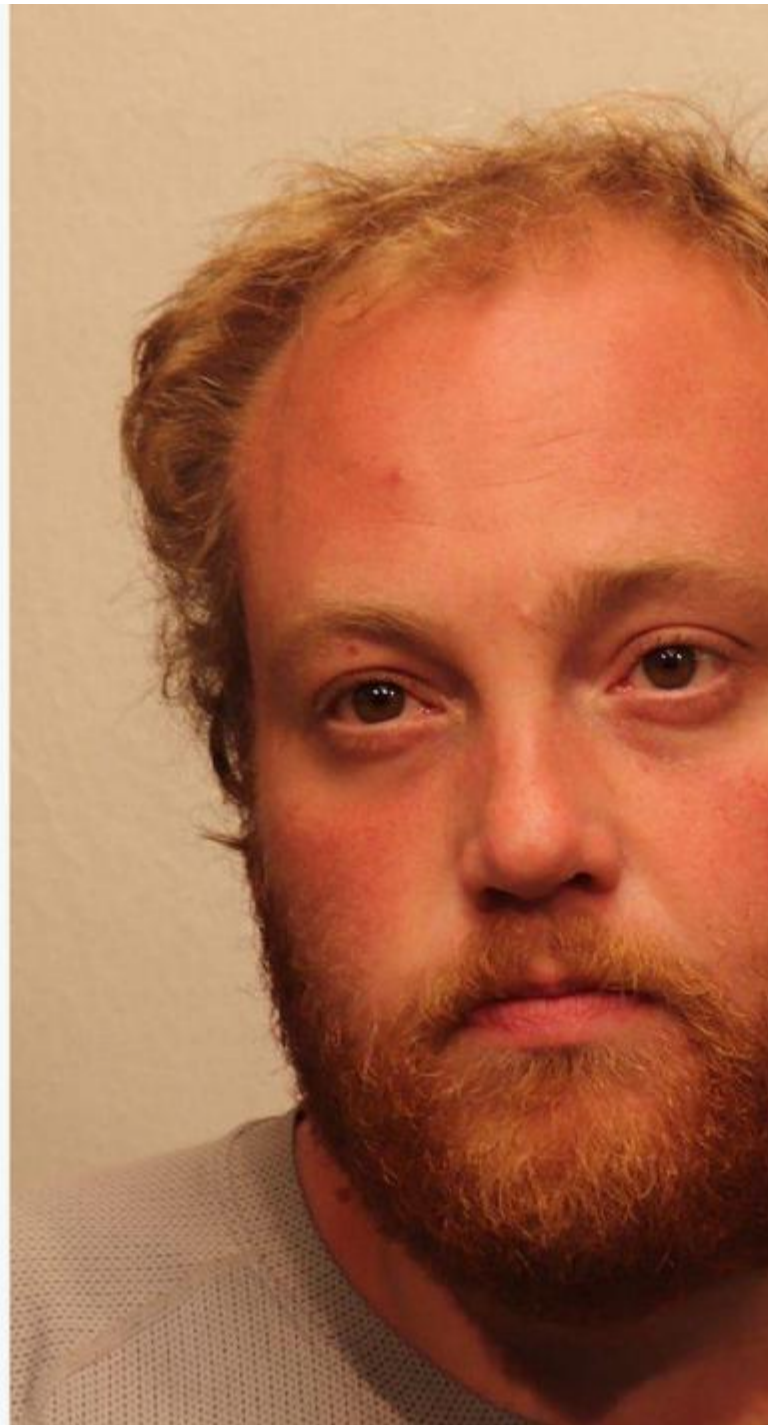
[Fires](#)

# UPDATE: Man charged in Duluth synagogue fire

A criminal complaint says Matthew James Amiot admitted to starting the fire and tried to extinguish it by spitting on it, but "when it would not go out, he walked away." His brother believes the homeless man was trying to stay warm on a cold night.

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Matthew James Amiot

A homeless Duluth man allegedly admitted to starting the fire that destroyed the Adas Israel Congregation synagogue last week.

Matthew James Amiot, 36, was charged Monday with felony and gross misdemeanor offenses in the Sept. 9 blaze that ravaged the 118-year-old synagogue in downtown Duluth. Bail was set at \$20,000.

Police have said there is "no reason to believe that this is a bias or hate crime," and Amiot's brother attributed it to a misguided attempt to stay warm on a blustery night.

According to a criminal complaint, Amiot used a lighter to ignite "a variety of combustible materials" in the sukkah, a separate religious structure behind the synagogue, early that morning.

At 2:13 a.m., Amiot was seen walking behind the synagogue at 302 E. Third St., according to the complaint. Two minutes later, the document states, he was seen "looking back at the flickering flames." Authorities arrived at the scene at 2:22 a.m. and reported 3-foot-tall flames coming from the area.



By 3:39 a.m., the building began to collapse. Duluth Fire Department Capt. Ben Gasner was knocked unconscious by falling debris, while there was "near miss" for a number of other firefighters, according to the complaint. Gasner, who has been with the department for 19 years, is recovering at home from a concussion, officials said Sunday.

The synagogue was deemed a total loss. The structure was valued at \$117,000, according to county property records, while the loss of religious artifacts was estimated to be in excess of \$250,000.

In a statement to police after his Friday arrest, Amiot allegedly admitted to starting the combustible materials on fire outside the synagogue. The defendant stated he tried to extinguish the fire by spitting on it but "when it would not go out, he walked away," according to the complaint.

Accelerants were not detected at the scene, authorities said.

Amiot is charged with a felony count of starting a negligent fire resulting in more than \$2,500 in damage and a gross misdemeanor count of starting a negligent fire resulting in great bodily harm.

He was not charged with arson, the crime on which he had been held since Friday. That offense requires intent in damaging or destroying a building by fire.

The defendant's brother, Ben Amiot, said he was dismayed to see people insinuating that the incident was a hate crime.

"He's not the type of person to do this intentionally," Ben Amiot told the News Tribune. "He's been homeless for years and has some mental health issues. He was trying to get out of the elements on a cold, windy and rainy night in a shed behind the building. I feel that the fire started uncontrollably and he panicked and took off instead of alerting authorities."

Ben Amiot said his family has been the target of online harassment since his brother was first identified as the suspect.

"This was a total accident and I feel he should be held somewhat responsible once they have the investigation completed," he said. "(But) I want people to know that this wasn't a hate crime or

targeted because of (religious) beliefs. Just someone trying to stay warm and something terrible happened when it shouldn't have."

Public defender Natasha VanLieshout, who represented Amiot at his arraignment, said the defendant "denies all allegations against him." Amoit has been living at the CHUM shelter in Duluth and relies on disability as his only source of income, the defense attorney said.

"He says he was in the wrong place at the wrong time because he is homeless," VanLieshout told the court.

St. Louis County prosecutor Vicky Wanta pointed to a "steady stream" of theft and trespassing charges in Amiot's recent history in requesting the \$20,000 bail figure. She said he has been issued 16 citations with nine convictions, along with receiving a stay of imposition in a third-degree burglary case.

Sixth Judicial District Judge Eric Hylden cited concerns over Amiot's history of failing to appear for court appearances in granting Wanta's bail request and denying the defendant a referral for supervised release.

Amiot, who remains at the St. Louis County Jail, is scheduled to be back in court on Oct. 8.

The Adas Israel Congregation synagogue is home to a "shul" of Modern Orthodox Jewish families. Built in 1901, the synagogue was the last of its kind in the Northland. To worship in the Modern Orthodox Jewish faith is to practice Jewish law while living out modern lives.

Officials said they were relieved to learn the fire was not apparently the result of a hate crime. The congregation's lay leader, Phillip Sher, said Sunday that arrangements are being made to begin services again.

"True Judaism is in the heart — it's not in the building — and our legacy will go on with our hearts," he said.

*News Tribune staff writer Adelle Whitefoot contributed to this report.*



Smoke still rolls out of a window after fire destroyed the Adas Israel Congregation synagogue Monday in Duluth. Jed Carlson / Forum News Service