

COATS ROOMING HOUSE

PIONEER, OHIO

NOVEMBER 11, 1979

14 FATALITIES

Prepared by

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In cooperation with

The National Bureau of Standards

and

The United States Fire Administration

INTRODUCTION

On November 11, 1979, fourteen people died in a fire at the Coats Rooming House, Pioneer, Ohio. A three and one-half-year-old child playing with a cigarette lighter was responsible for a rapidly spreading fire which killed thirteen residents and one of the owners of the home. The rooming house provided room and board for eleven elderly private residents and eight mentally retarded outpatients. Two apartment units in the building had an additional five occupants. The home was operated by the owners, who also resided in the building. Because of the husband's poor health, the wife continued the day-to-day operation of the boarding home with the help of one employee.

The fire which occurred at 9:20 a.m. on a Sunday morning, started in a sofa in an apartment unit located on the first floor of the one- and

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This report is based on a three-day, on-site study and subsequent analysis conducted by the NFPA's Fire Investigations Department. The cooperation and assistance of Mr. Robert Crayer, Investigator for the Ohio State Fire Marshal's Office and Det. Sgt. Paul Goble of the Williams County (Ohio) Sheriff's Department, is greatly appreciated.

The facts and conclusions contained in this report were developed by the NFPA, and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Fire Administration or the National Bureau of Standards.

two-story structure. Fire and smoke spread rapidly throughout the building, trapping many residents in their rooms. Combustible interior finish, heavy fuel loading, lack of compartmentation, a single means of egress from the second floor, and the apparent lack of response of some of the residents to the fire conditions contributed to the fourteen fatalities.

The official investigation of this incident has been conducted by the Ohio State Fire Marshal's office with a concurrent investigation by the Williams County Sheriff's Department. The information in this report was gathered with the assistance of both of these agencies. Field work for this incident was conducted on November 12-14, 1979.

This report was prepared following authorization to conduct a limited investigation under the contract listed above.

While most of the building remained structurally intact following the fire, several areas of the building were extensively destroyed and collapsed. In these areas the location of partitions is based on interviews and the recollection of an employee of the home. The floor plans attached to this report represent the best estimates of interior configurations based upon that information.

#### Background

Pioneer is a farming community of approximately 1,000 residents located in the northwest corner of Ohio, 60 miles west of Toledo. The community's fire protection is provided by the Pioneer Volunteer Fire Department which operates three pumpers, a tanker, an equipment truck, a grass fire vehicle, and two ambulances. Fire fighters are alerted by radio and sirens, and a public water system provides water within the town limits. A hydrant was located within one-half block of the Coats Boarding Home.

The original structure had been a two-story and basement frame building with brick veneer built as a single family residence approximately 100 years ago. Balloon frame construction provided vertical and horizontal channels which had no firestopping.

The building had undergone a series of expansions that provided a one-story frame addition which completely surrounded the original frame and brick structure. Continued interior remodeling created a myriad of rooms throughout the building separated by plywood partitions and the original structure walls of frame, brick, and plaster on wood lath. Windows in what had been exterior walls were not closed or filled in when the one-story additions were added.

Interior finish consisted of partitions constructed of 1/4-inch high density fiber board panels or 1/4-inch luian plywood panels on 2-inch

by 4-inch studs. Plaster and lath walls were covered with several layers of wallpaper and paint. The ceiling of the addition was low density fiber tiles on 1-inch by 3-inch furring strips. Doors, where provided, were louvered doors or hollow core plywood doors with corrugated paper spacers. In lieu of doors, some rooms had shower curtains on rods to provide privacy from public areas.

In addition to the combustibile interior finish, an accumulation of furniture, dry goods, sheer curtains and other drapery materials provided a heavy fuel load for this type of occupancy. Some rooms were filled with furniture to the extent that only a narrow walkway was available for the residents' movement.

The Coats Boarding Home had four single station mechanical heat detectors located in the building. There was no smoke detector or manual alarm system within the building. Witnesses did indicate that a noise thought to be a detector was heard after fire fighting efforts had been initiated. It was reported the heat detectors were located in the basement, kitchen, first floor, and second floor.

Both carbon dioxide and water type fire extinguishers were available in the building. The extent of distribution was not known. There was no automatic sprinkler protection.

The building had been operated as a nursing home from 1958 to 1973 when the State of Ohio adopted the Life Safety Code for Intermediate Care Facilities. The home could not meet the requirements and was converted to a rooming and boarding house. As a rooming house, the facility was not required to meet any State construction standards. Adoption and enforcement of code requirements pertaining to this type of occupancy was left up to the local jurisdiction. In this case, there were no local requirements that had to be met. Building construction and renovation was not subject to building code provisions or inspection services.

#### The Fire Incident

The fire originated in a daybed on which two children had been sleeping in the rented apartment unit in the northwest corner of the building. On the morning of the fire, a 20-year old mother, her three children aged 3 years, 2 years and 3 months were in the apartment along with the 17-year-old baby-sitter who had slept over after watching the children the previous evening.

At approximately 9:25 a.m., the baby-sitter sleeping in a bunk bed at the rear of the rental unit, awoke to find the day bed on fire. The fire was already extending up the sheer window curtains behind the couch. She picked up the 3-month old sleeping in a nearby crib, ran past the day bed to the entry foyer of the apartment where she woke the mother who was

asleep on a couch. The 2- and 3-year-old children were standing by the sleeping mother.

As the baby-sitter got the children out of the building, the mother ran through the kitchen of the rental unit to the kitchen of the boarding house where she found the owner. As she opened the door between the apartment and the kitchen, smoke poured through the doorway after her. The mother took a 10-pound carbon dioxide fire extinguisher from the kitchen and returned to the room where the couch was burning. She attempted to extinguish the fire, but the carbon dioxide extinguisher was ineffective. As heat and flame rolled back toward her, she retreated and left the building.

The owner had been in the kitchen and immediately placed a call to her son-in-law, who was the town's police chief. He broadcast the fire alarm over the fire department base station located in his home.

Upon hearing the alarm, the ex-fire chief for the town, his son, and another neighbor ran from their homes across the street to the rooming house. Fire was issuing from the windows of the apartment located in the northwest corner of the building. They entered the corridor on the east side of the building. Smoke was already filling the rooms and corridors.

Although thick smoke was present in their rooms, several residents were found sitting in chairs or sitting or lying on their beds. They were pulled to their feet, and either led or directed to the nearest door to the outside. Seven residents, including the invalid owner of the building, were led from the building before smoke conditions became untenable and rescuers were forced to abandon their efforts.

Although it was apparent to the other rescuers that it was impossible to reenter the building to rescue any other residents, the owner reentered the building. Her body was later found at the bottom of the single stairway to the second floor. Her arms were around a resident whom she was attempting to rescue.

The town fire department was located four blocks from the rooming house. The department responded rapidly, but upon arrival, they found heavy fire in the northwest corner of the building and the entire first and second floors heavily charged with smoke. As they pulled lines and set up for fire fighting and rescue actions, the entire building flashed over. All efforts were converted to fire fighting activities. Because of the balloon construction and hidden combustible spaces, extinguishment was difficult.

The fatalities from the fire ranged in age from 36 to 87 years old. Ten of the eleven residents who resided on the second floor succumbed to the fire. One 58-year old resident who roomed on that floor was at church at the time of the fire. Of the fatalities on the second floor,

three were found sitting or lying on their beds. One resident was found sitting in a chair.

Three victims were located on the first floor. One victim was on her bed while a second was found in a bedside chair. The third was found in a location that would indicate possible movement toward the front door which was in the direction of the fire when the victim was overcome.

### Discussion

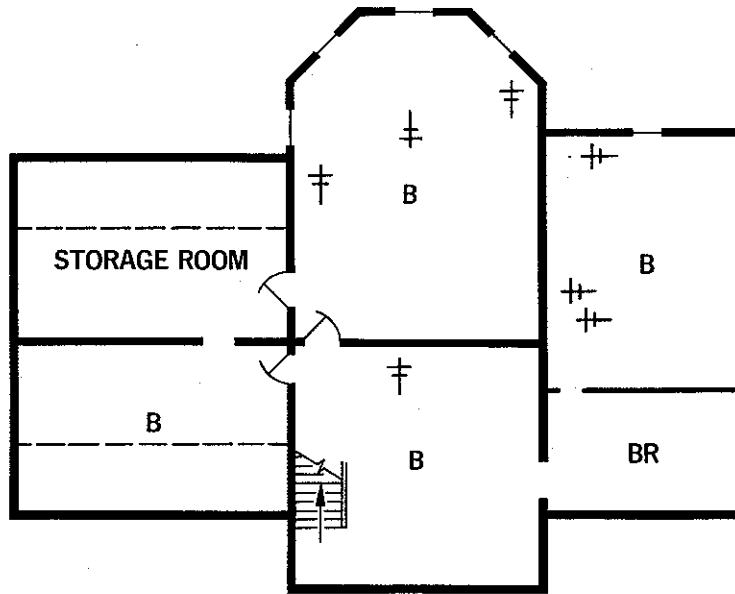
The mattress of the daybed, that was the point of origin, consisted of natural fiber filling. It is not known how long the fire had been burning in the couch before discovery. However, once the fire spread from the couch to the curtains, the fire developed rapidly and spread over the combustible interior finish and furnishings.

There was no separation between the area of origin and the rest of the building. From the apartment, the fire rapidly spread into the front hallway and directly into the interior of the original structure. The hallway also connected with the single stairway leading to the second floor. This allowed smoke and fire to extend to that area quickly while blocking the single means of egress.

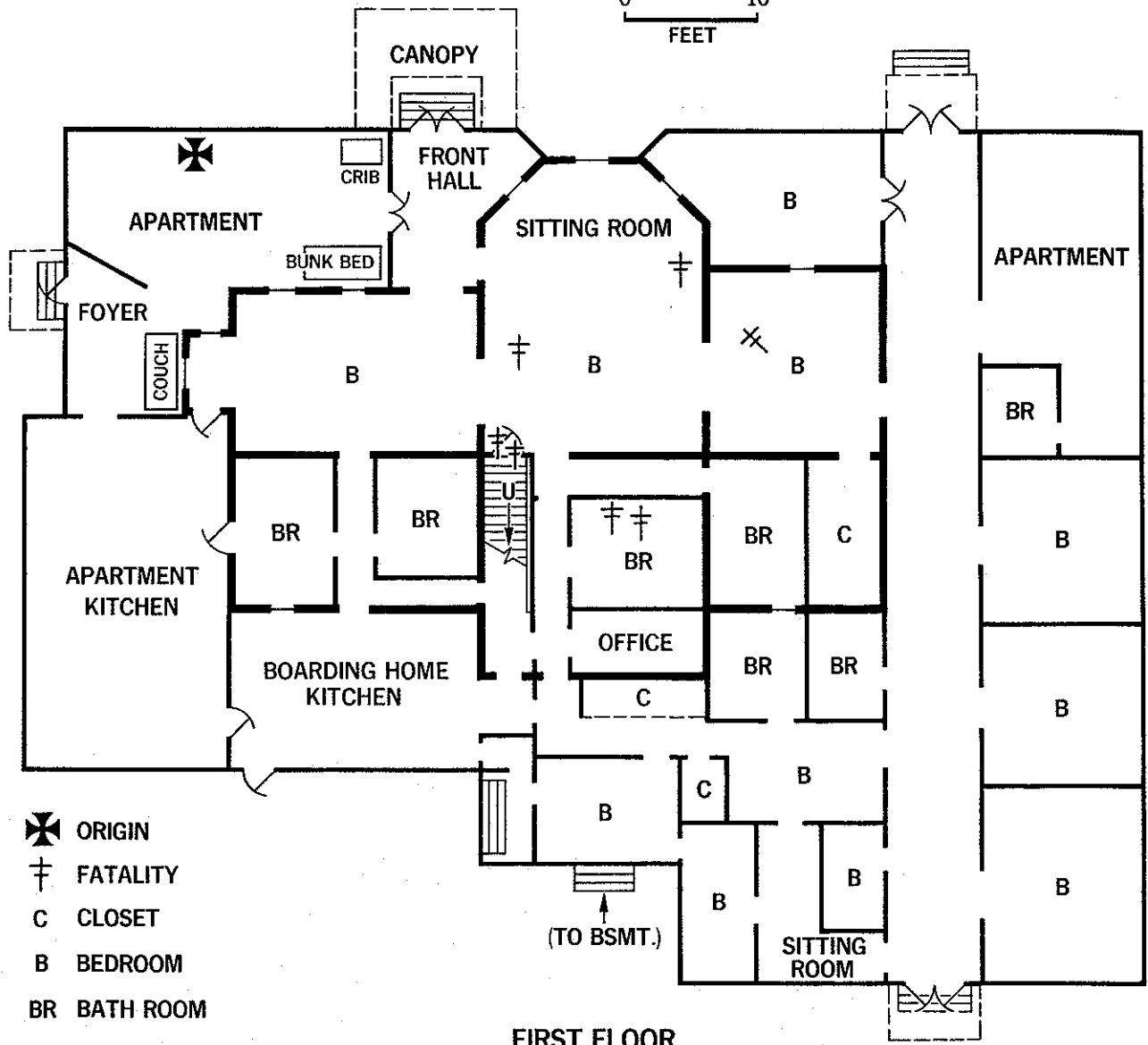
Lack of doors and open doors created an essentially open and continuous area within the building. Combustible fiber ceiling tile, tufted and high density fiber board paneling, wallpaper, draperies, and furnishings induced the rapid spread of fire and the rapid development of flashover conditions within the entire building in as little as five to seven minutes after the fire was discovered.

The limited supply of heat detection devices in the building did not provide satisfactory warning capability due to the rapid spread of heavy smoke ahead of flame or heat condition. Given the combustibility of the interior finish and the lack of reaction by residents to deteriorating conditions within the building as the fire developed, it is questionable whether any alarm signal from these or any other fire warning device would have significantly altered the life loss.

Because the number of residents housed in this facility was larger than 15, this home would be classified as a "hotel" for application of Life Safety Code® requirements. While the Code recognizes the difficulties encountered in converting single family homes to rooming or lodging houses, this and similar incidents indicate that life safety risks exceed those found in a single family dwelling which warrant increased levels of construction and features of protection. The apparently greater need is that those codes, standards, or regulations which address rooming and lodging homes must be applied and enforced by the appropriate administrative processes.



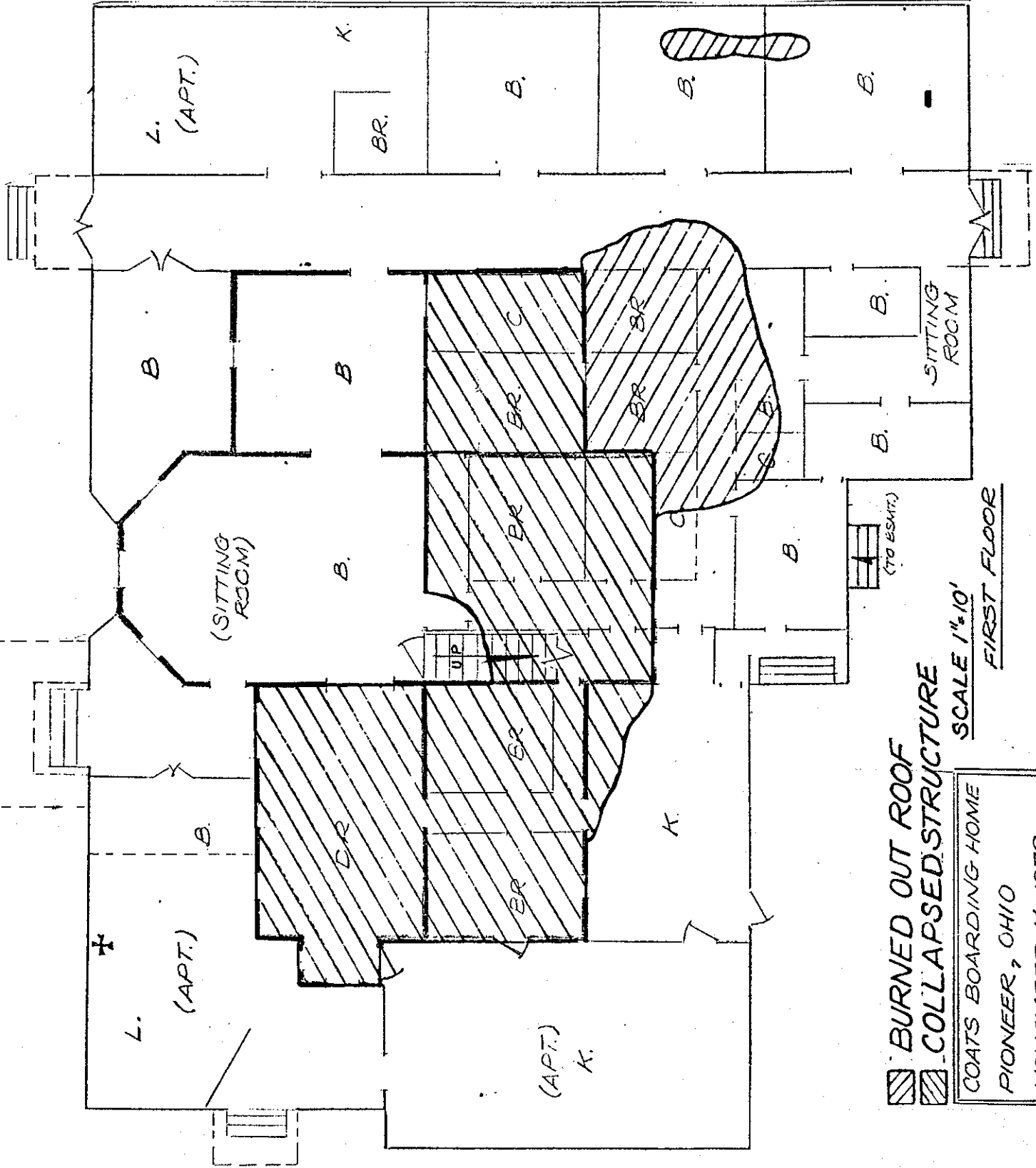
SECOND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR

- ✠ ORIGIN
- † FATALITY
- C CLOSET
- B BEDROOM
- BR BATH ROOM

A



[Diagonal Lines] BURNED OUT ROOF  
 [Hatched Area] COLLAPSED STRUCTURE  
 SCALE 1/8"=10'  
 FIRST FLOOR  
 COATS BOARDING HOME  
 PIONEER, OHIO  
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 NFPA J R BELL





**Photo 1: Northwest corner of the building showing the one story addition. The point of origin was a sofa located in the apartment in this corner of the building.**



**Photo 2: View of the Coats Boarding Home from the South.**

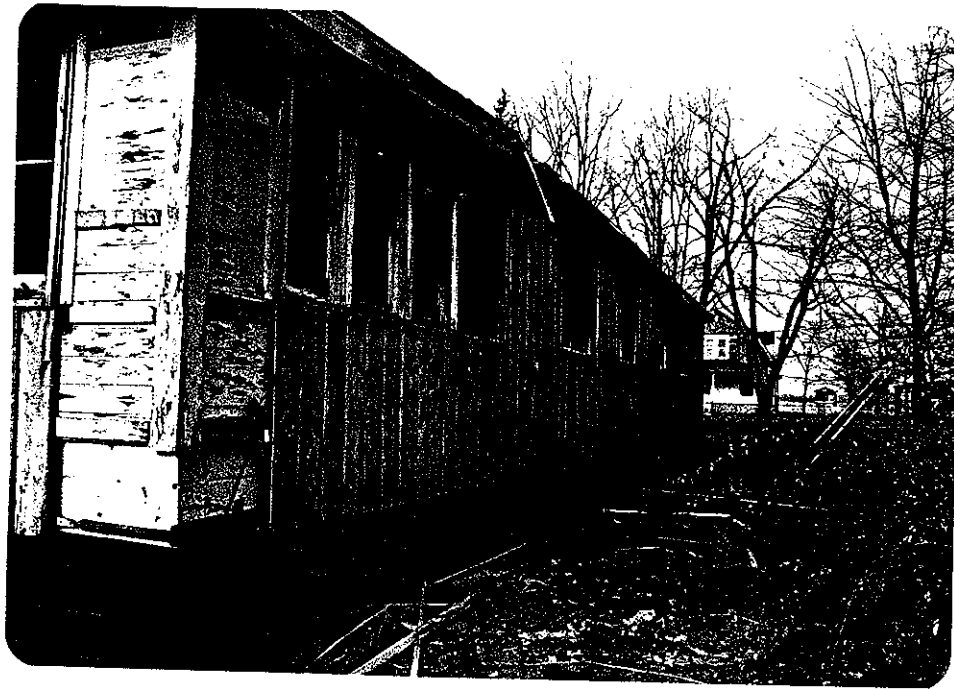


Photo 3: Southeast corner of the building.



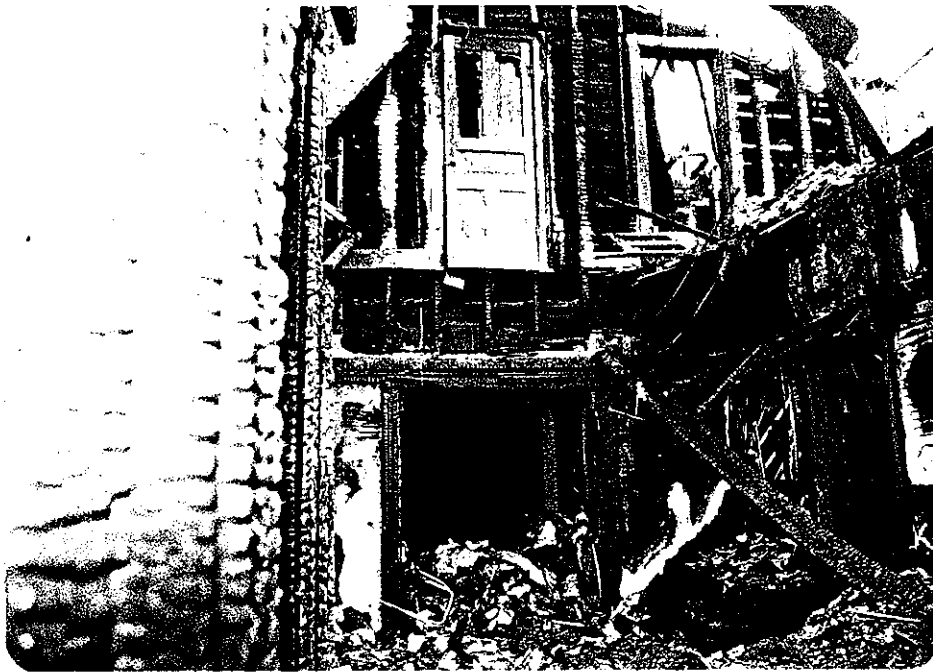
Photo 4: Coats Boarding Home from the North.  
Shows the original two story structure.



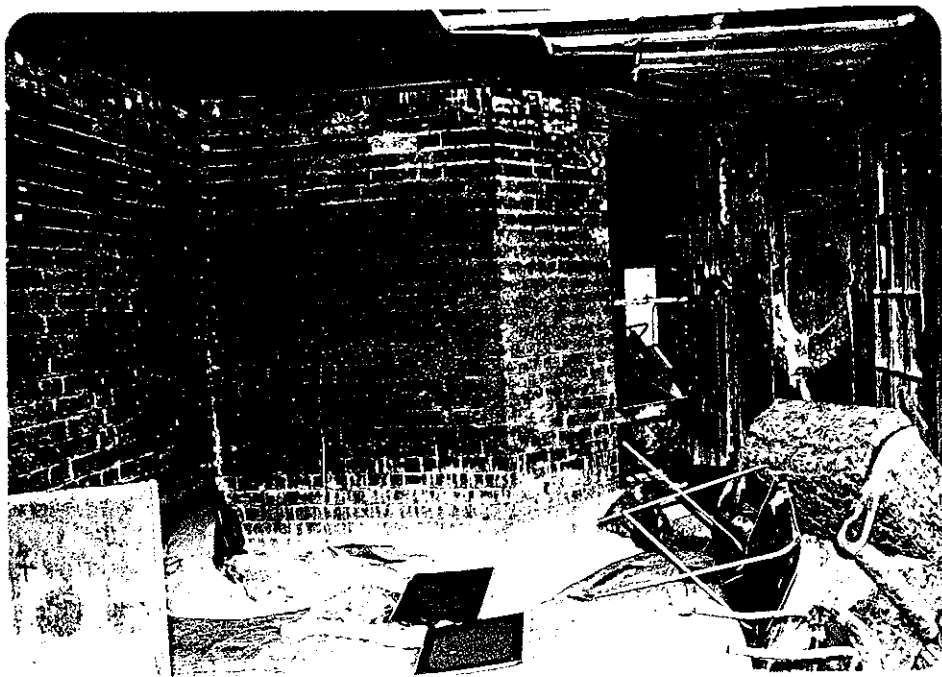
Photo 5: Remains of the sofa which was the point of origin.  
The cushion of the mattress consisted of natural fiber fill material.



Photo 6: Point of origin of the fire in the rental apartment.  
Sofa was located along the wall to the right.



**Photo 7: Fire damage exposes the balloon frame construction in the original structure.**



**Photo 8: What had been an exterior wall and window is enclosed within the building by one story frame additions which surround the original structure. Heat pattern on the wall to the right indicates fire traveled through the interior window on the left.**



**Photo 9: Presswood (1/4-in.) panel and stud partition which separated the room of origin from the rest of the structure.**