

# Before and After the Sirens: Woodstock Arson Deepens Building’s Mystery

BY AMY VOSS-DEVITO

By the time first responders arrived minutes after 10 pm on Friday, August 13, a billowing column of smoke and flame already shot past the treetops at 402 West Locust Street in Woodstock.

The cavernous, 111-year-old building, which first served as a grocery store and then an egg processing plant, had been abandoned in recent years. Owner Lena Frances Keegan had long hoped to turn the sprawling, four-story wooden structure into a bistro and boutiques but Keegan, who hasn’t been seen by family members in more than two years and whose disappearance has sparked a FBI investigation, was not on hand to see her property burn.

Instead, stunned townsfolk lined the curb of West Court Street, watching fire and rescue vehicles race in from all over Shenandoah County to battle the fully engulfed structure. Its glowing plume was reported as far north as Toms Brook and spotted by Musicfest concertgoers returning home on I-81 outside Edinburg.

Ironically, while onlookers corralled pajama-clad children and speculated as to the cause of the fire, one man working to contain the blaze already knew that answer. Within 24 hours, Woodstock Fire and Rescue member Ray Boyd Kerns was arrested and now stands charged with arson, destruction of property, and breaking and entering to set the fire.

## Watching history burn

Alisha Remillard shook her head. “I thought the Woodstock schoolhouse was on fire,” she said.

Standing on the sidewalk in front of the newly renovated Woodstock Lofts, Remillard explained that she and her husband had seen the fire’s glow through a screen of trees at the top of their backyard. The couple rushed from their home one street over to find the rest of the crowd watching 402 West Locust blaze.

“I couldn’t figure out why I couldn’t stop hearing sirens,” she said. Beside her, the Remillard’s young son watched the flames from a seat on his father’s shoulders. “I saw the glowing sky. I thought it was the schoolhouse.”

Woodstock Loft resident Lauren Wilson had a terrified moment thinking the fire was in her building, too. Wilson—who moved to Woodstock three months ago—credited her dog, a lab-border collie mix named Loretta Lynn, for alerting her to the fire.

“My dog was freaking out,” she said.

Bill Moyers watched the fire with his wife, Shirley, from their home on nearby Stonewall Circle. “The closer you got, the scarier it was....awesome scary,” he said.

The next morning they discovered singed pages from books that had floated over the treetops and landed in their yard.

But for George Shaffer, who saw the flames across town from his front yard on Eagle Street, the fire was especially personal. He was ten years old when his father purchased the old Boyer building in 1957 to warehouse the family’s egg processing business.

It remained in the family until 1995 when the rise of mega egg processing plants in the Midwest made smaller local operations such as the Shaffer’s impractical. George then sold the building—broom clean and empty of all except an oversized egg incubator—to Lena Frances Keegan for \$105,000.

“I would “help” pack the eggs in grade school and worked there summers,” Shaffer later reminisced. “A lot of good people worked there.... It was sad to see it go, there were a lot of memories up there.”

By 10:35, slightly more than a half hour after the initial call reporting the blaze, the building collapsed. Embers thrown far above the treetops flew straight up into the windless night sky. Firefighting crews securely in place, the crowd scattered, leaving behind wreckage that would finally be extinguished the following morning.

## A mystery solved

He set the fire, arrived on the first engine responding to the blaze and was promptly arrested a day later by the Shenandoah County Fire Marshall’s Office after being identified at the location in a security video.

Ray Boyd Kerns of Toms Brook has confessed to the arson, according to Shenandoah County Assistant Fire Marshal Joe Loving. He is being held at the Rappahannock–Shenandoah–Warren Regional Jail without bond.

Officials suspected arson early in the investigation as the unoccupied building had no electricity turned on and the evening’s clear weather ruled out lightning strikes or storms.

According to the affidavit for the search warrant, Kerns entered the back of the building through an open door and “ignited papers that were already in the building with a cigarette lighter he took from the fire station.” He then “...returned to the fire station and waited for the fire to be reported.”

According to Woodstock Fire & Rescue chief Aaron Sigler, Kerns had only just three months ago to full duty at the West Court Street station after a break in service. The revelation of an arsonist in their midst has understandably shaken his staff.

“We’re an extended family of brothers and sisters, it came as a big shock to everybody,” he said. “Within our department, it’s the only case (of firefighter arson) that we are aware of in over 199 years of service to this community.”

Exhausted after spending the entire night extinguishing the blaze, the Woodstock fire crew was too wiped out to participate in their annual Yard Crawl “Fill the Boot” fundraiser the next day. To their rescue came the Shenandoah County Chamber of Commerce, who literally “came to the firehouse to ask to fill the boot for us.”

“They understood that one person’s actions don’t represent a fire department,” Sigler said. Volunteers raised helped raised over \$3,000 that day. “We appreciate everyone’s positive words during this tough time.”

As for the fire itself, Sigler believes the town dodged a bullet. Even though the still night and recent rains helped limit the fire’s spread to brush around the building, residents on Muhlenberg and Main Streets reported ash on their cars and lawns. Churchgoers attending services that Sunday at Emmanuel Lutheran on High Street found debris in the parking lot.

“If it had been later in the fall or during fire season, we would have been in a lot of trouble,” the fire chief added. “It would have spread toward the houses off Commerce and Locust (Streets). We were very lucky.”

## A mystery remains

As far as anyone knows, Lena Frances Keegan is still missing.

On March 1, 2021, an MLS listing advertised 402 West Locust Street for sale. It described a four-story, 10-room, wood frame building with a gable roof on 1.74 acres priced at \$499,000. By April 8, it was abruptly taken off the market.

The property had been listed for sale by her daughter, Elizabeth Keegan of Maurertown.

Lena hadn’t been seen by friends and family for over two years by then. A missing person report was filed soon afterwards; Elizabeth was charged with embezzlement for allegedly writing checks on her mother’s bank account and forging a power of attorney in an attempt to sell her mother’s property.

She was released on bond and a court date of July 7, 2022 was set to address the embezzlement charges in Shenandoah County Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court.

Meanwhile, Lena’s Woodstock home on 212 North Lee Street, the 402 West Locust property and Elizabeth’s home in Maurertown were searched on June 2 by FBI agents and Shenandoah County Sheriff’s Office deputies with cadaver-sniffing dogs. As far as the *Mountain Courier* is aware, no public information about the results of that investigation is available.

During that brief window in spring 2021 when the property was listed for sale, George Shaffer made an appointment to visit his family’s building one last time. He hoped to buy back the old egg incubator that the Shaffers had left on the premises when they sold it to Keegan in 1995. His son, Matt, wanted it, he said.

But the day of the scheduled visit was busy, and Shaffer missed his appointment. When he

called to request another, he was informed that nothing from the house was for sale. Shortly afterwards, the building went off the market.

But Matt Shaffer had toured the building the week before and left astonished at the amount of “stuff she (Lena) had squirreled away.”

The building was “jampacked with yard sale stuff,” Matt reported. “Boxes and boxes and boxes of paper and stuff and very combustible.”

Mountain Courier *Editor Amy Voss-DeVito and husband Jeff live in an old yellow farmhouse in the town of Woodstock, only two streets over from the scene of the fire. She wishes to thank everyone who helped with this story, especially all the Fire & Rescue first responders who work every day to keep Shenandoah County safe.*

SIDEBAR

## A Dream Gone Up in Smoke

You’d understand her dream if you had toured the place, and it would perhaps become yours too. When Frances Keegan talked about the galleria she would be opening soon, it sounded wonderful, but impossible. How could a small town like Woodstock support such a grand plan and was Frances capable of making it happen?

But then, if you had the pleasure of a tour of the huge gray building on Locust Street, you would wish Frances’ dream was possible. As you entered past the decorative tables on the patio, you found yourself in an enormous room with a spacious aisle dividing two sections of shops.

You could imagine having coffee or lunch in one of them, buying jewelry in another, browsing books, shopping for health foods, cosmetics, and more—some looked ready to open.

A small group of us had the privilege of a guided tour by Frances several years ago. From the elegant galleria, she took us on to the theater, a good-sized performance venue with a large stage and dressing rooms, even a grand piano. The theater had a spacious lobby with a refreshment counter and a popcorn machine.

From there we moved on to Frances’ office, one of the rooms off the shopping promenade. The ceiling was carved wood with a wonderful chandelier in its center. We sat there and talked a while with interruptions now and then from a man doing repair work on the building. We got the impression he was there most days.

Some areas were crowded with boxes and furniture. It seems that when Frances saw something she liked and thought might be useful in her galleria, she would buy multiple copies. I counted five pianos in the place, scattered from the theater to the shopping area.

The place had potential. Frances had a decades-long dream. Woefully, her dream was more an illusion and her life a sad mystery.

—Joan Anderson