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Front Page

February 7, 2008

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Arraignments postponed for arson suspects

BY L. L. LEHANS LLEHANS@HOLDENLANDMARK.COM

WORCESTER - Tuesday's arraignments in Worcester Superior Court for two men charged with setting fire to the Mary Sawyer homestead in Sterling on August 12, and a barn in Holden on August 13, were canceled because only one of the suspects was on his way to court.

John Rousseau of 40 School St., Clinton, and Michael Dreslinski of 278 Main St., Clinton, both 28, are being held without bail after being charged in Greenfield Superior Court with two counts of burning a mill in the Western Mass. town of Erving on July 30. They were also charged with setting fire to a small railroad building in the nearby town of Florida. They also face charges of conspiracy, stealing railroad radio equipment, and other charges.

At "first call" of the Worcester Superior Courtroom 18 docket on Tuesday, attorneys for the two men told the judge that their clients had not yet arrived from the Franklin House of Correction in Greenfield, where they've been held since August.

Court officers learned a short time later that only one defendant had been sent in the van, which was still enroute. Both men were required in

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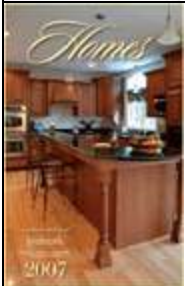
court for their joint arraignment, so the case was put over to Tuesday, February 19.

The arrests of Rousseau and Dreslinski for the Sterling and Holden fires came after a task force investigation headed by Attorney General Martha Coakley's office and police and fire investigators.



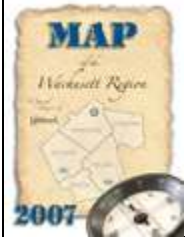
Coakley's office led the investigation because the string of arson crimes crossed several court jurisdictions.

In 2003, a judge dismissed charges against Rousseau in connection with a six-month arson spree in his home city, after ruling statements made by Rousseau during questioning were found to inadmissible.



Both men were known to Holden Police after they made several visits and phone calls to the station to view police logs prior to the two local fires.

The August 12 fire in Sterling destroyed the birthplace and homestead of Mary Sawyer, made famous in the poem "Mary Had a Little Lamb." The building, still owned by the family, had not been used in many years and lacked electricity and plumbing.



The August 13 fire in Holden destroyed approximately 140 feet of a former dairy barn on Bond Road in the Jefferson section of town owned by John Sandstrom.



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