

## Mystery shrouds fire cause

# Easton concentrating on cleanup

Cleanup was the order of the day yesterday in the fire-ravaged 200 block of Northampton Street, Easton.

Two adjoining buildings housing four stores, 10 apartments and a pair of social organizations were destroyed by a general-alarm fire Tuesday.

Twenty persons were left homeless.

Occasional wisps of smoke could be seen yesterday coming through the wreckage of the wrecked buildings that formerly housed Schiffer's Fabric Center, Sage's Leather Store, Seidel's Juvenile Shoes, Timely Gifts, the Brown and Lynch American Legion Post and the Black Diamond Model Railroad Society.

Investigators, led by Easton Fire Chief Earle Brotzman and State Police Fire Marshall George Umberger, probed gingerly through the badly weakened structures in a search for the cause of the destructive fire.

"We were looking through the buildings to try to determine a cause, if possible," Brotzman explained. He added, "It's going to be next to impossible."

Most of the floors and roofs of the four-story brick buildings collapsed in a fiery crash during the height of the smoky fire Tuesday.

Noting the tons of rubble piled in what were the cellars, Brotzman said, "It's going to be hard to find a point of origin in that mess."

Former tenants, he said, will not be allowed to enter the premises to retrieve what few belongings may have survived the flames, at least for the present.

"There's no way we can let them in there now," Brotzman declared. "It's much too dangerous."

The chief said he is investigating a sto-

ry that a tenant in one of the apartments told a reporter that he had heard a muffled explosion about 2 a.m., apparently in the cellar of one of the buildings. He said he didn't smell any smoke at the time and did not report it to the fire department.

Brotzman conceded he was having some difficulty getting some of those involved to talk about the fire.

"If we could have caught that long before we did, it would have been a lot less trouble than what we found at 7 a.m.," he declared.

Called by a neighbor who said he smelled smoke, the first firemen nearing the scene found great billows of gray and white smoke rolling across Northampton Street. A general alarm was immediately sounded.

Eventually, more than 100 fire fighters from six Lehigh Valley communities — including Easton — pitched in to help extinguish the city's most damaging fire in many years.

Asked to assess the damages, Brotzman

said he could offer no figures. Northampton County Courthouse records show the Sage building, at 214-216 Northampton, had an estimated market value of \$37,600. The adjacent structure at 218-220 Northampton had a market value of \$46,000.

However, that does not cover the value of the stock from all four stores, all of which was lost. Nor does it take into account the personal losses of the tenants.

In addition, much of the stock of Joseph's, a large menswear store at 222 Northampton, received extensive smoke and water damage. The store will be closed indefinitely, according to store officials.

Some interior walls and floors remained standing yesterday. A conference today involving Brotzman, city building inspector George Winter and others will determine what is to be done with the buildings.

Last night, Winter said that demolition of the blackened buildings was a necessity. The structures pose numerous hazards to the public, he explained.

The only questions about the razing, he said, are how soon will it be done, and by what procedure. Should the owners of the buildings delay or refuse to take them down, the city could do the work and place a lien on the property.

That, however, would be a last resort. Winter said that initial contacts with the owners following the fire indicated full cooperation.

In the meantime, Northampton Street east from Center Square to 2nd Street remained closed to vehicular traffic yesterday and last night. Brotzman said it may be reopened this morning.

Tuesday night and yesterday morning, a rotating crew of four fire fighters and a truck remained at the scene playing water on the smoldering debris.

One of the major handicaps the fire fighters faced Tuesday was the configuration of the buildings. Each is very narrow but about 100 feet long, making it difficult to get at the fire.

The Easton Chapter, American Red

Cross, and the Easton Redevelopment Authority pooled resources to find housing for the 20 displaced tenants.

Using data compiled by the ERA on possible available housing the Red Cross located quarters for two families in private housing. The Easton Housing Authority offered use of a three-bedroom unit in the Delaware Terrace project for two families on a temporary bases.

The Red Cross chapter director, Mrs. Herbert Rubel, again appealed for houses or apartments for the homeless group. Anyone who can offer shelter is to contact the chapter office.