

Accused St. Landry church arsonist facing hate crime charges; prosecutors present videos of fires found on his cell phone | Crime/Police

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OPELOUSAS — Digital evidence presented Monday places 21-year-old Holden Matthews at the scene of all three fires he is accused of setting, investigators and St. Landry Parish prosecutors said.

Louisiana State Fire Marshal H. “Butch” Browning, testifying at Matthews arraignment and bail hearing in the St. Landry Parish District Courthouse, said photos and videos from the churches were pulled from Matthews’ cell phone. They were taken at the scenes of the three fires as the fires were starting and before and after emergency responders were on scene.

Photos also show Matthews returned to the scenes of the fires days later, when the churches were reduced to rubble, Browning testified.

Browning said agents found copies of news reports discussing the fire on Matthews' cell phone that he altered to take responsibility for the crimes.

"He superimposed himself on these news reports claiming responsibility for these fires," he said.

He also said investigators found a roughly 10 second video of Matthews discussing church fires in St. Landry Parish with a friend. Matthews said gasoline was the best method to use to burn a church. Time stamps from the video indicated it was taken before the fires were committed, Browning said.

Prosecutors upgraded the charges against Matthews to include three Louisiana hate crime counts. Matthews is now being charged with two counts of simple arson of a religious building, one count of aggravated arson of a religious building and three hate crime counts relative to his motive behind the arsons.

The hate crime charges specifically referenced the crimes being committed because of the "actual or perceived race, age, gender, religion, color, creed, disability, sexual orientation, national origin, or ancestry of the owner, or owners, or occupant or occupants of that property or because of actual or perceived membership or service in, or employment with an organization."

The upgraded aggravated arson charge stemmed from the "immediate danger" posed to residents who were sleeping in a home 15 feet from the Greater Union Baptist Church as it burned, Browning said. He said the home's siding adjacent to the church caught fire as a result of the blaze, and firefighters had to take "extraordinary measures" to prevent the home from catching fire.

The two residents were evacuated, he said.

Matthews appeared in court via video conference at 9 a.m. Monday, where he was formally arraigned and entered a plea of not guilty for all charges. District Judge James Doherty denied him bail, saying the weight of the evidence presented and the seriousness of the charges made Matthews a continued risk.

"There is a substantial amount of evidence, it appears," Doherty said.

Matthews is charged in a string of arsons that destroyed three predominantly black Baptist churches in St. Landry Parish in a 10-day span. The first was St. Mary Baptist Church in Port Barre on March 26; followed by Greater Union Baptist Church in Opelousas on April 2; and finally Mount Pleasant Baptist Church in Opelousas on April 4.

A trial date has been set for September, with a pre-trial hearing scheduled for July 17. Jury selection will take place Sept. 10 and 17.

Browning also elaborated more on the physical evidence previously discussed in the crimes.

He said investigators found a black Bic lighter and a pack of red oil rags in Matthews' truck, matching the ones agents determined Matthews purchased from a Walmart hours before the first fire. Several of the rags were missing from the package, and remnants of matching rags had been found at the scenes of the fires, Browning said.

Agents also confirmed gasoline was the accelerant used in each of the three blazes, he said.

Matthews' association with black metal music was also a topic of discussion at Monday's hearing. Investigators and officials have frequently cited this association as a point of interest when discussing the case.

The Scandinavian subgenre has been linked to church burnings in Norway in the 1990s. One of the genre's most notorious figures, Norwegian bass player Varg Vikernes of the band Mayhem, was arrested and accused of setting the string of church fires, as well as killing one of his bandmates.

Browning said Matthews' bedroom was littered with posters, signs and devices mimicking elements from the film "Lords of Chaos," a semi-fictionalized biopic released this year detailing Mayhem's criminal acts during the early 1990s. He also had a replica of the torch the films' subjects used to set the church fires in Norway.

The fire marshal said Matthews also suggested to FBI investigators the film may have been a reason the churches were burned, though he didn't admit to committing the arsons himself. Browning said the film was not referenced in the interview prior to Matthews' own suggestions.

Other connections to the film included text messages between Matthews and a friend where the individual asked Matthews, "Was that your work?" regarding the fires. Browning said the messages mimicked communications in the film.

Finally, Matthews made comments on a Facebook post inspired by the film where commenters were asked to select their "class" from a set of options including wizard, fighter, sniper, assassin, guardian or warrior.

Matthews commented, "I'll take the arson/assassin/bard." Browning noted arson was not a category listed on the Facebook post.

When arguing for Judge Doherty to deny bail, prosecutor Charles Cravins, the chief administrative officer for the DA's office, said the severity of the evidence and the charges make Matthews a flight risk. That risk could increase if federal charges are added, he said.

Browning said it's possible the Federal Bureau of Investigation will bring federal hate crime charges and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives may bring federal arson charges.

"I'm being told that it's a big possibility at this time," he said.

Browning also said he believes Matthews poses a continued risk to community safety.

"These three fires were done in a very deliberate and violent manner," Browning said.

Browning said he believes Matthews' behavior is reminiscent of a pathological arsonist and it would be impossible to ensure he wouldn't set more fires while out on bail. He said in his experience, arsonists don't stop setting fires.

"They continue to set fires and they become larger in nature, more tragic in nature and can even become deadly," Browning said.

Matthews' court appointed attorney, Quincy Cawthorne, argued his client didn't have the financial means to flee the parish if released on bail. He also challenged Browning's focus on the film "Lords of Chaos," questioning if Browning had personally watched the entire film. He said he had not but coordinated with investigators who had.

Matthews' parents, Roy and Angela Matthews, were seated front row at the hearing, only a couple seats away from St. Landry Parish District Attorney Earl Taylor. They were visibly distressed and during a recess both broke down in tears and stepped into a personnel anteroom off the main chamber.

Angela Matthews stared at the floor for most of the hearing as Roy Matthews wrung his hands.

Browning, Taylor and Cravins each stopped for a moment to speak to the couple during the recess.