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Another fire hits downtown Barrie

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

The Ontario Fire Marshal's Office is investigating after the third fire to hit downtown Barrie in less than a year broke out last night.

The fire began beside the historic Queens Hotel on Dunlop St. E. at about 11 p.m., sending bar patrons and residents of nearby apartments scrambling for safety.

Firefighters battled the blaze until 4:30 a.m. One firefighter was treated in hospital and released, but no other injuries were reported.

The former hotel, built in 1850 and now run as a popular bar, escaped with only minor smoke damage and could reopen later today, according to Deputy Fire Chief Rick Monkman.

"The hotel did not catch fire," Monkman said. "It has some smoke damage."

Monkman added that the three fires in the past year are unrelated.

Last December, the historic Wellington Hotel and several other businesses were destroyed at the city's Five Points intersection in a suspected case of arson. That case is before the courts.

Last July, a heritage building was destroyed at the intersection of Mary and Dunlop Sts.

All three fires occurred within a few blocks.

Tuesday's fire apparently started when a mattress next to a gas meter caught fire, according to a witness.

David Hardwick, who was working as a security officer at the Queens Hotel, said he discovered the blaze near two apartments beside a back patio.

"I noticed an orange glow out back," he said. "I went out to the back patio and saw a fire right at the gas line. I saw a guy run from one of the nearby apartments with a cat under each arm."

The ground-level apartments face a small alley that runs behind businesses on Dunlop St.

Hardwick sounded the alarm and staff evacuated about 60 bar patrons through the front doors as smoke filled the building.

Some ran out the back.

"I tried to go through the front door and it was all smoky, so we went around back," said a shaken Megan McGregor, 21, of Barrie. "The two apartments beside the patio were completely engulfed."