10 Famous Arsonists and Why

Arsonists are some of the most stealthy, mysterious and down-right malicious criminals in history. Revenge, insurance money and boredom are just some of the reasons why arsonists attack. With thousands of acres ruined, millions of dollars in damage and thousands of innocent victims killed, arsonists are to blame for much of America’s destroyed lands and financial woes. Here are 10 famous arsonists and why they made it on the list:

1. John Orr

   John Orr was a former fire captain and arson investigator for the Glendale Fire Department in Southern California, and to much surprise, a serial arsonist. During the ‘80s and early ‘90s, there were a series of fires around the Los Angeles area that were going unsolved. Investigators noticed that the fires were started in areas next to major highways and, ironically, while arson investigation conventions were going on nearby. During the investigation, police discovered an important piece of information — a fingerprint on a time-delay incendiary device from the 1987 fire in Fresno, California. The fingerprint was linked to arson investigator John Orr. In addition to the fingerprint evidence and seized accelerating devices belonging to Orr, there was an earlier incident that sparked suspicion. Orr was one of the arson investigators assigned to a 1984 South Pasadena fire that destroyed a hardware store, killing four people. All of the arson investigators agreed that the cause was an electrical fire, but Orr insisted that it was arson. Orr was convicted and charged with three accounts of arson and is currently serving life in prison.
2. Paul Keller

Paul Keller is one of the most notorious serial arsonists in American history. This Seattle man is responsible for at least 70 fires and three deaths in and around the Seattle area during the ’80s and ’90s, with unsolved cases even popping up in recent years. This polished looking advertising salesman and active churchgoer was ruthlessly setting fires to homes, churches, businesses throughout four counties, making this one of the worst serial-arson cases in state history. Finally in 1993, Keller was found guilty and sentenced to 99 years in prison.

3. Julio Gonzalez

Julio Gonzalez, a Cuban immigrant, was responsible for setting fire to the Happy Land nightclub in Bronx, New York, in 1990, which killed 87 people. The night of the fire, Gonzalez was thrown out of Happy Land after getting into a fight with his girlfriend who worked there. Gonzalez returned to the nightclub intoxicated and poured a can of gasoline along the club’s only stairway and started the fire. Most victims were trampled or suffered from asphyxiation. Gonzalez was charged with 174 counts of murder and sentenced to 25 years to life in prison.
4. Marc Thompson
In 2002, Marc Thompson, a Chicago investment executive, intentionally set fire to his two-story home to collect $730,000 in insurance money. Thompson, who was apparently short on money to support his high-profile lifestyle, used his 90-year-old mother to make it appear like she set the fire to kill herself. Thompson put his mother in the basement, spread lacquer thinner on the walls and set the fire, where she later died. He received $600,000 in insurance money and his mother’s death was ruled a suicide, until investigators took a closer look at Thompson’s finances and extreme debt. After a number of suspicious money transactions and identity covers, Thompson declared bankruptcy. Thompson was tried in federal court, was proven guilty and sentenced to 190 years in federal prison.

[no picture]

5. Earth Liberation Front (ELF)
Known for using fire to spread their message against exploitation and destruction of the environment, the eco-terrorist group named ELF has caused millions of dollars in damage by setting fires around the world. In 1998, ELF caused $12 million in damage at Vail, Colorado, by setting fire to part of the ski resort. ELF announced that they set fire to Vail because of its plan to expand, which would ruin a sacred lynx habitat in the state. This particular act of arson drew national attention and remains one of the top domestic terror threats in the U.S. The Elves also torched some 30 SUVs at an Oregon dealership, in addition to burning down a five-story, 206-unit condo project in San Diego in 2003, as well as several laboratories, multi-million dollar homes, excavators and much more. Many of the ELF arsonists were arrested and served, or are still serving, jail time.
6. Terry Barton

A love letter went terribly wrong in the 2002 case of Terry Barton, a U.S Forest Service Worker, who burned a letter from her estranged husband, which caused a massive wildfire that burned 138,000 acres outside of Denver and destroyed more than 100 homes. Investigators found the remnants of some burned matches and a letter mailed to Barton, who called in the fire and later admitted to starting it. Barton pleaded guilty to the arson charge, was sentenced to six years in federal prison and was ordered to reimburse the federal government $14.6 million.

7. Raymond Lee Oyler

Raymond Lee Oyler was arrested and charged with murder during the 2006 Esperanza wildfire that destroyed 40,000 acres across the San Jacinto Mountains. This deadly fire was caused by arson and worsened when Santa Ana devil winds picked it up. Five firefighters were killed while defending a vacant home that was destroyed by the fire. Oyler was arrested for the Esperanza fire, as well as two wildfires in the summer of 2006. He was convicted of five counts of first-degree murder, 20 counts of arson and 17 counts of using an incendiary device, in which a jury called for the death penalty in a 2009 hearing.
8. Jason Robert Bourque and Daniel George McAllister

A fairly recent arson case involving 10 church fires in east Texas has two young men behind bars. Jason Robert Bourque and Daniel George McAllister were charged with one count of felony arson for the burning of a rural Smith County church near Tyler, Texas. The two men were arrested in connection to one of 10 church fires, which DNA evidence linked one of the suspects to the fire. If convicted, the men could face life in prison.

9. Benjamin Christensen

Benjamin Christensen, a former Whites Crossing, Pennsylvania, volunteer firefighter is responsible for setting seven fires that destroyed buildings, homes, business and even landmarks from 2007 to 2008. He was said to have set the fires out of boredom and anger. Christensen’s case marks one of the largest multi-agency arson investigations in history. In a 2009 hearing, Christensen pleaded no contest, in which he faces a maximum of 20 years in state prison and 20 years of probation.

10. David Berkowitz

David Berkowitz, also known as ‘Son of Sam,’ was a serial killer who was responsible for killing six people and injuring several others in New York City from 1976 to 1977. Berkowitz is most infamously remembered for murdering women, but his destructive behavior first began by setting fires throughout the city. His arson spree involved setting hundreds of fires to buildings in an attempt to vent his anger. One of the fires that Berkowitz set was outside of Craig Glassman’s apartment door, in which firemen found .22-cal shells in the ashes that didn’t get hot enough to set off. Glassman lived directly under Berkowitz and was a recipient of his hate mail, which was a major link in connecting the letters and murders of Son of Sam to Berkowitz.

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