NORTHAMPTON - As they continue to pore over evidence from the fire that destroyed a Northampton rooming house last week, investigators are studying the story the fire itself can tell.

When it comes to determining the cause of a fire, investigators glean much information from what a fire looked like, what color the smoke was and how the blaze reacted to water, seasoned investigators say.

The color of smoke can indicate what is burning. The fire's reaction to water can tell firefighters if an accelerant was used - as is believed to have been the case in the fire that destroyed a 25 Hancock St. house early Wednesday.

This morning, Northampton Detective David Vitkus said there is nothing new in the investigation.

But a key question has already been answered: Last week, authorities determined the Hancock Street fire was arson.

Determining the cause of a fire is, in large part, a process of elimination, in which investigators rule out various scenarios until the source is pinpointed, said Northampton's Deputy Fire Chief Duane Nichols, who is chief investigator in the June 21 rooming house fire at 25 Hancock St.

"It's not a 1-2-3-step process. It's kind of like a puzzle, you have to piece it back together," Nichols said.

Investigators are offering a $5,000 reward for information that leads to the arrest and conviction connected to the fire. Anyone with a potential tip is asked to call the state's arson hotline at 1-800-682-9229 or the Northampton police at 587-1133.

The fire displaced the six tenants who called the large, rambling rooming house home. Two had lived there for years.

After the fire last Wednesday, the house was demolished. Now a tall pile of rubble sits surrounded by a fence at the corner of Hancock Street, a short street that runs between Hawley and Williams streets, at the juncture with Pomeroy Terrace.

The acrid smell of burnt wood and other belongings hung in the air for days after the fire.

Jennifer Mieth, a spokeswoman for the state fire marshal's office, who works in Stow, said investigators can find where the fire started because that area shows the most severe burns.

Then they set out to determine what was in that spot. For example, was a space heater there, or the chair where grandpa smoked his cigarettes?

Investigators use this forensic evidence to analyze the statements from witnesses.

Anyone who saw the fire or had any interest in the building is interviewed for information, Nichols said.

In the case of the Hancock Street blaze, that meant investigators interviewed the building's tenants, its owner, Alan Verson, a city lawyer who owns several properties in Northampton; neighbors and the person who called to report the fire. They were each questioned as to what they saw, smelled, heard and knew.

Through these sessions, investigators determined the fire started in the rear porch. Not only was burning the heaviest there, but a tenant, Eric Mountain, said the porch also was engulfed in flames before the house was on fire.

Another tenant, Lynette Hanlon, said she smelled gasoline after noticing that the house was on fire. Police found a melted gas can at the scene.

The state fire marshal's office has five dogs trained to sniff out accelerants, Meese said. Once found, the chemicals are sent to a lab to determine exactly what they are. If a dog indicates that an accelerant was used, it is almost always right, she said.

A fire marshal's dog was dispatched to the scene of the Hancock Street fire and found accelerant, which has since been sent to a laboratory.
Fire investigators can also find evidence of arson by looking at the fire's burn pattern, how quickly it spread, how deeply the structure was charred and how far the fire traveled, Nichols said.

Kevin Perry, a resident of the Hancock Street rooming house said the fire seemed to be spreading 'unnaturally fast.'

The house was engulfed in flames within a half-hour, according to Nichols.

Once arson is determined, the investigation goes to police, who look at who would have a motive to set the fire.

Police look at everything from whether anyone in the building had enemies to who had insurance connections to the property. They go wherever any lead takes them, according to Detective Sgt. Kenneth Watson.

'It's a matter of just hitting the pavement and tracking them down,' he said.

Kimberly Ashton can be reached at kashton@gazettenet.com.

$5,000 reward offered

Fire investigators have posted a reward for information in their search for the arsonist who set fire to a rooming house at 25 Hancock St. Wednesday. The reward is $5,000 for information that leads to an arrest and conviction. Anyone with information can call the state Arson Hotline 1-800-682-9229 or the Northampton Police detectives unit, 587-1133.