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Panthers Granted A 2-Day Fire Delay

By LEONARD KATZ and
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Pre-trial hearings in the conspiracy case of 13 Black Panthers were delayed until Wednesday by Supreme Court Justice Murtagh as a result of a fire that damaged offices of two of their lawyers.

Attorneys Gerald Lefcourt and William Crain had offices in the six-story loft building at 37 Union Sq. W. that was gutted yesterday by a four-alarm blaze considered "suspicious" by fire officials.

28 Firemen Hurt

Lefcourt had asked Murtagh today for a week's adjournment, saying he had no opportunity to evaluate the damage done by the fire. He said he would advise the court if he could be back sooner.

Murtagh seemed ready to approve this when Asst. DA Joseph Phillips suggested the court rearrange the hearings—three of 13 have been held thus far—and proceed with the case of Lee Roper, whose lawyer, Sanford Katz, had offices elsewhere.

Crain, told Murtagh such an arrangement would be satisfactory, adding that the Panthers were anxious to cause as little delay as possible.

The fire, which broke out about 4:30 a.m. in a ground

floor tavern, the Tarot Discotheque, injured 28 firemen. It was called suspicious by Chief Fire Marshal Vincent M. Manty.

But Canty said he doubted that the blaze had anything to do with the Panther case. Lefcourt, however, said yesterday he "wouldn't be surprised" if the blaze had been set.

"All this is a real shocker," the attorney said. "That's what aggressive advocacy gets you if you fight on the side of oppressed people in this country."

The fire spread to 39 Union Sq. W. before it was brought under control about 11:30 a.m.

Near Warhol Studio

The fire was two doors from the building which houses Andy Warhol's factory, film studio and offices.

Most of the injured firemen suffered smoke inhalation when a mezzanine collapsed on them. They were pulled out by other firefighters. One suffered a dislocated shoulder and was admitted to Bellevue Hospital.

Mayor Lindsay and Fire Chief O'Lowery both went to the scene.

Michael Maye, president of

the Uniformed Firefighters Assn., charged today that Fire Dept. "negligence" had paced the lives of firemen in additional jeopardy yesterday.

Maye said that the men of Tower Ladder No. 1 had been warning the department for more than a year that the ladder, known as the cherry picker, had a hydraulic leak. At the peak of the fire the cherry picker broke down and had to be replaced by another brought from Brooklyn, Maye said.

"This critical delay at a time when men were in danger of being trapped and injured resulted from negligence in ignoring warnings and failing to properly maintain a vital piece of firefighting equipment, he charged.

Canty said the fire began in the tavern and spread through the rest rooms to the five other floors. There was smoke and water damage throughout the building, he said, but direct fire damage was limited to the ground floor and rest rooms.

The owner of the tavern, Maurice Saffaroth, said there had been a party there Saturday night and that some 800 guests left about an hour before the blaze began.

Fire rages in the Union Sq. building which houses the offices of the lawyers for 13 Black Panthers.
Associated Press Photo

