

FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 157: 1919 (ANNUAL MEETING LOCATIONS)

By Richard Schulte

By tradition, the Annual Meetings in the early days of the National Fire Protection Association were held either in New York or Chicago. In 1917, the Annual Meeting was held in Washington, D.C. and the meeting in 1919 was held in Ottawa, Ontario. Since Underwriters' Laboratories was located in Chicago and the work of the Laboratories was of great interest to the Association, there was no doubt that meetings would be continued to be held in Chicago. The following is an excerpt of the discussion of the Executive Committee Report which addressed holding future meetings in New York City:

*“Mr. H. O. Lacount (**Associated Factory Mutual Fire Insurance Companies**): There is one other subject in the report which I think it will be well to discuss a little,— the place of our annual meeting. As members know, it has been our practice of late years to have the meetings held alternately in New York and Chicago, these being the centers, one in the east and the other in the middle west, with the two exceptions mentioned in the report, namely, two years ago in Washington and this one here in Ottawa, for which there were special reasons, and particularly in the present case very special and most excellent reasons for deviating from what has been the practice; but in the report of the Executives the hope is expressed that this previous policy may be somewhat modified in that it may be our policy to meet much more frequently than in the past in different parts of the country. Some doubt has been expressed as to the wisdom of this policy. I think there may be members here who have certain convictions of their own in this matter, and I am sure the Executive Committee would like an expression of their opinion as to the plan of meeting outside of the two cities mentioned, as a rule, keeping always in mind preserving the privilege of meeting in different places when very special reasons make that seem the proper thing, as, for example, in the present case.*”

The President: Does anyone wish to discuss the point that Mr. Lacount has raised?

Mr. Rudolph P. Miller (New York, Chairman of the Executive Committee): The Executive Committee would very much like to have an expression on this point from the Association. It was felt that the meeting at Washington was a great success. If I understood the Secretary correctly, it was one of the best meetings this Association has had, if not the largest and most enthusiastic. This one also promises to be one of our banner meetings, and in view of these facts it does seem perhaps worth while that we should, when desirable opportunity offers, make an exception in our meeting place from New York and Chicago.

Mr. Stoney: I would ask if it is not in the Constitution of the Association that we meet in New York and Chicago?

The President: No, sir; only practice or precedent. Perhaps none of us feels it would be desirable to tie ourselves up either way; either to take action that would make it mandatory to meet in only two places, or to take action that would oblige us to consider invitations from every burg in the whole continent.

Mr. Forster: I should like to see the day when every village and farm might strive to get the convention! I see no reason why we should not follow the custom of most associations of taking ourselves annually to different places. In other organizations of which I know something this practice has had a distinctly stimulating effect in the increase of membership in the districts visited and the increase of local activities, and in order to bring this matter to ahead, I move it is the sense of this meeting that the Executive Committee adopt the practice of varying, at least reasonably, the place of the annual meeting.

Secretary Wentworth: I think the members usually like to go to Chicago at least in every two years. The Laboratories, of course, is the great attraction in that city. For my own sake, not on account of my residence in Boston, but as a perfectly unbiased person, I cannot see any reason for our meeting in New York. (Laughter.) I think New York is the worst place on the American continent for a convention to meet. (Applause.) In the first place, nobody cares a thing about us; the New York newspapers don't know we are there, and our New York members are continually running back to their offices and forgetting to return to the meeting. We have more or less of that trouble in Chicago, but it is particularly the case in New York. In our first departure from our old routine, when we went to Washington instead of New York, we had our best meeting in a decade; the members attended the sessions and stayed there one afternoon up to six o'clock en masse, and disposed of some very weighty matters. I assume we will do the same here today, because there are not too many distractions outside. I do not know that I quite agree with Mr. Forster that we should make it a settled rule or policy to go from one city to another, but I do think that the membership should endorse the policy of the Executive Committee in choosing, when a particularly desirable opportunity is offered, such a place as Washington, where we had the invitation from the Bureau of Standards, and

Ottawa, where we had the invitation from the Fire Prevention Committee of the Dominion. This is the point: are we satisfied that we have had these meetings in Washington and Ottawa, or should we prefer to stick religiously to the old custom, not a ruling, not a law, of vibrating between New York and Chicago; in other words, are we willing occasionally to omit, as the place of meeting, the village of New York. (Applause and laughter.)

Mr. Edward R. Hardy (New York Fire Insurance Exchange): As a humble resident of New York I would like to be allowed to speak at this point, merely to second the remark of the Secretary that I think New York is about the poorest place on the continent to hold any kind of convention. As a matter of fact, the New York members probably get less out of a meeting of the Association there than in any other place where the meeting could possibly be held; it is as unsatisfactory to them as it is to the Association, and I hope the Executive Committee will feel quite free to drop New York off the map entirely and use its year for some other place.

The President: Would Mr. Forster be willing to accept the language in the Executive Committee's report rather than that used in his motion?

Mr. Forster: I would be glad to.

The President: You have heard the motion, which practically recommends the adoption of the recommendation made in the report of the Executive Committee. Do you wish to discuss it any further?

The motion was adopted.

The Secretary: I move the acceptance of the report of the Executive Committee as a whole.

The motion was adopted."

While the roots of the fire insurance industry and the National Fire Protection Association were in New England, New York was the principal financial center of the nation. With New York roughly half-way between Boston and Philadelphia and close enough to Washington, DC, to make rail travel between Washington and New York convenient, New York seemed to be the ideal location for meetings of the NFPA. Apparently, experience proved otherwise.

Holding Annual Meetings at other locations throughout the country helped the NFPA expand its reach and, more than likely, brought members who had never attended an Annual Meeting before to the meetings. Holding meetings outside of the East was key to expanding the reach of Association.

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