

## FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 158: 1919 (THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS)

By Richard Schulte

The Great War, World War I, ended on November 11, 1918. A little less than 6 months after the Armistice was declared, the NFPA held its twenty-third Annual Meeting in Ottawa, Ontario. As was tradition, the President of the Association addressed the meeting with the following speech:

*"The Chair: We will now give our attention to the President's address. (Applause.)"*

### **President's Address.**

*President F. J. T. Stewart, of New York.*

*After four successive annual meetings within a period during which most of the world has been at war, it is a great satisfaction to feel that in coming together on this occasion we can plan for the future full of hope that peace will reign indefinitely.*

*It may be, however, too much to expect that we will be without enemies. In the terms of the international diplomat, it may not be a war of nations, but we may depend upon an indefinite conflict with our neighborly enemy "Fire." This characterization of fire is found in the address of former President W. H. Merrill, who, after summarizing the life and property loss incident to a series of conflagrations in the preceding fifteen years, added: "Had these twenty thousand persons been killed in fighting for their country rather than simply for their lives, their fame would be everlasting. Had these two billions of property value been wiped out by the invasion of a foreign foe, the call for defence would meet with a universal response."*

*All this may rightfully be said of the past four years, and in addition it may now be recorded that the response to the call for defence was so universal that the importance of Fire Prevention as a war measure gained a general recognition far beyond any we have been able to claim for it as a conservation measure in time of peace. We are encouraged, however, to believe that one of the beneficial results of the war will be a lasting realization of the national importance of conserving life and property against loss by fire.*

Many of our members, notably the National Board of Fire Underwriters, aided the various departments of the Government in an organized effort to prevent fires due to carelessness or design which might destroy munitions of war. In this connection the Fire Prevention Section of the War Industries Board, whose working force was almost exclusively composed of National Fire Protection Association members, rendered a notable service. The war work of many of our members, especially among the architectural and engineering professions, was a prominent feature, and the importance of fire prevention was kept in the foreground in matters pertaining to construction and planning.

The various standards and regulations of the Association for safeguarding against fire which are already widely used on this continent found even a broader-scope of application during the war. *I have always felt that members of this Association could rightly take pride in the many excellent standards which have been prepared over a period of nearly twenty-five years.* This feeling has been fully justified recently in connection with the discussions of plans for an *American Engineering Standards Organization*. On several of these occasions the fact was favorably commented upon that the National Fire Protection Association is unique in the field of standard making, being as it is an association of associations organized to bring together all interested talent in the preparation of Fire Prevention Standards or Codes.

You will no doubt be interested in further information regarding the plans for an American Standards Organization, to which reference has just been made. Most of you perhaps know of the *American Engineering Standards Committee which was formed by joint action of five National Engineering Societies (American Society of Civil Engineers, American Institute of Mining Engineers, American Society of Mechanical Engineers, American Institute of Electrical Engineers and the American Society for Testing Materials, called the "Founders' Societies.")* Its purpose is to provide machinery for the development of engineering and industrial standards, by the operation of which duplication is avoided and co-operation between all interested organizations and Government Departments secured. It was expected that a standard or group of standards thus developed would be acceptable to all concerned, and therefore become a truly "American Standard." Moreover, it was felt that, as international standardization develops, there will be need for an authoritative national body to deal with the corresponding foreign bodies. National Engineering Standards Committees are said to be already in operation in England, Canada, France and Holland; others will probably be organized in the near future.

*It is now proposed to broaden the scope of the work and membership of the American Engineering Standards Committee, as the outcome of a conference held at the U.S. Bureau of Standards at Washington on January 15 of this year to consider methods of procedure to be followed in the preparation of Safety Codes. The present intention is to reorganize it into an association of associations in some respects similar to our own organization. Briefly stated, the aim of the new organization will be to co-ordinate the work of standard-making, particularly with reference to new standards, and in cases where no one organization is obviously best qualified or sufficiently interested to act as sponsor body and provide for a committee to prosecute the work. The Standards Association will be interested chiefly in knowing that such working committees are sufficiently representative of the interests most concerned with the subject under consideration. It is not proposed to review in detail a finished standard worked out by such a committee and approved by the sponsor body.*

*It will therefore be seen that it is not the intention of the Standards Association to do any actual work of standard making, nor to interfere with the scope and influence of existing bodies such as our own which already, are engaged in such work. In the beginning it is expected that any existing standard, if presented by the organization which prepared it, will be adopted as an American Standard. We are given to understand that the preparation and promulgation of fire prevention standards will be expected to continue as before, except that an opportunity will be afforded, if desired, to secure additional backing by having them designated as American Standards by the new organization.*

*It is significant that we should be holding our annual meeting in Canada just at this time while we are talking and thinking so much about national and international standards. In the matter of Fire Prevention Standards it is perhaps safe to say that Canada and the United States are already practically in harmony, and our co-operation is becoming closer and more comprehensive each year. As far as these two countries are concerned, we therefore seem to have anticipated in fire prevention matters the present movement looking eventually to the establishment of International Standards of all kinds.*

*The war has resulted in stimulating standardization work in general, and we may expect an unusual activity of this nature in the future. As the importance of standardization work becomes increasingly prominent, our responsibility for the numerous Fire Prevention Standards already promulgated will be proportionately greater. It will be necessary for the Chairmen of our Special Committees to keep even more closely in touch with each development affecting their subject, and promptly change our standards when found necessary to keep them in step with the state of the art.*

*So much for Fire Prevention Standards and standardization in general. Our next great concern which logically follows the possession of standards is how to utilize them to best advantage. While we no doubt all agree that a certain amount of Fire Prevention legislation is important, I am sure we cannot hope for pronounced success in reducing the fire waste on the North American continent unless we can personally reach and interest the individual in some manner. Apparently good headway has been made lately by appeals to the patriotic duty of the individual to minimize waste by fire during the war. I think the response to that appeal was greater than we realize and is accountable for the fact that the fire loss was not radically greater than it was during the period of the war. The persistence of the newspapers in prominently featuring their suspicion and even opinion that each important fire was due to the design of an enemy undoubtedly had a deterring effect on fires due to both carelessness and design.*

*We cannot, however, expect the effect of all this to be permanent unless we make a special effort to keep up the interest which is apparently aroused. A few items may be cited which indicate that this is already being done. **The fire prevention inspections and educational work done by the fire insurance companies and their field men under the direction of the National Board of Fire Underwriters will be continued, although it was originally undertaken as a war emergency work.***

*The local fire insurance agents throughout the country are fully alive to the unusual opportunity which they have in dealing directly with the owners of practically every property, whether it be in the home or in the factory. Through their organization, the National Association of Insurance Agents (member of the National Fire Protection Association), they have pledged themselves to a fire prevention campaign, both by inspections and circulation of literature,*

*We have recently been encouraged to believe that the influence of women in an organized way may be made available both locally and nationally to assist in interesting the individual in fire prevention. We will hear more on this point later in our program from one of the women.*

*In addition to these items, there are other encouraging signs which one might dwell upon— and then there are the Canadians. The impending results of their enthusiasm and energy we contemplate with confidence.*

*I have not referred to any of the so-called discouraging conditions. The fact is there can be no conditions answering that description as long as we are unwilling to be discouraged. Let us therefore keep shouting with the optimist that "Business is fine," and it just cannot help but be so. Convince the laggard in fire prevention that he is out of step with others, and a lonely feeling will soon drive him to get the careful habit. We will never get anywhere by making people believe that nobody cares how many preventable fires occur.*

*It is the painful duty of the President to point out to you each year that we need more funds. Some day perhaps we will have a president who will regret to report a large accumulated surplus in the treasury; he at least should be ashamed of it. We do need more money as much as ever, but when we think how little the great game of waging war has interfered with our financial status, I again line up with the optimist and say, "We have much to be thankful for, and more to hope for."*

*When I recall how we marvel each year at the results accomplished by our efficient and enthusiastic Secretary-Treasurer, Mr. Wentworth, I wonder if some might not feel that nothing is impossible for him, so why worry over a difference of a few dollars.*

*My thanks and appreciation are extended to the members and committees for their excellent co-operation during the year.*

*Mr. William A. Stoney (Manager, Underwriters' Bureau of the Middle and Southern States): This Association has been very fortunate in the twenty-three or twenty-four years of its existence in having men as Presidents, who not only realized the responsibilities of their office and filled it with ability, but were optimistic enough and had broad vision enough to direct the Association in ways so successful. After listening to this very fine address, we cannot help but avow that President Stewart is no exception to the long line of his predecessors. In a concrete, practical way so characteristic of the man, he has brought to our attention certain facts which, if we recognize and act upon them, will mean not only the greater success of this Association, but advancement of the cause of fire protection. We must also remember that this report comes out of an experience which none of his predecessors ever had, due to the war. He is a modest man. He has not told us how many letters he has written, how many meetings he has attended, how many people he has interviewed, nor how many have interviewed him. He has taken his daily service of that sort for granted, keeping his eyes on the future. I am pleased to say, as an individual member of this Association who was present at its original organization, that our President has filled the bill. Gentlemen, I move that a vote of thanks be tendered President Stewart, and, in voting, that we pledge ourselves to the support of his suggestions, so wise, so practical, and so full of hope and enthusiasm for the Association's future! (Applause.)*

*The motion was unanimously adopted."*

Nothing of particular note in the President's Address at the NFPA Annual Meeting held in 1919, however, the address does contain a brief overview of the standards-making organizations as they existed at the time.

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**Source:** "*Proceedings of the Twenty-third Annual [NFPA] Meeting*", Ottawa, Canada, 1919.