

**FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 187: 1918  
(THE NBFU BUILDING CODE)**

By Richard Schulte

The first edition of the model building code developed by the National Board of Fire Underwriters (NBFU) was published in 1905. The following excerpt from the transcript of the twenty-second Annual Meeting of the National Fire Protection Association held in 1918 addresses the adoption of the NBFU Model Building Code.

*“RESOLUTIONS ANNUAL MEETING, MAY 7, 1918*

*The National Fire Protection Association, assembled in Chicago for its twenty-second annual meeting, again calls attention to the unusual hazards to life and property created throughout America by the world war. These hazards demand the utmost vigilance and initiative not only from those in authority, but from the private citizen as well. Every individual should consider himself a fire warden of the nation at this critical time, and should equip himself to serve his country by safeguarding to the extent of his intelligence and ability every form of natural and created resource. The elimination of waste, at all times the duty of good citizenship, is at this moment our profoundest public and private responsibility.*

*In its warfare against the needless sacrifice of human lives and property by fire the Association advocates the following measures:*

- 1. The adoption by municipalities of the **Standard Building Code of the National Board of Fire Underwriters** to the end that fire-resistive building construction may be encouraged, the use of inflammable roof coverings prohibited, adequate exit facilities from buildings assured, and interiors so designed and fire-stopped as to make easy the extinguishment of fires therein.*

[TEXT OMITTED]

*Mr. John S. Caldwell (New England Insurance Exchange): In connection with paragraph number one it might be interesting to know what success has recently been attained in the adoption by municipalities of the National building code. As Prof. Woolson is here, perhaps we might receive some information from him.*

Mr. Ira H. Woolson (National Board of Fire Underwriters): *I do not know that I can answer exactly as to the number of cities that have actually adopted the National Board building code, but I should think about eight or nine.* That may seem a relatively small number, but when you stop to think that it takes fully two years and sometimes twice or three times that for a city to adopt a code after it starts the machinery for creating one, you can understand the slowness of the operation. You know after a code has been carefully prepared by a conscientious city commission, it comes up before the city council for enactment, and there is always something that is distasteful to somebody. Long arguments, wrangles and fights occur which may drag the thing on for years. Thus the number is not as great as you might expect. I may say this, however, that the building codes that are being drafted today are greatly improved in the character of their requirements; seventy-five per cent over what they were ten years ago. They show the influence, perhaps not of our code alone, but of other good codes that are being recognized in the country as providing proper restrictions over fire hazards. *The whole subject of building code work is very much retarded at the present time, owing to the war.*

*The code has had one very marked success, and that is in being adopted as a textbook for schools of architecture and engineering.* Three years ago we began to ask institutions of that character who wrote in for information if they would like to use the code in their classes. Almost invariably they took it. *Last year fifteen institutions containing about three hundred pupils were being instructed in the requirements of the code in class room work.* This year there are forty, with over six hundred pupils. I do not think it needs any argument to foretell what the influence of this study will be in the not distant future, because these young men who are becoming acquainted with good building laws, good requirements for fire protection, are soon to go out into the world and supervise and erect buildings, and they naturally will carry with them, at least we hope they will, their ideas of what good construction should be. I think this is one of the most promising fields for the use of our code. (Applause.)”

While the number of cities which actually adopted the NBFU Building Code may have been few in number in 1918, clearly this Code served as the basis for the building codes developed by major cities throughout the United States and was the forerunner of the regional model building codes developed by groups of building code officials which formed.

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**Source:** “*Proceedings of the Twenty-second Annual [NFPA] Meeting*”, Chicago, Illinois, 1918.