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FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 208: 1906 (FIREPROOF CONSTRUCTION/THE NBFU BUILDING CODE)

By Richard Schulte

The tenth Annual Meeting of the National Fire Protection Association was held in Chicago, Illinois in late May 1906. One of the topics of discussion at this meeting was the subject of the requirements for fireproof construction. This discussion is of particular interest because of the reference to the building code developed by the National Board of Fire Underwriters (NBFU) (and also because the meeting was held within a few weeks of the San Francisco Earthquake and Fire which almost completely destroyed the City.). The following is a transcript of the discussion regarding the requirements for fireproof construction:

“The President called the convention to order at two o'clock p. m., and called for the report of the Committee on Fireproof Construction, Mr. F. E. Cabot, Chairman.

REPORT OF COMMITTEE ON FIREPROOF CONSTRUCTION.

F. E. Cabot, Chairman.

*R. P. Barbour,
E. T. Cairns,
W. R. Crane,
E. B. Creighton,*

*F. W. Eames,
I. G. Hoagland,
W. S. Lemmon,
W. C. Robinson,
J. S. Sewell,*

*F. J. T. Stewart,
A. P. Straddling,
H. V. Thayer,
W. P. Walsh.*

Mr. Cabot. *Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen: In making the report of the Committee, I shall begin by making an explanation. At your last meeting you approved a report somewhat tentative, presented by our Committee, and about that time the National Board of Fire Underwriters drew up a very elaborate and very exhaustive treatise on building law. I call it a treatise deliberately, because I don't think it is simply a building law. I think it contains all that any man ever ought, could, would or should talk about building law. It is greatly too long for enactment into a practical building law.*

There was one point relating to the amount of protection required for certain portions of the steel frame in which our report conflicted with the standards laid down in the report of the National Board of Fire Underwriters, and it has not seemed wise to take any more definite action until we could convince them that we were right, or they could convince us that they were right.

*I have, as Chairman of the Committee, been endeavoring throughout the year to reach an agreement on the disputed question, but I have not succeeded, and I have not felt that until I did succeed it was fair of me to ask the other members of the Committee to take any active part in the work, and therefore no work has been done, except this attempted conciliation. I think if we had not been afflicted with **the awful catastrophe in San Francisco** some kind of an agreement might have been reached before this meeting. It has not been reached, and my suggestion is that the Committee on Fireproof Construction be continued for a year—you won't hurt my feelings if you disapprove of the present Committee and appoint a new one—and that that **Committee be instructed to gather data bearing on the effect of fire on fireproof buildings along the line which the Special Hazards Committee has used on sprinkler risks**, and which the Secretary of the Association used before that Committee came into being.*

*I believe that if every bit of information which is available in this country during the next twelve months is brought together—or we will say within the next ten months—if it is brought together and printed and distributed, we shall at that time be in a position to say to the gentlemen who represent the National Board either, "We are wrong, and we admit it," or "You are wrong, and you ought to admit it," or "We are both wrong, and we both ought to admit it," and then I think we can draw up the necessary amendments to the set of rules which were laid before you last year, and **which should not be printed as a standard promulgated by this Association until they can concur with the standard laid down by the National Board.***

The President. You have heard the statement of the Chairman of the Committee. If there is no objection, the Committee reports progress, and the Committee will be continued. There is no objection. The next subject is Car Houses, Mr. C. H. Patton, Chairman."

The transcript above is interest for two reasons—the first is the reference to and the description of the building code developed by the National Board of Fire Underwriters, while the second is that Mr. Cabot's comments regarding the NBFU building code serve as an indication of the relationship between the National Board and the NFPA.

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Source: *“Proceedings of the Tenth Annual [NFPA] Meeting”*, Chicago, Illinois, 1906.

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