

## FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 216: 1912 (FIRE PROTECTION IN CHICAGO)

By Richard Schulte

The sixteenth Annual Meeting of the National Fire Protection Association was held in Chicago, Illinois in mid-May 1912. Included in the proceedings at this meeting was a brief message regarding fire protection in the City of Chicago submitted by the Mayor of Chicago. The following is a transcript of the Mayor's message:

*"The Chair: The Secretary will read a message from the Hon. Carter H. Harrison, Mayor of Chicago.*

### **MESSAGE FROM CARTER H. HARRISON, Mayor of Chicago.**

*A comparison is frequently made between Chicago and Berlin in the matter of losses by fire. **The population of the two cities being approximately the same, it is shown that the fire loss per capita in Berlin is only one tenth that of Chicago, and the cost of maintaining fire departments is in about the same ratio.** Speakers and writers on this subject call attention to the carelessness of the American people as compared with the greater regard for the property rights of one's neighbor evidenced in the practices and the laws of the German capital, and some go so far as to state that the prosperity and welfare of the American people is seriously threatened by the constantly increasing fire waste, which is said to have averaged \$250,000,000 per year for the past five years, and for the year 1912 to show an average of nearly \$30,000,000 per month.*

*I believe that it is the duty of a municipality to protect the lives and property of its citizens against loss by fire, and that this protection is quite as essential as proper protection against contagious diseases and similar menaces to the public health, as well as other features entering into the public welfare. **Fire departments are maintained for this purpose, building laws and ordinances are enacted, fire limits are prescribed and here in Chicago at the present time we have in contemplation the establishment of a special Bureau of Fire Prevention to deal with many phases of this subject, which do not or cannot come within the scope of the duties of present municipal officers.** At the same time I wish to point out what I believe to be the one*

underlying cause for the disproportionate losses by fire in American cities. No one has a greater admiration than I have for the thrift of the German people or the orderliness of German municipalities, but we must not lose sight of the fact that the average European city was not built in seventy-five years. Chicago, which has grown to its present size in this comparatively short period, could not possibly have attained its present size and importance as a city if it from the outset had attempted to follow those precautions which we at the present time recognize as necessary. *To have attempted to limit the central business section of the city to none but fire-proof structures before the great fire of 1871 would have been futile.* Since Chicago was rebuilt, following the fire, we have seen another entire rebuilding of the central business section, utilizing improved methods of construction, and I do not doubt that this will in turn give way to something offering even greater conveniences and safety to the inhabitants. *Progress is necessary to transform the small frame stores lining two sides of a single street into the modern city of steel and concrete and brick and stone, and this progress must often come through the scourge of fire.* For otherwise much of the old timber must remain as a menace to surrounding property and stay the advance of improvement.

It is indeed a heavy tax that we pay for rebuilding our cities through loss by fire, and it is to be hoped that modern building construction and methods are sufficiently stable so that future improvements will take place through other agencies. As a means to this end it should be the aim of every municipal officer to increase the efficiency of his city's fire defense. *Of recent years there has been great improvement in fire-fighting apparatus, which should be recognized and utilized.* The separate high pressure fire service system of water supply has been adopted more or less completely by a number of cities, and here in Chicago we are endeavoring to put this movement forward in connection with our subway and other problems of underground construction. *We have a new, and what we believe to be a comprehensive, Building Code, in a proper enforcement of which we are determined to proceed. The enforcement of adequate building regulations and the equipment of premises with first-aid appliances is essential in connection with all large establishments, and particularly in those places where large numbers of people congregate.* You gentlemen are thoroughly informed in reference to the efficiency of automatic sprinkler systems, the necessity for fire windows in buildings of fireproof construction, proper fire signaling systems, and all of the other items which go to make up efficient fire protection, and I understand have specifications in detail, covering all of these subjects, which are very largely utilized by the recognized authorities. It seems best to me, therefore, simply to impress you and your associates that Chicago is, as I doubt not other cities are, endeavoring to solve these problems for the benefit of the city and the citizens as a whole. Opposition is always in evidence to any plans which make for increased taxation or which seem to put a burden upon the cost of building construction, or which call for renovation of structures at one time accepted or permitted under former building ordinances.

*Civic betterment along all lines is the constant endeavor of many earnest men. We are endeavoring to bring about the City Beautiful, and we are likewise working for the City Safe. We know that we have the City Healthful, and we are certain that Chicago's location is unsurpassed.*

*It is shown that many things have a bearing on commercial supremacy, and among these I conceive that the question of the city's fire losses is by no means of minor importance. And it may come to pass that the fire record of a city may come to have as important a bearing on a city's supremacy as many other things which are more prominently advertised, and which are considered factors of prime importance.*

*The Chair: I will call on Mr. Glidden.*

*Mr. Glidden: Mr. President and Gentlemen, I rise to express on behalf of the members present and myself our appreciation of the address just read to us, and our regret at the absence of His Honor, the Mayor. I can say but a few words at this time, and the main thing I desire to impress upon you gentlemen is that in my judgment,—in fact I will venture anything almost on it,—His Honor, the Mayor, is sincere in what he says; he is earnest in what he is trying to do. As an evidence of that fact, I will state a little circumstance that is known to Mr. Robinson and myself. You of the National Fire Protection Association know that you have been striving for a long time to get an improvement in the fire hose used by the cities, and that you have met with violent opposition. It came to a crisis in Chicago and we were dismayed at the prospects. Mr. Robinson and myself called upon the Mayor,—strangers to him,—and he listened to us patiently, promising that we should have a fair hearing before the committee, and to our gratification and surprise, when we appeared before the committee, he was sitting with the committee, and was very useful in puncturing the sophistries that were presented at that meeting. Chicago has been buying specification hose since. (Applause.)*

*I have great pleasure in asking that the address be printed in the proceedings and that the thanks of the body be expressed to the Mayor.*

*The Chair: May I ask a second to the motion by Mr. Dugan?*

*Mr. Dugan: Mr. President and Gentlemen, I don't know that I can add anything to what Mr. Glidden has so ably stated, but I take great pleasure in seconding the motion.*

*The motion was unanimously adopted.”*

The Great Chicago Fire destroyed a large portion of the City of Chicago in October 1871. Forty years later, the memory of the Great Fire seemed to be still fresh in the minds of the municipal officials in Chicago. The Mayor's Message to the meeting of the NFPA being held in Chicago identified the means to prevent another recurrence of the Great Fire in the City:

- Improvements in the equipment utilized by the Fire Department, and
- Improvements in the water supply available for use by the Fire Department, and
- Improvements in the building and fire prevention regulations governing the construction of buildings, and
- The enforcement of the building and fire prevention regulations by the municipality.

The adoption of these four recommendations by cities throughout North America put an end to the "Age of the Great Fires".

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**Source:** *"Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual [NFPA] Meeting"*, Chicago, Illinois, 1912.

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