

FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 222: 1917 (NFPA RESOLUTIONS)

By Richard Schulte

The twenty-first Annual Meeting of the National Fire Protection Association was held in Washington, D. C. in May 1917. One of the subject on the agenda for the meeting was a series of Resolutions. The following is the transcript of the Resolutions:

***“National Fire Protection Association.
UNITED STATES AND CANADA
RESOLUTIONS ANNUAL MEETING, MAY 8, 1917.***

The National Fire Protection Association, assembled in Washington for its twenty-first annual meeting, calls attention to the new and unusual hazards to life and property created throughout North America by the world war which 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 firestopped as to make easy the extinguishment of fires therein.

2. The adoption by all states and provinces of minimum building requirements for the protection of state, provincial and county hospitals, asylums and similar institutions outside city limits and of small communities in which the establishment and enforcement of a building code is impracticable.

3. *The enactment by each state and province of the fire marshal law advocated by the Fire Marshals' Association of North America to the end that official investigation may be made of the causes of all fires, preventable fires may be eliminated by public education, and the crime of arson stamped out.*

4. *The adoption of the Association's suggested ordinance providing for the systematic inspection of all buildings by city fire marshals or local firemen to insure the vigorous enforcement of rules for cleanliness, good housekeeping, and the maintenance of safe and unobstructed exits, fire-fighting apparatus and other protective devices.*

5. *The enactment of ordinances similar to that of Cleveland, Ohio, fixing the cost of extinguishing preventable fires upon citizens disregarding fire prevention orders, and a more general legal recognition of the common law principle of personal liability for damage resulting from fires due to carelessness or neglect.*

6. *The wider general use of the automatic sprinkler as a fire extinguishing agent and life saver and the more general adoption of the fire division wall as an important life saving exit facility.*

7. *A careful study of the technical surveys of cities made by the engineers of the Committee on Fire Prevention of the National Board of Fire Underwriters covering the items of water supplies, their adequacy and reliability, fire department efficiency, fire alarm systems and conflagration hazards; and of the possibility of co-operation among neighboring cities through mutual aid and the standardization of hose couplings.*

8. *The adoption of the Association's suggested laws and ordinances for state, provincial and municipal regulation of the transportation, storage and use of inflammable liquids and explosives.*

9. *The universal adoption and use of the safety match and legislation prohibiting smoking in all parts of factories, industrial and mercantile buildings except in such fireproof rooms as may be especially approved for the purpose by fire departments.*

10. *The education of children and the public generally in careful habits regarding the use of fire.*

11. *The co-ordination of all these activities, through a central administrative officer or body of the state, province or city having primary jurisdiction, for the purpose of promoting uniformity of action and efficient co-operation.*

In the furtherance of these objects the Association appeals for the cooperation of all citizens. It asks them to help in the dissemination of its valuable literature and in the use of the standards of fire protection so carefully worked out by its committees to the end that the lives and substance of our people shall not continue to be dissipated by a reckless and easily preventable waste.

The Chair: *These resolutions constitute what we may call our Association platform, and are presented in this general form at each annual meeting. The items were pretty thoroughly discussed last year, and suggestions were offered. They were taken up section by section. If there is any desire at the present time to follow a similar line of action, the Chair will recognize members who have suggestions.*

Mr. J. O. Hammitt (Chief Fire Prevention Bureau, New York Fire Department): *I would suggest, as an addition to these resolutions, that the Association recommend the adoption by the Federal Government of regulations for the supervision of explosives and their ingredients and of chemicals that may be used for the purpose of making incendiary fires, to make it as difficult as possible for unauthorized persons of mischievous intent to get possession of such materials. In other countries engaged in the conflict in which this country is now engaged there have been occurrences of which we have heard in some of the large cities of this country, that could be prevented to a considerable extent by some such supervision that could be practicably established. In the City of New York, within the past week, two men were arrested having in their possession an explosive bomb. In that bomb was approximately a quarter of a pound of picric acid. That picric acid was accumulated from the stock of the laboratory of one of the largest hospitals in New York City by an alien cleaner. In the City of Ottawa, Canada, the parliament buildings were burned, approximately three weeks after information to the effect that those building would be burned in about three weeks was furnished to an official of this country by the editor of the Providence Journal, who stated that he had received that information from the German Embassy. The fire started in a library room, in a file of papers on a shelf. In the room at the time was a member of the Canadian Parliament. It was found impossible to check the fire, which spread with extreme rapidity. The investigation of the Canadian Commission that was created to investigate this fire reported that there had been no smoking in the room and no reason why, from any ordinary cause, fire should have started in that particular file of papers. A chemist was called before the Commission. He made fires in paper by spreading on the paper chemicals that started such fires a few minutes, or some hours, after the chemicals were spread on the paper, according in each case to the prediction of the chemist. The member of Parliament who saw the fire start was called, and there were exhibited to him fires started by chemicals in paper and fires started by lighting the paper with matches. He described in his testimony the difference in the manner in which those fires started. He said the fire that he had seen start in the library room started in the manner in which the fire started by the chemicals appeared to him to start. The Canadian Commission did not report that this was an incendiary*

fire; they reported that there was strong evidence that the fire was incendiary. The evidence that they had is what I have summarized. There was no other evidence one way or the other as to how the fire was started. We know, of course, doubtless many of the men here know, how that fire might have been started by the use of chemicals. That has not been discussed in the report of the Canadian Commission, which does not disclose to us what the particular chemical was that was used, for obvious reasons of its being opposed to public policy to spread that kind of information generally. Many of the chemicals that can be used for such purposes are commonly used in industry. The supply of them cannot be cut off without doing serious damage, but we have been over the question of the establishment of such supervision at great pains with representatives of the industries most affected, and we know that it is both practicable and desirable, from the point of view I have expressed, that supervision be established, and that such supervision can be effective only if established by the Federal Government.

The Chair: That is very interesting. Are there any other suggestions?

Mr. E. P. Heaton (Fire Marshal of Ontario, Canada): When the resolutions were read, I naturally accorded them the very fullest support and did not intend to make any observations until the last speaker brought prominently to your attention a matter that happened in my own Province. As the Fire Marshal of Ontario, I have not received a report concerning the disastrous fire referred to, and I am in ignorance of the terms of the finding of the Commission; but I want to warn you that it may be well not necessarily to accept the views just expressed until some further evidence has become public property. I voluntarily offered to our Federal Government the use of our Fire Marshal's office of the Province of Ontario in the investigation they made, but they preferred to have the investigation made by an independent commission. The report of that commission has not yet reached my desk. I have, however, followed the evidence from time to time, and let me say to you, just to emphasize the point I am going to make, that two weeks prior to the event which destroyed our Parliament buildings a similar incident occurred, but the fire was put out. The fire did not take place upon a file of newspapers on a shelf; if it had, it would not probably have assumed the proportions it did. Those of you who have been in the parliamentary library will readily recognize that in all libraries there are files of newspapers dangling from supports, the newspapers blowing in the wind with every little draft opening them up and scattering them.

Two weeks prior to this fire, a member of the Canadian Parliament was standing in this particular room. He was smoking, and, so that the act might not be too readily apparent, he held his cigar in his hands behind him, and he was standing back to back to this file of newspapers. In a minute or two he found that a part of his body was assuming rather greater than normal heat, and he turned around to discover that his lighted cigar had set fire to the great file of newspapers in which subsequently the great disaster occurred, he had, however, the presence of mind to put

the fire out; but such an occurrence has not been uncommon, and, therefore, with all due deference to the last speaker, I venture to ask that you do not reach any pronounced judgment until the final information is before you. It may have been from the cause described, but there are many people in our country who hesitate to believe it, and who are "doubting Thomases." I will not tell you where I stand, because I cannot express an opinion, not having received the report. So much by way of personal explanation. (Applause.)

Mr. Paul A. Colwell (Insurance Association of Providence): *It seems to me that urging upon municipalities the adoption of a code they may not be able to adopt will not secure their hearty support, and I therefore suggest in paragraph 1 the insertion of the words, "in principle"—"the adoption in principle by municipalities of the Building Code, etc."*

Mr. Evans: *Mr. President, for fifteen years I have been attending these meetings, and as I look back over that time there seems to be something which is dragging at the anchor and holding back this movement, measured in years and results,—the whole movement for fire control. I should like to offer this resolution to be attached to the others:*

Resolved, that this Association urges the National Government to vote promptly authority and appropriation to investigate, report, publish and distribute a complete study of the causes, remedies and compensations of fires in the United States.

Almost all of our efforts to control fire have been sectional, sporadic and measurably ineffectual, because they are like a man grabbing at the side of a partially inflated balloon; it is too big; it gives, you cannot get hold of it, and if you push it at one side, the balloon is out on the other. We tackle this thing in cities and in states one at a time, and it escapes or evades us. In something like a dozen state investigations they have not been able to get at conclusions that command support, and the same might be said for the action in a great number of cities at a great number of times. The Chamber of Commerce of the United States four years ago adopted the theory that the study of fire was a national subject, and it formed a fire prevention committee which, for three years, I headed as chairman. The result of that three years of work was to bring in a unanimous report which the Executive Committee of the National Chamber desired should be left in the archives for two reasons: first, that the subject did not seem to command sufficient popular interest to make it an issue, and consumed the time and effort of the organization; second, that this report had certain comments to make with respect to certain phases of this problem which reflected the sum total of the evidence produced in these various state investigations usually under oath with the power to compel records and witnesses. Recently the Chamber of Commerce of Philadelphia has authorized its fire prevention and insurance committee to act on that report as a Chamber measure, and correspond with

other chambers throughout the United States with respect to action thereon. The tenor of that report is to impress upon the National Government the reasonable needs for a countrywide study simultaneously with adequate power to get the truth. Yesterday afternoon various representatives of the Automatic Sprinkler Companies spent something like four or five hours with a committee of the N. F. P. A. discussing that particular phase of fire protection and prevention, and the conference, which was the second, brought out the fact that there is lost motion in every angle of this situation, and wherever we investigate anything with respect to the situation, there is something wrong, and it has never yet been tackled as a broad, countrywide job with adequate power, and the purpose of this resolution is to put this Association on record as inviting the Federal Government, which has the power countrywide, to give us the truth. (Applause.)

The Chair: *Are there any further suggestions or criticisms? If not, it is the thought of the Chair that the resolutions should be adopted as offered, and the suggestions made by members referred to the Executive Committee. Are there objections?*

Mr. Evans: *Do I understand that these additional suggestions are to be referred to the Executive Committee with power to include them if they so elect?*

The Chair: *That is what is understood. If there are no objections it will be so ordered. We shall now have the report of the Treasurer."*

Of particular interest above is the fact that the building code developed by the National Board of Fire Underwriters (NBFU) was referred to as the Standard Building Code. Also of interest is that it was recognized that sprinkler systems not only were capable of providing property protection, but also could be used to provide protection for building occupants.

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