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BMS92 (1942): Residential Occupancies

By Richard Schulte

The following excerpt from BMS92 published in 1942 provides a perspective on building fire safety from the 1940's:

“The largest loss of life in burning buildings occurs in those housing occupancies of the residential type, including hotels, apartment buildings, and other types of multi-family dwellings as well as private dwellings. Although associated with the lower range in combustible contents and concentration of occupants, there is apparently considerable hazard at night when occupants are asleep. The limitation in point of height for residential buildings of other than Fireproof type has been variously placed at 3 to 6 or 7 stories. Considering that the application of firestopping to prevent communication of fire through the concealed spaces in wood framing cannot be assured, it appears that a reasonable degree of safety in higher buildings having such framing is difficult to obtain. The increased safety with incombustible floor and other subdividing interior construction has been abundantly indicated by the fire record. Also, there would be less objection to more rigid requirements in this respect if the required fire resistance of buildings recognized as fully fireproof for the purpose were proportioned with respect to the relatively low fire severity to be expected from the occupancy.”

Today, 96 percent of the fire fatalities in building structures in the United States occur in residential occupancies (based upon statistics for 2009).

Now we know that the answer to the fire problem in residential occupancies is not fireproof construction, but rather sprinkler protection. The number of fire fatalities which occur in residential occupancies which are protected with sprinklers is a mere handful.

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