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FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY: A PERSPECTIVE

By Richard Schulte

The field of fire protection had its origins in the late 1800's and early 1900's. The Great Chicago fire occurred in 1871. The devastating fire at the Iroquois Theater in Chicago occurred in 1903, followed shortly thereafter by the Great Baltimore fire in 1904. The San Francisco earthquake and fire occurred in 1906.

Today, great fires like those that occurred in the late 1800's and early 1900's are a thing of the past. Perhaps this is why the history of the fire protection field is so fascinating-it's simply difficult for us to comprehend the fire hazards and the frequency of fires that existed little more than a century ago.

Given that the modern world is so different from the world of a century ago, can we learn anything from studying the origins of the fire protection field? The answer to that question is a most definite yes. Just from the historical record between 1896 and 1902, we see that many of the issues which were being addressed a century ago are still with us today.

One hundred and ten years ago, there was a concern about the level of science being utilized and applied in the field. While our understanding of fire and fire development has increased many fold over the years, we still struggle with the application of science in the fire protection field. Studying the history of fire protection allows us to learn about how this issue was addressed and the "science" incorporated in our building codes and standards in use today.

Perhaps, the one thing that we will learn with a study of the historical record of fire protection is that our modern building codes and standards are not so scientific. While this is certainly no revelation, still it is important to understand the origins of provisions included in our buildings codes and standards prior to making changes to those provisions.

How much of the historical record of the field of fire protection still exists? Only further research into the subject will answer that question.

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