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FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 3: NFPA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE REPORT (1897)

By Richard Schulte

The first annual meeting of the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) took place in New York on May 19th and 20th, 1897. Among the documents presented at that meeting included a report submitted by the NFPA Executive Committee.

The first portion of the Executive Committee's report was a tribute to the NFPA's first president, Charles C. Little. Following the tribute, the Executive Committee provided a review of how the National Fire Protection Association came into being and the purpose of the Association.

The following is a portion of the NFPA's Executive Committee's Report from 1897:

“EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE REPORT

To the National Fire Protection Association:

GENTLEMEN –

[TRIBUTE TO CHARLES C. LITTLE]

“Your committee feel that it would be proper at this, the first regular meeting of the Association, to make brief reference to the circumstances and conditions leading up to its organization, and briefly outline its object.

The first attempt on the part of stock underwriters to give proper consideration and encouragement to automatic sprinkler protection was in the year 1885, when the Factory Improvement Committee of the New England Insurance Exchange was organized. This Committee met with pronounced success from the first, and demonstrated the fact that it was possible for stock underwriters to successfully consider the problems involved in the protection of risks, and that, when properly understood, they would receive support of agents and the insuring public. It is but a simple statement of facts when we say that this work first originated in the East, not on account of superior ability, intelligence, or foresight on the part of underwriters in that section, but owing to the peculiar and unusual conditions which there surrounded the business, and which did not at that time exist to any extent in other sections of the country. We refer to the Manufacturing Mutual companies, who were pioneers in this special feature of protection. It was clearly not the mutual principle, but superior and intelligent consideration of hazards and protection and business methods which occasioned a competition that threatened to remove from our books nearly all of the manufacturing risks. The stock underwriters were compelled to take up and consider this question. The results will amply testify as to their success. The work thus commenced extended into other sections of our country, and associations were formed in the Middle, Southern, and Western States for the proper handling of this business. The introduction of complicated apparatus as a means of protection at once suggested the necessity of proper and careful inspection, and the result was the formation of numerous inspection bureaus, having for their special object the proper and systematic supervision of this class of business. The different associations and bureaus having in view the same general object, and yet no system or means of conference, or interchange of ideas, resulted in a considerable divergence of opinion on the various subjects involved, and a consequent wide dissimilarity in the conditions for automatic sprinkler installation. The outcome was a condition annoying and confusing to underwriters having charge of the entire territory as well as to the sprinkler equipment companies. The wish was frequently expressed that underwriters having charge of this work in different sections be brought together for mutual conference. Repeated efforts met with little success until the call for an informal meeting of underwriters, which was held in New York, December, 1895. At this time a committee was appointed to formulate rules governing automatic sprinkler installations. This committee made their report in March, 1896, and their recommendations were generally accepted and adopted by organizations throughout the country. At this meeting the value of a permanent organization was brought forward, and a committee appointed to present a plan for association, which they did at an adjourned meeting held in New York, Nov. 6, 1896. Their report was accepted and the present organization formed at that time. The various associations, now members of the National Fire Protection Association, will be named in the report of the Secretary. If there is doubt on the part of anyone as to the wisdom and value of a mutual association of stock fire underwriters for the purpose named, your Committee would respectfully suggest the careful examination into conditions prevailing not many months ago, and to a considerable extent at the present time. It is a fact that there are local conditions which may affect the question of sprinkler installation, as for example the water supplies available.

These local conditions may have an influence on underwriting experience. The general principles, however, underlying the whole question are the same in every section of the country. A 5,000-gallon tank will supply the same amount of water in Maine as in Georgia, and at the same elevation it will give an equal amount of pressure. A sprinkler will distribute no more water under the same pressure in Florida than it will in Illinois. If a sprinkler is unreliable and uncertain in its action and poor in distribution in New England it must be equally defective in the West, and if a dry-pipe valve or other apparatus is undesirable and to be condemned in one section it should be equally condemned in all others. No wonder that the assured having property in different sections of the country asks the question, "Why do you ask for a 5,000-gallon tank in one place, elevated 10 feet, and in another, call for a 10,000-gallon tank at an elevation of 25 feet; and then again, why ask in one locality for a 4-inch pipe and in another, under the same conditions a 6-inch; why in one place do you call for an arrangement of sprinkler entirely different form than in another?" Yet the representative of the same companies make the varied conditions, and the assured's conclusion, "you don't seem to know your business or what you want," would seem natural and to the point.

Before the report of the Committee forming this organization, there were within a radius of 100 miles 9 radically different standards for size of piping and sprinkler spacing. It seems reasonable to suppose that the great difference in the rules was due not to differences in ability, but from varied experience or from want of experience, and a misunderstanding as to real conditions. Certainly no section of the country has all of the knowledge or experience, and every organization can gain by mutual conference and interchange of experience with its associates.

To bring together the experience of different sections and different bodies of underwriters, to come to a mutual understanding, and, if possible, an agreement on general principles governing fire protection, to harmonize and adjust our differences, so that we may go before the public with uniform rules and conditions which may appeal to their judgment, is the object of this Association. In order that there may be no misunderstanding as what we do not intend to do, as well as suggest what we would like to accomplish, your Committee call attention to one section of "Articles of Association," viz.: "That it is not the purpose of the Association to consider the subjects of insurance rates or compensation to agents, and also through membership none are pledged to any course of action." As the object of this Association is largely educational and for the exchange of ideas, your Committee respectfully suggest that the membership of this Association should be extended to all who are interested in this general and important work of protection against fires, and they recommend that Article 2 of the Association be amended to allow an associate membership having all the privileges of active membership except that of voting.

Respectfully submitted,

U. C. CROSBY, Chairman.

Source: NFPA Proceedings, 1987-1900 Volume

The narrative of the origin of the NFPA is rather an interesting story. Essentially, the National Fire Protection Association was formed due to the development of automatic sprinkler protection and the competition for business between stock and mutual fire insurers.

Of particular importance is the statement that *“the object of this Association is largely educational and for the exchange of ideas”*. The purpose of the Building Code Resource Library website is the same.

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