

FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 118: 1952 (THE (NBFU) NATIONAL BUILDING CODE)

By Richard Schulte

The fifty-sixth Annual Meeting of the National Fire Protection Association was held at the Hotel Statler in New York City in June, 1952. Among the various presentations made at this meeting was a series of five presentations which were part of a section of the program referred to as the Building Code Forum. One of these presentation titled "*The National Building Code: Its Value to the Nation.*" was given by James K. Evans, Building Code Engineer with the National Board of Fire Underwriters. The following are excerpts from this presentation:

"This fact is evidenced by fires of conflagration proportions occurring in our country as far back as 1835, when New York City suffered a loss of buildings covering thirteen acres. Ten years later, in 1845, Pittsburgh suffered a conflagration in which there was a loss of 1,000 buildings. Later, in 1849, St. Louis, Missouri, lost 425 buildings. In 1866, Portland, Maine, saw 1,500 buildings burn down. In 1871, Chicago lost 17,430 buildings, and in 1872 Boston lost 776. From 1874 to 1892, Chicago, Seattle and Spokane, Washington, Boston and Lynn, Massachusetts, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, were visited by fires of conflagration magnitude. Then in 1901, Jacksonville, Florida, lost 1,700 buildings, and in 1902 in Paterson, New Jersey, 525 buildings were lost. In 1904, Baltimore, Maryland, lost 80 city blocks in the business section. In 1906 in San Francisco, 28,000 buildings were burned down. Worse than the loss of these buildings, there was also a considerable loss of life."

". . . .The National Board of Fire Underwriters was the first organization to come to the Nation's needs by establishing as one of its objectives a study of fires and their effect on buildings, particularly with regard to safety to life of occupants, and the reduction of property loss."

"In 1904 the National Board of Fire Underwriters issued a pamphlet containing a compilation of various measures considered suitable in formulating building law. . . .Hence, in 1905 the National Board of Fire Underwriters published its first recommended building code thus fulfilling one of its constitutional aims, influencing and encouraging the introduction of improved and safe methods of building construction. Not only was this the first building code published by the National Board of Fire Underwriters, but it was the first model building code, and for many years the only model building code, published in this country."

"In 1907 and 1909, revised reprints were issued. In 1915, a complexly revised edition of the Building Code was published. In 1920 and 1922, revised reprints were issued. In 1931 a complete revised edition was published. In 1932 and 1934 revised reprints were issued. In 1943 and 1949, complete revisions were published."

"In the development of our Code over the period of years, the National Board has tried to preserve the Anglo-Saxon tradition that the writing of law is not a function of those who enforce the laws."

". . . Therefore in that same year, 1899, the National Board created a Board of Consulting Engineers to pioneer in this field. The activities of the latter group expanded, and in time the Board of Consulting Engineers developed into what is now known as Underwriters Laboratories, Inc. The National Board is proud that it launched and continues to sponsor this enterprise, which has become a unique institution, one of unparalleled importance in the fire protection field."

"History consequently reveals that the National Board has been not only a leader but also actually a pioneer organization in the building code field. As we look back at these pages of history, we find that the contribution by the National Board of Fire Underwriters in the interest of public safety, public security and public welfare is unexcelled."

"The National Building Code is not a copyrighted document, and municipalities have used it to their liking without having to pay a fee or obtain permission from the National Board."

"Building practice has now become a science. There is actually little or no excuse for erecting buildings which are deficient in safety precautions. Structural design has progressed to the point where the safety of buildings is no longer a serious problem, so far as structural safety is concerned. For this reason, we seldom hear of a collapse."

"As a result of public demand arising from the LaSalle and Wincoff Hotel fires, the National Board made studies of suitable restrictions to apply to existing buildings. Careful consideration was given this matter, because restrictions of a retroactive nature had not been recognized in building codes. To satisfy the public's demand we drafted "Safety to Life Requirements for Heretofore Erected Buildings." "

"The organization which I have the honor to represent has been engaged in the fight against fire for over three-quarters of a century. We will not only continue that fight in the days ahead, but we will intensify our efforts. We will do all in our power to help make America a safer place to live."

And here we have a very concise brief history of the National Building Code, the first model building code in the United States, developed by the National Board of Fire Underwriters. As indicated above, the first edition of this Code was published in 1905.

* * * * *

Source: "*Proceedings of the Fifty-sixth Annual [NFPA] Meeting*", New York, New York, 1952.