

FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 83: 1913 (SPRINKLER PROTECTION AND LIFE SAFETY)

By Richard Schulte

Among the papers presented at the National Fire Prevention Convention held in Philadelphia in 1913 was a paper presented on the topic of “Building Construction” by H. W. Forster, an insurance engineer employed by the Independent Inspection Bureau in Philadelphia. The following is an excerpt from Mr. Forster’s presentation addressing the issue of sprinkler protection and life safety:

“I am limited to [the topic of] building construction, but will step beyond that a moment. Given a building of the ordinary combustible construction type, and the problem is to make the proposition safe for life. I would leave out division walls and elevator and stair enclosures if necessary, but I would sprinkle it. In our National Fire Protection Association we have records showing something like 16,000 fires in dangerously occupied buildings— cotton mills, celluloid factories, wood-working establish, etc. That is where fires have taken place and sprinklers have handled them in fine shape. The recent Binghamton fire occurred in a factory building insured for about \$20,000, with about \$50,000 worth of contents. The cost of putting in a sprinkler system supplied by the excellent city mains would have been \$1200, and thereby the insurance reduction would have been \$300 per year. You could not have burned the people in that building with a sprinkler system operative in it.

The proper enclosure of elevators and stairs and fire escapes does not provide the safety accomplished by the sprinkler system, and the insurance return is practically nothing. We must think of the pocketbook of the man.

There is one last thought I would leave here with the men representing the law-making element—that the automatic sprinkler system is the one best life-saver and the one best property-saver.”

Even in 1913, the value of sprinkler protection for purposes of protecting the occupants of a building from fire was recognized.

Source: “Official Record of the First American National Fire Prevention Convention”, Powell Evans, Editor, pages 70 and 71, 1914.

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