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FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 198: 1903 (TALL BUILDING FIRE PROTECTION)

By Richard Schulte

The seventh Annual Meeting of the National Fire Protection Association was held in Chicago in late May 1903. Among the various reports presented at this meeting was a report of the Association's delegates to the annual convention of Fire Engineers held September 1902. This report addressed recommendations for fire protection for tall buildings. The following is the transcript of the delegates' report:

"**REPORT OF DELEGATES TO FIRE CHIEFS' CONVENTION AT NEW YORK CITY.**

H. E. Hess. *William McDevitt.* *Ellery Sanford.*

To the President and Members of the National Fire Protection Association:

Your Committee appointed to attend the thirteenth annual convention of Fire Engineers beg to report that they were present at the opening meeting of the convention on Tuesday, September 16th, at the Grand Central Palace, New York, and in due course were given an opportunity to place their business before the convention, whereupon the Chairman of the Committee addressed the meeting, requesting the support of the fire chiefs for three propositions, as follows:

Provide all tall buildings with stand-pipes, running to the roof, and having fire-engine connections at the street level.

Equip basements and sub-basements with automatic sprinklers or with perforated pipes having fire-engine connections at the street level.

Establish public high pressure water supply systems capable of furnishing water under good pressure at the top of the highest buildings.

Following the Chairman's presentation of the matter a spirited discussion took place and finally resulted in the passage of a resolution calling for the appointment of a committee of five to consider the question and report further to the convention. Later, the President of the Convention appointed Messrs. E. F. Croker, New York; James Foley, Milwaukee; E. H. Musham, Chicago; C. E. Swingley, St. Louis, and W. T. Cheswell as such committee with instructions to report at the annual meeting.

Your Committee feel that the earnest way in which their suggestions were discussed and acted upon indicates the hearty sympathy of the fire chiefs with the propositions advanced, and we have every reason to believe that at the next annual convention a report will be made by the Fire Chiefs' Committee favoring such suggestions and covering practical methods of carrying them out.

H. E. Hess,
Ellery Sanford, Committee.
Wm. McDevitt,

Memorandum of Remarks of Chairman of the Committee Representing the National Fire Protection Association.

The Committee of which I have the honor to be Chairman represents the National Fire Protection Association which is composed of all the stock fire underwriting organizations in the country, and which has for its object the improvement of methods of protecting property against fire.

While you fight a fire after it has started it is our object to secure such improved construction and equipment of buildings as shall either prevent a fire starting at all or lead to its being promptly extinguished before it has reached any headway.

You are today witnessing one of the most extraordinary transformations in the construction of cities that the world has ever seen. Buildings are being run up twenty stories or more high, with as many as five stories more below the surface. Fire fighting facilities must be developed to meet the extraordinary conditions imposed by these tall buildings. We believe and we hope to have your support in such belief that three things should be done as offering practical remedies for the conditions referred to.

One. Provide all buildings with stand-pipes running to the roof and having fire-engine connections at the street level.

Two. Equip basements and sub-basements with automatic sprinklers or with perforated pipes having fire-engine connection at the street level.

Three. Establish public high pressure water supply systems capable of furnishing water under good pressure at the top of highest buildings.

We hope these three requirements may appeal to you as worthy of support and that they may receive your favorable endorsement, for you and we are working to the same end, that is, the reduction of the enormous fire waste of the country, amounting as it did to $152,000,000 last year, and threatening this year to amount to almost as much. And because of our working for the same end as yourselves, although along different lines, it is very natural that we should feel deeply interested in your meeting and that we should desire to express to you our good wishes and the hope that your present convention may outshine its predecessors in everything that goes to make up an instructive and profitable good time.

Mr. McDevitt. Mr. President, your representatives attended the Convention of Fire Chiefs, and about the only report on matters that we were connected with was on the topic "Are Fire Departments Keeping Pace with the Increased Number of Fires and the Construction of Buildings of Large Areas." The gentleman from Chicago and myself were together in recording our experience of fourteen years ago when we stood side by side handling streams from a steam fire engine, the most powerful which was then made, and with all the water we wanted, pouring it into the building, and when we were done there was nothing left but the walls. He asserted that that condition still exists in all our large cities. The assertion was undisputed, and it seemed to be the opinion of all the others that that was a defect which existed up to the present day with the best equipped fire departments. Now, it occurred to me, how long is this thing to continue, or how long is it to be allowed to continue? We are taxed to support fire departments, and when the fire chiefs acknowledge that they cannot cope with a fire, because of reasons which can be over-come, it seems to me that it is the duty of this Association to take the subject up.

States have been appealed to, and the United States government has been appealed to, to lend aid in checking the fire waste, without any result, simply because it has not touched the pocket. But it touches all our pockets, indirectly, and I think it is a subject that we should take up. I often wonder if the members of this body realize the duty which they have taken upon themselves, and what they have already done towards the prevention of this fire waste. This Association has established itself, and its effect has been felt all over the country; there is no question about that. There are able men here, their experience and their knowledge is undisputed, and I think this is a subject which should be taken up when there is an acknowledgment on the best fire departments in the country that they cannot cope with fire. Wherever we go into large cities we can pick out buildings where we can't see why a conflagration would not ensue if they took fire under certain conditions, and from reasons which, as I say, can be overcome. I believe that all these large buildings should be piped, with connection from the outside, and then if we can't get into the building we can put the water on to every floor where it will reach the fire

and perhaps prevent the occurrence of what the fire departments say they cannot cope with. I think we should demand that all such buildings should be piped and equipped with automatic sprinklers or with some other device which shall deliver the water where it is wanted. It is not disputed by the chiefs today that they can go to a building and stand out in the street and work at it for hours, and when they are through there will be nothing left but the walls. One building may represent a loss of half a million or a million dollars even if the fire is confined to it; but look at the chances there are of the fire spreading to other buildings and causing a general conflagration. This, as I say, was the question brought up at the convention which particularly interested us, and it is one which to my mind is serious, and I think this Association should take hold of it.

Mr. Anderson. I should like to ask if the question of the fire department attaching to the sprinkler equipment was brought up.

Mr. McDevitt. Not at the recent convention. At a previous convention it was brought up, and many of the chiefs agreed to do it, while others, as you all know, are rather shy about it.

The President. If there is no objection the report of the delegates will be referred to the Executive Committee and take the usual course."

In 1903, a tall building was 20 stories in height. Note that even then, it was recognized that fire fighting in tall buildings was extremely difficult. Also note that it was suggested that sprinkler protection be provided to protect tall buildings. It wouldn't be for another 7 decades that the first tall buildings in United States (Transamerica Building, San Francisco and the Sears Tower, Chicago) were protected throughout by a sprinkler system.

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Source: "*Proceedings of the Seventh Annual* [NFPA] *Meeting*", Chicago, Illinois, 1903.