SCHULTE & ASSOCIATES
Building Code Consultants
3500 Creighton Road, K5
Pensacola, FL 32504
fpeschulte@aol.com
847.312.7617

FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 93: 1914 (AN OPINION ON BUILDING DESIGN)

By Richard Schulte

The eighteenth Annual Meeting of the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) held in Chicago in May 1914 included a number of speakers who addressed various topics. One of the speakers was Frank D. Chase, the President of the Chicago Chapter of the NFPA, who presented a paper titled "Adoption of N. F. P. A. Standards By State and Municipal Action." The following is an excerpt from Mr. Chase' presentation addressing both the issues of reductions in passive fire protection requirements when sprinkler protection is provided (typically referred to as sprinkler "trade-offs") and sprinkler system design criteria:

> "*To-day buildings are designed not primarily by architects, but by engineers, and it is a question, first, of the engineering design, and second of the architectural design. We find, however, when we come to draw up our code and when we come to design our building, that it makes little or no difference whether we design a good building or a poor one–that we can, by the very simple expedient of installing a sprinkler system, bring our insurance rates down to a common level. A premium is put on the inferior construction by reason of the preference given the sprinkler. Stop to realize what this really means. It means that throughout the entire country, affecting millions of people, thousands of communities, we can build any old thing, if we sprinkle! Sprinklers do stop fires. A gentleman said, in the Fire Prevention Congress last fall, that it mattered not whether a building was fireproof, nor whether the vertical and horizontal openings were closed, nor whether the floor areas were large or small, so long as the building was sprinklered. This may be good engineering for some high-grade, well inspected factories, but I think it's a mighty poor and unscientific way to build our cities. Let's not encourage the practice of figuring on the most expensive system of sprinklers now required, and then seeing how cheaply we can build. We should design our buildings the best we know how--and then put in sprinklers, and give a rating on a system with a 4-inch pipe as a maximum. It will take care of 90 per cent of our fires. Everyone, and the sprinkler companies most of all, would be benefited, if this association would do a little internal legislating to alter our sprinkler installation standards.*"

Even in 1914, the issue of “balanced” fire protection was being discussed.

Perhaps, even more notable, was the fact that the design criteria for sprinkler system installations developed by the National Fire Protection Association was being called into question.

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