



The Great Chicago Fire, Building Codes, and the Creation of Fire Prevention Week

Fire Prevention Week (FPW) has been observed during the week of October 9 since its inception in 1922. But why this week? The date commemorates the Great Chicago Fire, which began on October 8, 1871, and caused widespread devastation. This horrific conflagration killed more than 250 people, left 100,000 homeless (approximately a third of the population of the city at the time), destroyed more than 17,500 structures, and burned more than 2,000 acres of land. The historic blaze also proved to be the turning point in the development of safe building codes and fire standards across the U.S. This also played a part on the creation of the California Office of the State Fire Marshal in 1923.

Prior to its national adoption by the National Fire Protection Association in 1922, FPW started in Chicago after the 1871 fire. The densely packed wooden balloon frame construction along with highly flammable tar roofing of much of the City of Chicago in the 1870s meant that the fire spread rapidly. Most of the downtown sidewalks were also made of wood. Months of severe drought conditions and the destruction the city's water pumping system in the early stages of the fire compounded the scale and speed of the destruction.

In the wake of the fire, city officials as well as member of the architecture community determined that brick walls and a more disciplined fire department and police force would have reduced the death toll and damage significantly. The construction of brick buildings with tile roofs became the norm in the city. Around the turn of the century, the use of internal steel structures became a building standard as this was deemed to reduce the threat of collapse in the event of a fire. This development is also cited as the incentive for the development of skyscrapers as larger and sturdier buildings were able to be constructed safely.



The aftermath of the 1871 Great Chicago Fire which burned 2,112 acres and left one in three Chicago residents homeless.



The 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York killing 146 people. After the fire new laws mandated better building access and egress, fireproofing requirements, the availability of fire extinguishers and the installation of alarm systems and automatic sprinklers.

Office of the State Fire Marshal the early 1920s as well the adoption and enforcement of many of the safety codes and standards keep Californian's safe today.

However, this did not mark the end of catastrophic structure fires in Chicago. On December 30, 1903, the Iroquois fire occurred, resulting in 602 deaths. This is one of the deadliest single-building fires in American history – made all the more tragic by the fact the building had been declared 'fireproof' prior to the disaster.

The Iroquois fire resulted in many landmark developments in emergency exit and evacuation codes that we now take for granted. Enclosed fireproof stairwells and mandated unlocked fire exit doors that opened outward became mandatory after the fire as well as clearly marked exit signage and maximum capacity. It also became illegal to obstruct exits as this was determined to be one of the main reasons why so many were trapped inside the building.

Events like the Great Chicago fire, the Iroquois Theatre fire, and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York in 1911 lead to greater political and societal support and awareness of the importance of fire safety. Out of this environment and with the ever-increasing urbanization of the U.S. came the creation of Fire Prevention Week and the California