

# NEWS ABOUT FIRE



National Fire Protection Association  
One Batterymarch Park, P.O. Box 9101  
Quincy, Massachusetts 02269-9101

(617) 984-7270

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FOR MORE INFORMATION CALL:  
Julie Reynolds at NFPA: 617-984-7274

## **REMEMBERING THE COCOANUT GROVE FIRE** November 28 is 50th anniversary.

In wartime Boston, November 28, 1942, was a day that started out like any other. One could see Errol Flynn, Judy Garland and Humphrey Bogart in first-run films. The smart night spots were thriving. Morton Downey was the main attraction at the elegant Copley Plaza Hotel and Beatrice Kay headlined the talent at the Latin Quarter. At the Cocoanut Grove, Boston's premier nightclub, the lineup that Saturday night included the dance team of Pierce and Rowland, the Carr Brothers, and Mickey Alpert and his orchestra.

But the Saturday that began so typically would end in chaos and destruction for the nearly one thousand people who packed the Cocoanut Grove and its Melody Lounge that fateful night. For the survivors of the Cocoanut Grove fire and those who treated and assisted them, nothing would ever be the same again.

The infamous Cocoanut Grove fire is the second deadliest building fire in the history of the United States. The blaze that began in the Melody Lounge swept the building in a remarkably short time, killing 492 people and injuring 166. The list of casualties would include people from 21 of the 48 states. Fifty-one U.S. servicemen lost their lives in the fire.

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The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), a nonprofit fire safety advocacy group headquartered in Quincy, Massachusetts, investigated the fire and was outspoken about it then, as it is now. "The Cocoanut Grove nightclub tragedy is clearly due to gross violation of several fundamental principles of fire safety, which had been demonstrated by years of experience in other fires, and which should be known to everybody," said the late Robert S. Moulton, then NFPA's technical secretary, in a newspaper account that appeared following the fire.

As the publisher of the *Life Safety Code*®, the NFPA has long recognized the necessity for adequate means of egress in public occupancies. The code, at that time known as the *Building Exits Code*, prohibited revolving doors as exits in places of assembly and required that, in other occupancies where revolving doors were used, they must be flanked with swinging doors. In addition, the code required that "decorations of theaters and assembly halls shall be of fire-resistive or non-flammable materials" and a cautionary note warned, "paper and cloth decorative materials should be kept to a minimum in places of assembly since such flimsy materials increase the hazard of the kindling and spread of fire."

While the precise cause and origin of the Cocoanut Grove fire are dubious, and, in fact, the official records of the Boston Fire Department list the cause as unknown, the lack of proper exits and the presence of combustible decorations are well-documented and contributed to the outcome of this fire.

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"The cause of the Cocoanut Grove fire is essentially immaterial," says NFPA president George D. Miller. "The real issue of this tragedy was the lack of basic fire protection elements in the building. The absence of adequate means of egress resulted in enormous loss of life."

Mr. Miller urges people to remember the Cocoanut Grove fire not only for the tragedy that it was, but also for the role it served to call attention to the importance of fire and life safety regulations. "The victims of the Cocoanut Grove fire did not die in vain," he says. "Because of this terrible loss, the enforcement of fire safety regulations was dramatically improved, and countless lives have been saved in the 50 years since."

NFPA believes that many more people would have died in similar fires, albeit in small increments, if the Cocoanut Grove tragedy had not placed a spotlight on major inadequacies in fire protection of public buildings.

The fire galvanized regulators to improve fire codes and regulations to specifically address:

- **Exits:** All portions of a building used for public assembly should have two separate and remote means of egress, functioning only with approved panic hardware, and swinging out with direction of flow.
- **Combustible materials:** No combustible materials should be used for decorations in places of public assembly. Materials used for interior finishes should conform to nationally-recognized and accepted test methods.
- **Emergency Lighting:** Emergency lights, independent from the regular lighting system, should be permanently installed to guide egress from the building.
- **Definition of Places of Public Assembly:** At the time, nightclubs and restaurants were not considered in many jurisdictions as places of public assembly, as they now are.

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"The Coconut Grove fire is an historical incident that we must never forget," says Mr. Miller. "While this fire resulted in changes in fire safety regulations, it did nothing to guarantee we would never suffer a similar loss. We must make certain that fire and life safety codes are adopted *and fully enforced* if we are to protect people fully."

The NFPA strongly urges people to pay attention to their surroundings, especially in nightclubs and restaurants, where the concentration of a large number of people slows the evacuation of the building. The Association suggests people identify two accessible exits in all public buildings, indicated by illuminated signs, and not enter a building with an occupancy that appears to exceed the legal limit.

"Always know two ways to get out, wherever you are. Even when fire safety regulations are enforced properly, fire can happen. We all must take responsibility for our own safety, and do what we can to protect it," Mr. Miller concludes.

Approaching its 100th anniversary, the National Fire Protection Association has led the way to fire safety since 1896. The mission of the international nonprofit organization is protecting people, their property, and the environment from the effects of fire and related hazards through education, codes and standards, research, and technical advisory services. The *Life Safety Code* is one of 280 fire safety codes and standards published as the *National Fire Codes*. Developed by technical committees staffed by 5,000 volunteers, these documents are adopted and enforced throughout the world. The Association also publishes fire safety educational materials including the *Learn Not to Burn® Curriculum*. NFPA headquarters is in Quincy, Massachusetts, USA.

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