



The worst nightclub disaster took the lives of 492 persons in the Cocoanut Grove in Boston, Massachusetts, November 28, 1942.

Panic in the Cocoanut Grove¹⁰

At the time when the United States was completely engaged in World War II a terrible nightclub fire occurred in Boston, Massachusetts. Unlike many other tragedies that were overshadowed by the war news, this incident made immediate impact on the national consciousness, and practical improvements in fire protection throughout the country were achieved shortly after the disaster. Among the important consequences was the knowledge gained in the use of blood plasma and the treatment of burns and general improvement in the enforcement of fire safety laws and ordinances throughout the U. S. and Canada.

The Cocoanut Grove was a typical nightclub, a one-story building with a basement cocktail lounge. Most of its exterior featured brick and stucco walls but inside the building there were low ceilings, combustible wall and ceiling finish, and flammable decorations. A holdover from prohibition days, the Cocoanut Grove was very popular and extreme congestion was common particularly on Saturday nights. November 28, 1942, was a Saturday toward the end of the football season, and the Cocoanut Grove was crowded to extremes. The official seating capacity of the building was something over 600, but on the night of the fire about 1,000 people were reported to have been in the building. The several bars were crowded, tables around the bars were filled to capacity and every available square foot of floor space was occupied just prior to the beginning of the floor show at 10:00 p.m.

Down in the Melody Lounge, a cocktail lounge in the basement, a sixteen-year-old bus boy was replacing a light bulb near an imitation palm tree. The exact cause of fire was never determined but it was agreed by witnesses that the point of origin was near this location. Within seconds, the fire flashed over highly combustible decorations, such as artificial cocoanut palms and cloth-covered ceilings and walls. It flashed up the stairs from this lounge cutting off the only visible means of exit. People on the main floor had no warning of the pending tragedy; some surviving witnesses said they first knew of the fire when a girl with blazing hair ran screaming across the room. Others first saw flames flashing through the air just below the ceilings. In seconds, throughout the building, there was a desperate rush for the exits.¹⁷

The main doorway, the only exit that most of those present knew, was blocked by a revolving door which quickly jammed. Some 200 victims piled up behind it. The flames also flashed through a corridor to the Broadway Cocktail Lounge and here 100 other victims piled up behind the door that opened inward, rather than outward to the outside doorway. Another door, leading to the street, was partially opened by an employee but other doors were locked. A few people escaped from the basement by crawling out of a cellar window, and some escaped through the small windows of toilet rooms. A few made their way upstairs to the second floor dressing room and escaped through windows onto roofs. But many people were quickly overcome by the noxious smoke and gases from the fire and collapsed at their tables without ever making a move toward the exits.

The Boston Fire Department was on hand immediately; in fact, just a short time before, four engine companies, two ladder companies, a rescue

One fact to remember: most people endangered by sudden fire within a building will try to escape through the same doorway they originally entered. If too many people rush for the same exit simultaneously, the situation can become disastrous. Whenever you enter any building take a few moments to learn the location of two or three possible exits . . . and make sure they are not locked or obstructed.

squad, water tower, a salvage company, the Deputy Chief of Division One, and the Chief of District Five had responded to a nearby automobile fire when cries for help, emanating from the nightclub, brought their immediate assistance. The first alarm of fire specifically for the nightclub was sent from a box alarm about 150 feet away from the Piedmont Street entrance. This was received at fire alarm headquarters at 10:21 p.m. and two more engine companies were dispatched, plus another deputy chief and a district chief. A third alarm came in at 10:24 p.m. and a fourth at 10:25. These brought fourteen engine companies, three ladder companies, and three district chiefs. A fifth alarm at 11:03 p.m. brought five more engine companies and two additional rescue squads were specially called.

Of necessity, the fire department had to carry out fire fighting and rescue operations simultaneously but, after the initial flashover, the fire was controlled promptly. The rescue operations were extremely difficult.

The work of emergency civilian medical services was credited with saving many lives. It was estimated that one Cocomanut Grove fire victim reached the Boston City Hospital every eleven seconds, a faster rate than casualties were taken to any hospital during London's first air raids. More blood plasma was used for burn and shock in Boston hospitals the first day of the disaster than was used in Hawaii after the Pearl Harbor raid. The Red Cross mobilized more than 500 workers within thirty minutes and the Nurses Aide Corp mobilized nearly 500 aides to work at the hospital, plus an additional 100 trained nurses. Two hundred and twenty-five units of dried blood plasma collected from volunteer donors were released to the Boston City Hospital and when the Boston Chapter of the Blood Donor Center issued a special appeal public response raised the week's collection of blood to an all time high of 3,789 units.

A disaster card system that had been developed for use in case of bombing attack on Boston was quickly utilized to list the victims of the tragedy because telephone calls soon were coming in from all over the country. One operator handled more than 1,000 calls within eight hours.

Four hundred officers and men from the First Naval District of the U. S. Coast Guard assisted in the fire fighting and rescue work.

The Cocomanut Grove fire received a tremendous amount of publicity and subsequent investigation brought criminal indictments against the building owners, the Boston Building Commissioner, members of the Police and Fire Department, a building designer, contractor and the foreman who participated in building the new bar and lounge.

The lessons of this fire were obvious and fortunately found their way into improvements of fire laws and ordinances throughout North America. Essentially they were these:

No place of public assembly should be filled beyond authorized seating capacity.

No combustible material should be used for decorations in places of public assembly.

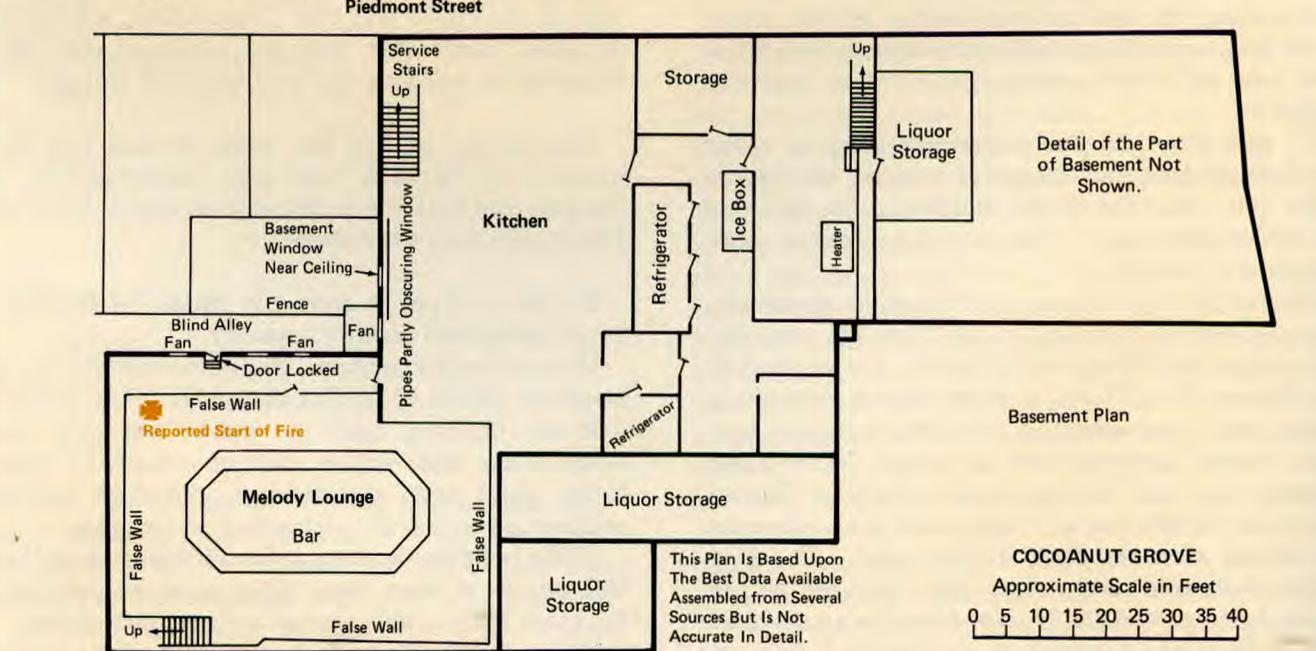
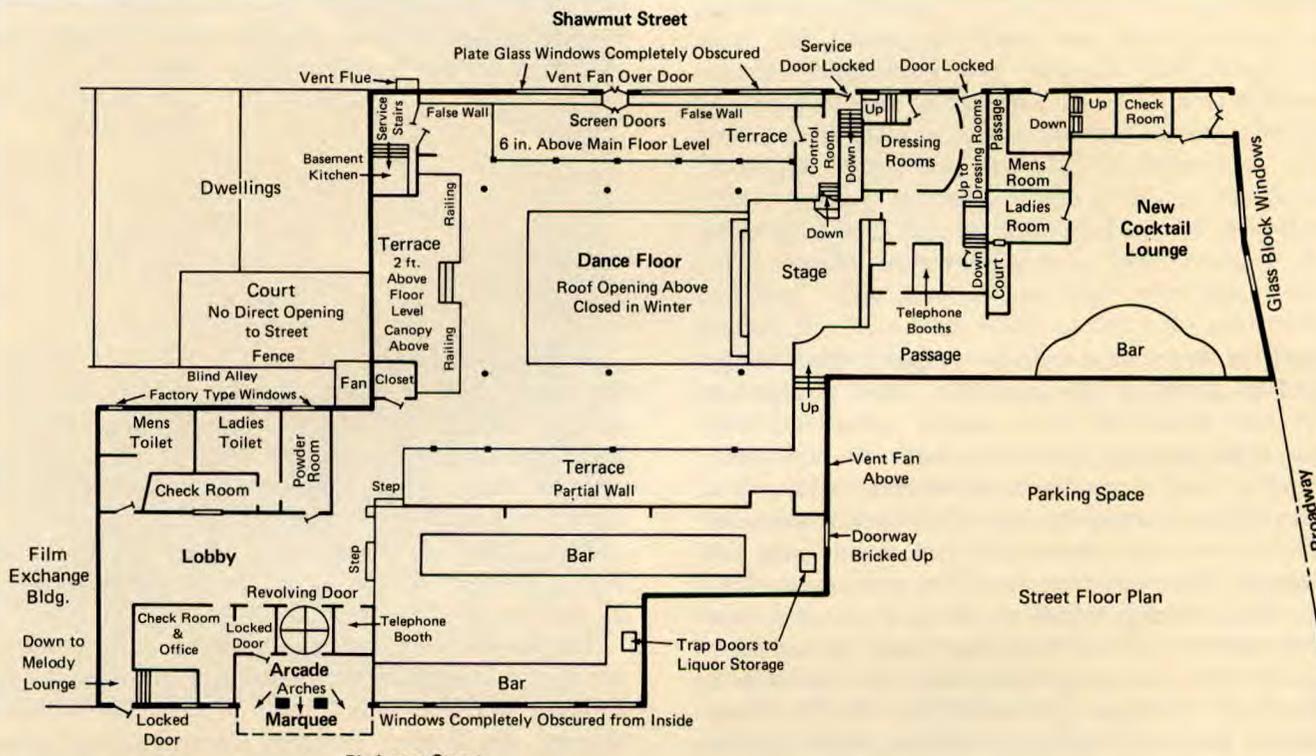
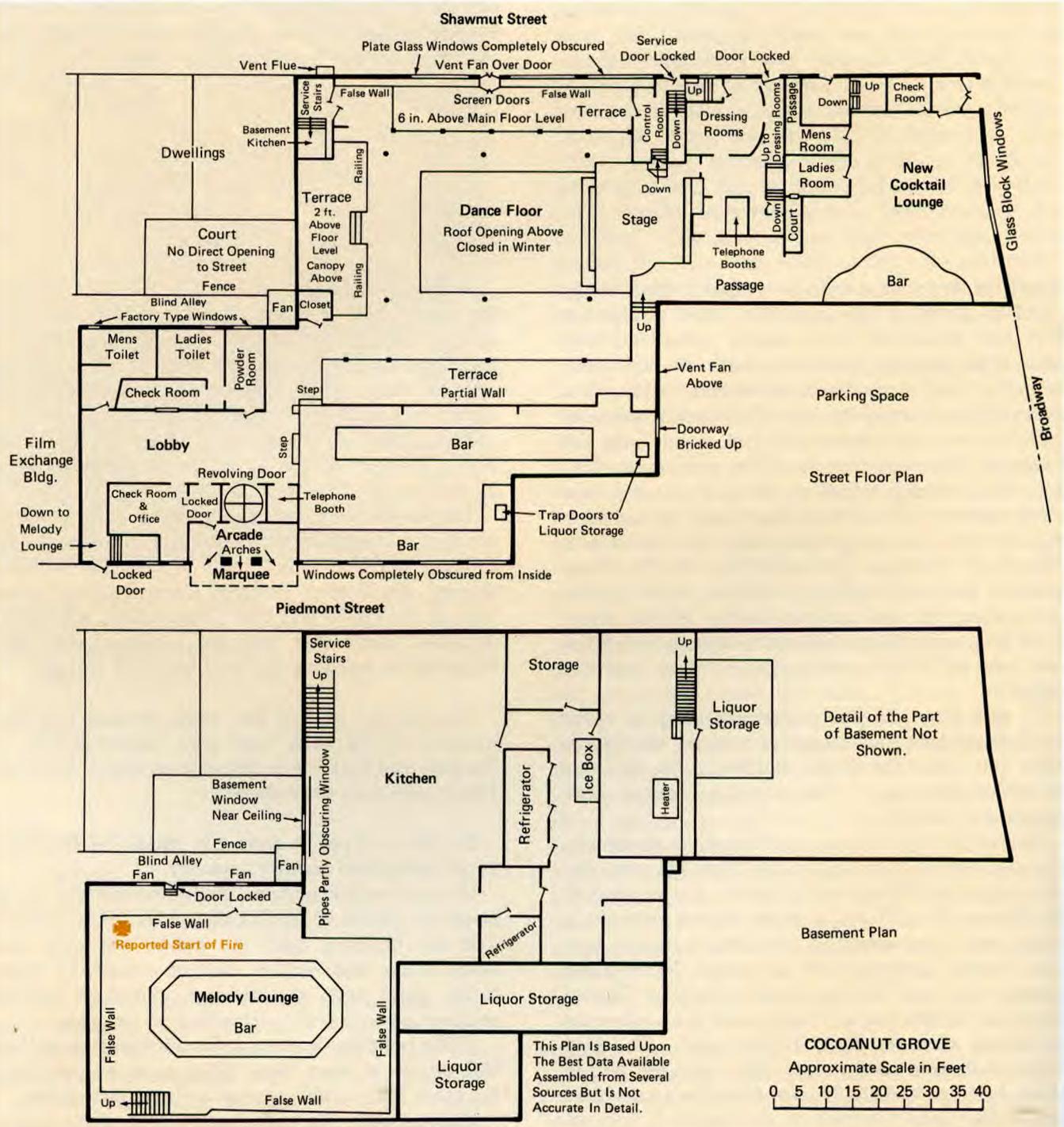
Every building used for public assembly and every room and section thereof considered separately must have at least two means of exit located as remote from each other as practical.

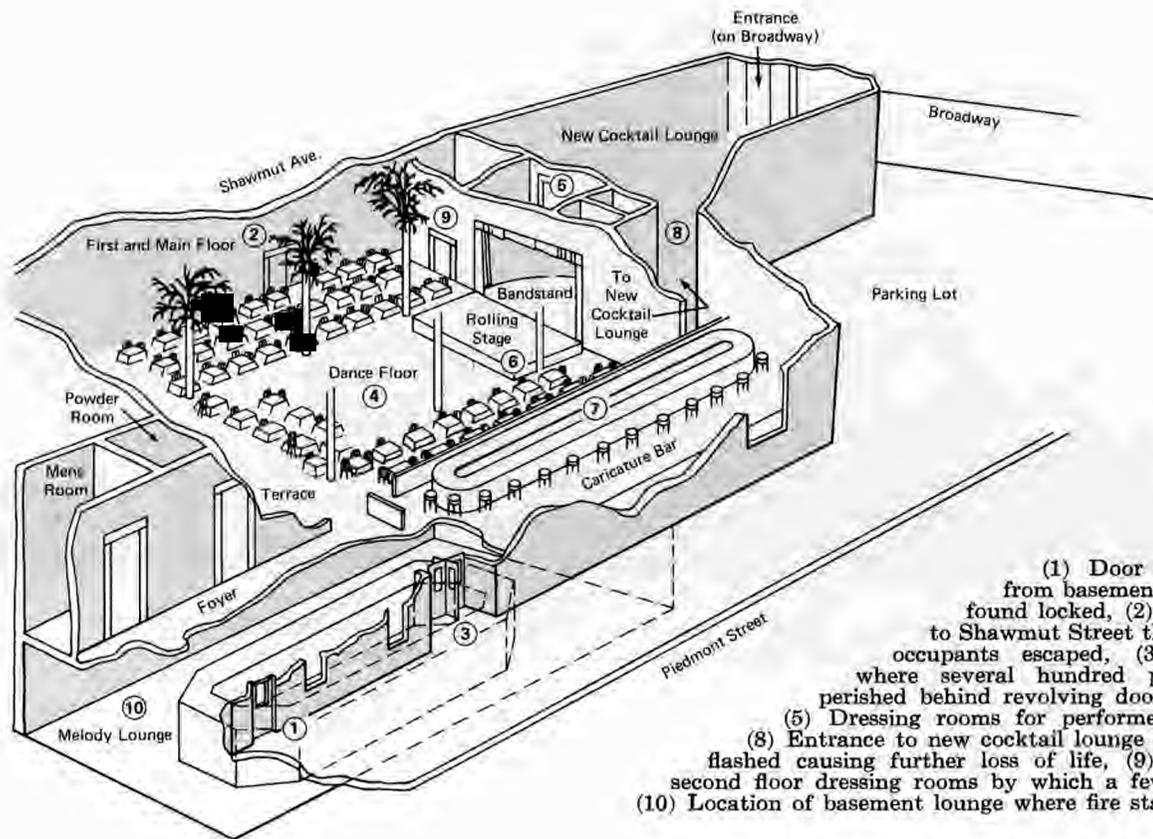
If the building or room accommodates more than 600 people at least three exits must be provided; for more than 1,000 persons at least four exits.

Exits should be maintained free and nonobstructed at all times when the building is occupied. They shall be clearly marked and adequately lighted.

Exits must provide a clear path of travel to the street or to an open yard or court communicating with the street. Exit doors must swing with direction of exit travel.

Cocoanut Grove Floor Plan





(1) Door at head of stairs from basement lounge which was found locked, (2) Rear door leading to Shawmut Street through which some occupants escaped, (3) Main entrance where several hundred persons reportedly perished behind revolving door, (4) Dance floor, (5) Dressing rooms for performers, (7) Main bar, (8) Entrance to new cocktail lounge into which the fire flashed causing further loss of life, (9) Stairs leading to second floor dressing rooms by which a few persons escaped, (10) Location of basement lounge where fire started.