Suspected Arson Kills Twelve in 120-Year-Old Pennsylvania Inn

RICHARD BEST

Twelve hotel guests died November 5, 1978, when a fire attributed to arson raced through the 120-year-old Allen Motor Inn in which a large-loss-of-life fire could have been predicted. The three-story hotel, labeled a “firetrap” by a county official, had open wooden stairs, no fire protection features except for portable fire extinguishers, and no fire alarm system. Despite recent attempts by officials to enforce safety codes, the hotel owner had been granted three separate time extensions to make repairs, and the hotel had continued in use with major firesafety violations until the November 5 fire took the lives of more than half of its occupants.

Background

The Allen Motor Inn was located in Honesdale, Pennsylvania, in the northeast corner of the Commonwealth. The three-story-and-basement motor inn was "J"-shaped, with its largest dimensions 85 feet by 117 feet. A 22-foot-by-44-foot, two-story addition adjoined the west end of the hotel, with no communicating openings. The building was of ordinary construction, with wood-joist floors and roof. The outside walls were of brick, large (old) masonry units, and poured-in-place concrete.

The original 85-foot-square building, built in 1858, was believed to be the oldest concrete hotel in Pennsylvania. A 32-foot-by-44-foot, three-story brick addition was added to the west end of the original hotel in 1881. The concrete walls of the original hotel were poured by hand. Outside walls were 18 inches thick; inner walls were 12 inches thick.

The first floor of the hotel contained a bar and restaurant, kitchen, the hotel lobby, and offices. The hotel sleeping rooms were located on the second and third floors. The basement, which formerly contained mercantile and business occupancies, was not being used. The

Mr. Best is a member of the NFPA Fire Investigations Department. The assistance of Robert W. Kinsman, Honesdale Fire Chief, is acknowledged and appreciated.
two-story adjoining building was occupied by a laundry business.

The main entrance on Ninth Street, the north side of
the building, led to the hotel lobby and to an open stair-
way leading to the upper floors. An entrance on Church
Street on the east side gave access to a corridor that led
to the same stairway. The main stairway could also be
reached from the rear or south of the building. Other
open stairways to the upper floors were located at the
south and west sides of the hotel. A metal fire escape was
located on the southeast corner of the building.

There were no sprinkler, alarm, smoke detection, or
standpipe hose systems in the hotel. Some portable fire
extinguishers were provided.

The Allen Motor Inn, formerly known as the Allen
Hotel, and prior to that, called the Allen House, had
been a well-known hotel and popular nightspot in its
earlier years. At the time of the fire, however, the Motor
Inn was no longer considered a first-class place to stay.
Many of the younger guests had previously had difficul-
ties with the law.

The hotel was occupied by about 20 elderly or tran-
sient guests on the day of the fire. One guest was a
cerebral palsy victim. Another retired guest was handi-
capped and needed a walker to move around. The owner
occupied a two-story apartment at the southwest corner
of the building. There was an opening between the
apartment and the hotel at the second floor, but no
communicating opening at the third-floor level.

The hotel's interior walls and ceilings were of plaster
on wood lath. The lower sections of the main corridor on
the first floor were wood-paneled. The first-floor cor-
ridor floors were carpeted, and reportedly the upper
corridor floors were also carpeted. Further details of
the hotel's interior could not be determined because of
the complete destruction and collapse of the building that
resulted from the fire.

The hotel originally had 50 rooms, but some of the
rooms had been combined and the exact total number of
living units at the time of the fire could not be deter-
mined afterwards.

The Honesdale Fire Department consisted of four
volunteer fire companies operating under one chief. The
four companies operated two engines, an aerial ladder
truck, and a quadruple combination fire apparatus or
"quad." One of the two engines was out of service for
repairs at the time of the fire.

Honesdale had adopted building codes several months
prior to the fire, and a building inspector had been ap-
pointed. The building inspector was undergoing training
for the position, and had not yet inspected the Allen
Motor Inn. A question of jurisdiction had to be resolved
before the Honesdale building inspector could inspect
the hotel, because the Pennsylvania Department of
Labor and Industry had previously inspected the build-
ing and was attempting to enforce its own regulations.

Two previous fires had occurred at the Allen Motor
Inn in 1978. A midsummer fire in the basement of
the hotel was believed to have been accidental. Another fire
on October 5, 1978, one month to the day prior to the
November fire, was determined to have been incendiary
in origin. The October fire had involved a pile of newspa-
papers under the front stairway. On that occasion, the
hotel guests had been successfully evacuated, and the
Fire had been extinguished without injuries to the occupants. The person or persons who set the fire were not identified.

The Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry had inspected the Allen Motor Inn in 1977 and had ordered that 16 violations of the Department of Labor and Industry regulations be corrected. The conditions cited included the lack of a fire alarm system, fire extinguishers, and emergency lighting in the building. An open stairway between the second and third floors was also cited. An order to vacate the entire second and third floors of the hotel was included.

Reportedly, three separate time extensions had been requested by the owner and had been granted. Although some improvements had been made by the owner, such as providing some portable fire extinguishers, and plans for other improvements had been approved, the hotel was continuing to operate with major life safety violations at the time of the fire.

The Fire

An occupant of the hotel who had been out for the evening discovered the fire on Sunday, November 5, 1978, as he was returning to the building. The occupant pulled a box alarm, located about 300 feet from the hotel. The Honesdale Fire Department received the box alarm at 2:57 am. All four companies responded with all available equipment, which consisted of one engine, one quad, and an aerial ladder truck, arriving at the hotel at approximately 3:01 am.

Guests on the Church Street (east) side of the hotel were hanging out of windows, shouting for help. The aerial truck company placed ladders in position and started to rescue the occupants. Fire was noted in the lobby area on the first floor, and when other apparatus approached the rear (south) side of the hotel, fire was also coming out of the windows from the upper floors. A second alarm was immediately ordered.

One guest on the third floor of the hotel jumped from a window to the awning over the Ninth Street entrance. The awning broke his fall, and he survived with three broken toes. Another guest who was staying on the second floor on the Ninth Street side of the hotel was awakened by a cry of "Fire!" He later stated that his room was filled with smoke, so he ran to the window and shouted for help. There was no one on Ninth Street, and when he looked to his left, he saw a woman guest also yelling for help from her window. Fire fighters rescued both the man and the woman, taking them down a ladder.

In all, four guests were taken down ladders; however, two occupants (including the man mentioned earlier) jumped before fire fighters could reach them, but survived. Other occupants were seen at the windows, but were overcome by the fire conditions before they could be reached.

Fire fighters were able to enter the Motor Inn, but because the stairs were burning, they were unable to gain access to the upper floors. Approximately 20 minutes after fire fighters arrived, the upper floors partially collapsed. Fire fighters were ordered out of the building and were unable to attempt any more rescues.

A total of 15 fire companies from surrounding communities responded with 11 engines, four ladder trucks, one tanker, and four ambulances. The fire was controlled in about 1½ hours, but equipment was kept on the scene until daylight to complete the extinguishment. Three deck guns and two ground monitor nozzles were used to control the fire, in addition to ten 2¾-inch handlines and a number of 1¾-inch handlines.

Honesdale police, sheriffs' deputies, and Pennsylvania State Police assisted at the scene. About 80 members of the Pennsylvania National Guard were on duty following the fire to keep order and prevent possible looting.

The cause of the fire was determined to have been arson. An occupant of the hotel has been arrested and charged with the crime. Several points of ignition were discovered, including the main front stairway.

Damage

Major portions of the wooden floors and the roof of the north section of the hotel collapsed. Outside walls were spalled at the rear, but were still standing and appeared to be sound after the fire. The interior of the building was virtually destroyed.

Casualties

Bodies of 9 victims of the fire were located and removed after the fire was controlled. Two more bodies were located the following afternoon (Monday), and the
twelfth victim was discovered on the following Wednesday. Four of the victims were located on the first floor, where their bodies had dropped down with the collapsing floors from above. Other victims were located in their rooms, three on the west end of the third floor and one on the east side of the third floor. Three victims were located on the south side of the second floor, and another body was on the east side of the second floor. Two of the victims were female; the rest were male. Information regarding the cause of death of the victims was not available from the County Coroner’s Office.

Four occupants were admitted to the hospital and treated for smoke inhalation and other injuries. One fire fighter was admitted suffering from head and neck injuries; another fire fighter was treated and released. Two other hotel occupants refused hospital treatment.

In summary, one guest (who discovered the fire) was not in the building during the fire. Of the remaining 19 guests, 12 were killed (60 percent of the total occupancy). Of the survivors accounted for, two jumped and four were rescued over ladders by the Fire Department.

Discussion

NFPA 101, the Life Safety Code, specifies measures that will provide a reasonable level of safety from fire in hotels and other occupancies. The enclosure or protection of stairways, elevator shafts, or other vertical openings is required in buildings such as the Allen Motor Inn. A manual alarm system is required when the hotel can accommodate 15 or more guests, unless each guest’s room has a direct exit to the outside. Ratings of interior finish materials are controlled, and the separation of hazardous areas is required. Also, unprotected openings other than door openings are prohibited in partitions of corridors serving as exit access from guest rooms.

Other sections of the Life Safety Code require that hotel employees be trained and drilled in duties that they are to perform in the event of fire, panic, or other emergency.

A detailed comparison of conditions at the Allen Motor Inn with the NFPA Life Safety Code could not be made because of the nearly complete destruction of the building. The Honesdale Fire Chief reported that the building was not sprinklered, did not have an alarm system, smoke or heat detection system, or standpipe hose system. There reportedly was no desk clerk on duty on the night of the fire. Inspection of the destroyed stairway on the first floor verified that the stairway was not enclosed.

The Allen Motor Inn was severely lacking in the fundamental life safety requirements that would have permitted the prompt escape of the occupants when the fire occurred. Numerous other large-loss-of-life fires in hotels and motels have been nearly identical to the wet method.

1 The codes being enforced by the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry were not determined. The 1976 Edition of NFPA’s Life Safety Code was used to analyze conditions at the Allen Motor Inn on the date of the fire and compare them to the latest edition of the Code.


The destroyed front stairway on the Ninth Street side of the Inn. The bucket was one of several found after the fire that proved to be unrelated to the fire origin.

NTPA
Third, the system does not take into account the incidental features of the facility... for example, the types of draperies, curtains, wastebaskets, and mattresses.

Fourth, the separate mechanical systems are not evaluated, such as a piped-in oxygen system, space heaters and heating system, and other types of electrical and mechanical systems that can affect the building's overall fire safety.

Fifth, the system does not take into account the evaluation of the staff in terms of their training, their competence level, the number of fire drills, and the quality of the evacuation plan. These would all be reflected in a safety evaluation of the building.

And finally, the system is limited by the fact that it does not provide absolute values of risk and safety, but only relative safety in comparison with a given set of codes or regulations.

The system has been successfully field-tested and is now being proposed as an appendix to the NFPA Life Safety Code. As an appendix, it will provide a tool to help any enforcing official to determine the equivalency of retrofit measures in a building. The system has been applied to trial buildings and has suggested multiple alternative solutions for equivalence. It has also been presented to the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare for use in evaluating facilities.

Current work at NBS has been expanded to adapt this system to other types of occupancies. At present, work is proceeding on applying the system to residential occupancies. At the same time, an attempt is being made to develop a generalized system that can be applied to any occupancy.

Penn. Inn Fire (continued from page 27)

Allen Motor Inn in their construction features and lack of fire protection and life safety features. A large-loss-of-life fire in the Allen Motor Inn could have been predicted.

The particular circumstances of the November 5 fire certainly could not have been foreseen, but a fire that would kill a large percentage of the occupants on more than one floor certainly was foreseeable, based on the lack of fire protection and considering the construction and operating features of the hotel.

One county official allegedly had publicly labeled the Allen Motor Inn a "firetrap" some time prior to the November 5 fire. State officials had inspected the hotel and had cited 16 violations of conditions that, if corrected, could have prevented the large loss of life.

The correction of major safety discrepancies in older buildings is often a slow and difficult process. The Allen Motor Inn was no exception. Three separate time extensions had been requested by and granted to the hotel owner without any significant progress being made. The hotel continued in operation with serious life safety violations until fire finally resulted in a predictable disaster.