DANCE HALL FIRE (RHYTHM CLUB)
Natchez, MS
April 23, 1940

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Natchez Dance Hall Tragedy
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Natchez Dance Hall Tragedy

One of the worst fire disasters of the twentieth century occurred in a small dance hall in Natchez, Mississippi, a quiet old river town of about 16,000 population. There, on the evening of April 23, 1940, 207 persons lost their lives and 200 others were injured when fire involved combustible Spanish moss over the dance floor. There was only one main exit and the small windows apparently were nailed shut. The panic-stricken people piled up at the rear wall of the building, most of them dying from suffocation or from being trampled.

The Rhythm Club in Natchez was used as a place of entertainment by the black people. It was only one story high with the roof and sides made of corrugated iron. It was a long, narrow structure, measuring 120 feet in length and thirty-eight wide. The main entrance opened to an interior lobby which in turn opened onto the dance floor. At the rear of the building was a bar, with the orchestra platform in the opposite corner. Along the side and rear walls were approximately eighteen windows, all boarded to keep out “gate crashers.” There were no skylights or upper windows to vent the heat of any fire which the metal walls of the building would confine like an oven.

On the night of the fire, a popular Chicago orchestra had attracted a record crowd and about 700 or more persons were inside the building at about 11:15 p.m. The fire started near the hamburger stand at the front of the dance hall when the gray Spanish moss, hanging from ceiling joists, ignited and began to burn rapidly. People in the lobby in front of the dance floor were able to get out the door quickly, but others were trapped by a hedge of fire when the burning moss dropped and ignited clothing of the people. In a surging movement the hundreds of victims within the hall pushed back to the rear, where most of them died. It was surprising that so many escaped since the only main exit passed through a cloak room and the lobby where the doors opened the wrong way, inward.
The fire department responded to an alarm within minutes and the fire was quickly extinguished. Sheet metal siding was torn off to allow rescuers to reach the victims but many, trapped below the deck, suffocated before they could be released.

Like every other fire tragedy, this incident presented lessons which should have spurred many cities into improving their fire prevention regulations. The Rhythm Club had one main exit which was partially blocked. Doors leading to this exit opened toward the interior; but people trying desperately to escape expected the doors to open the other way. The mass of highly combustible Spanish moss was an obvious danger; so were the closed windows. The outer iron covering of the building, while noncombustible, confined the heat with maximum intensity on the people trapped inside.

Similar fires, in earlier years, should have served as a warning. In 1929 in a club in Detroit, the combination of combustible oak leaves hanging from the ceiling and boarded windows caused twenty-two fire deaths and twice as many injuries from panic when a carelessly discarded match ignited the decorations.

In 1936 nine persons lost their lives in a New York City restaurant when fire spreading through a window from the floor below flashed over festooned silk cloth ceiling decorations. Today, fire codes require that no furnishings or decorations of an explosive or highly flammable character shall be used in any place of assembly or other occupancy. But, after Natchez, other fire disasters would underscore the need for such common-sense fire safety.
The construction of the building was a major undertaking. The site selection was critical, and the design was developed with careful consideration of the surrounding landscape and architectural style. The foundation was laid, and the framework was constructed, with attention to detail and quality. The interior spaces were designed to be both functional and aesthetically pleasing, with ample natural light and efficient use of space. The building was completed on schedule, and it has since become an iconic landmark in the city.

The opening ceremony was attended by dignitaries, local leaders, and community members. The official ribbon-cutting was performed by the mayor, and speeches were given by various officials and guests. The building was dedicated to the community, with the hope that it would serve as a hub for cultural and social activities for generations to come.

In conclusion, the construction of the building was a significant achievement, and it has had a positive impact on the community. It stands as a testament to the hard work and dedication of those involved in its creation. The building is a symbol of the city's growth and development, and it is a source of pride for all who call it home.
The rear of the dance floor. Orchestra platform is at the right, bar is at the left. Note that some strands of Spanish moss are still hanging from the walls, while the building is located in a valley above the floor. This is the platform of the building where the windows were located, and the floor was suspended from the roof. The dance floor was covered with Spanish moss, supported by wires strung in both directions.

The dance floor gave the impression of a long nave. The raised platform on a high pediment and which opened to the outside, the recessed opening on a shady gallery and which opened to the inside, the recessed opening on the side of the door, were prominent features of the building. The dance was received from the lobby through a single door. The dance floor was raised from the lobby, and into a lobby. The lobby was a room about 7/4 feet wide, and 10 feet deep. The single door opened into a narrow entrance way about six feet deep.

The lobby, without a doubt, however, the door did act as a check valve for those who were trying to get out.

not did any part of the building was completed during the last four years. No part of the building was once a critics' and has never been shown except by the interior decoration was proposed by the architect at the first suggestion made. The design of the dance floor was based on the idea of having the dance floor as a single level of the building. The dance floor was raised to the level of the dance floor, and the room was raised to a height of 10 feet above the floor. The dance floor was covered with Spanish moss, supported by wires strung in both directions.
Page 73

THE NATIONAL DANCE HALL, HOBOKEN.

The National Dance Hall has been designed and constructed to provide a location for the enjoyment of music and dancing. The building is a single-story structure with a large main room and a smaller dance room.

The main room is used for general dancing and social events, while the dance room is reserved for formal dances and other special occasions. The building is well-lit with ample space for guests to move about.

The National Dance Hall is located on a corner lot in Hoboken, providing easy access from the street.

Conclusions

The National Dance Hall, Hoboken, New Jersey, is an excellent example of modern design and construction. Its spacious interior and carefully thought-out layout make it an ideal location for social gatherings and events.