The Hotel Winecoff Disaster.

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The lessons to be found in the ruins of the Hotel Winecoff are the focal point of international attention by hotel owners and managers, architects and builders, building and fire department officials, fire prevention and casualty engineers; fire, casualty, and life insurance companies; manufacturers of fire protection equipment; legal authorities and the public, immediately concerned with the prevention of loss of life from fire causes throughout the world.

The Building.

Mr. Marvin Harper, for the past year Chief Building Inspector for the Atlanta Departments of Buildings, stated following his careful examination of the structure after the fire on December 7 that the building did not deviate in any major respect from the requirements of the 1911 Atlanta Building Code. Except for minor improvements too slight to require compliance with the provisions of a new building code, adopted on December 7, 1923, and subsequently amended by ordinance, the building at the time of the fire was essentially in the same condition structurally as it was on the day it hospitably opened its doors in 1913.

A building permit was issued in 1912 by the then City of Atlanta building inspector for the erection of the 15-story, basement and sub-basement, protected steel-framed structure, to be built on a lot 62 ft. 9 in. by 70 ft., or 4,386 sq. ft. Under the provisions of Sections 65, 68 and 89 of the 1911 Building Code with the lot size less than 5,000 sq. ft., no protection...
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Plan of the third floor. The fire is supposed to have started near the end of the corridor, upper left in this plan, although the exact origin may never be known. The arrangement was the same on all floors above.

Applicable excerpts from 1911 Atlanta Building Code.

Section 65. In any building hereafter erected to be used as an office building, store, factory, hotel, lodging house, or school, covering a lot area exceeding five thousand feet and not exceeding six thousand five hundred feet, there shall be provided at least two continuous lines of stairs remote from each other; and every such building shall have at least one continuous line of stairs for each six thousand five hundred feet of lot area covered, or part thereof, in excess of that required for six thousand five hundred feet of area. (Section 65 further provides that there shall be not less than three feet six inches in the clear between hand rails of the stairs.)

Section 68. No opening in any floor or roof shall be without a solid covering or enclosure as provided in this code, to prevent the communication of fire from story to story, except as otherwise provided in this Code for certain stair case openings which are not required to be inclosed.

Section 89. Any hotel building having an area requiring more than one stairway as provided in Section 65 of this Code, shall have at least one continuous stairway inclosed in the manner described in this Section.
Press Association.

View of the fire taken from the corner of Peachtree and Ellis Streets about 5 a.m. By this time all of the lives had been lost.
cal throughout all floors above the second. There are fifteen rooms per floor, approximately 530 sq. ft. of hall and corridor space, a small service closet, and space for the two enclosed elevators and the unprotected stairway. It will be noted that the corridors and hall do not extend to the exterior of the building on any floor.

The incombustible stairway is typical throughout all upper floors except for a direct stairway from the uppermost floor to the roof. The arrangement of the stairway must be understood to provide the only plausible explanation for the fact that the fire, believed certain to have originated in the third floor corridor, did not swiftly reach the top floor and mushroom at that level. It will be noted from the floor plan on page 142 that the entrance to the stairway is between the two passenger elevators on each floor. There are 10 stair treads to the landing, from which the stairway divides to the right and left behind the elevator shafts and in seven stair treads reaches the floor above. There is approximately 800 cu. ft. in volume in the stairway space at each floor. This unusual arrangement acted as a temporary check to the passage of hot gases and the spread of fire from floor to floor, but was insufficient by itself to prevent the nearly total destruction of all combustible material from the sixth to the twelfth floors at the time of the fire.

There were other vertical openings in addition to the unprotected single stairway, though none contributed to the spread of fire in the building. The two passenger elevators were enclosed in masonry shafts, with wired glass panels in metal doors. Though the wood doors in the corridors to the pipe shafts burned off, there was no spread of fire throughout the building attributable to this condition.

Left—looking up the open stairway between the two elevator doors. Right—looking down the stairway from the floor above. The stairway branched at the landing, as shown in the plan.
Typical interior of a room showing character of damage. The window in this picture is wired glass designed to provide protection against exposure from the adjoining mercantile buildings.

Each service closet had a protected opening to the sheet-metal laundry chute. Wood backing for the mail chute burned out on several floors, but there was no indication of spread of fire at the point of passage through the floor construction.

Structurally, the fire resistance provided for the steel-framed building was sufficient to resist, without collapse, the fire which required the heroic efforts of the Atlanta Fire Department for three hours before it was brought under control. Except for metal sash and wired glass windows in the south wall of the building, all the window frames and sash in the masonry exterior walls were wood.

Floor construction throughout the upper floors of the building is concrete and tile. Floors, except the single stairway, were covered completely with rugs, which did not contribute to the spread of fire throughout the building until other combustible materials in the rooms and corridors were completely involved.

Room and corridor partitions were plastered 3-in. hollow clay tile throughout the building. Partitions in the corridors and the hall were decorated with an unobtrusive painted burlap to wainscot height. Rooms throughout were finished with wallpaper, in some rooms seven layers in thickness. During the past two or three months the corridors and halls were redecorated with an oil base paint, thinned with mineral spirits, reported to have been thoroughly dry at the time of the fire.

Of major importance in the spread of fire were wood doors and transoms used
throughout the building. Corridor doors were 1½ in. in thickness, with ¾-in. plywood panels and mirrors on the room side of each door. Wood-framed transoms had wood panels 5/16 in. in thickness. Baseboards, trim, wainscot molding and access doors to pipe shafts were all wood. In the light of events, it can be said that the amount of combustible material surface in the halls and corridors was comparatively high in proportion to the approximately 4,700 cu. ft. of volume of the hall and corridors per floor. Interior woodwork was highly finished. Furniture throughout the hotel was combustible for the most part. Several rooms with metal bedsteads burned out, leaving the twisted metal debris behind. It is reported that the hotel management had made a practice of flameproofing mattresses and pillows, though this treatment was of no avail when other combustible material became totally involved.

Special hazards did not in any way contribute to the spread of fire or loss of life. Refrigeration equipment, paint storage and maintenance shops were located in the basement and sub-basement. The hotel kitchens on the first and mezzanine floors were relatively undamaged by fire. The
The valet shop was in the penthouse.

In general, appearances following the fire indicated that the Hotel Winecoff was in good condition at the time of the fire. There were no indications of poor housekeeping or lack of maintenance. The chief engineer, among other qualifications, had experience in the installation of automatic sprinkler systems. In 1942 fires occurred in guest rooms of the hotel and were successfully confined to the rooms of origin by hotel employees and the Atlanta Fire Department, and thus contributed to the general over-confidence in the structure.

Fire Protection Facilities.

Private fire protection equipment included a 4-in. standpipe, with siamese connection at the sidewalk level in Ellis Street. Two and one-half-inch hose was provided at each floor, and it is fortunate that hose connections to the standpipe were changed during the past year to fit the standard thread of the fire department. The standpipe was supplied from a 5,000-gal. tank on the roof, with 92 lb. normal pressure maintained. Static pressure on the city mains in this location is normally 43 lbs. with an adequate supply. One 2½-gal. soda and acid extinguisher was provided in each elevator hall.

The night engineer doubled as the watchman and was expected to make two-hour rounds, without clock. The time stamp at the registration desk in the lobby was used to register the start of each tour. On the night of the fire the following employees were on duty:

- Night Manager
- Elevator Operator
- Night Engineer (female)
- Telephone Operator
- Room Maid
- Night Manager's Wife
- Room Cleaning
- Bell Boy
- Woman

The N.B.F.U. grading schedule was used in 1933 to classify Atlanta as having Grade 3 fire protection. The National Board of Fire Underwriters bulletin reported on the changes in fire protection facilities for the City of Atlanta on June 24, 1946. Two engine and two ladder companies are located within two blocks of the Hotel Winecoff, one station is thirty seconds running time from the building, and both stations responded on the first alarm at this location.

Cause and Origin.

The cause of the fire has not yet been determined. Its origin is believed certain to have been in the west corridor of the third floor, though the exact point of origin may never be known. One guest room off the west corridor was taken over for office space the day before the fire and the bedroom furniture, including bedstead, bed spring, mattress, and a chair, had been temporarily placed in the corridor. Following extinguishment of the fire, the partially burned mattress, painted burlap wainscot, wood baseboards and molding were found as shown in the photograph on page 8. At a point nearer the west elevator shaft the baseboard, painted burlap wainscot and the wood molding were entirely consumed, giving plausibility to the belief that the point of origin may have been nearer the stairway opening to the fourth floor, particularly in view of the high degree of combustibility in the remaining unconsumed portion of the mattress.

Delayed Discovery and Alarm.

Official records of the Atlanta Fire Department show that a telephone call at 3:42 A.M. was the first and only notification to the department that there was a fire at the Winecoff. The night manager is reported to have given the telephone alarm. Events preceding the alarm to the fire department are obscure though evidence is given to statements made by the bell boy and the night engineer, which place the event.
place the time of discovery at 3:15 A.M. It was the custom to require a time stamp at the desk in the lobby for all room service orders. The bell boy is reported to have received a call for service from room 510. Upon answering the call he stated that he time-stamped the service slip at 3:10 A.M. and went to the fifth floor, leaving his master keys and the slip on the stool in the elevator, which was left at that floor with the door blocked open.

After the fire the elevator and the master keys were found as the bell boy had reported he left them. The bell boy and the occupant of room 510 were trapped in their room when, five minutes later, upon opening the door to the corridor, it was found that the corridor was full of heat and smoke. Both were rescued 45 minutes later through the outside window. Inquiries which have been in progress since the fire may disclose exactly what transpired between 3:15 A.M. and 3:42 A.M., but the delay in discovery was disastrous.

It is reported that the night manager attempted to warn the occupants of the guest rooms of the danger by house telephones, though the cramped halls and corridors on each floor were rapidly untenable and as there was but the SINGLE STAIRWAY FOR EGRESS from the upper floors the position was hopeless for the occupants except for the possibility of rescue through the exterior windows. In this case had a manual alarm been provided to arouse the guests and had it been used to send them into the confined corridor with its single stairway almost certain death by asphyxiation would have been the result. The roof was the safest place in the structure above the fire. Persons on the upper floors specifically warned to escape to the roof in time, probably could have reached that location safely.

Spread of Fire and Loss of Life.

On the arrival of the first engine and ladder company, thirty seconds after the receipt of the telephone alarm, guests were jumping from the windows of the upper floors. One body fell at the feet of the fireman setting the ladder jack under the first aerial ladder to arrive on the scene. Many guests were seen attempting to descend by knotted bed sheets. Several successfully reached the fire department ladders raised to their maximum elevation.

Three hundred and four guests were
Rescue operations were conducted, using a short ladder as a bridge across the 10 ft. alley between the hotel (left) and the Mortgage Guaranty Office building (right).

registered in the hotel on the night of the fire. One hundred and nineteen died and some sixty-five guests were injured. About 120 escaped uninjured. Fire department ladders raised from the street accounted for many rescues from the lower floors. Some rescues were also effected by short ladders used as bridges across the alley. A number were saved by jumping into nets although with several people jumping simultaneously to the same net only one could be caught. As in other fire tragedies, many persons lost their lives by jumping who might have been rescued had they remained in the building a few minutes longer.

The fire department, devoting its first attention to saving life, did all that could reasonably be expected under the circumstances. Their operations were limited by the available manpower and equipment and by the fact that most of the windows on the upper floors were inaccessible. Below the top two floors, which escaped the most serious burning, keeping doors and transoms closed served only to delay death. Apparently no one on these floors survived except those rescued by the fire department.

The fire spread from floor to floor through the unenclosed stairway by ignition of the combustible interior finish in the corridors and halls, aided by the draft produced through open wood transoms over the wood doors to those guest rooms in which the exterior windows had been thrown open to await rescue or to obtain air to maintain life.

Wood doors and transoms were burned away on all floors from the fourth to the thirteenth, with almost total destruction of all combustible material from the sixth to
the twelfth floors. There was little physical damage except from the heat and smoke on the fourteenth and fifteenth floors (believed due to the fact that the fire was gradually venting itself through the exterior windows of lower floors), though loss of life did occur on both floors, in one instance due to open windows.

As in the Hotel LaSalle fire, there were rooms totally burned out with transoms open, and others only slightly damaged where the transoms were closed.

Extinguishment.

The Atlanta Fire Department, consisting of approximately 385 men and officers under Chief C. C. Styron, mans twenty-two engine companies (most of which are equipped with 1,000-gal. pumpers), eleven ladder companies and a squad company. Of five aerial ladders one was out of service at the time of the fire. In all, forty-nine pieces of fire apparatus were in service at the Winecoff. Mutual aid agreements were responsible for assistance from Avondale, College Park, Conley Motor Base, Decatur, Druid Hall, East Point, Ft. McPherson, Hapeville, Marietta and the Naval Air Base.

First alarm response in the Winecoff area consisted of four pumpers, two ladder trucks, and one squad car carrying rescue equipment.

Several firemen were injured by falling bodies during rescue operations with ladders and nets.

The first engine company on the scene laid their lines into the lobby and up the stairway. As additional equipment arrived and was placed in service the fire was fought simultaneously from the interior, from the street, from the roof of a 12-story office building across a 10-ft. alley, and from the roof of a 6-story department store across Ellis Street (58 ft. wide). Fire department pumpers supplied the standpipes in the Winecoff, the office building and department store, from which lines were used to combat the fire, finally brought under control in about three hours as firemen battled their way floor by floor up the single stairway in the center of the building, using fire department hose to replace the hotel hose burned from the standpipe connections. It was a rugged, nasty job in confined space and dense smoke and in the face of cascades of hot water pouring down the stairway. Several firemen were overcome and carried to the street for resuscitation. Delayed discovery and delayed alarm to the fire department produced a situation which the fire department could not be expected to overcome without heavy loss of life.

Other Contributing Factors.

There are many additional factors, other than hazards inherent in the structure from the moment the plans left the drafting board, which contributed to the eventual loss of life in the Hotel Winecoff. Some were within the control of the owners and managers, others were not, as they could not be expected to have fire prevention and protection experience. The accurate determination of some of the additional contributing factors is impossible due to the passage of time and the death of individuals who alone could supply the necessary information.

The original owner and his wife died in their tenth floor apartment during the Winecoff fire. The architect had passed away at some earlier time. It would be useful to learn from them the considerations which had prompted the erection of a hotel on the small area site. The building exit requirements of the 1911 building code permitted economies in building
When the fire department raised their first aerial ladder, people were awaiting rescue at windows and many were already jumping. This picture shows improvised bed sheet ropes which were used successfully in some instances to descend from windows above the reach of the 85 ft. ladder. Many of those seen in the windows of this picture, beyond the reach of the fire department, could not be rescued.

exit costs and therefore additional rental return from guest rooms in the hotel where space limited the number of rooms to fifteen per floor. At an estimated $2.00 per night gross return for one room on each floor needed to provide a second means of egress, over $300,000 in gross return over thirty-three years was available to the owners. The death of the principals also makes it impossible to learn whether or not the fire insurance rating organization which had jurisdiction was consulted by the architect to determine, in advance of design and construction, the additional fire insurance costs to be charged throughout the life of the building because of the proposed lack of protection for the single unprotected vertical stairway opening. Perhaps the usual choice was made by the owner that he would pay the additional costs in fire insurance premiums in lieu of protecting the opening, though had he elected otherwise, the loss of life which occurred in 1946 would almost certainly have been minimized, and the fire confined to the floor of origin, regardless of
the provisions of the Atlanta building codes. In any event, the owners of the hotel paid the deficiency insurance charges for the unprotected stairway through all the years, no doubt over-confident in the structure, as they advertised it as "Absolutely Fireproof!"

It would also be useful to report whether or not the owners of the Hotel Winecoff had ever been approached by the manufacturers and distributors of automatic sprinkler and automatic fire detection equipment. Following the fire, none was discovered who had done so, though automatic sprinkler protection in the corridors alone would have detected and extinguished the fire. In view of the thirty seconds running time from the nearest fire department engine house, automatic fire detection equipment could be expected to have avoided disastrous delayed discovery and brought prompt response by the fire department. The clue to the advantages of partial automatic protection for halls, corridors and hazardous areas in fire-resistant hotels was found in the history of the Hotel LaSalle fire, but thus far no one has been found who carried the story to the owners of the Winecoff.

Almost immediately after the Winecoff fire there was the usual public demand that the provisions of the latest edition of the Atlanta Building Code, which require at least two means of egress and enclosure protection for vertical openings be enforced. The usual statements as to the unconstitutionality of retroactive provisions regarding existing structures of all building codes followed. If the point of view is accepted that retroactive provisions of building codes can be enforced, the fact remains that no legal action was taken against the owners of the Winecoff since the adoption of the new building code by the General Council of Atlanta in 1923, which was the first opportunity provided to correct the inherent hazard in the exit facilities at the Winecoff, which were constructed in accordance with the provisions of the 1911 building code. To have legal responsibility but insufficient staff to discharge the responsibility is not confined to the Department of Building of the City of Atlanta. At the time of the fire, Chief Inspector Harper’s staff consisted of himself and five others, including stenographic help. Aside from other places of public assembly, there are approximately eighty hotels in the city of Atlanta, all of which present specific life-safety engineering problems for solution by owners and building officials.

Similar considerations of the legal aspects of enforcement of the retroactive provisions of building code requirements had occurred in Atlanta prior to the Winecoff disaster. Following the loss of thirty-five lives from fire in the 5-story, brick and wood-joisted Terminal Hotel in Atlanta early in the morning of May 16, 1938, a solution was sought for those situations in which the public believed there was “no legal recourse” to obtain correction of hazardous conditions. Mr. J. C. Savage, then, as now, City Attorney of Atlanta, stated at that time that he differed with those who were under the impression that all that was needed to make hotels and other places of public assembly safe was “more law.” He cited Title 72 of the Code of Georgia of 1933, Section 72-102 as follows:

Private citizens may not generally interfere to have a public nuisance enjoined, but the petition must proceed for the public on information filed by the solicitor general of the circuit. A public nuisance may be abated on the application of any citizen specially injured.

Mr. Savage further stated on June 29, 1946, following the Hotel LaSalle fire that, “All of Sections 72, 73 and 74 of the
In view of its possible usefulness to enforcement officials interested, the following quotation from the Code of the City of Atlanta of 1942 is provided:

CHAPTER 63—Code of the City of Atlanta of 1942—Sec. 63-102.

631102. ABATEMENT OF NUISANCES IN OR AROUND BUILDINGS.

1. CONDITIONS CONSTITUTING NUISANCE.—Any building, structure, enclosure, place or premises is a nuisance, where it is perilous to life or property by reason of its construction, or of the condition or quantity of its contents, or of the use of the building or its contents or the enclosure, or of the overcrowding at any time of persons therein, or of deficiencies in its fire alarm or fire prevention equipment, or of conditions in its construction likely to cause fire or spreading of fire, or of conditions therein which would hamper or impede the Fire Department in combating a fire in or about the building, or where the condition of the walls, floors or roof is such that the building is likely to fall on account thereof, thereby endangering the safety of its occupants or of the public.

2. DUTY OF BUILDING INSPECTOR, WITH CHIEF OF FIRE DEPARTMENT, TO ENFORCE SECTION.—The Building Inspector, acting in cooperation with the Chief of the Fire Department, is charged with the duty of enforcing this section.

3. PROCEDURE ON ABATEMENT.—Whenever the Building Inspector has information that any building is alleged to be a nuisance within the provisions of this section, he shall cause an examination thereof to be made. If in his opinion, after such examination, such building constitutes a nuisance within the provisions of this section, said Inspector shall serve notice upon the owner of such building, or the person in possession, charge or control thereof, directing him to abate the nuisance, if the same is abatable, and specifying the defects or things to be corrected to place the building in a safe condition; and if conditions be such that the defects or things cannot be corrected or abated, requiring him to demolish such building. Such notice shall provide and name a reasonable time within which such nuisance shall be abated or the building demolished. Upon the failure of the person notified to obey such notice, the Building Inspector shall, after the expiration of the time specified in the notice, cause a summons to be issued to such person, requiring him to show cause before the Recorder, at a time and place named therein why such nuisance should not be abated or, in event the alleged nuisance cannot be abated, why the said building should not be demolished. If upon a hearing of the case, the Recorder determines that such building cannot be repaired or

By the time this picture was taken, further rescues from the upper floors were impossible.

Code of Georgia of 1933 are devoted to nuisances and their abatement and vest the power of the State to be exercised through the Solicitor General wherever it is a public rather than a private nuisance."

Again quoting Mr. Savage, "After the Terminal Hotel fire we closely scrutinized the City Ordinances with reference to nuisances and their abatement. We found them to be somewhat inadequate and outmoded. We felt that we could simplify their enforcement and at the same time broaden their scope. Thereupon we prepared a complete new nuisance law for the City of Atlanta, which law was adopted June 10, 1938. A great deal of study by the entire Law Department was put into this ordinance and we think it is good beyond all question. If any officer of the City of Atlanta presents to the Law Department sufficient evidence to sustain a case of public nuisance or a fire hazard we will prosecute to the fullest extent of our ability, regardless of who might be involved."
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...put in a safe condition, he shall render a judgment that the building be demolished by the defendant within a specified number of days and that, upon failure of defendant to demolish it, then the same shall be done by the City of Atlanta at the expense of the defendant. In the event that the Recorder upon such hearing shall find that the building constitutes a nuisance, but that the nuisance can be abated by the doing of certain things to said building, such as repairs, changes or alterations, the Recorder shall provide in his judgment how and in what manner such nuisance may be abated and shall designate the time within which such acts must be begun. In such case, the judgment shall further provide that if the defendant fails to begin compliance with said judgment within the time specified, notices shall be placed at the entrances of the building, stating that the premises therein have been declared to be a nuisance and unsafe, and that the entrances to said premises upon the sidewalk or street shall be blocked off by barriers or guardrails. In the event of an appeal being taken from the judgment, pending such appeal the Building Inspector shall cause to be erected on the street or sidewalk adjacent to the entrances of the building, signs stating that such building has been declared to be dangerous and unsafe. (June 10, 1938.)

It will be noted that Chapter 65 of the Code of the City of Atlanta vests the authority for the abatement of nuisances in the Building Inspector acting in cooperation with the Chief of the Fire Department. The shortage of manpower in the Chief Building Inspector’s office has been previously discussed. Chief Styron and Fire Marshal Phillips were similarly handicapped. At the time of the fire at the Winecoff, the Bureau of Fire Prevention staff provided for enforcement of the Fire Prevention Ordinance adopted by the General Council on August 4, 1941, consisted of seven uniformed officers and men, one on military leave. Chief Styron’s secretary is the only clerical assistance available to Fire Marshal Phillips. Under the Fire Prevention Ordinance, Chief Styron is also responsible for the issuance of permits for the use of explosives, pyrotechnics, nitrocellulose motion picture film, pyroxylin plastics, compressed and liquefied gases, flammable liquids, etc. Whatever the legal provisions made for the enforcement of building code requirements and the abatement of nuisances, it is difficult to avoid consideration of the effect on the loss of life in the Winecoff disaster had the Building Inspector’s office and the Fire Prevention Bureau not been undermanned.

Lessons.

The lessons which are available in the loss of life in the so-called “fireproof” Hotel Winecoff will be of no use whatever unless their full import effectively reaches hotel owners and managers whose basic responsibility for life safety in their structures cannot be morally or legally avoided. Public condemnation of hotel managements or the use of legal force will not be required in the vast majority of cases if hotel managements are convinced that conditions needing improvement can be demonstrated from the record to be necessary and reasonable. Hotel owners and managers can do little without technical engineering advice which they must seek or which is placed at their disposal by public or private agencies.

The loss of sixty-one lives in the Hotel LaSalle fire in June, 1946 (also described as “fireproof”) was the “tip-off” and the loss of 119 lives at the Winecoff furnished the “proof” that a re-examination of previously accepted practices and activities in the hotel field and the fire and casualty insurance industry is imperative if the future safety of hotel guests and employees is to be assured. Thus far it has appeared impossible to transmit through cold print, to those who should be concerned with life safety from fire the lesson quickly learned by children through their first contact with a hot stove. This latest and heaviest loss of life in a fire-resistant structure provides the necessary impetus to review the lessons.
and thus delayed the fire in the corridors from spreading rapidly into the rooms. Closed transoms would have afforded the fire department a better opportunity to extinguish the fire in the corridors which spread rapidly by the draft produced through open transoms and exterior windows. Automatic fire detection equipment, properly maintained, installed in the corridors (in rooms if the hotel management wished to protect the fool who smokes in bed) could have avoided the tragic delayed discovery altogether. Properly maintained automatic sprinkler protection for the corridors alone would have not only detected but extinguished the fire in its incipient stage. Complete automatic sprinkler protection for the entire structure would have not been necessary to prevent its collapse or total destruction.

Owners and Managers.

Owners and managers desirous of improving the safety of hotels would be well advised to consider the adequacy of their exit facilities and the presence of unprotected stairway and elevator openings. The employment of able watchmen, sufficient in number to assure patrols at not less than 20-minute intervals would have prevented the delay in discovery of this fire (of whatever cause and origin) that eventually reached holocaust proportions. In this fire, a single fifty-dollar door installation at the entrance to the stairway from the third floor (if closed) would have prevented the spread of fire to the upper floors. More than half of the 195 transoms over the doors to guest rooms in the Winecoff were found in open position following the fire. Seven hundred and eighty-six-penny nails, four to the transom, a forty-nine cent hammer and a man to use it could have closed the transoms and thus delayed the fire in the corridors from spreading rapidly into the rooms.

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The owners of the Winecoff hotel were convinced that life safety is paramount over all other considerations there is an example in

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Atlanta following the Winecoff fire. The
owner of the Hotel Ansley called Fire
Marshal Phillips and asked him to wit-
ness the signing of a contract for $107,000
for the provision of complete automatic
sprinkler protection throughout the build-
ing, additional exits from the roof-top
night club and the enclosure of all unpro-
tected stairway openings, all this without
reference to fire insurance rate credits,
legal force or other coercive action by any
public or private agency. The owner of
the Ansley also employed two 45-year-
old retired Atlanta firemen to patrol the build.
ing and maintain the fire protection equip-
ment. The 119 victims of the Winec
~off
fire will not have died in vain if other
hotel owners throughout the world are
convinced, as was the owner of the Hotel
Ansley, that the “stove is hot.”

Fire Protection Equipment.
The lesson in this fire for the manufac-
turers and distributors of approved auto-
matic sprinkler and automatic fire detec-
tion equipment lies in the fact that investi-
gation failed to disclose efforts on the part
of anyone connected with the industry to
convince the management of the Hotel
Winecoff that installation of this equip-
ment would prevent delayed discovery and
alarm to the Atlanta Fire Department. A
very few automatic protection
 systems
were sold and installed in Atlanta hotels
following the loss of thirty-five lives in the
Terminal Hotel fire in 1938.

Architects and Builders.
There are four major lessons for archi-
tects and builders in this disaster:
1. It is dangerous to sacrifice life-
safety features such as adequate exit facil-
ties, protection of vertical openings, etc.,
for economic considerations of space re-
turn and building costs.
2. Though the steel-framed structure
was found to be structurally sound fol-
lowing the fire, the comparatively small
surface area of combustible wall finish,
doors, transoms, trim, and baseboards in
the confined hall and corridor space was
sufficient to provide fuel for a fire of the
intensity required to burn through guest
room doors and totally consume all com-
 bustible material in guest rooms from the
sixth to the twelfth floors, particularly in
those rooms in which combustible trans-
oms were left open. The LaSalle and
Winecoff hotel fires both demonstrate the
severe hazard to life in the use of transoms
without automatic fire detection and prompt extinguishment of fire in the
incipient stage outside the rooms.

3. Active cooperation is required of
the architect and builder on behalf of their
clients with building departments and fire
prevention bureaus, insurance rating or-
ganizations, insurance company fire pro-
tection engineers, all of whom have access
to loss-of-life records, nationally recog-
nized standards of fire prevention and fire
protection and can contribute to the future
life safety of the clients, guests and em-
ployees in both new and existing buildings.

4. Automatic protection, properly in-
stalled and maintained, for corridors and
especially hazardous areas, storage rooms,
in a fire-resistive structure is sufficient to
avoid delayed discovery of fire and con-
fine the fire to the place of origin.

Building and Fire Department Officials.
There are several lessons apparent in
the results of the fire at the Winecoff for
building and fire department officials:
1. Municipal authorities who have by
ordinance vested the legal responsibility
for life safety in hotels and other places of
public assembly in the building depart-
ment and fire department officials, have
the obligation to provide these depart-
ments with well-trained and qualified
staffs commensurate with their responsi-
bilities. Building and fire department offi-
cials would be well advised to survey their
manpower needs and place their require-
ments before the municipal authority for
attention. The apathy of the public before
a disaster such as occurred at the Winecoff
is common, but this factor should not
deter building and fire department officials from making their needs known. Such disasters, unfortunate as they are for the victims, more often than not result in a public support for improved protection of the lives of those remaining.

2. The hazards of insufficient means of egress, lack of protection for vertical openings and other structural deficiencies which are responsible for large loss of life and property are as important to the inspection services as are the common hazards of heat, light, housekeeping, etc., and are equally important to call to the attention of building owners and managers. In both the Winecoff and the LaSalle fires none of the common or special hazards, such as kitchens, repair shops, valet shops, housekeeping, smoking in bed, etc., contributed to the eventual loss of life.

3. The knowledge and experience of the inspection staff can be enhanced, and
standards of efficiency raised to much higher levels, by the study of reports of fires involving loss of life and property in similar occupancies which are available from many sources. Hotel and other property owners need only to be convinced that conditions in their properties are similar to take the necessary steps toward remedial action consistent with the specific requirements for improvement in life safety.

4. There is much to be said for the planning of fire-fighting operations that will be necessary under varied conditions and points of origin in all places of public assembly prior to the need to use the plans. While no criticism can be directed at the fire-fighting operations in the battle against great odds in the Winecoff fire, the fact that the fire was difficult of access contributed to the loss of life. The successful fire-fighting operations in guest rooms in 1942, no doubt contributed to a feeling of confidence on the part of the fire department that it could take care of any situation which might arise in this so-called "fireproof" building.

Fire Protection and Casualty Engineers.

Fire protection engineers and also casualty engineers will find much in common in the lessons of the Hotel Winecoff fire:

1. Both fire protection engineers and safety engineers can be relied upon to apply the most rigid standards for the protection of life in the highly hazardous occupancies such as powder plants, oil refineries, grain handling operations and others accepted as inherently dangerous to life. The experience in the most recent series of hotel fires suggests an introspective look at our effectiveness in the reduction of loss of life possibilities in the occupancies generally believed of low-hazard character housed in fire-resistant structures, first evident in the Hotel LaSalle fire and proven in the Winecoff disaster six months later.

2. Delayed detection of the fire in the Winecoff corridors and the accompanying delayed alarm to the fire department were responsible for the fire being out of control on the arrival of fire fighters and rescue companies. The use of automatic detection and extinguishing equipment primarily for the prevention of loss of life will also in effect prevent loss of property.

3. The Winecoff disaster suggests the importance of private inspection authorities discussing fire-fighting operations planned in this building with the fire department officials. Such discussions could have set in motion a chain of circumstances and cooperation that would have placed more than one means of access to the guts of the structure for the fire department, and at the same time reduced the probability of heavy fire damage through spread of fire from floor to floor.

4. Standards for the protection of hazards and safety to life are technical documents little understood by the public and the architects they employ. It is unfortunate that architects receive little or no specific fire prevention or fire protection instruction in the interest of basic life-safety conditions in most architectural schools. If the architect finds standards such as the N.F.P.A. Building Exits Code difficult to interpret he needs help which can be supplied by the fire protection engineer and the casualty engineer during the design of the structure, not after it is completed and occupied.

5. As in the Hotel LaSalle lounge and coffee shop, the obscurity of the combustible interior finish materials on the walls of the Winecoff corridors contributed to the loss of life. The painted burlap wainscot unless carefully examined could easily be taken for a stippled paint finish of much less hazard. Once ignited the painted burlap burned with a dense smoke and fire spread rapidly over its surface.

6. The N.F.P.A. Building Exits Code is the "bible" of the casualty engineering profession, who by tradition do not concern themselves with the destruction of property by fire if they are satisfied that the building exits are such that all the occupants can safely escape. Unfortunately, fire protection engineers have also traditionally come to accept as their only concern the prevention of property damage. N.F.P.A. procedure requires that
A room on the top story where five women were reported found dead. The room was practically undamaged. Death was due to fire gases.

both fire protection engineers and casualty engineers participate in the preparation of the Building Exits Code, but there is a long gap to be bridged between the two points of view in reaching property owners in the field. The standards are known, but it is not clear why their application was not made in the 33-year-old Winecoff or the 37-year-old LaSalle prior to the disasters which occurred. Profiting from these incidents, the fire protection engineer and the casualty engineer would do well to get together.

Insurance Companies.

It may be of interest to life and casualty company officials to learn that on the basis of a $2,255 average disbursement by one life insurance company per death claim from the Cocoanut Grove, Hartford Circus and Hotel LaSalle fires (involving 200 of the dead in those fires) the life insurance claims alone for the 119 dead in the Winecoff disaster will amount to an estimated $265,000. Life insurance payments have not heretofore been included in the dollar loss figures by the N.F.P.A. Department of Fire Record, but they are a proper charge against the loss. Just one-tenth of the estimated life insurance claims resulting from the Winecoff fire would go a long way in the protection of the single vertical stairway opening, automatic detection equipment, or the correction of the transom condition which figured so heavily in the loss of life.

Many fire insurance companies have long permitted the client to assume responsibility for fire hazards in his property by the payment of the premium charged for the deficiency by the insurance rating organization having jurisdiction, particularly so if the occupancy may be classified as low-hazard. Where large loss of life is possible as in the Hotel
Winecoff, it is well worth considering whether the owner of the structure should be permitted the option to pay insurance premiums for the lack of adequate exits, unprotected vertical openings, etc., which are known by fire and casualty insurance company loss departments to be productive of heavy property damage and under certain conditions, heavy loss of life.

Legal Authority.

Legal authority as the last resort (as it properly should be), was not used to obtain the correction of the structural hazards at the Hotel Winecoff. It is believed by competent authority that the definition of "public nuisance" in the Atlanta Code was sufficient to do so. Other states and municipalities may not have a law as understandable to the layman as the Georgia law appears to be. Too much and too complicated law is as bad for life safety as none at all. The cooperation of the legal fraternity with fire protection and casualty engineers interested would do much to produce realistic and understandable legal life-safety protection for the public. Good law in the hands of adequately staffed enforcement agencies, and after all other public and private agencies have failed to obtain the needed correction, will go far toward taking care of the occasional recalcitrant property owner. Common sense fire prevention and fire protection must be laid before the property owner and rejected by him before legal action is taken to force the issue.

The Public.

Last, but certainly not least, there are lessons for the public at large in the ruins of the Hotel Winecoff. In Atlanta, and throughout the country there was, as usual after all major disasters, a wave of public indignation and the demand to "pass a law" to prevent such catastrophes. In Atlanta, as in other communities, there was and is sufficient law. To demand enforcement of the law and at the same time fail to demand that elected officials provide an adequate and well-trained staff of engineers for the enforcement agencies is a public responsibility and failure.

The public, in its indignation, overlooks the ignorance of most property owners of the simplest requirements for life safety, the resistance of many owners and managers to recommendations for the correction of fire hazards, the failure of many architects and builders to protect their clients' moral and legal obligations for the life safety for their customers without legal coercion, the pressure of politics on honest building and fire department officials, the failure of fire and casualty insurance engineers to "sell" fire prevention and safety recommendations, the insurance salesman whose only service to his client is to collect the premium, the willingness of insurance companies to permit property owners to accept responsibility for hazardous conditions simply by payment of an insurance premium for the deficiency, the lawyer who is "wedded" to the due-process clause of the Constitution of the United States and can see no justification for any reasonable requirement for life safety that can be tagged as "retroactive," and above all the failure of those who have the knowledge and experience and equipment to reach the owners of hotels and other properties with the message that could have prevented the disaster at the Hotel Winecoff.
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