Winecoff Hotel Fire

Name

Affiliation

Date

Winecoff Hotel Fire

The Winecoff hotel fire is one of the deadliest incidents of hotel fire in the history of the United States of America. The fire incident took place in the year 1946 and took the lives of almost one hundred and nineteen people, which included the occupants, as well as the staff and owners of the hotel. The Winecoff hotel was advertised to be fireproof by the authorities of the hotel, as its architectural structure was based on the modern steel structure. In addition to it, the steel structure of the hotel was supported by concrete fireproofing and structural clay tile, which ensured the authorities about the strength and incombustible nature of its structure. Due to this, the hotel management and authorities did not bother to install the fire alarms and make proper arrangement to control and extinguish the fire, in case it erupts due to any sort of situation. The incident caused great concern to the general public, as well as to the other authorities of the society. The poor exit arrangements of the hotel, in addition to the combustible furniture and the lack of the availability of the fire alarms and sprinkler, may have played an important role in making the fire worst, resulting in the killing of more than hundred people.

Winecoff hotel was built, as well as opened in the year 1913, at 176 Peachtree Street in downtown Atlanta. The building consisted of fifteen floors and was among the tallest buildings in Atlanta, at that time. The structure of the whole hotel was made of steel. The third to the fifteenth floor of the hotel comprised of the guest rooms and there were fifteen rooms on each floor. The structure of the inner side of the hotel comprised of an H shaped hallway. The building of the hotel had only one staircase, which connected all the fifteen floors of the hotel and was the only stairway exit of the hotel. It was made of the non-combustible construction material; however, it was not supported by the fire resistant doors. The general construction practice during that time period was that the buildings consisting of multiple floors also used to have multiple stairways. On the other hand, the Winecoff hotel consisted of fifteen floors and was among the tallest buildings of Atlanta; however, it was built on an area of less than five thousand square feet, due to which it got the permission by the Atlanta Building Code of 1911, to include a single stairway in its structure. The concrete fireproofing as well as clay tile structuring were among the features which made the constructors and authorities believe the fact that hotel was fireproof, the thing which was not only highlighted through the advertisements but was also mentioned on the stationery of the hotel. The constructors of the hotel had also ensured to make the interior structure of the hotel as fireproof. They covered the wall between the guest rooms and the corridors with clay tiles, as well as wit plasters. The doors of the room were made of wood and consisted of the slideable transom panel. There was a little space between the doors, for the sake of ventilation. The rooms were also furnished with multiple layers of wallpapers. The fire alarm system of the hotel was managed manually from the front desk of the hotel and there were water hose racks on each and every floor of the hotel building. Most of the multiple floor buildings had the automatic water sprinkler system, which was also absent in the Winecoff Hotel. Apart from the internal and external structure of the hotel building, the building was located in the closed premises of Atlanta Fire Rescue Department; moreover, two ladder companies were also located in the closed premises of the hotel building, still the fire caused the greatest number of causalities, in the history of the hotel fire incidents (Heys, & Goodwin, 1993).

 The incident of fire broke in the early morning of 7 December in the year 1946 at around 3. 15 a.m. The original cause of the fire could not be found, however, it was thought that it started from the third floor of the hotel building and gradually spared to the upper as well as lower floors of the building. The firefighters were of the view that a mattress, as well as a wooden chair presents in a corner of the third floor of the building, had caught the fire and spread it to the other floors of the building. The bell boy of the hotel had gone to the fifth floor of the building, in order to respond to the call service of the guest staying in one of the rooms on that floor. He identified the fire due to the smoke present in the hallways. He alerted the authorities of the hotel; however, the fire started spreading at a faster pace. The single stairway of the hotel building was blocked due to smoke and caught more fire as it was not protected by the use of the fire resistant doors. The two elevators of the hotel building also became inefficient, as the fire had spread to all the other floors of the buildings. On the other hand, the uppermost floors of the hotel building were filled with smoke, even if the fire had not reached there (McKay, 2011).

The fire extinguishing department which was only seconds away from the hotel building was not informed till the first thirty, most crucial minutes of the outbreak of fire and they reached at the time when the fire had become enormous and hard to control. In addition to it, the guests of the hotel had started climbing off the windows of their hotel rooms, in order to escape the fire, which proved to be the greatest obstacle for the firefighters, as they had to stop their movement, in order to ensure that they do not hit the people climbing off. Still, the people were not able to save their lives by jumping off the windows of the hotel building. Some of the people used the ladders made out of the bed covers, in order to safely reach the surface of the earth through the windows. Some of them succeeded, while others had to face the worst circumstances. The structure of the building which only had one stairway also ceased the exit of the guests, as well as hindered the entrance of the firefighters, who could not get access to the upper floors of the building. The fire was extinguished after six hours of its eruption. One hundred and nineteen people were killed in the deadly fire and most of the guest in the hotel died during their sleep. In addition to it, more than sixty-five people received serious injuries during one of the worst incidents of history (McElroy, 1947).

The wrong advertisement of the hotel management and authorities that it was fireproof was one of the most important reasons for the fire incident, as it made the authorities and the guest carefree. In addition to it, the hotel also did not get the fire inspection due to its claims of being fireproof. Another grave mistake was the absence of automatic fire alarms and the automatic water sprinklers which could have controlled the fire when it has just started. Another grave mistake on the part of the hotel authorities was the only one exit stairway and no other emergency exit, for the fifteen floors of the building, which blocked the way of the people who were trying to escape the fire. Moreover, the firefighters were informed quite late about the incident. The hotel authorities also did not utilize the ladder companies to save the life of the people, who then jumped off their windows and caused a greater hindrance for the firefighters who could not move ahead and start their rescue activities. New codes were instituted to prevent such incident of fire eruption from happening again by ensuring the presence of the emergency exits and multiple stairways in the multiple floor buildings. In addition to it, the inspection of the buildings for the safety measured was made compulsory. Moreover, the installations of the automatic fire alarms and the automatic water sprinkler were also made compulsory. Smoking inside the building was also prohibited, in order to ensure safety (Hensler, 2011).

The Winecoff hotel fire incident was one of the deadliest and worst fire incidents in the history of the United States of America. The incident took place due to the negligent and ignorant attitude of the hotel authorities towards its construction, in addition to their false claims of being fireproof. The absence of the fire alarm system and automatic water sprinklers made the situation worse. The firefighters could also not reach the place of the incident due to the obstacles caused by the people trying to save their lives. The codes of construction were changed after the incident, which ensured the availability of multiple and emergency exit, in addition to getting the fire inspection., in order to ensure that no such incident happens again in future.

References

Hensler, B. (2011). *Crucible of fire: Nineteenth-century urban fires and the making of the modern fire service*. Potomac Books, Inc..

Heys, S., & Goodwin, A. B. (1993). *The Winecoff fire: The untold story of America's deadliest hotel fire*. Longstreet Press.

McElroy, J. K. (1947). The Hotel Winecoff Disaster. *Quarterly of the National Fire Protection Association*, *40*(3), 140-145.

McKay, J. (2011). *It Happened in Atlanta: Remarkable Events That Shaped History*. Rowman & Littlefield.