Firestop Contractors International Association
April 25, 2019
Judith Frydland, Commissioner
“The common council, for the purpose of guarding against the calamities of fire, shall have power to prescribe the limits in said city, within which wooden buildings shall not be erected or placed without the permission of the said common council...”
Between 1837 and 1871, the population of Chicago grew from 4,000 to 334,000. In the downtown district, many buildings were built with brick, stone, and iron. But in the city as a whole, more than 90% of buildings were frame construction.
The Great Fire destroyed more than 15,000 buildings, killed more than 300, and left more than 100,000 homeless.
The City rebuilt rapidly. The council adopted a building code in 1875. The 1875 ordinance was reportedly “the subject of much careful consideration by the leading architects, builders and insurance agents of the city.” It was 5.5 pages. The *Tribune* thought it was too long.
In 1893, the council adopted a new building code and created the Department of Buildings. The 1893 code also imposed strict height restrictions that would not be fully lifted until the 1920s.

Masonic Temple, State & Randolph, 21 stories (1892)
The Iroquois Theater fire resulted in 602 deaths. All Chicago theaters remained closed for more than a month after the fire. The fire led to adoption of the first comprehensive building code in 1905.
From 1946-49, John O. Merrill, founding partner of SOM, oversaw the last comprehensive revision of the Chicago Building Code. One of the most controversial issues was whether to allow wallboard instead of plaster-and-lath.
1946

After the end of WWII, the City allowed many forms of temporary housing on an emergency basis.

Midway Plaisance housing
Over time, new requirements have been added in response to tragedies.

Our Lady of the Angels fire, 1958
Over time, new requirements have been added in response to tragedies.
In the early 1970s, there were several high-rise fires in Chicago. The 1974 film, *The Towering Inferno*, helped to build popular support for enhanced high-rise safety requirements, which were adopted in 1975.
In the 1980s, the code was amended to make it easier to rehab and reuse existing buildings.
After the 2003 Cook County Administration Building Fire, Chicago committed to upgrading all pre-1975 high-rise buildings. That effort took more than 15 years and involved more than 1,000 buildings.
From the late 1990s until 2004, Chicago studied adopting the new International Codes. Ultimately, this effort did not have popular support.
Code Modernization Benefits

- Reduce barriers to cost-effective construction
- Enhance public safety
- Promote energy efficiency and sustainability
- Streamline permitting process
- Facilitate innovative design and construction
- Benefit from national code development efforts
Phased Implementation

• Energy Code effective **June 1, 2019**
• Administrative Provisions effective **July 1, 2019**
• Code published by ICC, **mid-October 2019**
• Invitation-only test projects, fall 2019
• Optional use of new code for permit applications, **December 1, 2019**
• Minimum standards, Spring 2020
• New code mandatory: **August 1, 2020**
For more information:

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