



FIRE PREVENTION ACADEMY



HISTORIC FIRES SERIES

(Issued April 2024)

LOCATION: Rhythm Night Club, Natchez, MS

DATE OF FIRE: April 23, 1940

CAUSE: Accidental/Flammable Finishes

FATALITIES: 209

INJURIES: 100+

BACKGROUND:

The club was a single-story, wood building with corrugated steel siding, 120 ft X 38 ft with 24 windows that were mostly shuttered or nailed shut at the time of the fire. There was only one exit, with an *inward opening door*, that opened into a main entrance foyer that had another set of doors *that also opened inward*. On the night of the fire, the club recorded 577 paid admissions and 150 passes. The orchestra had 14 members and 5 attendants, bringing a likely final total number of people at the club to 746. Advance tickets for admission cost \$0.50, tickets at the door cost \$0.65, and the average age of attendees was between 15 and 25 years old. The fire started near the main entrance door around 11:00 P.M. fed by Spanish moss that had been draped over interior rafters as a decoration, which quickly engulfed the structure. To ensure there were no bugs in the decorative moss, it had been sprayed with FLIT, a petroleum-based insecticide. Under the dry conditions, flammable methane gas was generated from the moss.

Twenty one of the 24 existing windows had been boarded up to prevent outsiders from viewing or listening to the music, and as a result the crowd was trapped. Some survivors were able to get out through the front door or through the ticket booth, while others tried to press their way to the back door, which was padlocked and boarded shut. Upon realizing their limited options to escape the fire, many victims attempted to break through the corrugated steel walls of the building but were unsuccessful. People broke through windows using their hands and chairs, but the windows became jammed. Blinding smoke made movement difficult. Survivors remembered the burning moss falling from the ceiling and forming a barrier between the dance floor and the exit, with the moss igniting clothing and hair of victims and survivors. The front door was the only exit, and the doors swung inward. Escape from the main entrance was made almost impossible as flames blocked the entrance, pushing the crowd towards the back of the club. Due to the walls being made of metal, and little ventilation for the heat or smoke, the walls held the heat in the club like an oven. When water from the fire hoses hit the metal siding, it created steam that scalded many victims. Doctors later found that most of the dead had

succumbed to the smoke or were crushed as the crowd was pushed to the rear of the building. Most of the bodies were found piled near the rear of the building by the bandstand with the stacked bodies reaching shoulder height.

Fire Code Issues and Lessons

There were no building occupancy restrictions at the time of the fire. Future laws and codes would limit the number of people allowed in a place of assembly and would require doors to open outward to prevent people from being trapped. The fire helped bring forward building requirements that were aimed at making night clubs safer in the event of a fire. Calls for stricter fire laws and addressing overcrowding in buildings and schools were made loud and clear after this fire as well. Requirements for nightclubs in New York City now include the installation of fixed fire protection systems, provisions for safer interior finishes and decorations, provisions for better exiting systems, and for clubs to have trained crowd managers on duty.

Two years later, on November 28, 1942, the Coconut Grove Night Club in Boston burned trapping and killing 495 patrons. The lessons learned in Natchez did not transmit to the rest of the country. History had in fact repeated itself.



The exterior of the club.



What's left of the interior.



A local woman holds a batch of Spanish moss the day after the fire that ironically, didn't burn up during the fire the night before.

LEARNING FROM THE PAST, PREVENTING FUTURE CATASTROPHES