

The Rhythm Nightclub Fire: Tragic lessons many of us never heard about

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FIRE PREVENTION

An Untold History

The Rhythm Nightclub Fire provides tragic lessons, but many of us never heard about it

By Jim Crawford

Editor's Note: This article first appeared in the February issue of FireRescue magazine. We're sharing it here to mark the anniversary of the Rhythm Nightclub Fire.

February is Black History Month. I was born in 1954, and I grew up in a Eurocentric environment, where I didn't really understand the need for a month devoted to African-American history. I was taught a great deal about Abraham Lincoln in my school classes, but nothing at all about Frederick Douglass, the African-American abolitionist who played a significant role in the movement to free slaves in our nation. I learned nothing at all about the Slave Trade Act of 1808, which restricted further slave trade with Africa but didn't abolish slavery in the United States. The Tuskegee Airmen? Never heard of them as a student.

What does this have to do with fire prevention? Just as the history we learned in school is sometimes vastly incomplete, our fire service history seems so as well.

Nightclubs Ablaze

As I grew up in the fire service, I learned about the Iroquois Theater Fire of 1903, the Coconut Grove Club Fire of 1942 and the Beverly Hills Supper Club Fire of 1977 (which, I learned, was NOT in California, but in Kentucky). Each of these fires is a notable example of inadequate fire safety features in locations where people crowd together for entertainment.

The number of people killed in each fire captured national attention and helped to usher in new building and fire code requirements about proper exiting and fire protection features that would help to prevent similar disasters. Nightclub disasters can still happen, of course, as we learned from the Station Nightclub Fire in Rhode Island in February 2003. But in general, these venues are much safer as a result of these historic fires that taught us so much.

You've probably heard of all these fires, too, but what about the Rhythm Nightclub Fire? Until my good friend Faron Taylor told me about it, I'd never heard of one of the worst fires in United States history.

The Rhythm Nightclub Fire

On April 23, 1940, a fire broke out in a nightclub in Natchez, Miss. A converted church had been remodeled to serve as a nightclub and—similar to what many fire marshals today still see—the windows had been boarded up to prevent those who weren't willing to pay from seeing or hearing the entertainment.

Decorations are important for the festive environment of a nightclub, and in this case something called "Spanish Moss" was brought in and was hanging throughout the nightclub. I'm not sure whether the codes at the time addressed these types of materials, but I do know that even today's business owners often don't pay attention to how the decorations in their nightclubs can contribute to fire spread.

In the case of the Rhythm Nightclub, the moss was ignited, probably by a discarded match, at the front of the building near the main entrance (and exit). The rapidly moving fire quickly engulfed the entire building, trapping many inside and killing some 209 people. The actual figures are different depending on the source, but regardless of the exact number, this fire and the ensuing loss were extremely severe.

And every one of the victims was African-American.

Why Haven't We Heard of It?

It is no coincidence that I chose this month to write about this relatively unknown fire. There's no significant difference in this situation from what we've learned from other nightclub fires. A big-name musical act of the time was performing, so there were about 300 people in attendance. Exits were poorly designed; there was an exit in the back of the building, but it was blocked in part by the band. Because the windows were blocked, exiting through them was difficult at best. The combustible decorations contributed to the rapid spread of fire.

The cries heard from people trapped inside serve as the same chilling reminder of the deadly possibilities that fire has presented in case study after case study throughout our history. In my opinion, the Rhythm Nightclub Fire should serve, along with the rest of the disasters we often hear about, as a historical lesson that continually motivates us to do better in our prevention efforts.

Jim Crawford is a deputy chief and fire marshal with the Vancouver (Wash.) Fire Department and is chair of the NFPA technical committee on professional qualifications for fire marshals. He has written "Fire Prevention: A Comprehensive Approach," published by Brady, and has also written a chapter on fire prevention in "Managing Fire and Rescue Services," published by the International City/County Managers Association. Crawford is a past president of the International Fire Marshals Association and has served on the NFPA's Standards Council. He is a member of the IAFC.