

**Fire Prevention in the Wake of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911:  
the Role of Fire Chief Edward Croker**

by James Gerber

The fire department radio crackles to life, announcing a reported fire. The alarm bells sound, indicating that it is a fire in our district. I grab the brass fire pole, well worn by a century of firemen sliding down to the apparatus floor, pull on my leather boots, and don my red suspenders, still wet from the last fire.

As the fire engine roars to life and rolls out of the firehouse, I recognize the address. It is an address that all firemen of the New York City Fire Department know well, due to the stories passed on from generation to generation of firemen. Rounding Washington Square Park, the hulking 10-story building stands out from the others, taller than most buildings in Greenwich Village to this day.

The fire engine stops in front of 23 Washington Place, the same building in which a deadly fire occurred on March 25, 1911. On the eighth floor of this ten-story building, a fire broke out in a pile of flammable rags. Due to the amount of flammable material and lack of extinguishing agents, the fire rapidly grew, trapping many garment workers on the floors above. The ladders of the fire department were not capable of reaching the ninth and tenth floors, forcing many of the female workers to jump to their deaths. Known as the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, this was the largest industrial disaster in New York City history with 146 dead.

Fire Chief Edward Croker

It has been exactly one century since this horrible tragedy occurred and much has changed. Unfortunately, changes in laws and the New York City Fire Department occur

in exactly the same way—as a reaction to a great tragedy. In this instance, however, there was one person who was the driving force behind these changes: Fire Chief Edward Croker.

Edward Croker was appointed as a firefighter with the New York City Fire Department on June 22, 1884. As a probationary firefighter, he quickly learned the many aspects of the job. The most important part of his training was learning about building construction and the types of occupancies within New York City. Each building type and occupancy designation has its own inherent dangers.

One specific building type, the “loft” style building, is characterized as a five- or six-story “fireproof” building with a brick or masonry exterior, cast-iron columns, and concrete floors. The majority of these buildings were constructed in the late 1800s in the SoHo section of Manhattan. Due to the commercial occupancies in these buildings, with abundant combustible material and fireproof exterior structure and floors, the fires that started in these buildings would rage for days. For this reason, SoHo became known as “Hell’s Hundred Acres.”

As construction methods advanced, steel I-beams were incorporated into the building structure. This led to larger floor plans and taller buildings. The Asch Building, located at 23-29 Washington Place (a.k.a. 245 Greene Street) was built in 1900-1901 and was designed by architect John Woolley. The eighth, ninth and tenth floors housed the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, a garment manufacturer employing more than 275 employees. The workers were mostly young immigrant women, working in what would now be considered sweatshop conditions. Row after row of sewing machines were packed tightly together, with large amounts of stock piled everywhere.

Firefighter Croker was well aware of the dangers of this type of building. Additionally, he was aware that these work conditions exponentially increased the potential for disaster. His devotion and passion for learning the profession of firefighting were unparalleled and as such, he rose meteorically through the ranks. With only 15 years of service, at the young age of 35, he reached the highest uniformed position as Chief of Department on July 1, 1899.

Despite his age, the young chief won the confidence, admiration and respect of the rank-and-file of the fire department, fire insurance interests, local politicians, and even the press. It was said that his political influence and power even exceeded that of the mayor of New York City.

Croker was a hands-on chief, and he responded to all fires below 14<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan. He would often reach the location of a fire before any other units, taking charge from the beginning of fire operations. This was especially true after Croker acquired the first official automobile in the fire department, while his subordinates were still using the horse and buggy as a means of transportation.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire was no exception. From Chief Croker's quarters located at 42 Great Jones Street, the building was merely four blocks away. The Chief arrived first on the scene and remained in charge throughout the entire operation. Having this perspective—seeing this great tragedy unfold before him—stirred something deep inside him. At this moment, Chief Croker realized that no matter how much he trained or educated his fire officers and firemen, tragedies like this would only happen again and again. There was only one way to ensure against this: fire prevention.

Witness for the Prosecution

Chief Croker retired shortly after the fire and devoted the rest of his life to fire prevention. The first order of business was the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory trial. As the first witness called to the stand, Croker described in detail his role in the fire and the problems and dangers of this type of building. Although the trial resulted in a not guilty verdict for the company owners, Croker's testimony became part of public record. Additionally, his power of persuasion over the press created even more public outcry for change.

Based largely on his testimony and use of the press, a commission headed by Senator Robert F. Wagner was established to investigate conditions in the city's sweatshops. The purpose of this commission, the first of its kind in the United States, was to investigate conditions in manufacturing establishments.

#### The Factory Investigating Commission

The retired Chief devoted much of his time to the commission, and the results he found greatly changed factory conditions, leading to the enactment of labor laws protecting workers in health, disability and fire prevention. The enactment of the New York Labor Law created provisions mandating adequate exits, fire-resistant stairways, fire escapes, automatic sprinklers, alarm systems, limits on the number of employees, and fire drills.

The commission also made a number of fire prevention recommendations including commentary on three specific areas:

1. Prevention of Fire
2. Notice to Authorities in Case of Fire
3. Prevention of the Spread of Fire

These recommendations would ultimately result in a number of additional laws, including the New York City Zoning Resolution of 1916, the New York City Building Code of 1916 and the New York City Fire Code.

The New York City Zoning Resolution of 1916 provided the nation's first comprehensive zoning regulations. These laws designated height and setback controls on all new building construction. Additionally, they set forth zoning restrictions separating residential, commercial and manufacturing uses. The New York City Building Code of 1916 is a 194-page document that is considered the first complete building code in New York City, and included regulations for the most recent innovations in building construction. Although the first building code in New York City was established in 1850, this became an extremely outdated code as building construction rapidly progressed. The Code of 1916 established regulations for the newest type of commercial buildings—commercial high-rise buildings made of steel I-beams and concrete floors.

The New York City Fire Code constitutes laws that establish the requirements and standards for life safety and property protection. This code governs:

1. The manufacturing, storage, handling, use, sale and transportation of hazardous materials and combustible materials, except for the installation of storage tanks and auxiliary storage tanks for oil-burning equipment.
2. The design, installation, operation and maintenance of devices, equipment and systems designed to prevent, mitigate, control and extinguish fire, explosions or other life safety hazards.
3. Emergency preparedness and planning, including the orderly evacuation of occupants of buildings, structures or premises in the event of fire, explosion, biological, chemical or hazardous material incident or release, natural disaster or other emergency, or the threat thereof.
4. The prevention, mitigation and control of hazards to firefighters and emergency responders during emergency operations.

5. The operation and maintenance of any manual, automatic or other fire alarm or fire extinguishing device, equipment or system.

### Division of Fire Prevention

Once these laws were enacted, New York City needed an agency to assist corporations in compliance with these laws, and an enforcement agency to ensure that these laws were followed. Once again, Edward Croker was the catalyst for the compliance component by organizing the Croker Fire Prevention Company in 1911. In 1912, New York City established the Division of Fire Prevention to enforce these laws.

To this day, the Croker Fire Prevention Corporation continues to manufacture fire prevention and protection equipment. Additionally, the Fire Prevention Division of the FDNY continues to be the enforcement agency of these laws, with more than 350 inspectors currently. The primary responsibility of these agencies is to enforce the Fire Code provisions that now regulate the manufacturing, storage, handling, use and transportation of hazardous materials and the design, installation, operation and maintenance of facilities and premises.

### Conclusion

Having devoted his life to firefighting and fire prevention, Edward Croker remains the most influential person in the fire service. Through his combination of knowledge, diligence, and strength he was able to translate his dreams and nightmares into laws, forever changing the working conditions in this country. A century later, Chief Croker defines what it means to be a firefighter in every sense. He is the embodiment of the firefighter and fire officer I strive to be.

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