

History of Building Codes

Many people may ask, why do we need laws that tell us what we can or cannot do with our own property? One answer could be, that what any of us might do or not do has an effect on other people and it is for the benefit of others that we are required to follow the law. In any event, we do have building codes and there are penalties imposed upon us if we don't follow them.

The regulation of building construction is not a recent phenomenon. It can be traced through recorded history for over 4000 years. The great Babylonian King Hammurabi, in 2000 BC instituted a performance-type code which was based on the simple principle of "an eye for an eye", where the Builder was responsible "in kind" for any damages that occurred due to the failure of the structure. If the Building owner died as a result of a collapse, then the Builder would be killed as restitution. If the Building owner lost an arm as a result of collapse, then the Builder would sacrifice his arm.

Archeological fragments of Greek and Roman laws give the first evidence of buildings being required to be inspected during construction. For example, the records of a building being constructed by Socrates in 341 BC tell of the specific requirements:

"He shall set the joints against each other, fitting, and before inserting the dowels he shall show the architect all the stones to be fitting, and shall set them true and sound and dowel them with iron dowels, two dowels to each stone..."

In 1189 AD, the Mayor of London, Henry Fitz-Elwyne, issued an ordinance known as the "Assize of Buildings." This ordinance was referred to as a "planning act," but contained much on the construction of structures. After the plague and fire consumed much of the city in 1664, Parliament enacted further building regulations reflecting the growth in knowledge of building technology. To enforce these "codes" surveyors were appointed and empowered with the authority to invoke jail sentences on violators. Perhaps this was the birthplace of the first building inspector.

In early America, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson encouraged the development of building regulations to provide minimum standards that would ensure health and safety. Today, most of the United States is covered by a network of modern building regulations ranging from fire and structural safety to health, handicap accessibility and conservation of energy.

In the early nineteenth century or about 1905, here in the United States, one of the first building codes was developed on the East Coast by the Fire Underwriters Association intended to be a national code and it was directed toward protecting the building rather than the people in the building. This building code was titled "National Building Code." National codes directed toward the safety of the occupants (fire exiting, fire alarms, isolation of hazards) were not developed until the 1930's and 40's. Wisconsin adopted its first Building Code in 1914 and remained one of only 2 States to have its own independent Building Code until 2002 when it adopted the newly created "International Building Code" for all buildings except 1 & 2 family homes. 1 & 2 family homes remain covered under Wisconsin's "Uniform Dwelling Code".