

BOSTON FIRE DEPARTMENT

November 19 70

FROM:

TO: THE FIRE COMMISSIONER

Subject: COCOANUT GROVE FIRE 1942

On Saturday, November 28, 1942, just after 10 p.m., the Cocoanut Grove was conducting business in its usual manner.

The Cocoanut Grove was a night club located at 17 Piedmont Street and in operation as such since 1927. The application for the license in 1942 stated that the premises contained 100 tables, 400 chairs and 30 fixed stools. Number of people authorized ???

The public had access to the following portions:

Street floor entrance - the entrance door was of a re-
volving type (since outlawed). Inside the entrance was a foyer and to the left was a corridor leading to the basement Melody Lounge. To the right of the foyer was the Caricature Bar; ahead where the Caricature Bar ended was the entrance to the Main Dining Room. From the Main Dining Room a passageway lead to the Broadway Lounge.

Exits on the ground floor totalled 6 and in the basement totalled 3.

A decorative scheme in this building made use of the following materials:

On some walls a covering of artificial leather stretched

over concrete surface; a covering of a rattan material; wood veneer on "Masonite" covered with artificial leather; artificial leather attached on plywood; wall lined with rattan and unfinished wood. (All materials now used in these places are tested by Fire Department Chemist).

Ceilings had the following materials:

Foyer finished in plaster; Dining Room covered by fabric from wall to wall; Caricature Bar of plasterboard; Broadway Lounge of soundproof construction.

Floors had the following:

Linoleum on concrete; wood on concrete; tile on concrete; linoleum on wood; carpet on wood.

The weather was clear and cold, the temperature being slightly below freezing (28.1) degrees, and the air being very dry.

A show was about to commence on the stage situated in the Main Dining Room and there were approximately one thousand persons on the premises.

The basement Melody Lounge had four portable air conditioners located in the corners, and heat was provided by means of blowers suspended from the ceiling.

THE FIRE ORIGINATED IN THE MELODY LOUNGE. (In my opinion it started about 10:15 p.m.). It was first seen burning in a palm tree and in the suspended false ceiling in the northwest corner of that room.

The fire immediately spread throughout the Melody Lounge, along the underside of the false ceiling. It reached and ascended the stairway.

As the fire rushed up the stairway it traveled near the ceiling and above the heads of the persons ascending to make their way out of the building. The movement of this fire and great volume of carbon monoxide gas generated by lack of oxygen was accelerated by the narrow (4 feet) width of stairway which acted like a chimney adding a draft of suction to the room below. In the stairway the partially unburned gas rapidly mixed with air and increased the temperature and rapidity of flow.

The burning mass passed from the top of the stairway into a narrow connecting corridor. At this end of the corridor was an exit door leading to Piedmont Street (this door was locked the night of the fire). The other exit from the Melody Lounge was by means of a door (used by waiters) leading to a passageway to the kitchen. Located in this passageway was a door leading to an outside alleyway. (This door was locked the night of the fire).

Fire appeared in the street floor lobby within two to four minutes after it was first seen in the Melody Lounge. It was described as traveling rapidly as a "ball of fire" below the ceiling and of a yellowish or blue color.

Most of the lights on the premises became extinguished immediately upon the appearance of the fire. This fact, coupled

with the appearance of smoke and flame and the cries of "fire", produced great confusion.

The fire in the corridor of the Foyer appeared to have been accelerated by a large ventilating fan placed over the further end of the Caricature Bar acting to draw air from the Foyer along the length of the Caricature Bar.

Exits from the Foyer were through the revolving door to the street; through the office coat rooms to the street (This was obstructed by a coat rack and a lock); through the door to the street at end of the corridor (previously mentioned as being locked); and through the other end of the lobby into the Main Dining Room.

As fire traveled through the lobby toward the Caricature Bar it was soon followed by a thick cloud of smoke. The fire then traversed the length of the area containing the Caricature Bar.

Some few persons, including persons coming from the basement Melody Lounge passed through the revolving door on Piedmont Street before the mass of flames reached it. The door then appears to have jammed. There was a very great pouring of flames through the exit. The great majority of persons on the street floor had no warning of the fire until flames actually appeared in the lobby.

A number of persons attempting to make their way out of the building sustained burns about the head and in some cases the hair became ignited.

As fire spread rapidly from the lobby and Caricature Bar, a number of persons were caused to collapse. Others dropped on their hands and knees to the floor and crawled in that manner to the door on the Shawmut Street side. (Further wall of the Main Dining Room).

Upon reaching the Main Dining Room the flame, moving rapidly, swept high about the room near the ceiling, shortly followed by a cloud of dense smoke described by witnesses as acrid.

The burning and decomposition of wall coverings once again produced material largely gaseous and capable of further combustion and very rapid movement.

Adjoining the orchestra platform in the Main Dining Room was a door leading to a control room for electric switches, to a stairway to the basement, and to another door which led out to Shawmut Street (this door was locked the night of the fire), and to a dressing room.

The Shawmut Street wall of the Dining Room was covered by a wood veneer concealing three plate glass windows. Ventilating fans were located over the exit door in the center of the Shawmut Street wall and at the head of the stairs to the kitchen.

The great mass of partially burned gases spread from the Main Dining Room and into the Broadway Lounge.

The rapidly pouring mass of burning gaseous material appeared to have been depressed from its high elevation within the premises in order to pass through the exits. Persons attempting to pass through the exits were overcome by the great heat of fire and of the gaseous material pouring through them at the same time.

The fire within five minutes after it was first seen in the basement room entirely traversed the street floor of the main building and had passed to the entrance to the Broadway Lounge. Escape was not possible with respect to most of the open exits once the fire had spread throughout the first floor. Persons unable to escape through the exit doors were thus exposed to the effects of carbon monoxide gas, the superheated air, or the flames themselves, in various parts of the building. Until such time as they were brought under control, the flames poured out of the exits on Piedmont Street, Shawmut Street and Broadway. It was at these exits as well as in the low passageway leading from the Caricature Bar to the Broadway Lounge where the bodies of many of the patrons were found piled up.

At 10:15 p.m., an alarm was received at Fire Alarm Headquarters from Box 1514, situated at Stuart and Carver Streets. When the apparatus, which had responded to the alarm, arrived at the box a small fire was found in an automobile at the corner

of Stuart Street and Broadway. The fire was quickly extinguished and the Fire Fighters were about to return to their quarters when attention was called to smoke emanating from the Coconut Grove a few doors away. Upon their arrival at the entrance to the Broadway Lounge on Broadway, they found a number of persons leaving the premises amidst cries of "fire". At 10:20 p.m., Box 1521, Church and Winchester Streets, was received at Fire Alarm. The Chief in charge of the companies present immediately ordered a "third alarm" to be sounded from Box 1521, which was sounded at 10:23 p.m. When it became apparent to the Chief in charge that the immediate problem was one of rescue, he ordered a "fourth alarm", which was received at 10:24 p.m. A "fifth alarm" was received at Headquarters at 11:02 p.m.

Upon reaching the night club premises, rescue work was immediately begun by the Fire Fighters who had responded to the automobile fire.

The first water delivered on the fire was through the door of the Broadway Lounge on Broadway. Subsequently, water lines were operated on Piedmont Street, Broadway and Shawmut Street. Hose lines were introduced through windows and doors of the main building to the first floor, by way of the Shawmut Street entrance to the kitchen, and through the Piedmont Street entrances to the Melody Lounge. Ladders were raised on Piedmont Street,

Shawmut Street and Broadway, and vents were opened to permit egress for the fire as well as to provide access for hose streams. In all, eighteen streams were operated for the purpose of quickly cooling the areas to facilitate prompt rescue work.

The principal cause of the large loss of life was the extremely rapid spread of the fire throughout the premises, and the partial pouring of the fire through most of the available exits. Such rapid spread and pouring of fire was attributable to the peculiar gaseous nature of the fire and the high temperature and the pressure of the gaseous material.

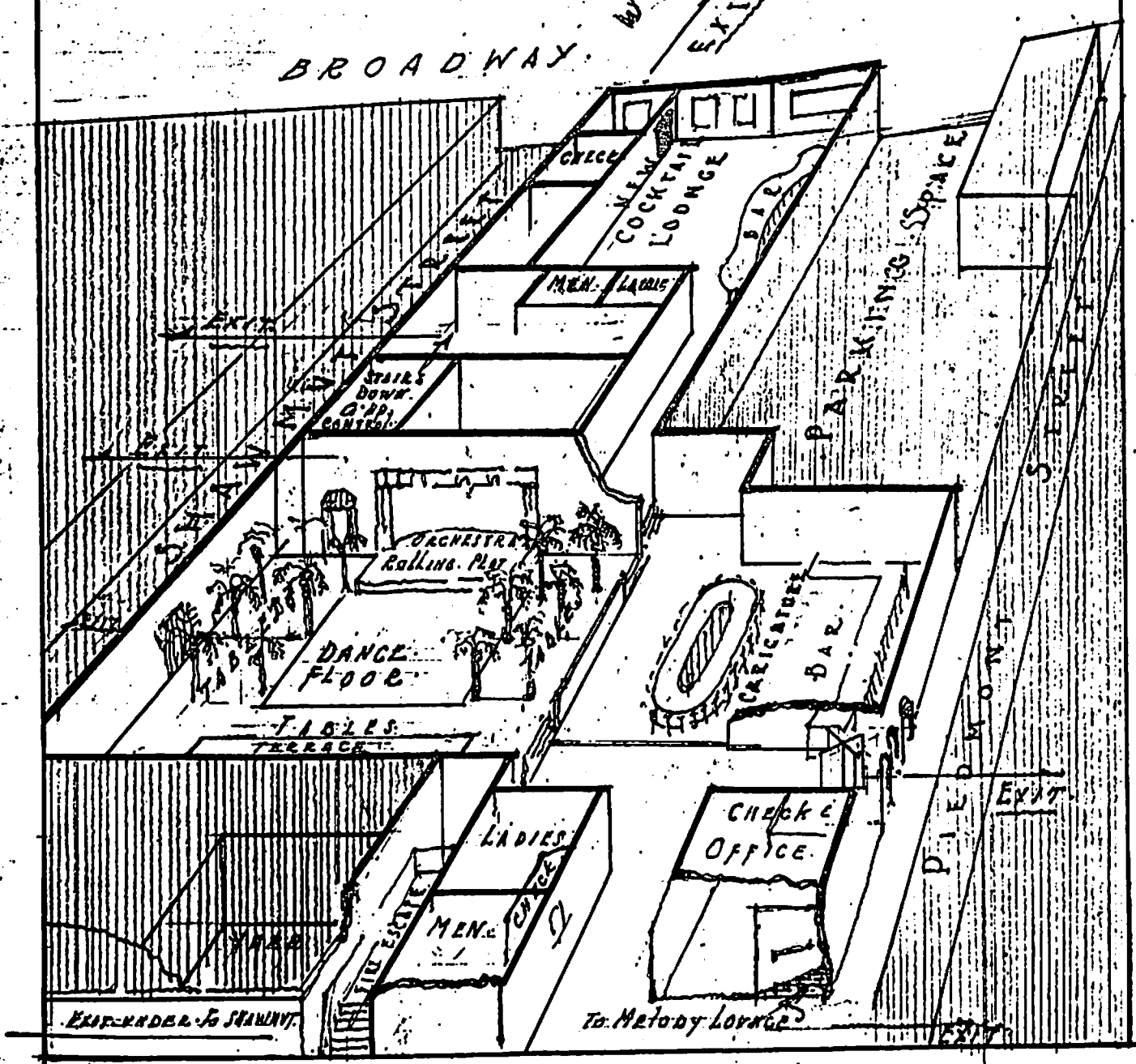
A number of people escaped through available exits on the street floor before the flame actually reached such exits. A smaller number of persons escaped through exits after the flame had reached them and had subsequently been beaten away or extinguished by operations of the Fire Department. Some other persons who lay on the floor of the Melody Lounge until the fire passed from that room up to the street floor, subsequently escaped up the stairway and through the street floor exits. Other persons escaped through exits leading from the kitchen and through windows; which exits and windows were never at any time reached by the flame.

A bus boy, aged sixteen, employed by the Cocoanut Grove on the night of the fire, testified to lighting a match in the process of replacing an electric bulb in the corner of the Melody

DIAGRAM
OF
COCOANUT GROVE
CITY OF BOSTON
MASSACHUSETTS



BROADWAY



Exit under to stairway

To Melody Lounge

Subject: COCOANUT GROVE FIRE 1942 (Continued)

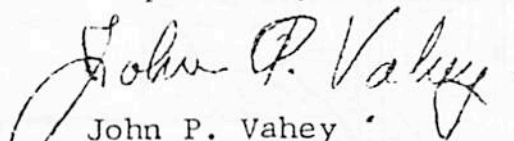
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Lounge, where the fire started, and dropping the match to the floor and stepping upon it. After a careful study of all the evidence and an analysis of all the facts presented, the department was unable to find the conduct of this boy as the cause of the fire.

No evidence of incendiarism found. The Fire Department unable to determine the original cause or causes of this fire. The fire will be entered in the records of this department as being of unknown origin.

The fire resulted in 490 deaths and 166 injuries, as recorded by the Boston Committee on Public Safety.

Respectfully submitted,


John P. Vahey
District Fire Chief