WITHOUT WARNING

A REPORT ON THE HOTEL VENDOME FIRE
JUNE 17, 1972
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With grateful appreciation to the following for their assistance and cooperation:

Boston Fire Department
Boston Fire Fighter's Local 718, I.A.F.F.
Fire Fighter William F. Noonan
Fire Fighter James P. Teed
Fire Fighter Patrick MacAuley

By publication of this document it is hoped that information contained herein may be of assistance to Fire Chiefs throughout the country in averting tragedies of this type by the increased diligence and effort on the part of all public officials concerned for increased inspection of buildings during and following construction, with special emphasis on reconstruction of a structure following a fire.
A REPORT OF THE HOTEL VENDOME FIRE
June 17, 1972
by
John P. Vahey
District Fire Chief
Boston Fire Department

Preface

This report of the Hotel Vendome Fire of June 17, 1972 was compiled from many sources made available by Fire Commissioner James H. Kelly and Chief of Department George H. Paul. None of the investigations, interrogations, interviews, opinions or conclusions are mine. I used freely some of the records and reports of the Boston Fire Department, Vendome Report of the State Fire Marshal Joseph G. Sneider and his Special Counsel Paul Levenson, Esquire; Investigations of the Vendome Fire by Captain Leo J. Doyle, Detective Lieutenant John G. Hulme and Detective Lieutenant Edward F. Hunter, all of the Department of Public Safety; Walter J. Hickey P.E. of Walter J. Hickey Associates; Hotel Vendome Report by the Board of Inquiry, Boston Fire Department, Deputy Fire Chief Leslie W. Magoon, President; The Boston Firefighters Digest, Firefighter Tom Getherall; Principal Operator James Fix and Albert K. Bowers, Jr. of the Fire Alarm Office; Interviews of Firefighters by Fire Lieutenant William J. Kelley; and I wish to express my thanks to my wife Mary for her assistance in compiling this report.

John P. Vahey
CUT-AWAY DRAWING
SHOWING SECOND FLOOR
SUPPORT SYSTEM.
Part One — The Building

“The Hotel Vendome is an old building which, when properly renovated, will still have many years of productive life ahead. The building has a proud history and is of such architectural style that it will never be repeated. The Hotel Vendome deserves to be retained.”

With these, the words of Structural Engineers, start a series of events in which a grand old building is given a new lease on life. A Development Company begins its reason for being, an Architectural Firm and a Structural Engineering Firm are engaged, the Boston Building Department is involved as are numerous Trade Contractors, and ends with the greatest personal tragedy experienced by The Boston Fire Department as nine heroic Firefighters lose their lives, as part of the building, suddenly, without warning, collapsed.

The architectural style of the Hotel Vendome reflects the influence of the European artist, architect, and artisan who lived during that period of early nineteenth century empire building, and social change, in an effort to show the greatness and grandeur of their culture. The building in Boston, which is also showing its influence, as the cultural Athens of the New World, is a copy of the building known as the Vendome in Paris.

The original, or what must be called the first part of the Vendome, is constructed at the corner of Commonwealth Avenue and Dartmouth Street. It measured approximately forty-two feet by one-hundred and three feet, and contained five stories. The building is founded on wood piles driven into gravel, as are all other buildings of this vintage in the Back Bay area. This first part consisted of wood floors supported on masonry bearing walls. The floors in general were of hardwood applied on a layer of tongue and groove sheathing on a mortar of gypsum fill over a tongue and groove sub-floor. The supporting joists are of wood and are parallel to Dartmouth Street. The fill is for the reduction of sound transmission between floors.

This part of the building, finished in 1872, would reflect the red rays of fire that year, for two nights and a day from the Great Boston Fire. The Chief in charge of that fire, John S. Damrell, made his plans during that fire and confined it within a definite area, successfully preventing it from spreading beyond the boundaries that he alone set down.

Another continuing battle, this time for better building construction, was fought by the same John S. Damrell, as he became the first Building Commissioner of the City of Boston when the office was created by Act of The Legislature of 1877. For the next twenty-six years he will direct the Building Department in its efforts to improve the quality of construction in Boston.

This improvement in building construction is evidenced in the Hotel Vendome, as a new section is added along Commonwealth Avenue. The new section is constructed using brick arches framed between steel beams. These steel beams are supported by masonry bearing walls. The main entrance is in the newer section, contains seven stories and a tower, and is completed in 1881. The exterior facade is of cut stone up to the sixth floor. Above that floor is a mansard roof finished with slate. The experience of the wood covered mansard roofs during the Great Boston Fire would not be repeated ever again in Boston. The Tower is also slate covered.

Sometime around 1890 or before, alterations of major importance in the first story of the older section were made. What must be identified, for the purpose of this report, as the C—Line Wall and the partition on the D—Line Wall were removed in the first story. Dual fifteen inch wrought iron beams, together with a seven inch diameter cast iron column, in the center, were installed to carry the loads of the second floor and the floors above previously carried by the section of the wall that was removed. The partition on the D—Line was replaced by twelve inch wrought iron beams suspended by a saddle on a ten inch wrought iron beam spanning between the C—Line and the E—Line, along a center line, above the cast iron column. The cast iron column was based on a twelve inch square by two inch thick metal plate directly over the lower portion of the wall at the C—Line. This formed a part of the second floor framing system. Thus the seven inch cast iron column was the main support of the bearing wall above the second floor with the addition of at least half of the second floor load in the area. The bearing stress
on the wall, approximately 200,000 pounds, due to this load was about seven to eight times the allowable stress for a masonry wall of a good grade brick with a good lime cement mortar.

In 1911, to add to the elegance of the structure, a sun parlor is built over the roof of the older section facing Commonwealth Avenue. A sun deck of quarry tile is also added over the other portion of the same roof.

Society and social life surround the Vendome for many years. The beauty of the building is proudly shown by Bostonians to the many visitors who enter the city. A way of life seems to develop within its walls, a way that seems to be not affected by the wars and social changes that affect most of mankind. The economic disaster known as "The Depression", in the thirties, is but little felt at the Vendome as life goes on its placid way. Pleasant social activities abound in its dining rooms, social rooms, and grand ballroom. Many high schools are not satisfied with anything else but to have the senior prom held at the Vendome.

To have their wedding reception held at the Vendome is the desire of many future happy newlyweds. Although time marches slowly by, to some, the aging effect of it is becoming obvious as the occupants, the hardly ever changing employees and the building gracefully grow old, almost together.

A cigarette, carelessly disposed of, starts a fire in the Vendome on January 16, 1968. This is the start of several fires that will bring to an end its glorious existence as a luxury hotel. A fire of incendiary origin three months later, followed by another on August first, followed again by another fire two days later will hasten its demise. A three-alarm fire in June of 1969 and a two-alarm fire (probably incendiary) on December 27, 1969 will mean the end of the building’s use as a hotel. The last date the Vendome is certified as a hotel is December 31, 1969 at which time the required certificate, issued by the Division of Inspection, Massachusetts Department of Public Safety, is revoked because of recent fire damage and the lack of proper rehabilitation and maintenance of the building.

Photograph of the Hotel Vendome showing the southeast section. This photograph was taken about a month before the fire by Firefighter James Teed, Engine 12.
Part Two — The Renovations

On March 3, 1971 a development company purchased the Hotel Vendome. The building had been surveyed visually for structural and architectural considerations almost a year earlier. It was to gain new life by being converted from a hotel to a combination luxury apartments and shopping mall.

An architectural firm is engaged by the new owner for the project. Instead of the usual contract for architectural services, the architect is given different authorizations at various times to do diverse things by the owner.

A letter from the architect’s vice president to the owner of the Vendome, on March 23, 1971, states in part: “It is understood that the nature of renovation projects and the unique relationships we both envision does not permit a precise statement of the total scope of services required.” The letter then identifies ten tasks to be performed by the architect, and adds: “It is understood that our consultant involvement shall be sufficient to assure control of all major parameters affecting professional architectural and engineering liability. As a minimum, this should include all elements of the renovation which affect the structural characteristics of the building, the safety of its occupants and the minimum requirements for certification from all affected agencies (Building Department, Zoning Board, Department of Public Safety, etc.).”

In this letter the architect is also authorized to hire the services of structural engineers, “For the purpose of structural engineering consultation which may be required during the performance of our services.”

The Boston Building Department, upon application by the owner of the Vendome, issued what is known as a “short form permit” for stripping and rubbish removal, in preparation for renovating the interior of the building. This permit dated April 28, 1971 specified that it is not to be used for changes in occupancy.

With this, the first part of the renovations completed, the owner then applied for a “long form permit.” This permit is for “alterations, repairs or changes of occupancy.” It is dated May 24, 1971 and given the number 664. A description of the proposed work states, “Renovate Cafe Vendome —— include new walls, electric HVAC. This application for Cafe occupancy only —— following long form application to detail alterations and occupancy of remainder of building.” After alterations the building is to be occupied as a “restaurant and lounge.” However this application, number 664, is not followed up by the owner and it is abandoned on June 30, 1971.

On the same day, June 30, 1971, that application for permit number 664 is abandoned, a new application for a building permit is sought. This new application describes the proposed work, “Renovate Cafe Vendome restaurant dining facilities as per plans filed,” and gives “hotel” as the intended use. Signing this application is the agent of the owner. Sometime later, an employee of the architect and their principal contact man on the Vendome job, hand carried the application through the Boston Building Department’s Office. He added the phrase, “No structural changes —— for the architect 7.23.71.” He was not then a registered architect or engineer, and in adding this phrase he did not consult any of the architects or structural engineers. The effect of the addition of these words was to allow the issuance of the building permit without these plans being checked by officials in the Building Department responsible for passing on structural considerations. The plans submitted with this application indicate that it would be necessary to penetrate the building both vertically and horizontally for duct work of substantial size. There is no certificate or other representation by any registered architect or engineer that the placing of these ducts would not involve any structural members in the building. This application is given the number 860.

Another application for a building permit to work on the Vendome is submitted, also on June 30, 1971, by the same agent of the owner. The architect and structural engineer are the same as listed on Permit 860 as is the contractor who will do the work. This application is for the renovation of the Hotel Vendome into a one-hundred and twenty-four residential apartment building and a shopping mall. It is designated by the number 862.

The Building Department reviewed the plans submitted with the applications for the building permits. The staff of the Building Department relies entirely upon the stamp of the architect and structural engineers who prepared these plans.
The inspection arm of the Building Department, once a permit is issued, will be to go out on the job site and see that the work is being done in a workman-like manner and that they are living up to the permit that is issued.

The duties of the Building Inspector consist of inspecting the job site to insure that the licensed builder who has signed on the job is present when the work is being performed, the work performed does not exceed the limits of the permit, and that the work is in compliance with the Boston Building Code.

It is significant that in the preparation of the applications and plans for the cafe and building renovations, both the architect and structural engineer are under considerable pressure from the owner to have the applications filed before July 1, 1971. On this date the new Boston Building Code will take effect and its impact on this project would have been substantial — at least to the extent of delaying the issuance of building permits. As a result, the plans which are filed have a preliminary quality about them. The preparation of more detailed plans is contemplated but will never be prepared or submitted. No specifications appear to be prepared or submitted for this project either. Nevertheless, the page of the general renovation plans bearing the various stamps of approval, including that of the Boston Fire Department, bears a notation that a further submission of mechanical plans specifically is to be made.

The president of the construction firm has an oral contract from the owner of the Vendome to do the cafe renovations (Permit 860). After the work in the cafe is done he is again hired orally to do the renovations in the remainder of the building (Permit 862) and this work begins in July of 1971.

The construction firm was formed for the purpose of hiring non-union help and is primarily a management firm, with the actual work being done by sub-contractors.

A heating and air-conditioning contractor entered into an agreement with the construction firm to install duct work in the Cafe Vendome. Some of the work is performed at their place of business. The workmen of the heating and air-conditioning company are working in the Cafe Vendome on July 15, 1971 with the probability that some of them were there on July 6, 1971. The permit authorizing the work in the Cafe Vendome, number 860, is issued on July 26, 1971, a week after the date of July 15, 1971 mentioned earlier.

Sometime in the summer of 1971 an employee of the architect instructed the owner of the Vendome's project director to locate the grille for an air duct on the rear wall of the building. The engineer who prepared the restaurant ventilation plan wanted the duct to be placed closer to the westerly basement wall, to run straight back along the side. Although the architect's employee knew that this would require the duct to pass through several walls in the basement before reaching the rear, he did not consult any structural engineer nor did he suggest that the project director do so. The project director, apparently on the basis of cost, ordered that the duct go straight back in the area in which it was subsequently placed, but without any engineering advice.

Shortly after the June 30, 1971 filing of the renovation applications, the architect received a letter from the owner, dated August 3, 1971, enclosing a payment on account and stating: "I would like to request at this time that no further work or time be spent on this project unless authorized by me personally. The architectural cost of this project is exceeding our budget; and therefore, I would like to be sure that further professional service is definitely needed."

The services of both the architect and structural engineer were suspended as of August 6, 1971. At this point, to their credit, the architects knew that they could not continue to serve on this project without the involvement of a structural engineer who would be able to certify at the end that the building, as altered, met safety requirements.

During the time the architect and the structural engineer are off the job work on the Vendome continued. It is within this period that the duct openings are made in the basement walls.

The Building Department notified the owner on August 16, 1971 that his application, number 862, for the renovation of the Hotel Vendome into a one-hundred and twenty-four residential apartment building and a shopping mall, is refused because it
would be violating zoning considerations. This refusal was appealed to the Board of Appeals of the Building Department.

On one of his tours of inspection, during August of 1971, the building inspector found that the work being done on the Vendome exceeded the scope of the permit that was issued (Permit 860 for Cafe renovations), in that the tower on the roof had been reboarded, new windows were being installed and interior masonry walls were being installed. A violation notice is prepared by the building inspector and issued to the owner of the Vendome, stating that work was being done without the issuance of a permit. The Principal Legal Assistant for the Building Department recommended to the Deputy Building Commissioner that court action be taken on the building inspector’s violation. The inspector heard nothing further with respect to this violation though, in the usual case, the inspector learns the disposition made.

When the air conditioning workers arrived on the job in September of 1971, they found the holes already made through the basement walls in the direction that the duct was to run. Consequently, there was no review of this particular operation by the Building Department or by any structural engineer, although as mentioned earlier, there was conflict within the owner’s organization over the route the duct should follow.

After discussions with the owner, the architect was reactivated and authorized to direct the structural engineers to resume work, but under fairly tight control. The architect resumed the work in mid September 1971, after being off the job since August 6, 1971.

Returning to the project in October 1971, the structural engineers have their job captain make a survey of the Vendome. Around October 7, 1971 he made this survey during which he took a series of photographs and made notations on a set of renovation plans of various conditions he thought worthy of attention. Among these photographs are two of the duct work going through the basement walls. These he said were taken for the purpose of noting the area as, “a condition that needed to be repaired”, for it appeared significant to him in relation to the integrity of the wall. He reported this to an employee of the architect and conceived of steps to minimize the opening and to establish the integrity of the lintel in the doorway. He did not, however, discuss these areas with the builders because, in his opinion, immediate action was not required. He said that he did not know that a main bearing wall was involved.

On October 26, 1971 the Board of Appeals held a meeting on the refusal of Permit number 862 on the appeal of the Vendome owner. The Board allows a Variance of the Zoning Code being granted to the owner.

In December of 1971 the building inspector discovers that work on the premises is being done with the licensed builder absent. Another violation notice is issued.

A system of temporary supports is used to replace a bearing wall which had been removed by December 1971 from the southeast section of the basement in the older part of the building.

The long difficulty in getting Permit number 862 approved and issued by the Building Department comes to an end on December 6, 1971. The issuance of the Permit is the owner’s license to proceed with the renovation of the Hotel Vendome into a one-hundred and twenty-four residential apartment building and shopping mall.

The Cafe Vendome opens its doors for business on December 7, 1971.

As work continues on the renovation of the Vendome, it will be revealed that the close relationship between the principal contractors, who used one another’s employees, did not result in the keeping of accurate records detailing the progress of the work. It is impossible to tell who was in charge at any one time for there are major gaps in the field reports prior to the middle of January 1972. These reports were to be made out and filed each day by the licensed builder serving as superintendent. They briefly describe the work done that day and, if properly filled out regularly, they should produce an accurate picture of the progress of the project on any given date. Among the reports missing from the files are those for the dates from August 6, 1971 to September 24, 1971. This is the same period during which the architect and the structural engineers were off the job; and it is the same
period in which it is believed the duct openings were made in the basement walls. Furthermore the records of neither corporation actually show how much work was done by June 17, 1972.

The absence of field reports is significant in that without them it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to determine accurately who did what and when. The lack of these reports can cover a multitude of sins and in every major project it must be of prime importance to each building inspector to check on their proper preparation and filing.

The twenty-fifth inspection of the Vendome is completed on June 13, 1972 by the Building Department. After each visit the inspector prepares a report, on a Department Form, which he submits to his superiors. Each report includes a one or two line reference to the Vendome among the references to half a dozen or so other projects that fall within his jurisdiction. Each visit probably did not last more than forty-five minutes.

The plans with the notations made by the structural engineers in October of 1971 as a “Condition that needed to be repaired” and delivered to the architect, are received by the construction firm on June 15, 1972.

There is nothing to indicate that the architect or structural engineer offered any comment to the owner or the construction company employees relative to this part of the work being done during their absence from the job, prior to June 15, 1972.

This omission is not consistent with the complete reliance placed upon the architects and engineers by the Boston Building Department; and in this case, it left the owner and builder free to do things their own way.

The difficulty illustrated here is that it appears to be possible for an owner to hire well established architectural and engineering firms, only to dismiss them or limit their roles after the building permits have been issued, while the Building Department goes on believing that the public interest is being protected by these professionals.
Part Three — The Fire

On the morning of June 17, 1972 five workmen entered the Vendome to perform the task of sandblasting brickwork in the West Galleria of the seventh floor in the newer section.

A lone security guard patrolled the outside of the building to prevent any unlawful entry. On two occasions he checked the inside, but not above the third floor.

As the day got older, the Cafe Vendome opened its doors and is in operation serving customers.

About two o'clock in the afternoon two of the workmen were on the first floor of the Vendome. They notice yellowish-brown smoke drifting down the corridor from the upper floors. One of them, an electrician, ran over the stairs to the fourth floor where he heard a crackling noise and observed smoke overhead. He called down to the other workman to ring in an alarm of fire. Descending to the basement he notified the manager of the Cafe Vendome. About one-hundred patrons were in the Cafe at the time and without hesitancy they were evacuated. The manager of the Cafe offered the electrician a portable fire extinguisher. Running back up the stairs to the fire floor the electrician had thoughts of fighting the fire but gave this up as the smoke had become much thicker than just moments before. The other workman ran to the intersection of Newbury and Dartmouth and pulled Fire Box 1571.

At the Fire Alarm Office in the Fenway, Operators received the signal over the Box Alarm Circuit. The Box Alarm is quickly checked against this circuit, in order to maintain a high degree of accuracy, and retransmitted over the Tapper Transmitter to all Fire Houses in the city. Box 1571 is only the fifth Box Alarm received so far into the day, at 2:35 P.M.

Responding to the first alarm from Box 1571 are Engines 33, 22, 7, Ladder 15, 13, and the Chief of Fire District 4.

Engine 33 approached the fire alarm box along Dartmouth Street. Light smoke is seen showing from the fourth floor rear of the Hotel Vendome. Wheeling the apparatus into Commonwealth Avenue they take a position in front of the building advancing a line of hose over the front stairs into the lobby. The attempt to take the line to the upper floors, over the inside stairs, is thwarted as the crew finds their way blocked by plywood partitions and construction hiding the stairway.

Ladder 15 also approached the fire along Dartmouth Street. The truck is placed in the alley, off Dartmouth Street, at the rear. The 100-foot aerial ladder is raised to the fourth floor. Smoke is showing from this floor. The members of Ladder 15 go over the aerial ladder and enter the smoke filled room with hopes of finding the fire in this area.

The District Chief is notified by the Officer of Engine 33 that their way to the upper floors has been blocked. Meanwhile Ladder 13 is in position at the front of the building and their aerial ladder is raised, thus making it possible for the line of hose from Engine 33 to be carried to the fourth floor. The members of Ladder 13 move into the building for opening-up operations, ventilation, axe, and rake duty.

Over the Dartmouth Street stairway to the upper floors is the order given to Engine 22, and Engine 7 has the task of attacking from the rear as their line of hose is carried over Ladder 15’s aerial ladder which is in position and raised to the fourth floor rear. All the first alarm companies are now engaged in fighting the fire.

The fire has been burning, concealed and unobserved, for quite some time. It apparently started in an enclosed space in the ceiling of the third floor. This concealed space leads to other horizontal and vertical spaces in the floor above and walls. The draft, chimney-like effect, inside the walls feeds air, to what apparently was a small source of ignition, into a larger fire. Undetected in this period of time with apparently nobody on the fourth floor, the fire has been allowed to spread, greedily devouring anything that is combustible. This building being a second class structure, nearly a hundred years old, has plenty for the fire to feed upon. It is considered by many to be the most hazardous type of building fire. The thick smoke generated by the fire hides its exact location for some time.
It is very apparent that this is a serious fire and is threatening to spread. In minutes the District Chief reports this blaze to be a "Working Fire", in order to get more help on the fireground to locate, surround, and confine the fire.

The "working fire" companies are immediately dispatched by the Fire Alarm Office at 2:44 P.M., sending Engine 26, Ladder 17, and the Rescue Company (now known as Rescue 1) to the fire. As is their duty upon receipt of a "Working Fire", the Deputy Chief of Division 1 and the Special Service Unit are responding.

Heavy smoke and fire is encountered by the first alarm companies as they advance into the upper floors. The smoke and heat become unbearable at times. The air masks in use are as good as can be procured, but they are heavy and the supply of air is limited. Company members take turns in holding and directing the nozzle. Company Officers have their hands full directing each unit's operation and following the orders they receive from the Chief Officers. The lines of hose must be continually moved to fight this fast moving overhead and often times concealed fire.

Again, in a matter of minutes, a "Second Alarm" is ordered sounded from Box 1571. The alert Operators at Fire Alarm transmit the signal at 2:46 P.M. to the Department. Responding on the second alarm are Engines 3, 10, 21, 37, Ladder 8 and Aerial Towers 1 and 2.

Heavy smoke is starting to show in all the windows on the upper floors from the tower to the Exeter Street side. At this time word has been forwarded to the Deputy Fire Chief that the fire is in an air shaft. Having this information, he is of the opinion that the fire is extending up through the shaft into the tower. Due to the increasing intensity of the smoke, he orders a "Third Alarm" struck. The third alarm is transmitted at 3:02 P.M. sending Engines 24, 25, 34, 53 and Ladder 1 to the fire.

On the fourth floor members of Engine 7 removed a section of plywood flooring and discover fire under them, between the floor and the ceiling of the room below. Quickly this fire is extinguished, but the fire continues to spread rapidly in many other directions.

A "Fourth Alarm" is transmitted at 3:06 P.M. sending in Engines 11, 40, 42, and Engine 43. The Acting Chief of Department has received these alarms and is on his way. Companies throughout the city are on the move, some going to the fire, others covering vacated fire houses. Mutual aid companies are responding from other cities and towns to Boston's need. The switchboard at the Fire Alarm office becomes deluged with phone calls from inquiring people who had seen the smoke of the fire on their television sets as they watched the baseball game.

Water coming down from the upper floors upon the Firefighters is almost scalding. There is plenty of fire above them and they know it without seeing it. Fire boots rub feet and legs almost raw from the constant moving. The fresh shave that morning will make the faces of those wearing air masks tingle, but in a way not wanted. Although it is hot and sweaty inside the building, it is foolhardy to remove the fire coat. Leather helmets gain a few more pounds as water soaks in. Collars and cuffs seem to be made of sandpaper. The air mask, beautiful but so heavy. Smoke mixed with water vapor and steam blinds everything; a wheathlight raised to the lens of the air mask can't be seen.

Engaged on the fifth floor in overhead ventilation duty are the members of Ladder 15. The heat and smoke up there make the area untenable. In seconds a storm of smoke and heat fills the rooms and they fear they are trapped. Ladder 15's aerial ladder is in front of the building with the aerial placed into the windows, and the Firefighters exit to safety. A short breather out on the street and back into the building they go.

As the additional companies arrive on the scene, they are placed in such a manner as to confine the fire to the center of the building, through which the fire appeared to be extending from approximately the fourth floor up.

Lines of hose are carried over ground ladders, aerial ladders, and stairs to the involved floors on all sides of the building. Both Aerial Towers are engaging the fire as is the articulated "Boom-Nozzle" of Engine 26.
An extra ladder company is "Special Called" at 3:02 P.M. due to the amount of axe, rake, ventilation, ladder raising, overhauling, opening up, and the scores of other duties that fall upon ladder companies. The duty is given to Ladder 4.

Due to the fatigue of members of Engine 22 and Ladder 13, and those other companies on the fifth floor, a request is made for two extra engine companies to be sent to the fire at 3:52 P.M.

The news of the fire is well announced by television and radio. Many of the night crew will come in a little earlier to relieve their partners and get a good view of the work done to confine and extinguish the fire. There is much work still to be done and both the day and night crews are asked to remain.

The two extra engine companies, Engines 32 and 50, arrive on the fireground. Engine 50's line is carried over the aerial ladder of Ladder 1, at the front of the building, to the fifth floor. Engine 32's line, assisted by the members of Engine 22 and Ladder 13, is taken up to the fifth floor to assist Engine 22, which had been working in the southeast section.

The Canteen had been opened and men were getting refreshments. Fire hose is being made up and ladders placed back on the trucks as some of the companies are preparing to leave the fire. Scores of men leave the building preparing to go back to the firehouses and change. A detail line is being set up to guard against the rekindle of fire. The day platoon turned over equipment to their reliefs.

Overhauling duty is being performed in the southeast section of the building. A tin ceiling is being opened where it was smoking. Water from a line of hose knocked it down. A firefighter moved in to pull down the rest of the ceiling, the rakes is raised in the air, it swung..."The tin slipped....We were moving....The room was going down....There was no warning other than the sensation of moving right down....There was a rumble and like the tearing of wood separating, "BOOM" and we were in mid-air, then there was a lot of blackness"..."The floor just went....It started down....Got dark then everything stopped....I looked up, seen this guy, I knew I was alive"..."The floor suddenly started straight down, very slowly at first....Something hit me on the back and covered me with blackness, and I took a big ride that seemed like a roller coaster ride with a great big noise and then I glided to a landing"...."I heard a big noise and everything seemed to fall in front of me, and the firefighter who was there disappeared right in front of me"...."There was a noise there that stopped me and then the roof caved in, in the middle. I jumped back into the stairway"...."Just one solid roar, the loud roar of a very close jet plane, lasting fifteen or twenty seconds."...."Then somebody started screaming, 'Jesus, this guy is on top of the pile'....Then we started up to the pile and they were picking guys off the pile, but who they were I don't know....Then they were yelling to get off the pile because there is too much weight up there....'Just a few of you get up there and take turns working,'....Then they said there were more guys."...."Everybody that was there just ran for the pile because we thought there were two men trapped, but they had jumped free and proceeded to go straight to the top of the pile, but the building was still falling when they were going....The smoke hadn't even cleared, you could hear hollering and screaming then."...."I found myself pinned, I couldn't move, just barely turn my head....I looked up and there was a little bit of light about ten feet above me....I started yelling....At first there was no answer and when I yelled a few more times I heard them, the rescue party, shouting, 'Keep yelling, we hear you, we're coming'."

Without warning, at 5:28 P.M., the southeast section of the building collapsed. All efforts on the fireground were directed to the rescue of the firefighters who were inside. Responding to the scene of the collapse were the Fire Commissioner, James H. Kelly, and the Chief of Department, George H. Paul. From the command post set up at the scene, messages were radioed to the Fire Alarm Office. From there the notifications were sent out to the Boston Police, M.D.C. and State Police, Boston City Hospital, and many other agencies. Special calls were made to send in the Rescue Pumper Unit (now known as Rescue 2) and the Cambridge Fire Department Rescue Company. Superhuman efforts and many great risks were taken by all at the scene. Into the long hours of the night and into early morning went the searching, some with joy on finding a comrade
alive, others ending with great tragedy and sorrow. Fire Department Chaplain, Monsignor James Keating, gave the last rites of the Catholic Church to each man who was removed. Taken to Massachusetts General Hospital was Firefighter Henry Hudson, Engine 21, with multiple injuries. Treated for cuts and released was Fire Lieutenant David Shubert, Engine 40. At the Boston City Hospital, Fire Lieutenant James McCabe of Engine 33 was admitted with multiple injuries. Treated and released were Firefighter John Feeney of Engine 22, Firefighter Frederick Howell of Ladder 13, Firefighter Francis O'Connor of Engine 21, Firefighter Robert MacKinnon of Engine 3, Fire Lieutenant John Nicholas of Engine 7 and Firefighter John Heaney of Engine 7.

The last member was found at 2:45 A.M. Sunday, June 18th. This was Fathers Day, 1972, a tragic one for it left eight widows and twenty-three children without the head of the family.

Special Signal (10 – 15) was struck over the sapper circuit of the Fire Alarm Office at 7:45 A.M. June 18, 1972 for the deaths of the following members of the Boston Fire Department at Box 1571, Four Alarms:

- Fire Lieutenant Thomas J. Carroll – Engine Co. 32
- Fire Lieutenant John E. Hanbury – Ladder Co. 13
- Firefighter Charles E. Dolan – Ladder Co. 13
- Firefighter Joseph P. Saniuk – Ladder Co. 13
- Firefighter John E. Jameson – Engine Co. 22
- Firefighter Thomas W. Beckwith – Engine Co. 32
- Firefighter Paul J. Murphy – Engine Co. 32
- Firefighter Richard B. Magee – Engine Co. 33
- Firefighter Joseph F. Boucher, Jr. – Engine Co. 22

A Board of Inquiry was ordered by Fire Commissioner James H. Kelly. The convening was directed to Deputy Fire Chief Leslie W. Magoon.

"You are directed to convene a Board of Inquiry. The purpose of the inquiry will be to attempt to ascertain the cause of the collapse of the Hotel Vendome with the resultant deaths of nine firefighters. The following members of the Boston Fire Department are detailed to be members of the Board at the call of the President:

- Deputy Fire Chief Leslie W. Magoon, President
- Deputy Fire Chief Joseph L. Dolan
- Deputy Fire Chief Leo D. Stapleton
- District Fire Chief Paul M. Buchanan
- District Fire Chief Robert J. Shaughnessy
- Superintendent of Fire Alarm John M. Murphy
- Fire Lieutenant William J. Kelly, Secretary

Very truly yours,

BOSTON FIRE DEPARTMENT

/s/ James H. Kelly
Fire Commissioner."
CONCLUSION OF THE BOARD OF INQUIRY, BOSTON FIRE DEPARTMENT

The loss of support at the base of the circular cast-iron column was sufficient to trigger the collapse of the entire building starting at the second floor and proceeding upward. It is apparent that the cutting of the opening in the twelve inch bearing wall directly below the base of the column weakened the wall to an extent that any additional weight put on the upper floors, such as firefighters and their equipment moving about was enough to initiate the collapse. While there was some water on the floors, it appears that it was draining out quickly through construction holes cut by firefighters and added very little weight to the floors.

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The cause of the fire remains unknown.
In Memoriam

Fire Lieutenant
Thomas J. Carroll
Engine Co. 32

Fire Lieutenant
John E. Haubury
Ladder Co. 13
Fire Fighter
Joseph P. Saniuk
Ladder Co. 13

Fire Fighter
Charles E. Dolan
Ladder Co. 13
Fire Fighter
John E. Jameson
Engine Co. 22

Fire Fighter
Thomas W. Beckwith
Engine Co. 32
Fire Fighter
Paul J. Murphy
Engine Co. 32

Fire Fighter
Richard B. Magee
Engine Co. 33
Fire Fighter
Joseph J. Boucher, Jr.
Engine Co. 22

--- BOX 1571 ---

For whom do the bells toll,
Boston's firefighters nine.
The fire had been knocked down,
Things were going fine.

And then a sickening sound was heard,
The floor began to crumble.
A section of the Hotel Vendome,
Came down in a mighty rumble.

"There are men trapped in there,"
Men shouted above their fears.
The finding of their buddies,
Left their faces all sweat and tears.

Eight men had been injured.
Nine more lay there dead.
It's something they don't think about,
But firefighters dread.

To go in a smoke filled room,
Not knowing what they will find.
The saving of a life,
Is all that's in their mind.

To the wives and mothers of these brave men,
No suitable words can we say.
But to send their souls to the right hand of God,
We a grateful city pray.

Joseph L. Brady
Police Patrolman
District 4
Boston Police Department

From the Boston Firefighters Digest Hotel Vendome Memorial issue.