



City of Manassas Fire and Rescue Department - Fire Marshal's Office  
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Summer 2012

## ***Why we do tent inspections.***

Warm weather brings many types of outdoor events to the City: church picnics, historical recreations, an air show, flea markets, a railroad festival, fireworks sales, automobile displays, to name a few.

Most of these events use some type of temporary outdoor structure, or tent, to shelter the participants from the sun, wind, and inclement weather. Tents seen in the City, range in size from a 10' x 10' pop-up canopy to a tubular steel frame structure of 4,000 square feet.

Almost everyone has heard of the "Greatest Show on Earth" and the "Big Top" when the circus came to town. One of the most popular modern day shows, *Cirque du Soleil* uses a large tent for its performances.

The use of these types of structures results in great flexibility; however, the benefits are balanced by strict maintenance and inspection requirements.

*But why do tents need to be inspected?*

The answer is simple: History.

Like most laws, codes, ordinances, and regulations, Fire and Building Codes are written in response to tragic events that occurred throughout history in an effort to prevent them from happening again.

Here is an example:

## ***The Hartford Circus Fire of 1944***

July 6, 1944, was a warm summer's day in Hartford, Connecticut, and a perfect day for a matinee performance of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus. 7,000 people mostly women and children, streamed into the big top to catch the show.

Twenty minutes after it began, as the audience finished applauding The Incomparable Alfred Court's big cats and bears and awaited the Flying Wallendas' high-wire act, a fire broke out near the ground on the tent's sidewall.

Eyewitnesses said it was small at first, contained enough to extinguish with one or two buckets of water, but no one could get water on it fast enough. Within minutes, the entire big top was in flames.

According to witnesses quoted in the July 7, 1944, issue of *The New York Times*, flames raced across the top of the circus tent, dropping pieces of burning canvas onto the fleeing audience as the band played "Stars and Stripes Forever" as loud as it could (the song was traditionally used to signal distress to all circus personnel).

Eventually, the entire tent collapsed, engulfing hundreds of people still inside.

One hundred sixty-eight people died, many of them children, and almost 500 were injured. Six of the dead have never been identified. The Hartford Circus Tent Fire was the worst tent fire in U. S. history.

Fire Investigators blamed the cause for the rapid fire on the highly combustible solution used to waterproof the tent canvas: paraffin applied with gasoline.

The actual cause of the blaze remains undetermined; however, many speculate that the fire was ignited by a discarded lit cigarette.

*(Exerpts from an article by Kathleen Robinson in the July/August NFPA Journal)*

The Fire Prevention Code establishes the parameters for the safe use of tents and requires citizens to get a permit from the Fire Marshal to erect a tent that covers more than 900 square feet or has an occupant load of over fifty people. A building permit is also required to ensure that the tent is set-up safely and for the use of electrical generators and wiring.

Today, tents and other membrane structures must meet strict flame-retardant standards and be certified by an independent third-party testing agency such as Underwriters Laboratories, Inc. Fire and building inspections ensure that they will not collapse and that exits are clearly marked with signs and emergency lighting.

All of this is done in an effort to prevent history from being repeated.



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Comments or Questions about this or another fire prevention topic?  
Contact us at [firemarshal@mass.gov](mailto:firemarshal@mass.gov) or 703-257-8458