



Fire Safety Tips

City of Manassas Fire & Rescue Department - Office of the Fire Marshal



September 2011

"Back to School"

Each August, before school opens, staff from the Office of the Fire Marshal conduct fire safety inspections in all of the schools in the City of Manassas to ensure that the schools are ready for the start of a new school year.

A second inspection is done in January to ensure that all of the fire protection systems, exits, classrooms, etc. are being maintained in accordance with the Fire Prevention Code.

On December 1, 1958, a fire broke out in the basement of Our Lady of the Angels Catholic School in Chicago, educational home to approximately 1,600 students in Kindergarten through 8th grade. The school was a two-story structure built in 1910 but remodeled and added to numerous times in the intervening years.

While legally in compliance with the fire safety laws of the time, the school was woefully unprepared for any kind of fire. There was only one fire escape, no sprinklers, no automatic fire alarm, no smoke or heat detectors, no alarm connected to the fire department, no fire-resistant stairwells and no fire-safe doors from the stairwells to the second floor. While the building's exterior was brick, the interior was made almost entirely of combustible material - stairs, walls, floors, doors, and roof - all wood.



The wooded floors had been coated and re-coated many times with flammable petroleum-based waxes as part of the school's regular maintenance.

A fire started in a basement trash barrel around 2:20 PM and burned for 20 minutes before being discovered. It spread quickly up the main center stairway to the upper floors trapping students and teachers. ***Even though there was no fire alarm sounding, some of the teachers took the initiative and were able to quickly evacuate their students, contrary to a standing school rule that no one was permitted to leave the building without the permission of the principal.***

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Others were not able to evacuate due to the spreading fire and tragically 92 students and 3 teachers perished in the blaze. Firefighters discovered an entire classroom filled with dead students some burned and some not. In one classroom, firefighters found students that died from asphyxiation, some sitting with their heads resting on their desk.

Ironically, Our Lady of the Angels school passed a fire department safety inspection only weeks before the fire, because the school did not have to comply with all fire-safety guidelines due to a "Grandfathering" clause in the 1949 standards.



The new Our Lady of the Angels school opened in September 1963 and was equipped with every modern fire-safety feature available including a fire alarm that called the fire department directly and a fire sprinkler system.

In 1962, four years after the fire, one small boy, a student at the school at the time of the fire, confessed to fire investigators that he started the fire in a trash receptacle in the basement; however, he later recanted and the official cause is still not known.

In a tragic twist of fate, the daughter of the Superintendent of Fire Inspectors of the Chicago Fire Department was one of the students who perished in the fire.

As a result of the fire the building and fire codes were changed to include:

- Mandatory fire drills. Today all schools are required by law to have one fire drill within the first 10 days of school opening and one every month thereafter.
- Improved fire-resistive construction materials are used in schools.
- Fire alarms and fire sprinkler systems were installed.
- Smoking is prohibited.
- The amount of combustible material that can be used on walls is regulated (i.e. posters, art projects, cloth coverings, etc.).