



*The Commonwealth of Massachusetts*  
*Department of*  
*Public Safety*

1010 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, 15

November 8, 1943

To: His Excellency Leverett Saltonstall  
Governor of the Commonwealth  
State House  
Boston, Massachusetts

Subject: Report of fire which occurred at Cocoanut Grove,  
17-19 Piedmont Street, Boston.

INTRODUCTION:

Section 3, Chapter 148 of the General Laws provides that the State Fire Marshal "shall investigate or cause to be investigated the circumstances of all fires of suspicious origin of which he has notice, except such fires occurring in the city of Boston, and may investigate or cause to be investigated the circumstances of any fire occurring anywhere within the commonwealth."

On the night of November 28, 1942, at approximately 10:20 P.M., a fire occurred at the Cocoanut Grove, which was conducted as a night club, located at 17-19 Piedmont Street, Boston. I was notified of this fire at my home in Lowell at about 10:40 P.M. by the State Police teletype division, 1010 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, and I then directed that a cruiser be sent from the Concord barracks to take me to Boston. Trooper Michael Shea arrived at my home and we proceeded at once to the scene of the fire, arriving there at approximately

12:10 A.M.

Upon arrival I met the then Acting Commissioner of Public Safety John F. Stokes, now the Commissioner of Public Safety. We stood by at the direction of Your Excellency to offer any and all aid and the cooperation of the Commonwealth. Commissioner Stokes, Mr. Bottomley, Secretary to the Governor, and myself had several conversations with the Mayor of the city of Boston, Fire Commissioner Reilly and Police Commissioner Timilty concerning the fire and extended to them the cooperation of the Commonwealth. From then on I was there continuously with Fire Chief Pope of the Boston Fire Department awaiting any requests that might be made.

Commissioner Reilly decided that he would hold an inquest under Section 3, Chapter 148 of the General Laws. I sat in at the first day of this inquest on November 29th, both afternoon and evening. Later District Attorney Foley notified me by telephone at the Statler Hotel to be at his office Monday morning, November 30th. I went to District Attorney Foley's office where I was informed that the Attorney General of the Commonwealth had advised him to instruct me to conduct an investigation under his direction, and to start immediately.

Commissioner Stokes, upon being informed by me of the District Attorney's instructions, assigned Detective Inspector Daniel A. Murphy, Detective Philip W. Deady, Patrolman William Killen and Carl Stuetzel, Jr., Assistant Engineer, to this investigation.

However, sometime after 12 o'clock noon the same day, we received word from Attorney General Bushnell to be at his office the following morning, Tuesday, December 1st. Upon going to the Attorney General's office, I was informed by him that he

was going to conduct an investigation. He, also, suggested that I make a formal investigation of the circumstances of the fire, and assigned various assistant attorneys general and assistant district attorneys to cooperate and to advise in the conduct of the investigation so that the rights of all concerned would be properly protected.

The investigation was convened at the Department of Public Safety, 1010 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, on December 1, 1942, with various assistant attorneys general and assistant district attorneys present. During its course, which covered a period of approximately 25 days, there were more than 200 witnesses examined.

There were 492 lives lost in this fire and 300 persons were injured. For the various causes of death, may I respectfully refer you to the reports of the medical examiner. For the results of criminal proceedings emanating from the fire at Cocoanut Grove, may I refer you to the records of the criminal session of the Suffolk County Superior Court. Also, with reference to the electrical equipment in the premises, may I refer you to the report of Harrison C. Witherell, Executive Secretary, State Examiners of Electricians.

CONSTRUCTION AND OCCUPANCY:

The Cocoanut Grove was conducted in four connecting buildings abutting on Piedmont Street, Broadway and Shawmut Street. The main portion of the premises was the building #17 Piedmont Street which consisted of a basement and a street floor. Basically it was of what is termed first-class construction, that is, reinforced concrete floors and roof with brick external walls.

The remaining buildings were what is termed second-class construction. Adjacent to the 17 Piedmont Street building was the building 6 Shawmut Street, four stories in height. The floor above the street contained dressing rooms and locker rooms. Through the rear of this building was a passageway joining the 17 Piedmont Street structure with two connecting buildings on Broadway. This constituted the so-called new cocktail lounge and its foyer. The two buildings on Broadway were a two-story brick-exterior building in which was the bar, and a four-story brick-exterior building in which was located the foyer of the cocktail lounge.

The premises had a principal frontage on Piedmont Street of approximately 80 feet and extended through to Shawmut Street, a distance of approximately 91 feet. On Shawmut Street there was a frontage of approximately 128 feet and a frontage on Broadway of approximately 42 feet. There were two principal or main entrances to the premises, one located on Piedmont Street and the other on Broadway.

The basements of the premises contained what was known as the Melody Lounge, occupying a space approximately 58 feet in length and 41 feet in depth, a kitchen, storage and heater room space.

The first floor was occupied as a foyer, office, checking room, Caricature Bar, main dining room, the Broadway cocktail lounge and foyer, and ladies' and men's rooms.

The main entrance from Piedmont Street consisted of a revolving door which was found practically demolished, the remains of which were taken as evidence. The condition of this door was caused, no doubt, by people trying to leave the building. On

Broadway there was a vestibule entrance to the lounge from the street. The inside door of the vestibule swung inward, while double outside doors swung outward into an alcove on Broadway.

The premises can be better visualized by referring to the attached plans.

The ceilings and walls of that portion of the premises termed the Melody Lounge and located in the basement, the foyer, the Caricature Bar and the main dining room on the first floor were all finished with inflammable materials applied to wooden furring, with a considerable air space between the finish and the walls and ceilings to which they were applied. In addition to the highly decorative finish on the walls and ceilings, there was also similar treatment on the front of the Caricature Bar. Much of the furniture was also covered with an inflammable material.

In the Melody Lounge, at at least two points, there were artificial palm trees installed for decorative purposes, the supporting members of which were wrapped with loose vegetable fibre. Practically at the level of the ceiling there were spreading palm branches with leaves attached. These palm trees were equipped with electric lights set into cocoanut husks. Electric current was supplied to each light by rubber-insulated wire. This wire supported the weight of the hanging husk, the wire passing through the husk to the socket by means of a one-eighth inch unbushed nipple.

The buildings prior to the fire had undergone considerable alterations and, according to testimony by witnesses, these alterations had not been completed, in that required fire doors were not installed in wall openings between the buildings constituting

PROTECTION:

There was clear evidence that the only available fire protection consisted of several portable fire extinguishers scattered about the premises. At no time had the employees been instructed with reference to providing for the safety of the occupants and, therefore, it was probably too much to expect the untrained personnel to take such action as is necessary in an emergency.

FIRE:

There is no doubt from the testimony of witnesses at the inquest and from inspections of the property made by me that the fire originated in the basement, in the section occupied by the Melody Lounge.

Evidence in the basement indicated that the false ceiling of cloth had burned completely and with great rapidity. However, the palm trees were not entirely destroyed.

The fabric on the side walls of the stairway leading from the Melody Lounge to the main floor, which stairway was not cut off either at the basement or at the first floor, was burned upward towards the ceiling and partially burned downward on the sides, but not at the level of the stair treads. The carpet on the stairway had not burned.

Considering the large amount of combustible material on the ceiling where heat would naturally be retained, irrespective of the moderate amount of room ventilation, the fire would spread rapidly and produce a large volume of heat and unconsumed combustible gases. Such gases are not strange or unusual in fires. They are a logical result of combustion. It was natural for these

gases to follow the stairway to the main floor and enter the corridor and foyer at high velocity. Sufficient air for complete combustion would not have been available in the small corridor and foyer so that a considerable volume of unburned gases remained to burn intensely upon entering the main dining room, where 900 square feet of ceiling was covered with cloth, and the Caricature Bar area, and to instantaneously ignite all exposed inflammable materials. It gave every indication of being what is termed a horizontal fire and what fire departments have on so many occasions described as hot-air explosions, these being caused by the production and accumulation of hot gases naturally generated by the fire.

The passage from the main dining room and Caricature Bar to the new Broadway lounge served, in my judgment, as a combustible flue and discharged extremely hot gases and flame into the Broadway lounge.

There was evidence that practically all the area involved in the fire was almost completely sealed from the exterior. The only exceptions were the openings used for exhaust ventilation.

It is my belief that the spread of this fire would not have been so rapid nor so severe had it not been for the false cloth ceiling in the Melody Lounge; that had the egress been unobstructed and easy to discern on the part of the guests that night and had there been an inexpensive ordinary auxiliary lighting system, at least for exit purposes, that had there been some degree of responsibility on the part of the owner and occupant for the safety of the guests and the employees, there would have been a considerably smaller loss of life, notwithstanding some confusion on the part of the guests.

GENERAL:

During all this investigation and even at the present time, since exceptions of defendants are pending before the courts and the Building Commissioner of Boston is under indictment and must stand trial, or is in the process of being tried, it has been clear to me that I must refrain from additional statements until such time as these cases are concluded.

I would be prepared at any time to go before any committee, either legislative or appointed by Your Excellency, and suggest what, in my opinion, might prevent a reoccurrence of this catastrophe.

I cannot help but express my appreciation for the complete cooperation I received from Chief Pope and Commissioner Reilly of the Boston Fire Department and Mayor Tobin of Boston.

All the men and resources of this Division, as well as additional men assigned by the Commissioner of Public Safety, were put at the disposal of both the Attorney General and the District Attorney.

On Sunday, November 29, 1942, information was given out by the Boston Police Department wherein a young man named Stanley Tomaszewski stated that he accidentally started the fire. After a careful investigation of the premises and of all the facts and after reading the testimony of the youth, a part of which is quoted below, it is clear to me that he did not ignite the palm tree in the Melody Lounge and thereby cause the fire.

The following testimony was given by Stanley Tomaszewski at the inquest conducted by Commissioner Reilly:

- "Q. Did you light a match? A. Yes, sir.
- Q. Why did you light the match? A. I wasn't able to locate the bulb on account of the darkness.
- Q. You lit a match in an effort to find the bulb?
- A. Yes, sir.
- Q. Then when you turned the bulb on what did you do with the match? A. I shook it like, to put it out, and then I stepped on it. I was told not to lay any matches lighted on the floor, to make sure they are out.
- Q. You didn't drop the match? A. I stepped on it.
- Q. What were you standing on when you stepped on it?
- A. On the floor.
- Q. Did you use a ladder or get on the table?
- A. I used one of the stools.
- Q. You held the match until you got to the floor alongside of that tree? A. Yes.
- Q. Do you think the match could have caused the tree to catch fire? A. I don't know."

This fire occurred on a Saturday night and there is every indication that many people were there after attending football games and that it was crowded beyond capacity.

Had it not been for the excellent rescue work of the Boston Fire Department, members of the Armed Forces and others who were at the scene within minutes after the start of the fire, many more lives would have been lost and many more lung injuries would have occurred.

A great deal of credit and appreciation should be given to many private agencies, the medical profession, the clergy and others who played such a great part in alleviating the suffering of the injured.

It is clear to me that the preliminary inquiries normally to be made before the issuance of the licenses which were actually in force should have disclosed the existence of conditions which largely contributed to the disaster.