DANCE HALL FIRE (RHYTHM CLUB)
Natchez, MS
April 23, 1940

As appeared in:
The Natchez Dance Hall Holocaust
NFPA Quarterly (1940) 34 #1:70-75
&
Natchez Dance Hall Tragedy
By Paul R. Lyons
Fire in America (1976) p. 162-163
ALL NON-NFPA PHOTOGRAPHS HAVE BEEN REMOVED FROM THIS DOCUMENT.
Natchez Dance Hall Tragedy

One of the worst fire disasters of the twentieth century occurred in a small dance hall in Natchez, Mississippi, a quiet old river town of about 16,000 population. There, on the evening of April 23, 1940, 207 persons lost their lives and 200 others were injured when fire involved combustible Spanish moss over the dance floor. There was only one main exit and the small windows apparently were nailed shut. The panic-stricken people piled up at the rear wall of the building, most of them dying from suffocation or from being trampled.

The Rhythm Club in Natchez was used as a place of entertainment by the black people. It was only one story high with the roof and sides made of corrugated iron. It was a long, narrow structure, measuring 120 feet in length and thirty-eight wide. The main entrance opened to an interior lobby which in turn opened onto the dance floor. At the rear of the building was a bar, with the orchestra platform in the opposite corner. Along the side and rear walls were approximately eighteen windows, all boarded to keep out “gate crashers.” There were no skylights or upper windows to vent the heat of any fire which the metal walls of the building would confine like an oven.

On the night of the fire, a popular Chicago orchestra had attracted a record crowd and about 700 or more persons were inside the building at about 11:15 p.m. The fire started near the hamburger stand at the front of the dance hall when the gray Spanish moss, hanging from ceiling joists, ignited and began to burn rapidly. People in the lobby in front of the dance floor were able to get out the door quickly, but others were trapped by a hedge of fire when the burning moss dropped and ignited clothing of the people. In a surging movement the hundreds of victims within the hall pushed back to the rear, where most of them died. It was surprising that so many escaped since the only main exit passed through a cloak room and the lobby where the doors opened the wrong way, inward.
The fire department responded to an alarm within minutes and the fire was quickly extinguished. Sheet metal siding was torn off to allow rescuers to reach the victims but many, trapped below the deck, suffocated before they could be released.

Like every other fire tragedy, this incident presented lessons which should have spurred many cities into improving their fire prevention regulations. The Rhythm Club had one main exit which was partially blocked. Doors leading to this exit opened toward the interior; but people trying desperately to escape expected the doors to open the other way. The mass of highly combustible Spanish moss was an obvious danger; so were the closed windows. The outer iron covering of the building, while noncombustible, confined the heat with maximum intensity on the people trapped inside.

Similar fires, in earlier years, should have served as a warning. In 1929 in a club in Detroit, the combination of combustible oak leaves hanging from the ceiling and boarded windows caused twenty-two fire deaths and twice as many injuries from panic when a carelessly discarded match ignited the decorations.

In 1936 nine persons lost their lives in a New York City restaurant when fire spreading through a window from the floor below flashed over festooned silk cloth ceiling decorations. Today, fire codes require that no furnishings or decorations of an explosive or highly flammable character shall be used in any place of assembly or other occupancy. But, after Natchez, other fire disasters would underscore the need for such common-sense fire safety.
The building had been converted into a dance hall by the French. The dance hall was built on the second floor of the building.

Construction of the building.

The dance hall was built on the second floor of the building.

Some parts of the site are still visible.

The building was constructed on the second floor of the building.

The dance hall was converted into a dance hall by the French.

The building was constructed on the second floor of the building.

The dance hall was converted into a dance hall by the French.
two or three years as decorative material. It was under the
unlike materials it was estimated that the moss had grown in the building for
The entrance to the dance floor, for it was structurally heated in appearance. Not
was decorated with Spanish moss supported by wire strings in both directions.
was covered with Spanish moss supported by wire strings in both directions.
The dance floor gave the impression of a long cane. The edge of the floor
covered by the door which opened into the lobby can readily be seen.
ceiling. The dance floor itself was raised from the lobby through a single door.
The lobby was a room about 27 by 7 feet. The lobby was a room about 27 by 7 feet.
The single door opened into a narrow entrance way about six feet deep.

The rear of the dance floor. Orchestra platform is at right, bar is at left. Note that some strands of Spanish moss
are still hanging from the walls; others were burned in the building before the negroes died. Window openings were nailed shut at time of the fire.
In 1956, extensive repair and reconstruction was necessary to restore the original grandeur of the building. In order to preserve the elegance and grandeur of the building, the entire front of the building was completely rebuilt. The main entrance was relocated to the rear of the building, and a new, more modern design was incorporated.

Several months after the repairs were completed, the building was opened to the public. The entrance was a grand archway, flanked by tall columns, and a large clock was mounted on the facade. Inside, the rooms were decorated with ornate chandeliers and lace curtains, and the walls were painted in soft pastel colors. The entire building was designed to transport visitors back in time to the elegance of the pre-war era.

The interior of the building was equally impressive. The grand ballrooms were adorned with crystal chandeliers and mirrors, and the walls were covered in fine wallpaper. The music was provided by a live orchestra, and the atmosphere was one of sophistication and elegance.

Despite the renovations, the building retained much of its original charm. The grand archway and columns still stood tall, and the clock on the facade continued to chime the hours. The building was a testament to the enduring beauty of the past, and it quickly became a popular destination for visitors from all over the world.