



November 9 will mark the 150th anniversary of the Great Boston Fire of 1872. It decimated Downtown Boston killing over 20 people and taught the city one of the hardest and most expensive lessons in its history.

Despite its seemingly unforeseen rampage, this fire could have been prevented, according to Boston- based author, Stephanie Schorow, "It was a disaster foretold. It was not a capricious act of nature," she said.

The more well- known Great Chicago Fire occurred just one year prior. Boston's Police Chief John Damrell at the time warned city officials of the parallels between the two cities' infrastructure, essentially predicting the Boston fire would occur if preventative measures were not taken, according to Schorow,.

Despite Damrell's begging and pleading, the city took no urgency to his recommendations. On the evening of November 9, the fire was first spotted in a building on Summer Street at around 7pm.

The fire would burn for two days, destroying over 65 acres of downtown and 776 buildings.

Schorow calculated that the fire cost the city over 1.6 billion in damages in today's dollars.

"It burned from downtown crossing to the wharf. If there hadn't been an ocean there, it would have kept going," Schorow said.

There were many factors at play that caused the fire to burn so strongly across the city. "Boston was built to burn," according to Schorow,.

The main contributors to the fire's strength involved a lack of proper water infrastructure, the abundance of wood and flammable materials in the city, a lack of adherence to safety codes and the abundance of gas mains to heat and light buildings.

Additionally, firefighters at the time were not prepared to handle a fire of such size. The water pressure that ran through the residential mains was not strong enough to put out the fire. The fire engines used had to be physically towed by men, since all of the city's horses had been infected with an equine flu that was spreading throughout the northeast..

"It was a wake- up call to the city to start doing something about the water infrastructure. There were some codes, but they weren't enforced," Schorow said. "It finally sunk through into Boston's political structure that they had to take the growth of the city seriously." Although the Great Boston Fire caused a relatively small number of deaths and did not reach the immense acreage of the Great Chicago Fire, it is considered to be one of the most expensive fires per acre in U.S. history.

In early 2022, to commemorate the fire's 150th anniversary, Schorow published a book on the disaster and will be speaking at several events in the coming weeks.

Despite the age of the occurrence of the fire, there are still many lessons that can be taken from it, specifically concerning forest fires that have run rampant across the western U.S. in recent months, according to Schorow. "Fires are still killing people... We are still losing people to fire even though we know we need to enforce codes and safety," she said.

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