



What began as a typical lively Saturday night at Boston’s Cocoanut Grove Lounge on November 28, 1942, ended in the most tragic nightclub fire in U.S. history.

In remembrance of the estimated 490 lives claimed by the fire, The Cocoanut Grove Memorial Committee will be hosting a vigil on the fire's 80th anniversary. The vigil will be held on Monday, November 28 at 3pm at the nightclub’s former location on 17 Piedmont Street in Bay Village.

The committee is a nonprofit organization established in 2015 with the mission of ‘preserving the memory of the people who died, to honor the brave first responders and citizens who rescued those trapped inside and to recognize the breakthrough innovations in medicine and building safety.’

Although the definite start of the fire is still unknown, the most popular theory according to Michael Hanlon, Vice President and Treasurer of the committee is that the blaze was accidentally set by a teenage boy who worked at the club.

To replace a lightbulb in a dark corner of the supper club, the boy allegedly lit a match to help him see. It is rumored that the flame from the match caught onto one of the large paper palm tree leaves that adorned the club’s ceiling.

The fire lasted only 25 minutes, spread quickly, and burned hot due to the many flammable decorative materials and the structural setup of the building.

All six potential exit doors were either blocked or locked, because of the owner’s suspicion of guests sneaking out without paying their dues.

The lack of accessible exits resulted in a stampede of guests attempting to get out of the burning building through the only available exit, a set of revolving doors on the Piedmont Street entrance.

The sheer force from the panicked crowd jammed the doors shut, preventing anyone from exiting and causing many to be crushed under the weight of the crowd.

According to Hanlon, Cocoanut Grove was “the place to go” in Boston at the time and the club’s legal capacity was 460 individuals, but the club was in violation by dozens of people.

“As tragic as the fire was, it instituted an awful lot of changes, “ said Hanlon.

Almost immediately after the fire, legislators filed bills to not only investigate the incident itself but also improve and better enforce building fire, safety and inspection codes.

Many fire safety requirements used today were inspired by the event, according to Hanlon, including the requirement for lit exit signs to run on a battery separate from a building’s electrical source.

Additionally, the practice of using penicillin to treat burn victims with infections was first recorded at Massachusetts General Hospital only a few weeks after the fire, a treatment that is still commonly used today.

In addition to the vigil, the Cocoanut Grove Memorial Committee is also in the process of creating a memorial statue which will record the victims’ names, intending to be placed in Statler Park.

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