

The History behind the Codes

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By

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When we think of building codes, those of us who work closely with them see volumes of brightly colored books on our bookshelves. The layman sees incomprehensible tables and diagrams that facilitate people like me stop you building what and how you want to.

Building Codes are meant to help; they have developed over time as a way to protect the life safety, health and welfare of the people. Their history is long and varied and to truly understand them, we need to look back in time.

Between 1796BC and 1750BC, the Kingdom of Babylonia was ruled by King Hammurabi. He believed that he was chosen by the gods to deliver the law to his people and set out to do just that. His work was re-discovered in 1901, by Egyptologist who discovered an 88 inch tall basalt slab or stele in what is now Khuzestan, Iran.

Upon this stele is written the collection of laws commonly referred to as the Code of Hammurabi. In which we find the very first recorded Building Codes:

- 229. If a builder builds a house for someone, and does not construct it properly, and the house which he built falls in and kills its owner, then that builder shall be put to death.
- 230. If it kills the son of the owner, the son of that builder shall be put to death.
- 231. If it kills a slave of the owner, then he shall pay, slave for slave, to the owner of the house.
- 232. If it ruins goods, he shall make compensation for all that has been ruined, and inasmuch as he did not construct properly this house which he built and it fell, he shall re-erect the house from his own means.
- 233. If a builder builds a house for someone, even though he has not yet completed it; if then the walls seem toppling, the builder must make the walls solid from his own means.

This may be a little extreme, but the premise is that a contractor should do a good job or face the consequences – the same values that exist today.

Even the Bible addresses building codes: Deuteronomy 22 verse 8 is an earlier reference to a practical “structural” type code which states:

“In case you build a new house, you must also make a parapet for your roof, that you may not place bloodguilt upon your house because someone falling might fall from it”

Disasters have played a great part in developing and strengthening codes and construction through the ages. In 64A.D, Rome was besieged by a great fire. After the fire, Emperor Nero put in action his large scale master plan for rebuilding. The plan focused on the need for sound construction principles, fire resistance and appropriate sanitation facilities. The result was the Rome we know today, probably one of the first comprehensive plans, and another chapter in the development of building codes.

The second disaster to play a major part in building code development was the Great Fire of London in 1666. The fire destroyed nearly two-thirds of the structures in the City. Afterwards, the Parliament worked to improve the standards of construction. Unfortunately, this took over two years and in the meantime, much of London was rebuilt without the new standards.

More big steps were made in the nineteenth century. The industrial revolution, the end of slavery, and the significant increase in immigration to the United States lead to the enactment of many building laws to combat the poor conditions that existed in the tenement housing.

In 1867, New York enacted the First Tenement Housing Act which required a fire escape and a window in each room. This was amended in 1879 to specify that the window face a source of fresh air and light, not an interior hallway. In addition, the second act required the installation of toilets inside the building.

Yet again, disaster prompted further movement in the development of codes. In 1871, Chicago was booming. Development was rapid, combustible construction rampant and fire insurance policies were issued despite concern for potential losses. Then came the Great Chicago Fire. For two days, the fire raged in all areas of the City destroying 17,000 of the city's 60,000 buildings. The financial impact to the insurance industries left 60 companies in bankruptcy. Those that survived threatened to leave unless building regulations were improved. Resistance to tightening the regulations led to a four year implementation process and again, a significant amount of reconstruction being performed at lower standards.

The early 1900's saw the organization of building codes. Three main organizations emerged initially and these combined in 1994 to form the International Code Council (ICC) whose model codes provide the basis of today's Florida Building Code. Florida has adopted the International Codes but makes some amendments – all because of Hurricane Andrew.

In 1992 Hurricane Andrew became the costliest Atlantic hurricane in history (prior to Hurricane Katrina). 90% of all structures in Dade County had roof damaged and over 117,000 homes were destroyed or had major damage. Much of what was learned following Hurricane Andrew regarding construction in high wind areas has been incorporated in today's Florida Building Code and helps buildings in areas such as Charlotte County withstand high winds.

Codes have changed over the years, from an emphasis of blame and punishment, to a focus on prevention and safety. As technology, knowledge and products change and improve, so will codes. When ever buildings are being built or remodeled – there will always be a need for Building Codes and Building Departments. If you ever have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at jim.evetts@charlottefl.com or by phone at (941) 743-1201.