

# The Evolution of Building Codes

The regulation of building construction is not a recent phenomenon. It can be traced throughout recorded history for more than 4,000 years. Through time, people have become increasingly aware of their ability to avoid the catastrophic consequences of building construction failures.

The first building codes in the United States, established in 1625, addressed fire safety and specified materials for roof coverings. In 1630, Boston outlawed chimneys made with wood and thatched roof coverings.

In the late 1770's, George Washington recommended that height and area limitations be imposed on wood frame buildings in his plans for the District of Columbia. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson encouraged the development of building regulations to provide for minimum standards that would ensure health and safety. In 1788, the first known formal building code was written in Old Salem, North Carolina. Larger cities began establishing building codes in the early 1800's. In 1865, New Orleans was the first city to enact a law requiring inspections of public places.

Public safety is not the only byproduct afforded by modern codes. Architects, engineers, contractors, and others in the building community can take advantage of the latest technological advances accommodated by these codes with viable savings to the consumer.

During the early 1900's, model building codes were authorized by the building officials of various communities with key assistance from all segments of the building industry. Now, model codes are the central regulatory basis for the administration of programs in cities, countries, and states throughout the United States. They simply represent a collective undertaking, which shares the cost of code development and maintenance while ensuring uniformity of regulations so that the advantages of technology can be optimized.

The National Board of Fire Underwriters published its Recommended National Building Codes in 1905. In 1915, the world's first building safety code organization was established to provide a forum for exchange of ideas regarding building safety and construction regulations.

Modern building codes regulate a myriad of safety systems including design and structural requirements, fire prevention, electrical, plumbing and mechanical systems, property maintenance, energy efficiency and zoning.

For codes to be effective, an understanding and cooperative relationship must exist between building officials and the groups they serve – homeowners, developers, urban planners and designers, and others in the construction industry. Codes must therefore be responsive to the government's need to protect the public. They must provide due process for all affected and keep pace with rapidly-changing technology. These communities can work together to develop and maintain codes.

Building safety code enforcement has historically been accomplished by defraying the costs of administration through a system of fees relating to a specific project – a system that is self-supporting. These fees are generally less than one percent of the overall cost of the building project. Public protection is thus obtained in a cost-effective manner with the entire process, from plan review to field inspection, carried out in a professional manner. The system is developed so well that the true complexity of the process is obscure to many.