

Without Warning

With five dining rooms and a 320-seat mirrored banquet hall the owners of Boston's new Hotel Vendome could not help themselves when describing it, in 1872, as "one of the most palatial and most elaborately furnished hotels in the world." Thomas Edison himself supervised the installation of an electrical system that ran lights and a passenger elevator in Boston's newest hotel. President Grover Cleveland was just one of many dignitaries who stayed there and provide the hotel with a gravitas on which the owners would capitalize. In 1880 the hotel more than doubled in size when it was expanded onto Commonwealth Avenue then, as now, one Boston's most prestigious addresses. The Vendome earned the reputation as *the* place in Boston for weddings, high school graduation parties, cotillions, and many other celebrations of life.

The decline of the Vendome in the post-war era mirrored that of Boston, a tired city desperately grasping to regain its former glory with massive urban renewal projects in the 1950s and 1960s. So much of the old bricked Boston was being knocked down the ground to be replaced by glass and steel, it is surprising the Vendome survived. In 1969 a developer purchased the building intent on converting the hotel into condominiums.

As readers of History Magazine know, seemingly innocuous decisions can lead to unintended consequences. At the Vendome the decision, in 1890, to carve a new ballroom out of several rooms on the first floor would, decades later, turn out to be a deadly one. To be fair, creating the ballroom was itself not the issue. Nor was the removal of a main load-bearing wall that ran across the first floor. Under normal circumstances the remaining single, cast iron column would be enough to support the weight of the four floors above. But June 17, 1972 was not a normal day.

It started as a warm and sunny spring day in Boston as the morning still of the Back Bay was suddenly punctuated with the sound of decades of neglect being sandblasted away from the Vendome's glorious Beaux Arts exterior. Then, sometime in the early afternoon, a worker noticed smoke drifting down a stairwell. He ran to the corner of Newbury and Dartmouth Streets and pulled Fire Box 1571. From just a couple of blocks away first responders arrived to see heavy smoke pouring from the upper floors, and they quickly struck a second, then a third and finally a fourth alarm. More than 100 firefighters were now working to contain the smoky blaze. Calls poured into the Fire Department's switchboard as concerned viewers, watching the Red Sox game, saw smoke rising in the distance beyond centerfield.

In his report on the disaster, District Fire Chief John Vahey wrote the fire "...apparently started in an enclosed space in the ceiling on the third floor... the draft, chimney-like effect inside the walls feeds air to what was a small source of ignition into a larger fire." Later in his report Vahey described the hellish conditions inside the Vendome, as "water coming down from the upper floors upon the firefighters is almost scalding... although it is hot and sweaty inside the building it is foolhardy to remove the fire coat... Smoke, mixed with water vapor and steam blinds everything; a wheatlight raised to the lens of the air mask can't be seen."

The Vendome fire was stubborn but no match for Boston firefighters. By late afternoon it had been contained. The opening of a mobile refreshment stand known as the Canteen signaled a symbolic end to the fire. But, as described by Vahey, everyone knew "there was much work still to be done and both day

and night crews are asked to remain... Overhauling duty is being performed... a tin ceiling is being opened where it was smoking (known as "raking" to uncover and put out remaining embers)... water from a line of hose knocked it down."

It had been a long day, the men were bone-tired and glad to see Richard Magee, John Hanbury, Tom Carroll and others from the night shift show up early to relieve them. Equipment and jokes passed between the men as they switched places. Another early arrival, 14-year veteran Jim McCabe, had just stepped into the back section of the hotel when he saw Carroll raking the ceiling. McCabe made a joke to Carroll, who had recently been promoted to lieutenant, about not getting his hands dirty. Carroll never had the chance to reply. Without warning, at 5:28 pm, the rear section of the Hotel Vendome collapsed with a roar that shook the Back Bay.

By itself, the decision back in 1890 to remove a load bearing wall on the first floor to build a new ballroom did not directly cause the collapse. Had the fire not occurred the rear section of the Vendome might still be standing. According to the department's board of inquiry, the fatal error occurred when a contractor, tasked in 1971 with installing an air conditioning duct in the basement, cut a twelve-inch square hole in the wall *directly underneath the lone support column.*" Vahey, quoting from the official report, wrote the hole "weakened the wall to an extent that any additional weight put on the upper floors... was enough to initiate the collapse."

But at 5:28pm on June 17, 1972 all Firefighter Jim McCabe knew was he buried under a pile of rubble. He didn't know he was one of 17 firefighters who had gone down with the original section of the Vendome. Above him, muffled through two stories of debris could hear the muffled cries of the remaining firefighters swarming over the pile, some digging with their bare hands to reach trapped comrades. McCabe lived to tell of his ordeal, but nine men would receive last rites and their relatives a visit from a department chaplain. Father Dan Mahoney would go to the Arlington home of Tom Carroll and tell his wife, "he's in God's hands now."

"Yes," she replied, "but I need him, too."

On their first day, new recruits to the BFD are taken to the intersection of Commonwealth Avenue and Dartmouth Street. There, they are shown the brilliant black memorial sculpture of the Vendome Memorial, dedicated to the nine men who lost their lives fighting a blaze at the old Vendome Hotel on June 17, 1972. The names of the men are starkly etched -- Paul Murphy, Joseph Saniuk, Thomas Carroll, Richard Magee, John Jameson, Charles Dolan, John Hanbury, Joseph Boucher, and Thomas Beckwith. Recruits are told that while the odds of surviving a career with the Fire Department are good, the memorial is a reminder that there are no guarantees. Fare back home is offered to those who are not ready to make that sacrifice.

That no recruit has yet to take the subway home is a tribute to the nine.