

The following paper was prepared under the direction of Dr. Jennifer Dickey at Kennesaw State University for an Introduction to Public History course.

The Winecoff Hotel Fire, which is the deadliest hotel fire in the United States, occurred on December 7, 1946, and was given a historical marker by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources in 1994. This marker was put up not only because of the historical significance of the event, but to honor and remember the victims, survivors and firefighters of this tragic event. The Winecoff Hotel Fire led to the fire-safety regulations in place today.

The deadliest hotel fire in American history occurred on December 7, 1946, in downtown Atlanta when 119 people lost their lives in the Winecoff Hotel. When the Winecoff Hotel opened at the end of 1913, it was the tallest building in the city. The hotel was named after builder and owner, William Winecoff, who also perished in the fire. Winecoff considered the building “fireproof.” The hotel was fifteen stories tall and built out of stone and brick. Fire trucks in Atlanta were not equipped to handle a fire in a building of this size, as their ladders could only reach the eighth floor of the hotel. The Winecoff Hotel was not equipped with a sprinkler system or fire escapes, and the flames spread quickly. The fire broke out a little after three o’clock in the morning. That night, there were about 280 guests in the hotel.

A marker was put up by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources in downtown Atlanta in 1994, forty-eight years after the deadly fire, to remember the Winecoff Hotel fire. The marker serves as a dedication to the fire survivors, victims, and firefighters. The heartbreaking event sparked fire-safety initiatives, not just in the city of Atlanta, but across the United States. In the days, weeks, and months following the fire, there was a lot of talk about why and how it

happened. The tragic fire at the Winecoff Hotel was used as an example by those calling for safer fire measures. The fire safety standards that we have in place today were enacted in part because of the Winecoff fire and its aftermath. The historical marker stands as a testimony to this significant role that ultimately made buildings safer. Today the marker stands outside of what is now the Ellis Hotel (formerly the Winecoff Hotel) at 176 Peachtree Street Northeast in Atlanta, Georgia.

This event warranted a historical marker because of its historical significance in American history, in Georgia history, and in the history of the city of Atlanta. The devastating fire led very quickly to the implementation of fire-safety standards across the United States, which started close to home soon after the fire.¹ The Winecoff Hotel fire was a popular topic of conversation all over the country, but especially in Atlanta and the outer-lying regions.² The fire was such a big event that it was in the news all over the country and became one of the years' biggest news stories.³ The Winecoff Hotel fire was such an impactful event that photographer Arnold Hardy won a Pulitzer Prize for his picture of a woman falling from an upper story of the hotel. The photograph has been identified as a woman named Diasy McCumber, who jumped out of an upper story window to escape the fire and survived.⁴ Some reports say a cigarette caused the fire, but the cause is unknown and still debated today.⁵

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¹ "City Awaits Aerial Ladder Truck: Fire Chief Monday To Launch Two-week Inspection Drive." *The Marietta Daily Journal Morning Edition*. December 12, 1946.

² "Rotary To Discuss Winecoff Tragedy." *The Marietta Daily Journal Morning Edition*. December 15, 1946.

³ "Revise Top Story List To Include Winecoff Fire." *The Marietta Daily Journal Evening Edition*. December 10, 1946.

⁴ "Photos: The Winecoff Hotel Fire." *Myajc*.

⁵ "Cigarette Started Winecoff Fire, Probers Decide." *The Marietta Journal Evening Edition*. December 10, 1946.