

This Date in Safety History: April 10, 1766 – The Fire Escape Is Born



The multi-storey building was a mainstay of industrial revolution cities. Although it was an ingenious solution to space constraints, piling people on top of each other floor by floor created major safety problems. One of the biggest was figuring out a safe way to evacuate inhabitants of the upper floors from the building during a fire or other emergency, especially if the inner stairwells of the building were unavailable.

Enter the Fire Escape

Supposedly, the first fire escape was patented on this date in 1766. The system was rudimentary and involved a pulley attached to a wicker basket. In 1887, an American inventor named Anna Connelly registered a patent for the exterior steel staircase that would serve as the prototype for the fire escape that became mandatory under the building codes that cities began to adopt at the turn of the century.

A rival fire escape method that emerged in the early 20th century was a long canvas tube suspended below a large funnel outside the window of a tall building that could be used as a slide. Lord only knows how the modern city and popular culture would look like today if the tube had prevailed as the

principal form of urban fire escape:

- How would Jimmy Stewart have spied on his neighbours in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*?
- How would Tony have wooed Maria in *West Side Story*?
- How would the canvasses of Edward Hopper have looked if the urban scenes he painted had been crisscrossed by tubes?
- How would Ralph Kramden have shouted to Norton in *The Honeymooners*?