

## Fire Prevention and Mrs. O'Leary's Cow

What does 19th century Nantucket have in common with 19th century Chicago? They both suffered "Great Fires" that devastated their downtowns. The Nantucket fire was attributed to a faulty stovepipe, while a popular tale has it that a cow belonging to Mrs. O'Leary knocked over a lantern to cause Chicago's conflagration. Nantucket was extraordinarily fortunate that there was no loss of life. Chicago was not so lucky, with upwards of 300 deaths.

The 2022 fire that destroyed Nantucket's Veranda House and other nearby houses reminds us that devastating fires are not confined to history. As October is Fire Prevention Month, it's appropriate to consider measures we can take to avoid fires and protect ourselves if they happen. Prevention is largely a matter of good judgement around heat sources. Such judgement includes:

- Not overloading electrical circuits
- Keeping flammable materials away from heat sources
- No unattended cooking (cooking being the most common cause of household fires and fire injuries)
- Only charge devices on hard surfaces, not on a couch or a bed
- And yes, don't smoke! At least not indoors

The mass.gov Home Fire Safety web page says: "Working smoke alarms and a practiced home escape plan provide the best protection in a home fire." In Marine's Electrical Department, you will find a few types of smoke alarms in two categories: **ionization and Photoelectric**. Within those categories are battery-only alarms, hard-wired alarms for the house's alarm circuits with battery back-up, alarms with strobes, combination smoke and carbon monoxide alarms, and alarms with voice notification. The type recommended or required has changed five times since 1975, depending on building permit date. So for installation or replacement, it may be best to consult the Nantucket Fire Department for specifications. I was given a printout with clear requirements to make selections easy. The locations mandated for permits after 2011 are these:

- One on every habitable level
- One at the base of every stairway
- One at the outside of every sleeping area
- One inside every sleeping area
- A minimum of one smoke alarm for every 1200 sq. ft. of living space per level
- Must be hardwired with battery backup
- Must all be photoelectric
- Heat alarms for any garage attached to or under a residence

Smoke alarms should be tested monthly. If they have replaceable batteries, they should be replaced every 6 months. The alarms themselves should be replaced after 10 years. The

dates can be found on the back of the alarms. If there is no date, it needs replacing!

Fire extinguishers are also a good idea for home fire safety. While locations are not mandated, it would be logical to have them near heat sources such as kitchens, where most home fires start, laundry rooms, basements, and garages. Extinguishers should be mounted near exits so escaping a fire is always possible. Passing a fire to get to an extinguisher risk being trapped away from an exit.

Marine carries several kinds and sizes of fire extinguishers. Types are rated A, B, and C. A is for use on wood, paper, textiles, and rubbish. B is for flammable liquids, and C is for electrical equipment. Most in stock have combined applications for BC or ABC. As one would expect, the ABC rated extinguishers will cover most common types of fires.

Good judgement is critical when alarms sound. The time to safely escape a fire is most often under three minutes and fires can double in size every minute. The best response is to evacuate and call the fire department. If the fire is quickly determined to be small enough to put out with an extinguisher, make sure there is always an avenue of escape.

If the fire department is called to your home, fire or not, make sure they can see the house number clearly from the street. The numbers should be at least 4" tall, and preferably, lit for nighttime legibility. If there is a hydrant adjacent, make sure it is not obscured by plantings or fences. It should have a 36" radius free from obstruction to provide room to turn the large wrench needed to open the valve.

So... why do we observe Fire Prevention Week within Fire Prevention Month? I don't know the answer to that, but I do know that Fire Prevention Week was started in 1922 to commemorate Chicago's Great Fire. Maybe the rest of the month is to commemorate Nantucket's.