

**THE FINANCE
COMMISSION OF
THE CITY OF
BOSTON, PP. 10-54**

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**THE FINANCE
COMMISSION OF
THE CITY OF
BOSTON, PP. 10-54**

8. 25. 1912

THE FINANCE COMMISSION

OF THE

CITY OF BOSTON

A REPORT ON THE

BUILDING DEPARTMENT OF THE
CITY OF BOSTON



CITY OF BOSTON
PRINTING DEPARTMENT

1912



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legislation until after the occurrence of the building collapses of last year. Though strictly honest, and desirous of keeping his department free from demoralizing influences, he has not been active enough in hunting down rumors of graft which have been brought to his attention, nor has he dealt with his employees with sufficient severity to maintain the discipline required in a department upon which the safety of the public so largely depends. He might have secured the removal of certain employees who were a detriment to the department, if he had attempted it, but either because of the difficulty of removing employees who are under the protection of the civil service laws, or who might be protected by their political connections, he has not made the attempt in any case except one. In that case the removal was accomplished. In short, though he has done valuable work under the system he found in existence when he became head of the department, and has made some improvements in it, he has not shown as much initiative and vigor in originating and executing plans for improvement as the conditions required.

C. The Clerical Division.

The head of the clerical division is called the clerk of the department and receives a salary of \$2,500 a year. In 1878, at the age of twenty, he entered the department as a permit clerk, and in 1881 was appointed to his present position. His thirty-four years' experience in the department has made him familiar with its work and methods, and he has devoted considerable time to the study of the building laws. Besides having charge of the work of the clerical division, he personally prepares the statistical and other data for presentation in the department's annual reports, and assists the commissioner in preparing the cases that go to the Board of Appeal. Under his direction the office correspondence is attended to, the various papers and documents, which are required by law or by the existing

practice in the department, are filed and recorded, indexes are kept and notices are issued. In many respects the work is well done, but it is open to criticism in other respects. The commission's unfavorable criticism relates to the annual reports and to certain gaps in the records, both of which subjects are treated in other parts of this report.

D. The Plan Division.

This division receives and examines all applications, with the accompanying plans and drawings, for permits for the erection and alteration of buildings, the setting of boilers, engines, etc., and makes reports thereon to the Building Commissioner.

The head of the division, who is now about sixty-five years old, entered the Building Department in 1878, having had ten years' previous experience in an architect's office and five years' experience as an architect on his own account. In 1881 he was given charge of the plans filed with the department, and has since remained at the head of this division. His present title is superintendent of plans, and his salary is \$2,800 a year. He has three assistants, two rated as architects, and one as a draughtsman, appointed respectively in 1901, 1903 and 1911, the first two having had previous experience as architects, and the third having previously been a draughtsman in an architect's office. Each of the two former receives a salary of \$1,400 a year, and the latter \$1,300 a year.

The work of the division is not done in a perfunctory manner, as is shown by the fact that last year approval was refused on 1,247 out of a total of 6,141 plans filed, or more than one-fifth of the entire number. The work, however, is not done as well as it should be. There are marked differences in the abilities of the four members of the division, the head of the division being the best qualified by reason of his long experience. Yet the work is distributed in turns, generally without regard

to its difficulty, although the latest appointee is confined more to plans for second and third class buildings than are the older and more experienced officials. As a rule the superintendent of plans accepts the judgment of his subordinates, and the Building Commissioner accepts the judgment of the superintendent, so that permits may, and do, issue on the judgment of the least qualified. In the case of the Hanover street building which collapsed, causing several deaths, the superintendent did not examine the plan, but, relying on the judgment of the employee who did, he recommended the granting of the permit and the Building Commissioner granted it. The superintendent has since stated to the Finance Commission that if he had examined that plan he would not have approved it.

No one in this division has specialized on steel or reinforced concrete construction and there has long been a need for the services of a structural engineer. Both the head of the division and the Building Commissioner have been aware of this defect in the organization, but it has not been remedied. The Building Commissioner is authorized by law to impose such conditions as he sees fit in a permit for the structural use of reinforced concrete and, as there is no one in the plan division capable of passing upon such matters, he has until recently required the plans for all such structures to be approved, at the expense of the applicant, by an engineer selected by the commissioner out of four engineers not in the city's employ. At the present time such plans are submitted to the engineer of the bridge and ferry division of the Public Works Department, under an arrangement between the Commissioner of Public Works and the Building Commissioner, and the owners of buildings have thereby been relieved of the expense.

The division, in trying to explain to owners or builders the imperfections of plans, has wasted much time which could have been saved if such plans had been rejected with instructions to bring in proper plans prepared by

competent architects. If this had been done the builders who have employed incompetent architects, or competent architects who were paid so little that they could not afford to spend enough time on the plans to do good work, would have learned by this time that they were losing both time and money by presenting improper plans to the Building Department.

The division has also been hampered by the fact that its examination of plans has been made in a room open to the public, with no privacy, and subject to interruptions so frequent as often to prevent the concentration of mind which the study of plans requires.

The plan division is one of the most important in the department, but its actual needs, though known, have been long neglected. It should be thoroughly reorganized without unnecessary delay.

E. The Construction Division.

It is the duty of this division to examine the premises when an application is made to erect a building; to examine as often as practicable every building in process of construction or repair; to examine buildings damaged by fire, or reported or believed to be unsafe; to investigate and report upon the origin of fires, and to inspect the erection of boilers, engines and other structures.

The head of the division was appointed to his present position in 1903 under the title of supervisor of construction and his salary is \$2,500 a year. He is fifty-nine years old and has been connected since youth with the building business as carpenter, builder, and employee of the Public Buildings or the Building Department, except for about seven years, when he was employed in the Sealer of Weights and Measures Department. His practical experience has made him familiar with the building law and with methods of construction generally, but his qualifications for the supervision of the larger buildings of first-class construction are not as good as the city should require for such an important position. He should be retained