

# In 1979, a deadly hotel fire nearly cost Sumner Redstone his life. Here's what happened

By **Emily Sweeney** Globe Staff, Updated August 12, 2020, 1:53 p.m.



Firefighters worked to put out the five-alarm fire at the Copley Plaza Hotel in Boston on Mar. 29, 1979. JOHN BLANDING/GLOBE STAFF/THE BOSTON GLOBE

On a March night in 1979, Sumner Redstone was sleeping in a third floor room at the Copley Plaza Hotel when an arsonist set the building ablaze.

Redstone woke up to the smell of smoke, got up, and tried to leave his room. But when he cracked the door to the corridor, flames erupted. He opened a window and crawled out on a tiny ledge. He held onto the windowsill of his room, with his right hand and arm in flames. There, he waited, hoping to be rescued.

Redstone described the terrifying ordeal in detail in his memoir, "A Passion to Win." He recalled how flames were shooting out the window, burning off his pajamas, and searing his skin as he crouched on the ledge, high above the street.

"The pain was excruciating but I refused to let go," he wrote. "That way was death. I began counting one to ten, one to ten, hoping that a fire engine would come save me."



The third floor of the Copley Plaza Hotel where the fire started. WILLIAM BRETT/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

Redstone said he hung on "for what seemed like forever" until a ladder truck came and rescued him.

Redstone was among dozens of people who were sent to the hospital that night. Two of them later died from their injuries.

It took a long time for Redstone to heal. He had third-degree burns over 45 percent of his body. The chief of the burns unit at Massachusetts General Hospital operated on him five times for 35 hours, according to the Globe.



Firefighters battled flames at the Copley Plaza Hotel. JOHN BLANDING/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

“They consider it miraculous at the hospital that I recovered,” Redstone recalled in a 1981 Globe interview.

Julio Valentin Rodrigues, an 18-year-old man from the South End, was charged with setting the fire at the Copley Plaza Hotel and also setting fire to the Sheraton Boston Hotel that same night. Rodrigues, who previously worked as a busboy at both hotels, pleaded guilty to reduced charges of manslaughter and arson.

Rodrigues was ultimately sentenced to two consecutive 20-year sentences, and the judge ordered that he serve them at Bridgewater State Hospital.

Redstone, who went on to have a long and storied career as a media mogul, filed a lawsuit against the hotel.



The aftermath of the fire on the third floor of the Copley Plaza Hotel. RACHEL RITCHIE/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

“A year or so after I recovered, I went back to Mass General to tell the staff thank you,” Redstone wrote in his memoir. “I had sued the Copley Plaza for negligence and I donated the settlement, several million dollars, to the Burn Center.”

That burn center now bears his name. The Sumner M. Redstone Burn Center at Massachusetts General Hospital was dedicated in 1985. Today it's one of the largest adult burn centers in the Northeast, according to the hospital's website.

In a 1995 interview with the Globe, Redstone reflected on the fire that nearly killed him. “There has been a lot of mythology about that fire,” he said. “People talk a lot about how it changed my life, changed my values. That is not true. My values are largely the same.”

“But what is interesting,” he said, “is that the most exciting things in my life have happened after that fire.”

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# The Boston Globe

Pair of grays

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## Blazes 'set' at Copley Plaza, Sheraton Boston

# Hundreds flee 2 Hub hotel fires



Flames and smoke pour from windows of the Copley Plaza Hotel after a five alarm fire swept through the hotel forcing more than 400 guests to flee.

(UPI photo)

By Pamela A. Merritt  
and Victor Lewis  
Globe Staff

Hundreds of guests were forced to flee two multiple-alarm fires early today at both the Copley Plaza and Sheraton Boston hotels.

Alan Tremaine, manager of the Copley Plaza, said there were several fires going simultaneously in the building. He estimated damage there at at least "\$1 million." There were more than 450 guests at the Copley Plaza.

The Sheraton Boston blaze, which broke out about an hour after the nearby Copley fire, was "definitely set," there were 1400 guests there, management said. There were no known dead and surprisingly few injured, according to fire officials' first estimates.

Deputy Chief Vincent Bolger, arriving at the Sheraton, said there were several fires set on the third floor, near the Falstaff Room.

An emergency call for all available ambulances from surrounding communities was made, and theater owners in the vicinity of the Sheraton were being contacted to open up and shelter those driven out.

Authorities opened the Hynes Auditorium to shelter those driven out.

Occupants of the 25th floor at the Sheraton said there was smoke throughout the building, but no panic as guests made their way down stairs to safety.

A New Jersey man, in Boston on business, was trapped momentarily in a sixth-floor room and made his way to an outside ledge overlooking Copley Square where he waited to be rescued.

However, firefighters using air masks made their way to his room and brought him to safety over the stairs.

Deputy Chief George Thompson sounded five alarms in rapid succession, calling for all available ladder trucks to the front and sides of the seven-story building.

At least six ladders were raised to the upper floor and firefighters brought down numerous guests to safety.

Richard Edwards, a security guard

The next fire he saw was inside the Copley's butcher shop. This, too, he managed to put out with a fire extinguisher.

The third and largest fire Lim encountered was in an unused storeroom adjoining the kitchen. It was too large for the hand fire extinguisher Lim was using. Firefighters came to his aid and put the fire out.

A hotel spokesman said the building was about 92 percent occupied — with 450 guests — all of whom were believed to have been evacuated.

Cause of the blaze was not immediately known. Some hotel employees said there was a small fire which started in drapes in the dining room and was extinguished without problems.

Others said a fire broke out in the hotel kitchen and worked its way up into the building.

Copley Square was crowded with curious spectators who hampered firefighting efforts, police said.

Many of those driven out of the Copley Plaza were being taken across the street to the Copley Square Hotel where they were being sheltered overnight.

Wilma Rice, a registered nurse from Taunton, was breathing oxygen in the hotel lobby. She said she was on the sixth floor when she was awakened by some kind of noise in an alley.

She then smelled smoke and heard people running in the corridor outside her room. She made her way from her room to the sixth floor room of Dr. C. F. Schuh, 58, of Nuremberg, Germany. Six or seven other people sought refuge in Schuh's room, from which they called the hotel switchboard.

The switchboard operator told the group in Schuh's room to remain there. They were rescued by a firefighter who led them down a stairway.

"I'm still on German time," Dr. Schuh complained as he surveyed the confusion in the lobby.

Danielle Alexander, a piano player, had just finished a set in the hotel piano bar and, with a friend, Prudence Fleckspeen, went on a break in a first-floor room.

Ms. Alexander said when she en-

A photo of the blaze at the Copley Plaza Hotel appeared on the front page of The Boston Globe on March 29, 1979. BOSTON GLOBE ARCHIVES

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