

Fire Safety in Old Hyde Park Brick Buildings

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CHPV member James L. (Sandy) Wilson has approximately 40 years of experience managing old buildings in Hyde Park. He has personal experience with five fires in these buildings, ranging in size from one room to 12 apartments. Four of these fires were caused by overloaded electrical circuits and old extension cords. The recent fire in the 5100 block of Kimbark has reminded Sandy of these dangers and encouraged him to share the following advice about these two fire dangers:

1. Overloaded Electric Circuits

Old buildings tend to have fewer electric circuits than needed by the variety of electric appliances produced after World War II. Many of the old buildings in Hyde Park predate World War II by 30-50 years. Refrigerators were causing so many fires in the 1950's that the City of Chicago required the addition of one 20 ampere circuit to each kitchen exclusively for the refrigerator. The simple, commonsense rules are:

- Do not use more than two small, heat-producing appliances (coffee maker, microwave oven, or hair dryer) on any 15 ampere circuit.
- Do not use more than one space heater or window air conditioner on any 15 ampere circuit.
- If the lights dim when an appliance is used, that circuit is overloaded. Do not use that appliance on that circuit until other electrical devices have been removed.
- If the fuse or circuit breaker on an electric circuit is burned out or tripped, reduce the number of electric devices on the circuit before any of them are used again. DO NOT replace a fuse or reset a circuit breaker more than once without reducing the number of electrical devices on that circuit.
- Follow the manufacturer's recommendations when you install any additional electrical device.
- Clean refrigerator and window air conditioner coils regularly.

2. Old Extension Cords

Old, thin, usually brown, light-duty extension cords should be replaced every ten years. Two of the fires referred to above were caused by old extension cords next to flammable materials – in one case under a rug, in the other over a desk cluttered with paper. Over time the heat produced by the electricity passing through the extension cord dries out the rubber insulation. When these extension cords are moved after the insulation dries out, the insulation cracks or falls off. These comments do not apply to round, usually orange or red, commercial-quality extension cords often used by tradesmen. A good practice is to keep any extension cord away from flammable personal property. Replace any old, brown extension cords that are older than ten years.

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