

REGULATING HEIGHTS OF BUILDINGS IN THE DISTRICT
OF COLUMBIA.

DECEMBER 20, 1898.—Referred to the House Calendar and ordered to be printed.

Mr. CURTIS, of Iowa, from the Committee on the District of Columbia, submitted the following

R E P O R T .

[To accompany H. R. 11023.]

The Committee on the District of Columbia, to whom was referred the bill (H. R. 11023) to regulate the height of buildings in the District of Columbia, after careful examination report the same back to the House with the recommendation that it do pass with the following amendment:

Page 2, line 18, strike out the period and insert in lieu thereof a colon, and add the following:

Provided further, That on streets less than 90 feet wide, where building lines have been established so as to be a matter of public record and so as to prevent the lawful erection of any building in advance of said lines, the width of the street, in so far as it controls the height of buildings under this law, may be held to be the distance between said building lines.

A number of citizens have requested that an amendment be added to the bill which will permit the construction of buildings in accordance with adopted building lines, although the actual width of the street to which the District has title may be somewhat narrower. If the building line is so firmly established that there is no danger of an individual building his house in advance of the private building line there would seem to be no reason why these private lines should not be considered as fixing the width of the street for the purposes of this bill, and the above amendment was prepared, to which the Commissioners of the District of Columbia have no objection, and which is added to section 4 of the bill.

The question of limiting the height of buildings is comparatively a recent one. It is only in late years that buildings have been erected to such heights and in such numbers as to attract serious public attention, and the high buildings themselves have not yet had that test of time necessary to convince the more conservative of the entire safety and lasting power of the class of construction employed in their erection. In general terms, they are constructed of iron or steel framework, with a veneer of brick or stone, all electric light and power wires and pipes for steam, gas, water, etc., being carried up through the structural ironwork. The metal is hidden from view, where it is subject to corrosion and electrolytic action, which could easily cause serious and fatal defects before its presence became known. In view of these conditions the best authorities agree that under unfavorable circumstances the life of these structures might not be more than seventy-five years.

In addition to the uncertainty of structural conditions, serious objec-

tions can be urged on the grounds of light and ventilation and danger from fire.

Of course, the higher the building the more light and air is shut out from the street and the adjacent premises on all sides. The drafts of chimneys of houses in the vicinity of high buildings are also injuriously affected.

Danger from fire is a very serious objection. It would seem that the fire chiefs in the large cities who have had experience with high buildings are agreed that it is absolutely impossible for them to successfully fight flames over 85 feet above the ground with the fire apparatus now manufactured, as the pressure is so great that no hose now made can stand the strain and the men are unable to handle the hose.

In the recent case of *Bliss v. the District of Columbia*, to compel the issuance of a permit for the erection of a house 110 feet high on a residence street, the chief of the District fire department made affidavit to the effect that it was impossible for his force, with its present equipment, to successfully fight flames over 85 feet above the ground. The chief of the fire department of New York City, if credence can be placed in press reports, is also of the same opinion. The recent disastrous conflagrations in New York, when the "fireproof" buildings of the Home Life Insurance Company and the Postal Telegraph Company were burned, would seem to bear out the statements of these experienced men. Of course, the higher the building the greater the danger zone, and in the cases cited the entire street was barricaded to prevent possible accident from falling walls, etc. It might be added here that in deciding the case of *Bliss v. the District* the court upheld the Commissioners in refusing permit to build and denied the mandamus prayed for, holding that the regulation under which the Commissioners acted was a wise and proper one.

A number of cities throughout the country have taken up the question of limiting the height of buildings, and some of them have passed laws on the subject. In Boston the height is limited to 125 feet; in St. Louis, 150 feet; in Chicago, 130 feet; in London, 80 feet. Paris, which is generally considered as having model regulations, limits the height to 64 feet, and Vienna and Berlin follow the Paris standard in this respect.

The regulations of Boston and Chicago were followed in arriving at the limit employed in the bill, as these regulations are believed to represent the views of the highest authorities in the United States on the subject in question.

This bill was prepared in the office of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia as a substitute bill for H. R. 10430, relating to this same subject, and has their approval in the following communication, which is made a part of this report:

OFFICE COMMISSIONERS OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA,
Washington, November 8, 1898.

DEAR SIR: With respect to H. R. bill 10430, "To regulate the height of residences in the city of Washington," which was referred to the Commissioners at your instance for their examination and report, the Commissioners have the honor to recommend as a substitute therefor the inclosed draft of bill entitled "A bill to regulate the height of buildings in the District of Columbia," which applies to all kinds of buildings and is fuller in its specifications than the original bill.

Very respectfully,

JOHN B. WIGHT,
President Board of Commissioners District of Columbia.

Hon. J. W. BARCOCK,
*Chairman Committee on the District of Columbia,
House of Representatives.*