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Fires and Firefighting

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Various source media: Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers



During the nineteenth century, fire was perhaps the most severe environmental threat faced by Americans, especially in urban areas. Before the Civil War, hundreds of large fires destroyed property worth over 200 million dollars in the nation's principal cities. After 1865, conflagrations routinely destroyed large parts of cities such as Boston, Chicago, and Baltimore. Volunteer and professional firefighters were the first line of defense against this danger. In Philadelphia in 1803, a group of young artisans used lengths of hose to connect fire engines to the city's newly built water supply. With this simple technological innovation, the Philadelphia Hose Company redefined the work of firefighting in the United States. Over the course of the nineteenth century, firefighters created more specialized organizational forms and work processes. They would eventually establish a new occupation with its own professional organizations and work identity, as reflected in the pages of Charles Hill's book *Fighting a Fire* (1897)—one of the earliest studies of the firefighting techniques of urban professional firemen.

During the first five decades of the nineteenth century, volunteer firefighters relied on physical labor and technical competence with tools. On hearing a fire alarm, typically rung by church bells, firefighters rushed to neighborhood engine houses. Their teams of horses pulled hose carriages or engines, which sometimes weighed as much as two tons, through crowded, narrow, and unpaved streets. Hose companies then located hydrants, used spanner wrenches to open them, and connected their engines to cities' burgeoning networks of water pipes. The firefighters then stroked levers attached to the sides of the hand-pumped engines to create enough pressure

to spread water on the blaze. No firefighter could pump for longer than ten minutes, and company members rotated frequently, sometimes for hours.

Volunteers created a shared but competitive brotherhood that valued physical strength, technological acumen, and public service. Companies measured their effectiveness by the lengths of hose streams generated by pumping. During 1850, the Missouri Fire Company of St. Louis described the operation of its new engine in the company ledgerbook thus: "She threw one hundred and ninety four feet from the end of the nozzle one inch through a ten foot section of hose. My opinion of the engine is that she is a powerful engine, she throws well but she is a perfect mankiller to work, give her as much water as she can use and it would take a company of two hundred men to keep her working steady." Firefighters expressed their ritualized culture through balls, parades, and visits to fire departments in other cities, all of which demonstrated the colorful array of differences between companies but also affirmed a shared mission as guardians of the social and economic order.

The brotherhood of firefighters was limited, and strengthened, by shared beliefs regarding gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Most obviously, volunteers defined firefighting as male work and responsibility. The ideal of brotherhood presupposed an all-male workforce, so women were not included in company membership. Race, too, mattered in much the same way, although its expression varied to some degree by geographical location. In western and eastern cities, as in northern and southern towns, firefighters systematically

excluded African Americans, defining firefighting as the exclusive province of white men. Volunteer firefighters in Philadelphia threatened to strike in 1809 when African Americans sought to form a fire company. By contrast, in a few southern cities, such as Charleston and Savannah, black men fought fires shoulder to shoulder with whites. The service of African Americans was limited to physical labor, however; company leadership was maintained by white men.

Starting in the 1840s, and spurred by industrialization, urbanization, and immigration, cities and fire departments became ethnically diverse, a situation that threatened their unity. Groups with different ethnic, class, political, and/or religious convictions used the fire service to express those values, which existed in precarious balance with the ideal of brotherhood. Sometimes companies engaged in open conflict, but even when conflict was masked—at fires and in parades, for instance—significant differences were visible in costumes, rituals, and membership certificates. To quell conflict and maintain singularity of purpose, departments formed specialized management associations. These organizations often allied with politicians seeking to expand municipal control over urban services, and both groups attempted to make department funding tied less to neighborhoods and more to citywide administration. Like their predecessors who used hose and engine technologies to make firefighting more efficient, the leaders of management associations used bureaucratic techniques to promote efficiency and commonality.

In the 1850s, the fire insurance industry experimented with new technologies to manage its business, including actuarial methods, standardization of practices, and mapping techniques. As the industry embraced rationalized business methods, it urged the rationalization of fire protection. Insurers advocated bureaucratic fire departments operated by expanding municipal governments, the use of steam engines to make firefighting more efficient, and paying firemen wages.

Conflict between firefighters and insurers' recommendations spurred debate over the efficacy of volunteer firefighting in the 1850s. The terms and outcomes of those debates varied by locale, but they usually centered on the differences between steam engines and volunteers' muscle, which firemen sought to resolve by holding contests. The outcome differed from city to city, but usually firefighters' muscle won, as in Philadelphia in 1855. However, most volunteers agreed with the general sentiment that steam engines would eventually make firefighting more efficient. As a result, between 1850 and 1875 most large American cities replaced volunteers with steam engines operated by paid workers. Volunteer firefighters in fact quite often led in the formation of professional fire departments, as was the case in St. Louis and Cincinnati, where the well-regarded former volunteer Miles Greenwood directed the formation of a new department in 1853. Other cities embraced the new order at different times and in a variety of ways. For instance, volunteer fire companies in New York rejected steam engines, and even after that city adopted a professional department in 1865, firefighters relied on a mixture of steam and hand-operated engines. By

contrast, volunteer fire companies in Philadelphia used steam engines for over a decade, until they helped establish a professional department in 1871. Whatever the pace of change, professional firemen never completely replaced volunteers. As late as 1917, approximately 40 percent of American firemen in cities with populations between thirty thousand and three hundred thousand were volunteers. Nonetheless, as major American cities gradually adopted the new method of organizing fire departments, firefighting developed into a new occupation with national standards of work, training, and skill. This identity, like the new departments themselves, depended greatly on the labor and support of volunteer firefighters. In many cities the leaders of the new municipal fire departments came directly from the ranks of the volunteer fire departments, and as many as half the rank-and-file firefighters had once served as volunteer firemen.

The firefighters' occupational culture was expressed most strongly in images of heroic lifesaving, which appeared frequently in the popular press. This ideal developed from the work techniques and priorities of fire departments, especially as they struggled to maintain order in cities that grew taller, denser, and more flammable. In the context of ever changing danger, firefighters devised new work strategies, such as skill with ladders and climbing techniques, that would allow them to rescue trapped civilians. In the 1880s, Christ Hoell of the St. Louis Fire Department spearheaded the formation of a climbing unit, and later toured the country, training other firemen to use the new techniques it required. Fire departments also purchased specialized tools to assist rescue and work

efforts. Equipment such as ladder trucks was rare in the 1870s, but by the 1920s was nearly as common as engine trucks, depending on the size of the city. Although firefighters engaged in a common occupation, their work varied greatly between cities and between firehouses within the same city. Few departments used the same terms for equipment, and one fireman reported that companies in Philadelphia used different nomenclature for tools and work maneuvers. Work conditions were dangerous and difficult. Firemen worked six or seven days per week, twenty-four hours per day, with only a few hours for family. Becoming a firefighter depended upon politics or neighborhood connections. In addition, some companies welcomed new recruits and trained them only if they shared a common ethnic, religious, or community background. Other groups hazed newcomers regardless of background, making them prove their mettle as "men" before welcoming them. Work rules were lax, drinking was common, and physical training was nonexistent.

The firefighters' claim to status as professionals was furthered by the National Association of Fire Engineers (NAFE), which was founded in 1873. As firefighting became a more visible occupation, NAFE advocated improved working conditions by publicizing the lifesaving aspect of firemen's work. It demanded the dissemination of standard work techniques, shorter working hours, pensions, and control over employment conditions. As a result, firefighters found a common identity as men and as public servants, and created an occupation with great cohesion; indeed, firemen forged careers of unusual length. In 1885, over 36 percent of the nation's firefighters had been with their departments for longer than fifteen years. By the 1890s,

the majority of men entering the departments in Philadelphia and St. Louis could expect careers longer than twenty years.

During the early twentieth century, firefighting began to become more standardized thanks in part to continued agitation by the National Association of Fire Engineers (NAFE). New training regimens, civil service, pensions, better pay, and shorter working hours helped to make firefighting more regularized. In addition, that firefighters continued to define their service as the purview of white men aided the further development of a common occupational identity. Women were excluded from departments, as were African Americans. However, some cities began to hire black firemen, but segregated them into separate companies, usually led by white officers. And although few first-generation immigrants appear to have joined departments, jobs as firefighters became increasingly desirable in working-class communities and among the children of immigrants.

FURTHER READINGS

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