Outgrowing Our Citizens: The Demise of Philadelphia’s Volunteer Firefighting System

Senior History Thesis

By

Nicholas Mirra

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Bethel Saler, Assistant Professor of History, advisor

Susan McWilliams, Visiting Instructor of Political Science, second reader
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Introduction

An 1803 innovation in Philadelphia’s firefighting equipment began a steady path of development which would define the careers of the city’s volunteer firemen. The Centre Square Waterworks opened in 1801, drawing water from the Schuylkill River to supply a system of pipes, hydrants, and fire-plugs.¹ In 1803, the Philadelphia Hose Company purchased six hundred feet of hose to fill the city’s hand-pumped engines from the new hydrants.² Previously, fighting fires was the responsibility of community-manned bucket brigades. The innovation of hose cemented firefighting as the responsibility of a designated group of volunteers characterized by specific skills and equipment.

In response to their new designation, these volunteer firemen began to see themselves as a special class of citizen. Their voluntary assumption of the responsibility for public safety, combined with their public displays of strength, innovation, and efficiency, made them virtuous citizens. The firemen justified this new identity with a doctrine of republican civic duty and masculine prowess. A grateful public compensated them with adoration and funding. Yet by the 1850s newspapers were vilifying Philadelphia’s firemen, and prominent citizens were calling for their immediate

replacement by a paid fire department. This paper examines the changes that occurred within and around firefighting to turn civic heroes into civic pariahs.³

The answer is a complicated one, found both in the ways in which firemen changed firefighting, and the ways in which firefighting changed the firemen. During the first half of the century, firemen refined their avocation and developed a proud culture based around honor and ritual. Fire companies remained distinctly local and autonomous, changing in identity with the communities that supplied their rosters. As time went on, however, Philadelphia’s business community began to exert pressure on the firemen to emphasize efficiency over communal identity or civic duty. Fire insurance companies were particularly influential, arguing publicly by the 1850s for a redefinition of firefighting along industrial and bureaucratic lines. Firemen reflected this tension internally, caught between a genuine drive to improve their work and a desire to remain true to the culture of local volunteerism that defined them as citizens.

The firefighters’ position was weakened further by more subtle undermining influences. The ascendancy of fire insurance broke firemen’s monopoly on public gratitude for fire protection. Technological innovations like the steam engine required many fewer companies and men to operate, while requiring new levels of expertise incompatible with the volunteer system. Internal fire company reorganizations pushed the firemen closer and closer to their critics’ vision of a paid, hierarchical fire department. The firemen undertook many of these changes willingly, even as they lost fundamental components of their cherished firefighting culture.

³ Note: unless otherwise specified, “fire companies” will refer to both fire engine companies and hose companies.
Equally important in Philadelphia’s movement towards a paid department was the city’s growing concern over public disorder. The city’s latent ethnic, racial, and religious tensions exploded in the 1840s with violent riots and the emergence of deadly street gangs.\(^4\) During these unsettled times firemen contributed to both the destruction and the preservation of public order. The public visibility which they had carefully cultivated, however, made them conspicuous when the city’s middle and upper classes attempted to mend their broken social order. Immigrants’ increasing participation in firefighting contributed to the ease with which reformers channeled public prejudice into their arguments for a paid department.

In these ways, no single factor caused the fall of Philadelphia’s volunteer firefighters. Much more was at work. In adapting to the forces changing their avocation, the firemen encouraged many of the trends which promoted paid firefighting. The path of technological advancement which began with the Philadelphia Hose Company’s fire hose later introduced steam fire engines. The specialization of labor which began with the first fire companies ended with a paid fire department in 1871. The paid fire department, organized around steam engines, cut Philadelphia’s firemen roster by almost ninety percent.\(^5\) In their ultimate acquiescence to the forces working against them, Philadelphia’s volunteers justified their early rhetoric of devotion to civic duty and efficiency. It is to their founding that we turn first.

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Firefighting’s Early History

Philadelphia’s system for fighting fires, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, was rudimentary and democratic. Each household was required to possess and maintain a specified number of leather buckets for use in the event of fire. When the alarm sounded, men, women, and children would hurry to the scene. There, a fire marshal directed the residents into two lines. Men would pass the two or three gallon buckets from the nearest cistern, river, or other water source up to the fire engine. Women and children would form the second line, passing the empty buckets back to the source. These lines could be hundreds of people long. When the fire was beyond control, men pulled the building down with ladders, ropes, and hooks to prevent a spreading fire.6

The first “fire companies” were created by propertied men who banded together to protect their property and more efficiently meet the needs of the firefighting effort. Each man in these companies was responsible for bringing a certain number of well-maintained buckets to each fire and then manning the line. These fire companies ran the engines and kept them in good repair. Boston organized the first American fire company in 1717, and Benjamin Franklin organized the first Philadelphia company in 1736.7

That year, Franklin published a letter suggesting the utility of “forming a Company for the more ready Extinguishing of Fires, and mutual Assistance in Removing

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7 *Historical sketches of the formation and founders of the Philadelphia Hose Company...* (Philadelphia: privately printed, 1854), 34. Zurier, 24-25.
& Securing of Goods when in Danger.”⁸ Eventually a group of thirty men formed the Union Fire Company on December 7, 1736.⁹ The company created a set of rules that set the tone for future companies by emphasizing both the organizational and the social aspect of the association. All members were required to keep leather buckets in good shape, and members were fined for being late or absent to meetings and fires. The fine money was invested in new equipment. On the social side, the company agreed to “meet once a Month & spend a social Evening together, in discoursing, and communicating such Ideas as occur’d to use upon the Subject of Fires as might be useful in our Conduct on such Occasions.”¹⁰ The regular tavern meetings gave the company the aspect of a social club, a characteristic which helped induce other men to join or form their own companies. The spirit of innovation which Franklin helped infuse in the fledgling fire companies was still evident more than a century later.

Fire engines developed alongside the country’s first fire companies. Boston imported its first hand-pumped engine in 1713, Philadelphia in 1719. These engines were simple machines; several men operated hand-and-foot levers, or brakes, which pumped the water from a cache basin, or engine box, up through a metal nozzle. One man “played” the water on the fire by aiming the nozzle, while the bucket line filled the engine box. Wheels were an early improvement, allowing for larger and heavier engines. A London-built engine purchased for New York City in 1731 was six feet long and could pump 170 gallons a minute in a forty-yard stream. Over the course of the century, colonial mechanics continued to tinker with engines, producing greater water distance

¹⁰ Franklin, 665
and volume. Philadelphia kept its engine first out in the open, then in a shed built in the corner of a churchyard. A man was paid three pounds a year to maintain the engine.\textsuperscript{11}

Despite engine improvements, firefighting continued to rely on bucket brigades. Nervous urban property owners became increasingly dissatisfied with the system’s inherent inefficiencies. Philadelphia suffered from a rash of arson in the late 1790s that brought to a head public concern about fire prevention and protection. The city and state governments passed a series of ordinances to help prevent urban fire.\textsuperscript{12} Citizens played leading roles in this effort, both advocating new levels of fire safety and arguing against measures they deemed too expensive or oppressive.\textsuperscript{13}

It was a citizen-proposed civic improvement to fight yellow fever, however, that provided the breakthrough in fire protection. A 1799 petition to City Councils requested a public water system to curb yellow fever. Fire protection was given as a secondary benefit. Ground was broken on March 12, 1799, and water began flowing on January 27, 1800. Steam engines pumped sixteen thousand gallons of water from the Schuylkill River into a reservoir thirty-six feet above the ground. From there a series of wooden pipes distributed the water to city homes and hydrants. The system was a big success with the public, who paid five dollars per house per year to use the water.\textsuperscript{14} Interestingly, one criticism of the Schuylkill River plan was its use of steam engines, which were criticized as “machines of all machinery the least to be relied on, subject to casualties and

\textsuperscript{11} Zurier, 20-21.


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 482-487.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 510-519.
accidents of every kind.”¹⁵ This is noteworthy because of the complicated relationship that later developed between steam engines and volunteer firefighters.¹⁶

The water works allowed bucket brigades to fetch water from the nearest of the city’s dozens of hydrants. Accidental and incendiary fires continued, however. Philadelphia historians Scharf and Westcott write, “The entire year [1803] seemed to be more or less occupied with endeavors to improve the arrangements for extinguishing fires.”¹⁷ One suggestion circulating was to link the engines to the hydrants with hose. Nothing was done on the matter until a fire on December 13, 1803 destroyed eight unfinished houses on Sansom Street. Two days later, eight young men, ages seventeen to twenty, met in a private home and formed the Philadelphia Hose Company (PHC). Their idea was to purchase several hundred feet of hose and a carriage by which it could be easily carried to fires. They determined the cost of the hose and incidentals to be $350, and set about raising the money. Enthusiastic private donors contributed $700, and the men built a house for the carriage. They turned out for their first fire a few months later, and despite some problems of coordination with the engine company on hand, they showed that hose was an important new innovation in the urban fight against fire.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Philadelphia Gazette*, July 31, 1800, as found in Scharf and Westcott, vol. 1, 500.
¹⁶ Beginning in 1810, concerns were raised with the water works over inefficiency, cost, water pressure, and water purity. The Chestnut Street water works provided insufficient pressure, so that buckets were still needed to supplement the hoses which fed the engines. After several years of debate and proposals, new water works were built on Wissahickon Creek at Fairmount. The new system employed steam engines, reservoirs, and gravity-fed pipes, and provided enough pressure that buckets were permanently retired. Ibid., 561; Scharf and Westcott, vol. 3, 1903.
¹⁷ Scharf and Westcott, vol. 1, 516.
¹⁸ Ibid., 516-517. The date of the PHC’s first fire is uncertain. Scharf and Westcott place it on March 3, 1804, when notable politician and citizen Israel Israel’s stables in Whalebone Alley caught fire. A speech given by Richard Vaux on the 47th anniversary of the company cites the first fire as occurring on April 2, 1804, in “old Harmony Court, south of Chestnut Street and east of Fourth Street.” The discrepancy between these two might be explained by Vaux and the PHC being more technical in their definition of what constituted the company. See *Historical Sketches…*, 37-38.
The Philadelphia Hose Company’s founding is an important and useful benchmark in the history of Philadelphia firefighting. The emergence of the hose and engine system completed the transfer of responsibility for firefighting from the whole community to specific groups of men. It also helped cement the company system, which would define firefighting henceforth. Finally, Philadelphia’s leading citizens of the time took active roles in projects of public utility, and fire companies became one such project. This is noteworthy because, fifty years later, the same social and economic leaders would be arguing for the creation of a paid department. This change in attitude is best illustrated by beginning with a look at the men who formed the PHC.
The Philadelphia Hose Company and Founding Values

In 1854, the Philadelphia Hose Company held a celebration for its fiftieth anniversary. In conjunction with that celebration, the company commissioned the printing of a slim, one hundred-page volume. The volume contained “historical sketches” of the founding members, two addresses by company member and future mayor Richard Vaux (son of founder Roberts Vaux), and lists of members past and present. The biographical sketches are revealing in that they illustrate the sorts of Philadelphians who would form a civic association which came to deserve such “a prominent position in public consideration.” All eight founding members were Quakers or descendants of Quakers, and all were “sons of highly respectable parents, old citizens of Philadelphia.” Each member was “either apprenticed to some skillful handicraft, or engaged in acquiring the knowledge of mercantile business.” The emphases common to each man’s biography, and the tone of those sketches, provide insight into their values, or least the values their successors attributed to them.

Every sketch emphasizes either a strong inclination towards public good, or the possession of a character beyond reproach. The stated purpose of the sketches is “describing the character of the early firemen of Philadelphia,” but the message is more than reverence. Reuben Haines, a dry goods store apprentice at the time, devoted his life’s leisure time to “some useful object, or acquiring scientific knowledge.” Roberts

19 Historical sketches, title page.
20 Ibid., 7.
21 Ibid., 8. Those original eight were Reuben Haines, Samuel N. Lewis, William Morris, William Morrison, Joseph Parker, Abraham L. Pennock, Roberts Vaux, and Joseph Warner. Several other men were part of the original group but were unable to make the first meeting. Only Pennock and Warner were still alive in 1853.
22 Ibid., 8.
23 Ibid., 11.
Vaux left a legacy of being identified “with almost every useful public object.” Samuel N. Lewis and his brother Mordecai were “examples of the old fashioned merchants of Philadelphia; gentlemen of the purest character, most admirable manners, and highest respectability.” Joseph Warner possessed “a character beyond reproach” and found time “to attend upon every demand for his sympathy, or call for his aid, in unostentatious efforts for the public good.” Words like “useful,” “regard,” “charity,” “devote,” and “public” appear frequently. The PHC was founded by men of high character and good social standing, men who “devote time and energies and talents unobtrusively for the advantage of their fellow men, who organize experiment into the most successful operation, and which the test of half a century has proved and approved, have a claim upon the gratitude of posterity.”

There are several bases for the founders’ character and status, according to their successors. The founders’ willingness and initiative in pursuing the public good made them useful citizens. Their success as merchants and businessmen gave them public status. This combination of two distinct sources of public merit, service and money, is revealing. It highlights mid-century firemen’s attempt to reconcile their founding ideals of civic duty with the prominent doctrine of the day, economic efficiency. It also serves as character defense at a time when firemen were linked to violence and moral decay. The circumstances surrounding this defensive nostalgia will be discussed later on; it is sufficient to note it here.

The pamphlet’s other concern regarding its illustrious founders is placing them within a tradition of American liberties and associations. Richard Vaux’s anniversary

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24 Historical sketches, 8-9.
25 Ibid., 7.
speeches address this issue. To Vaux, the foundation of American liberty “rests and relies on individuality voluntarily associated…cemented by the conviction of direct benefit to the commonwealth.” The PHC’s founding members, as well as the early firemen of other companies, embody this through their voluntary assumption of the responsibility for communal fire safety. The names of other early companies, “Assistance,” “Resolution,” “Friendship,” “Hand-in-Hand,” “Good-Will,” reiterate this spirit of civic duty. The men who founded Philadelphia’s firefighting tradition were thinking only of their fellow citizens, unselfishly and honestly, and the “public voice spoke voluntarily of their value.”

Vaux was right to connect the PHC with an admirable and popular tradition of voluntary association. Private associations abounded during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Philadelphia led the country in the creation of labor unions prior to the Civil War. In the 1820’s, the city’s workingman movement argued for, among other things, a ten-hour day, free public schools, and the abolition of imprisonment for debt. The rhetoric they employed was very similar to the republican, civic-duty doctrine the firemen used to establish and justify their civic prominence. Philadelphia historian Gary Nash writes that “in pushing for the ten-hour day, laboring Philadelphians based their

26 Vaus was a contributing member of the company during the 1840s, and Mayor of Philadelphia from 1856 to 1858, making his words both biased and influential.
27 Historical sketches, 16.
28 Ibid., 18.
29 The tradition of voluntary association led back to before the Revolution. John Brooke writes that the instruments of pre-Revolutionary War resistance were “extralegal bodies of voluntarily associated men claiming to act in the common public interest.” Early American politics were dominated by associations and their opponents. Proponents placed their right to form such associations alongside the fundamental liberties secured with Independence. For an elaborate discussion of early American associations, especially Freemasonry, see Brooke’s “Ancient Lodges and Self-Created Societies.” John L. Brooke, “Ancient Lodges and Self-Created Societies: Voluntary Association and the Public Sphere in the Early Republic,” in Launching the “Extended Republic,” eds. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 289.
30 Laurie, 71.
31 Nash, 163, 164, 167.
demand on their rights and responsibilities as active citizens in a democratic republic.”

In 1835, skilled and unskilled Philadelphia labor joined together in the first general strike in American history. Vaux’s emphasis on the PHC’s associative aspect no doubt found special resonance with his Philadelphian audience.

Vaux does not mention Alexis de Tocqueville, but he appears to support the Frenchman’s observations on the American tendency towards civic association. Writing in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville asserts that America’s egalitarian society forces its citizens to form associations in order to effect change. These associations come first out of necessity, and later by choice. While possessing diverse aims, they are “constant reminders to each and every citizen that he lives in society.” Participation allows for “genuine sacrifices to the public good,” and serves as a reminder that “it is man’s duty as well as his interest to make himself useful to his fellow man.” Philadelphia’s firemen would have heartily approved of this analysis. Tocqueville, writing in 1835, no doubt encountered well-established volunteer fire companies during his travels. His writing then vouches for the durability of the spirit of civic duty in which firemen formed the first companies decades earlier.

Tocqueville’s discussion of honor is also quite relevant to the fire company tradition. He theorizes that “whenever men gather to form a particular society, a characteristic form of honor immediately springs up among them, that is, a distinctive set of opinions regarding what is to be praised or blamed. And these particular rules always

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32 Nash, 164.
33 Ibid., 164.
35 Ibid., 593.
36 Ibid., 593.
have their source in the special habits and special interests of the association.”  This was true of Philadelphia’s fire companies; as they became established, they developed their own sense of honor. Initially, this honor was grounded in the public service they provided. As Vaux said, “the Fire Department had its origin in benevolence. It required sacrifice of self for the common welfare, impressed by a high moral sense, stimulating to the discharge of a self-created duty.”  These general civic characteristics formed the basis for public praise of the firemen as well as for the firemen’s own personal esteem.

As time went on, however, this form of honor changed to a more specific pride in the “special habits and special interests” of the firemen. By examining the main elements involved in volunteer firefighting in the first decades of the nineteenth century, one can foretell what characteristics the men came to value in themselves. As they did so, they came to define their own firefighting culture.

The first and most obvious place to look in predicting the principal characteristics of an emerging firefighter culture is the physical act of firefighting. From the turn of the century until the introduction of horse-drawn steam engines decades later, physical strength and stamina reigned supreme. When the fire alarm sounded, firemen had to race to the firehouse (if they were not there already) or to the scene of the fire, depending on their role. Those at the firehouse then had to pull the fire engine or hose carriage through the streets, as fast as they could, to the scene of the fire. These engines could weigh as much as a ton. The men needed the strength to pull the engines quickly through crowded, narrow, and unpaved streets. Once moving, engines were hard to stop, and firemen who tripped or fell risked being crushed under the wheels. Once on the scene, the firemen had

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37 Tocqueville, 730.
38 Historical Sketches..., 47.
to attach the hard leather hose to the hydrant and the engine. They then attached the riveted leading hose, made out of leather or soft hemp, to the engine’s output valve, to play the water onto the fire.\footnote{Paul C. Ditzel, \textit{Fire Engines, Firefighters: The Men, Equipment, and Machines, from Colonial Days to the Present} (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1976), 66. Tebeau, 25-27.} All of this activity required concentration, physical stamina, and group coordination.

The supreme effort, however, came with the pumping of the engine brakes. By the 1830s, the large engines manufactured by men like John Agnew of Philadelphia required as many as forty men pumping continuously in order to generate consistent water pressure. Fit firemen could not maintain such exertion for more than ten or fifteen minutes at a time, and fires often took hours to control. To maintain pressure, firemen had to rotate in and out of the rapidly-moving engine handles, risking crushed fingers or broken arms. All of this exertion was done in public, frequently in front of large crowds. This is the source of the fundamental pride firemen came to feel in their own strength and masculinity.\footnote{Ditzel, 68. Tebeau, 25-27.}

The search for improved performance was another element in the firefighters’ ethic. Benjamin Franklin began this tradition with his monthly brainstorming sessions. In the first half of the nineteenth century, mechanically-minded firemen like George Mason, Patrick Lyon, and John Agnew built or designed apparatus.\footnote{Tebeau, 30.} To improve carriage speed at night, companies sent young runners ahead, carrying torches. To improve nighttime response, firemen began to rent rooms above the firehouse or in nearby buildings, beginning the tradition that came to be known as bunking. Firemen also slept with their boots and pants on, and placed their apparatus on skis or sleds after
snowstorms. Competing with themselves and with rival companies for every advantage in measurable firefighting performance, firemen nurtured a culture of innovation which elicited the favor of their contemporary public.43

Their public exertions, both physical and innovative, gave the firemen a civic prominence that helped them raise needed funds. Despite the upper-class wealth of some founding firemen, the companies required regular donations from private individuals and businesses to maintain their equipment.44 One tactic firemen employed to keep the donations flowing was to emphasize the republican, civic-minded spirit in which they volunteered. Beginning with the earliest companies and continuing through mid-century, fire companies organized themselves along democratic lines. Historian Mark Tebeau writes that, organized with presidents and voting systems, the firemen “represented themselves as democratically-organized associations protecting the nation’s physical, economic, and political orders from the disorder of fire.”45 Company mottos such as “The Public Good Our Only Aim” and “When Help Calls It is Our Duty to Obey” emphasized this devotion to the body politic.46 The firemen were strong men putting their time and their bodies on the line to protect the city and its population from the chaos of fire. Supporting such a worthy association with your purse, they suggested, would allow them to continue assuming their important responsibility.47

In the first several decades of the nineteenth century, Philadelphia firemen were an unqualified success with local communities. Their exploits at fires won them great

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42 Ditzel, 64-66.
43 Tebeau, 30.
44 Shortly after forming, companies began petitioning Philadelphia’s city government for funding. City Councils first donated to the city’s fire and hose companies in 1811, when they appropriated $1000 for the purpose. Scharf & Westcott, vol. 1, 551.
46 Zurier, 43.
47 Tebeau, 23.
admiration, especially from women, boys, and property owners. Like a sporting event without a ticket fee, tens or hundreds of spectators would come to cheer the firemen and watch the clash of water and flames, until the fire was put out or (as frequently happened) the building collapsed. While spectators often got in the way (or occasionally tried to loot the buildings), their presence also motivated the firemen to work furiously and heroically. In public view, the manner in which the men took upon themselves the responsibility of public safety, and handled it with strength and skill, “made them into firemen, and marked them as especially able and valuable citizens.”

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48 Boys too young to join companies would run alongside the engines and carriages. At the fire, they would cheer the firemen on and look for ways to help. These chances came often, as undermanned or exhausted engine companies frequently solicited help from bystanders in pumping the breaks. This interaction between young boys and firemen became a target for criticism on moral grounds when the firemen lost their public esteem around mid-century. Ditzel, 75. Tebeau, 26.

49 Zurier, 50-51.

50 Tebeau, 25.
Changing Companies and the Creation of a Firemen Culture

Philadelphia’s volunteer firefighting system began as a body of willing and able men filling an important city need. Innovations like hose allowed these men to become the city’s designated firefighters, and the city repaid them with funding and public adoration. What change occurred, then, to bring firemen into such disfavor that by 1853 Philadelphian property owners and economic elite had formed a committee to urge “the necessity of abandonment of the present voluntary system”?51 To begin to answer this question, one must look at how firefighter culture evolved during the first half of the century and how the community itself was changing.

An important factor in the public’s changing regard for the firefighters concerned their competitive nature. Competition between companies stimulated greater efficiency and attracted public attention, but it was also a source for eventual criticism. The seeds of this competition were sown with the companies’ initial establishment. One of Benjamin Franklin’s many projects was the Philadelphia Contributionship for the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire, established in 1752. The “first successful fire insurance company in America,”52 it placed firemarks53 on insured houses and then paid whichever fire companies responded to fires in those buildings. After the turn of the century, cities began paying companies for being first, second, or third to a fire.54 As time went on, companies developed a sense of pride in being first to the scene of a fire.

51 Tebeau, 113.
52 Zurier, 30.
53 Firemarks were plaques affixed to the front of a home or building that bore the insurance company’s logo. These designations meant that the building was insured against fire, and that (in the case of Franklin’s company as well as others) fire companies would be rewarded for fighting fires at that building.
54 Zurier, 30-31.
This attitude encouraged quicker response times, but also fed a growing competitiveness between companies which had less and less to do with efficient firefighting.\(^{55}\)

This desire to be first to a fire created “racing,” which became a popular (for the participants) component of firemen culture until the 1850s. Fire companies which encountered each other on route to the same fire would race through the streets, zigzagging to prevent the other company from getting ahead. Engines would run up on sidewalks trying to pass, and pedestrians both human and animal had to scamper to avoid being struck. Enthusiastic firemen frequently attempted to cut tow ropes and jam wheel spokes to slow down their rivals.\(^{56}\) The embarrassment of being passed became such that foremen, seeing they were about to be passed, would bring the engine to a halt and claim mechanical trouble. Not only was this somewhat poor sportsmanship, it was also counter-productive, as it meant that one engine took longer than necessary to reach a fire.\(^{57}\)

The competition did not cease once the engines reached the fire. Almost from their creation in the early 1800’s, hose companies would vie for the hydrants closest to the fire, and fistfights were not uncommon. The term “plug uglies” refers to the practice of hiring boxers or brawlers to reach hydrants first and defend them until their employer hose company arrived.\(^{58}\) On the occasions that a fire was too far away from hydrants for one engine’s range and hoses, “cooperation” could lead to brawls. One engine pumping water into another engine would attempt to pump enough water to overflow the next engine’s water tub, or “wash” the engine. To be washed was a great humiliation, and

\(^{55}\) Tebeau, 35.
\(^{56}\) Laurie, 77.
\(^{57}\) Ditzel, 66.
\(^{58}\) Zurier, 40.
could only be rectified by a “washing” of one’s own. Or perhaps brawling.\textsuperscript{59} Repeated clashes turned into company feuds, which made future encounters more heated and increased the chance for violence. Firefighter proponents defended such competition as stimulating greater efficiency and innovation,\textsuperscript{60} but fights and tactics like hiding hydrants under barrels decreased efficiency and distressed those property owners whose houses were burning.

Companies competed in easily-measured actions like speed to fire and volume of water pumped, but around the 1830s the associated pride became important enough that companies stopped waiting for a fire to prove their worth.\textsuperscript{61} One method of settling arguments and proving merit was to challenge a rival company to a test of stream length. In a given public space, often near a church steeple to be used as a point of reference, companies would work their engine brakes furiously in attempts to outdistance their rivals. These contests drew large crowds, which only raised the stakes further. Winning these contests “indicated a company’s fitness as men and as public servants,” while the loser went home disgruntled, thinking of the next opportunity to prove their worth.\textsuperscript{62}

When the weather was damp or the arsonists in abeyance, companies found other outlets for their competitive drive. In the 1830s, companies created a new classification of firemen, “contributing” members, who paid fees in lieu of service. This new income stream allowed companies to invest in equipment, as well as new decorations and expressions of company identity.\textsuperscript{63} Helmets became both more useful and more ornate. The wood on fire engines and hose tenders was painted, and the metal polished.

\textsuperscript{59} Zurier, 40.
\textsuperscript{60} Historical Sketches..., 41. Tebeau, 25.
\textsuperscript{61} Tebeau, 53.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 53.
Companies paid artists hundreds of dollars to paint their engines with heroic scenes from antiquity or the Revolutionary War.\textsuperscript{64} The PHC was the first Philadelphia company to place a bell on its apparatus,\textsuperscript{65} and also led the way in company uniforms, which they wore for parades and other special occasions.\textsuperscript{66} Until the 1830s companies generally kept their apparatus in basic sheds, but once cities began building companies legitimate firehouses, or companies built their own, the race was on for decorative and impressive architecture.\textsuperscript{67}

Company competition made for great public entertainment. In the 1840s newspapers in Buffalo and elsewhere reviewed fires like today’s papers review concerts or plays.\textsuperscript{68} The potential for brawls was one of the attractions to the fire scene. Engine contests would be announced beforehand in local newspapers so that citizens could turn out in droves. Parades, another popular source of entertainment, were a more passive form of competition. George Washington’s birthday inspired the first Philadelphia firefighter parade, held on February 22, 1832.\textsuperscript{69} In processions which could last hours and stretch for miles, companies marched alongside their apparatus launching a hail of salutes. Any excuse would do for a parade, from Fourth of July, to Presidents’ Birthdays, to the presence of foreign dignitaries. Companies spent days beforehand polishing their apparatus and adorning them with flowers, bunting, and even live or dead animals. During the parade, companies wore their most impressive uniforms and occasionally employed marching bands from local saloons. For the public, it was free, flamboyant

\textsuperscript{64} Zurier, 43.
\textsuperscript{65} A bell both alerted unwary pedestrians that a one-ton engine was rapidly approaching, and drew public attention to the handsome fire company running by. \textit{Historical Sketches...}, 41-42.
\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Historical Sketches...}, 42-43. Companies eventually had fancy uniforms for parades and functions, and less decorative uniforms for firefighting.
\textsuperscript{67} Zurier, 32.
\textsuperscript{68} Ditzel, 98.
\textsuperscript{69} Scharf & Westcott, vol. 3, 1910.
entertainment. In Philadelphia in 1832, a parade featuring thirty-seven companies attracted a crowd of one hundred thousand people.\textsuperscript{70}

In the first half of the nineteenth century, then, fire companies drew public attention to most every aspect of their existence, from their engine houses to the fires themselves. The competition that both fed off this attention and reinforced it masked an underlying tension within Philadelphia’s firefighter culture. Their cherished civic prominence required a uniform public perception of the city’s firefighters as heroic, useful citizens. Yet each company was proudly autonomous, and the idea of a “fire department” was “emerging only slowly at mid-century, and it was often subordinate to their affiliation with a company, community, or political unit.”\textsuperscript{71} There was no unified fire department in fact, but all firemen were invested in the creation and maintenance of a department mystique. Thus firemen marched together in parades in the afternoon, and then raced each other through the streets at night. This tension remained unresolved until mid-century, when sudden and severe public criticism forced the city’s companies to confront their lack of genuine departmental unity.

Philadelphia’s firemen remained popular through the 1820s and 1830s while maintaining a distinct firefighter culture through their increasingly passionate rivalries and ceremonies. During this time, fire companies began to resemble full-fledged social clubs. One can look back to Franklin’s tavern meetings for the origins of this characteristic, but its full expression had much to do with the firehouse itself. In the

\textsuperscript{70} Ditzel, 70-74.
\textsuperscript{71} Tebeau, 48. The 1853 creation of the Board of Directors of the Philadelphia Fire Department marked the introduction of ‘volunteer fire department’ into working terminology. Tebeau, 134.
1830s, cities began building dedicated firehouses for their fire companies.\textsuperscript{72} This intensified company feelings of brotherhood. The sitting room became the new center of company life. Decorated and usually better-furnished than the members’ own homes, firemen began spending time at the firehouse in between fires. The sitting room was a place to get away from the rest of the world, share stories, and bask in friendship, accomplishment, and status. Bunking rates increased. This reinforced, both for the individual and in the public eye, the fire company as a brotherhood separate from society and yet deeply devoted to it.\textsuperscript{73}

Other firefighting traditions changed to emphasize the “social club” image. Firefighter balls, originally held as company fundraisers, became annual social events.\textsuperscript{74} In the 1830s, firemen began visiting companies in other cities up and down the East Coast. The host company would put on several days of elaborate dinners, balls, and engine contests.\textsuperscript{75} The companies fraternized, swapped gifts and stories, and attempted to learn new techniques and tricks with which they could improve their performance back home.\textsuperscript{76}

The excitement of the fire, the bravado of the firemen, and the increasing exclusivity of the firehouse sparked the imagination and ambition of many young men and boys. The social status that the early firemen sought as compensation for their volunteerism became the reason many young men joined or formed companies.

\textsuperscript{72} Firehouse historian Rebecca Zurier suggests that this was the point at which people began “thinking of the fire department as a separate organization, worthy of its own quarters, and of the fire station as a monument in itself.” Zurier, 32.

\textsuperscript{73} Ditzel, 74-75. Zurier, 32, 44. While she does not discuss Philadelphia, Amy Greenberg’s \textit{Cause For Alarm} provides a thorough discussion of the nineteenth century firehouse as an alternative domestic space.

\textsuperscript{74} Ditzel, 50.

\textsuperscript{75} Tebeau, 44-45.

\textsuperscript{76} Ditzel, 74. Tebeau, 42.
Historian Paul Ditzel quotes the observations of an English visitor to Philadelphia in 1819:

“You have no idea of the consequence of a fire company. It is the summit of the hopes and wishes of one-half the clerks, counterhoppers and quill drivers in the city. A trumpet in one hand, a spanner wrench in the other and a lantern affixed to his leather belt and he is in the zenith of his glory, more especially if the night be dark when the effect of the various lights is more striking.”77

Firefighters’ public image was all the more important because class in Philadelphia in the first half of the nineteenth century was easily distinguishable by sight. One’s dress was a good indicator of general class and source of wealth.78 Donning the easily-identifiable fireman’s uniform “offered a means to status in a highly democratic period.”79 This helps explain why, although founded by the upper classes, the fire companies started to attract lower-class men and immigrants, especially the Irish. Social historian Bruce Laurie writes that “being elected into a company was a sure sign of a man’s acceptance by his neighbors.”80 Philadelphia’s Irish immigrants, facing anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic discrimination, found in fire companies autonomous organizations which could be endowed with feelings of home and could provide a dependable social structure.81

Concurrent with firefighting’s new appeal were increasing opportunities to volunteer. Philadelphia experienced significant growth during the middle decades of the

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77 Ditzel, 76.
80 Laurie, 77.
81 Dennis J. Clark writes that Philadelphia’s immigrant Irish community established a variety of associations which “preserved the ethnic traditions and identity of the Irish and provided organizational ties for them at a variety of social levels for a variety of purposes.” Dennis J. Clark, “The Philadelphia Irish: Persistent Presence,” in The Peoples of Philadelphia..., eds. Davis and Haller, 140.
nineteenth century. This growth created the need for new fire companies to serve new neighborhoods. Sixty-four of Philadelphia’s approximately seventy companies operating in 1857 were formed after 1825. The city’s immigrants tended to settle on the outskirts of the city, and they formed fire companies both out of necessity and as a means of establishing new social networks. These new companies assumed the political or ethnic identities of the communities that formed them. This growth further hindered the firemen’s greater sense of departmental unity, as the new companies were intensely homogenous on an individual level but increasingly heterogeneous when viewed as a collection of companies.

Political aspirations led some men to firefighting. Joining a fire company brought with it many social connections, and for companies like the PHC, those connections could be politically and economically useful. These connections could serve “as stepping stones to better jobs, higher social standing, and public office.” Seven New York City mayors, eighteen St. Louis mayors, and Presidents including George Washington, James Buchanan, and Millard Fillmore were volunteer firemen. Being identified as a firemen allowed any candidate to emphasize his patriotism and his sense of duty to his fellow man. Thus, membership and connections were a consideration for some men in selecting which fire company to join. From the other side, fire companies were important targets for politicians and parties, for if persuaded they brought the party both votes and a visible physical presence on election day. Tebeau writes that it is

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82 Between 1810 and 1830, Philadelphia grew from 100,000 people living in 15,814 houses, to 160,000 people living in more than 40,000 buildings. In the next twenty years, Philadelphia city and county swelled to 409,000 residents, almost thirty percent of which were foreign-born. Nash, 144. Tebeau, 65-66.
83 Tebeau, 71.
84 Zurier, 38.
85 Ditzel, 76.
86 Ibid., 76.
unclear how frequently firemen exercised political influence by voting as a bloc, but
established political parties frequently courted fire companies.  

Despite their lack of departmental identity, firemen occasionally behaved as an
organization, as in their exclusions of blacks. Philadelphia had a significant free black
population, but they did not share the Irish’s success with fire companies. In 1818 the
free black community attempted to organize a fire company, and took up subscriptions.
The existing fire companies opposed it, however, issuing the statement that:

“The formation of fire-engine and hose companies by persons of color will
be productive of serious injury to the peace and safety of citizens in times
of fire, and it is earnestly recommended to the citizens of Philadelphia to
give them no support, aid, or encouragement in the formation of their
companies, as there are as many, if not more, companies already existing
than are necessary at fires or are properly supported.”

The societies asked City Councils to prevent the new company from being allowed to open
fire hydrants, but the Councils refused on the grounds that they had no control over the
matter. It speaks to the city’s racism that the autonomous fire companies, uncoordinated
and destined for violent rivalry, came together to block the formation of a company
equally dedicated to “be of effective service in assisting to arrest the progress of the
destructive element.” Fearing the company to be more trouble than it was worth, the


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87 Tebeau, 35. The firemen’s attempt at their own political organization, which occurred around mid-century when legislation appeared to threaten their control over the city’s firefighting, will be discussed later on.
88 Scharf & Westcott, vol. 3, 1906. The assertion of too many companies did not stop whites from creating new companies, or locating their engine houses within blocks of one another. A partial list of new fire companies in Scharf & Westcott list one engine and two hose companies formed in 1818, and eleven engine and hose companies formed in the next two years. Scharf & Westcott, vol. 3, 1894.
89 Ibid., 1907.
men involved dissolved their company and returned the subscriptions they had gathered.\textsuperscript{90}

In the second quarter of the century, then, Philadelphia’s firefighters underwent several important changes. First, the motivation behind new volunteers was shifting. The young men who had run alongside the engines as boys, admiring the heroic and strong firemen, were now old enough to become heroic and strong firemen themselves. The public prominence the founders had built up to justify their very existence became a reason to volunteer. Firemen’s physical appearance, popularity, and solidarity became attractions, not compensation. The vigorous interest in this public status reinforced peripheral aspects of firefighting, such as parades and racing, which had more to do with image than with firefighting. By the 1840s, the social aspects of firefighting were as important to many companies as the actual responsibility of firefighting.

The average Philadelphia fire company was also changing in identity. The upper-class men who had formed fire companies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to protect their own property were being replaced, several decades later, by middle and lower-class men. Older companies slowly lost their neighborhood identity as members moved away from the firehouse.\textsuperscript{91} Other upper-class men retired, or found themselves too occupied with business to run off at the sound of the alarm. The creation of “contributing” members in the 1830s allowed those men with money to pay dues in

\textsuperscript{90} Tebeau, 37. An explicitly masculine culture, volunteer firefighting made little space for women. Molly Williams in New York, Marina Betts in Pittsburgh, and Lillie Hitchcok in San Francisco were exceptions. Ditzel, 76-77.

\textsuperscript{91} Laurie, 78. Better transportation and the rise of the factory production system also allowed business owners to move away from center city, which turned once-multi-class neighborhoods into increasingly middle or lower-class districts. This further increased individual company homogeneity. Nash, 158.
lieu of service. Meanwhile, the newer companies formed closer to mid-century were likely to be organized along specific ethnic, religious, or political identities, and were closely tied to their immediate neighborhoods.92 These changes reflected, as Tebeau writes, “the fracturing of American society along class, ethnic, and political lines [which] resulted in the emergence of significant diversity in volunteer firefighting.”93

This increasing diversity had important ramifications for Philadelphia’s volunteers in the 1830s and 1840s. Companies organized around single identities, like Irish or Whig, and concerned with image and honor, were easier to provoke. Parades, racing, and brawling increased, which drew more public attention. The firemen did not see themselves as anything larger than autonomous fire companies. The public held a less nuanced view, however, of “firemen” in general. Firemen encouraged this view, and while they behaved well, it allowed for widespread praise. When fire companies became increasingly disruptive, public praise turned to public criticism, which was leveled at the whole system. When the city’s latent ethnic and religious tensions exploded in the 1830s and 1840s, the firemen were not immune to the violence, and their general public image suffered an irrecoverable association with violence and disorder.

92 Laurie, 77-78.
93 Tebeau, 38.
**Prejudice and Violence**

Philadelphia in the 1840s suffered unprecedented urban violence. The violence stemmed from social conflict between whites and blacks, Protestants and Catholics, native-born Philadelphians and immigrants. Tension had been building in magnitude for years, but it was in this decade that it took its most destructive form. Firemen were frequently involved, acting at various times as perpetrators, targets, and keepers of the peace. Despite both noble and ignoble behavior, firemen became inextricably linked with disorder in the public mind. This association led civic and economic leaders in the 1850s to focus on firefighting reform as part of their efforts to restore public order.

Philadelphia lacked a meaningful police force until the city was consolidated in 1854, so firemen were occasionally called upon to help keep the peace. More than once firemen found themselves the target of mob violence as they attempted to battle a mob-started fire. In 1838, an antiabolitionist mob set fire to the newly-built Pennsylvania Hall, a center for abolitionist meetings and conventions. Firemen hurried to the scene, but the mob prevented them from playing water onto the fire, and the firemen had to settle for protecting adjacent property. The next day, a smaller mob set fire to the Shelter for Colored Orphans, “a quiet and unobtrusive establishment managed by the members of the Society of Friends.”

With the help of a police magistrate, firemen dispersed the crowd and saved the building. For this the firemen received public praise, including good

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94 Scharf & Westcott, vol. 1, 652.
press in the *Public Ledger*, although the paper's officers were menaced by crowds for several days following the article.95

Such examples of dedication and courage were tarnished by the gang violence that plagued city districts in the 1840s. Gangs rose to prominence in the 1840s, first as groups of neighborhood teenagers and young men who marked territorial boundaries with graffiti.96 The concurrent creation of many new fire companies in Philadelphia’s surrounding districts gave these rough-and-tumble youths local masculine figures to idolize and assist whenever possible. These gangs “ran” with companies to fires, and fought with rival gangs or companies at fires. These newer companies, whose members were much more likely to live near the firehouse, were also more likely to accept their doting young escorts as members.97 Shiffler Hose Company, for example, developed an alliance with the Shifflers, a gang that shared their territory and hostilities.98 Thus the line between fire company and street gang was blurred by the mingling of membership and behavior.

Like the mob violence of the period, gang and firemen violence stemmed from political, ethnic, or religious intolerance. Most of the companies in the district of Southwark were organized and identified along political or ethnic lines.99 As these identities hardened, the violence between rival companies and gangs intensified. Certain members of the Weccacoe Engine Company (WEC) left in 1842 in a dispute over temperance and started the Weccacoe Hose Company (WHC). The two companies’

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95 Scharf & Westcott, vol. 1, 652. The City Council investigated the Pennsylvania Hall arson and eventually found the victims to blame, for “openly promulgating and advocating doctrines repulsive to the moral sense of a large majority of our community.” Nash, 169.
96 Laurie, 78.
97 Ibid., 78.
98 Ibid., 78.
99 Ibid., 82.
headquarters were two blocks from each other. The WHC allied itself with the Democrats, while the WEC was American Republican.\textsuperscript{100} The companies engaged in street fights whenever their paths crossed. In June of 1844, the WHC made a nighttime assault on the WEC engine house, only to be repulsed by musket fire. On February 4, 1850, two WHC men snuck into the WEC’s newly-built engine house and set fire to it. Meanwhile, two other company members stole the nearby Southwark Fire Company’s spanner. The Southwark company arrived on the scene, but without a spanner they could not open the fire plug. By the time another company arrived to put out the flames, the first story of the engine house had been destroyed, at a cost of over $2,000.\textsuperscript{101}

Such violence did not have to be explicitly political. The WHC’s route to alarms in western Southwark took them past the Franklin Fire Company, who were prone to hurl epithets or brickbats at the passing men. In May of 1847 the Weccacoes captured and destroyed Franklin’s tender, prompting both sides to come together and settle differences.\textsuperscript{102} The truce lasted, but this example of hostility shows the degree to which competition and territory had for some companies snowballed into violent rivalry.

The title of most violent fire company could go to Shiffler Hose Company (SHC) or Moyamensing Hose Company (MHC). The violence between the two reflected the friction in 1840s Philadelphia between native-born Protestants and Irish Catholic immigrants. Shiffler was Protestant and American-Republican-affiliated, while Moyamensing was Irish Catholic and Democrat.\textsuperscript{103} Both companies were closely

\textsuperscript{100} Laurie, 75.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 80.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 79.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 75, 81. Both Shiffler Hose Company and the Shifflers gang were named after George Shiffler, an 18-year old killed by shots from the Irish Hibernia Hose Company firehouse in 1844. The event was greatly exaggerated by Native American Party leaders and other anti-immigrant groups until it was told that Shiffler died defending an American flag from an anti-American Irish mob. Nash, 171.
associated with, if not outright controlled by, notorious street gangs. SHC was affiliated with the Shifflers street gang, while MHC came under the control of the most notable of Philadelphia’s gangs, the Killers. A common Killers’ tactic was to set a fire in Southwark, and then hide in ambush along SHC’s route. When the company passed, they would assault them with brickbats, spanners, and guns, attempting to make off with SHC’s apparatus. They tried this five times in 1849, succeeding on the fifth try. By 1850, firearms were standard “firefighting” equipment for these companies.

The Killers’ violence extended beyond rivalries to threaten the general order of society. On October 8, 1849, the gang/fire company decided to burn the four-story California House, a tavern and hotel owned by blacks. Around 8 p.m., they rammed the building with a wagon containing burning barrels of tar. The blacks inside opened fire, and the Killers shot back. Police arrived on the scene, but the Killers drove them off. They also attacked fire companies responding to the blaze, killing three members of Good Will Company. At dawn, fire companies attempted to tackle the blaze again, but the Killers and the white mob they had attracted destroyed the Robert Morris Hose carriage and cut the Diligent Hose Company’s hose. It took the arrival of the militia to drive the Killers off so that Good Will and Phoenix Hose could prevent the fire from spreading.

During the worst period in Philadelphia, sixty-nine riots occurred in a single year and seventeen firefighters were jailed in one day. It is easy to comprehend the degree

104 The Killers were a particularly well-organized and vicious gang led by Bill “Bull” MacMullin which held great sway in eastern Moyamensing in the 1840s and early 1850s. MacMullin’s violence was ended only when a new Philadelphia police force made MacMullin a deputy. The Killers became law-abiding, and MacMullin later ran for alderman and won. Ditzel, 101. Laurie, 78-81.
105 Laurie, 81.
106 Ditzel, 101.
107 Ibid., 106.
to which gang and firemen violence captured the public’s attention, for one did not have to be a gang member or a firemen to be attacked. On September 3, 1850, a group of Shiffler Hose Company firemen noticed a number of German immigrants holding a celebration on the second floor of a local tavern. The firemen forced their way into the party, stabbed one German and severely beat three more, then trashed the tavern to warn the owner against renting to such parties again. Such violence mirrored anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic mob violence of the period, but the perpetrators here did not have the benefit of mob anonymity. They were firemen or firemen associates, and it was only a matter of time before the public’s patience grew thin.

Many firemen spoke out against this violence. The California Spirit of the Times and Fireman’s Journal, a San Francisco newspaper that devoted space to national volunteer firefighting news, provides an example of the firemen’s reaction. The March 5, 1859 edition features a letter from a New York City writer, “Dix,” who reports on his city’s fire department. He mentions two recent firemen fights in the city, but attributes both to “outsiders” who “think a fireman’s fight glorious fun.” He asks firemen to keep outsiders at a distance during fires to prevent such trouble. “What is most to be regretted,” he continues, “in these affairs, is the arguments they afford to enemies of our present organization, in favor of a paid Department.” The “large majority” of firemen who do not fight “bear a share of the odium” for those who do, and it is the former “who would most sincerely regret [the] change to a paid Department.” Dix’s concerns

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108 Laurie, 80-81.  
109 Fireman’s Journal (San Francisco), 5 March 1859.  
110 “Outsiders” would likely include the gangs of youths which escorted companies to and from fires.  
111 Fireman’s Journal, 5 March 1859.  
112 Ibid.
reflect the Philadelphia firemen’s problem with their treasured public status: all drinking from the same cup, it took only one drop of poison to stricken everyone’s lips.

As companies like MHC became linked with street gangs, the proudly autonomous and competitive firefighter culture lost much of its accumulated public goodwill. Despite the best intentions and efforts of a majority of the city’s companies, both old and new, the volunteers found themselves increasingly criticized for an identity that combined public fears about immigration and religion with legitimate concerns about the safety of their city. The public’s newly-critical eye also exposed the various rituals and other expressions of firefighter culture to charges of inefficiency. It is here, at the firemen’s moment of weakness, that a fledgling partner in the fight against fire grew up and turned traitor.
From Laudable to Liability

The relationship between Philadelphia’s fire companies and its fire insurance industry is a story of cooperation betrayed, of mutual interest reconsidered. Both forms of fire protection arose at roughly the same time in the city. Colonial American fire insurance began in Philadelphia with the Philadelphia Contributionship, which first offered fire insurance to its members in 1752. The Contributionship was another project of Benjamin Franklin’s and represented a new way for property owners to band together for their common protection. This and other mutual fire insurance companies provided limited protection, offering insurance only to those owners who met their stringent standards for insurability. Most members owned brick or stone houses, the company banned insurance on wood buildings in 1769, and all members had the financial resources to share in the company’s losses as well as its profits. Face-to-face relationships facilitated their shared risk.113

Joint-stock companies, which began offering insurance around the turn of the century, proved to be more profitable and popular.114 One such Philadelphia company, the Insurance Company of North America (ICNA), was a maritime insurer. Regarding fire insurance policies as a possible source of new revenue, the ICNA cautiously entered the market in 1794.115 Unlike the community-focused strategies of the mutual insurance companies, joint-stock companies were a more specialized and individually-based social organization.116 Individuals purchased residential or commercial fire insurance from the

113 Tebeau, 57-58.
114 Ibid., 57-59.
115 The ICNA was the first eastern seaboard company “to insure ‘goods, wares, and merchandize, or other personal property’ against loss by fire.” Ibid., 59.
116 Ibid., 55.
company without regard for the extent of their neighbors’ protection. Perhaps unnoticed at the time, this new form of fire protection initiated a steady process of undermining the firefighters’ privileged social status. First, the success of individually-based insurance over community-based insurance foreshadowed fire insurance’s eventual influence over community-based fire companies. Secondly, it changed the public’s perception of fire protection. If a merchant’s warehouse caught fire, he was no longer entirely in the hands of the local fire companies. Money and business could also come to the rescue. The volunteers’ monopoly over fire protection was broken.

The introduction of fire insurance did not immediately call into question the necessity of firemen. Indeed, the early relationships between fire insurance companies and volunteer fire companies were mutually beneficial. The Philadelphia Contributionship paid companies who fought fires at houses that bore its firemark. At the turn of the century, insurance companies helped fund the fledgling Philadelphia Hose Company.\textsuperscript{117} During the first few decades of the nineteenth century, the ICNA regularly donated money to Philadelphia’s fire companies, solicited or otherwise. It is believed that “both parties understood this financial support in terms of a communal effort to check the dangers of fire.”\textsuperscript{118} An early attempt at firefighter organization, the 1807 Fire Hose Association, appealed to various Philadelphia underwriters for funding. The underwriters contributed funds to the city’s companies, in turn acknowledging the “importance of volunteer firefighters’ ‘laudable exertions for the general preservation,’ even as they recognized that firefighters’ work was ‘especially advantageous’ to

\textsuperscript{117} Tebeau, 22.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 78, 79.
insurance firms.”¹¹⁹ Firefighters put out fires, which limited property damage, which limited insurance payoffs. Everyone won.

Despite their stated interest in fire protection, underwriters in the first few decades of the century did not fully employ their accumulating knowledge of urban fire toward such ends. They supported some legislation to improve public safety, but this was of limited effect and dealt only with extreme dangers like storing gunpowder.¹²⁰ The underwriters’ early difficulties in accurately predicting fire also induced in some industry leaders a fatalism about urban fire which may have prevented a proactive industry attitude towards fire protection. Tebeau, in studying the private letters and notes of senior officials of the Aetna Fire Insurance Company, writes that “unable and unwilling to advocate fire prevention as a company goal, the company’s leaders frequently expressed fatalism about fire, revealing an underlying belief that fire was beyond their control or comprehension.”¹²¹ To be fair, the rapidity with which the urban environment was changing in the first half of the century, and the increasingly impersonal nature of city life, disrupted all efforts at public safety. In general, however, despite their search for a systematic method of predicting fire, insurance companies “did not advocate a systematic approach to fire prevention.”¹²²

In the first half of the century, fire insurance companies were precarious businesses whose primary focus was prolonging their own solvency. This was not an easy task. In 1835, a large New York fire pushed twenty-three of the city’s twenty-six

¹¹⁹ Tebeau, 81.
¹²⁰ Other economic and political forces, better organized and more influential than the young insurance industry, frequently defeated legislation aimed at improving public safety. Ibid., 64.
¹²¹ Ibid., 77.
¹²² Ibid., 64, 76.
local insurance companies into bankruptcy.\textsuperscript{123} The problem was that fires were hard to predict in both quantity and magnitude. Wooden houses burned more easily and more frequently than brick houses, but companies struggled to determine how much more frequently. Toward this end, around 1850 fire companies began statistical analysis of their loss records and began laying the foundations for a rational bureaucratic business model.\textsuperscript{124} In this the Aetna Fire Insurance Company of Hartford, Connecticut, was a pioneering firm.

Aetna was the first company to implement a wide variety of means to assess risk. A national firm almost immediately after its 1819 founding, Aetna operated through a vast network of field agents. These agents were assigned territory in which they were the company expert on risk.\textsuperscript{125} An Aetna expert had to be very knowledgeable about fire risks and industrial, business, and residential practices, for the policies they wrote or did not write were only periodically reviewed by more senior officials. As time went on, Aetna became increasingly complex in its categorizations of risk and information, and its system for handling field agents became more bureaucratic. While accurate fire prediction remained an elusive goal, Aetna’s organizational structure heralded the increasing importance of bureaucracy and specialist knowledge which would come to threaten the firemen’s methods of operation.\textsuperscript{126}

Another Aetna innovation with ramifications for firefighting was its emphasis on morality and good character in business. First and foremost, Aetna stressed that its agents must not drink, gamble, or exhibit other immoral or reckless behavior. The

\textsuperscript{123} Tebeau, 77.  
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 93.  
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 56.  
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 70-73.
company relied heavily on its agents’ field reports, and thus wanted to feel secure in that trust. Secondly, a reputation as a prudent company would help attract customers of “fair reputation” and good “moral character.” Arson was a popular pastime before fire insurance, and now there was the possibility of insurance fraud. As early as the 1830s, then, Aetna was combining the concepts of fire protection, economic efficiency, and upstanding character. This combination of values complimented the volunteer firemen so long as the public associated them with all three characteristics.

Changes to both volunteer fire companies and the fire insurance industry combined to deteriorate their cooperative relationship. In the 1830s and 1840s, fire companies increased their requests for money from insurance companies. Around this time, disorderly companies like MHC began setting fires out of boredom or to bait rival companies, raising into question their status as a fire-prevention association. Insurance companies, meanwhile, were growing increasingly sophisticated and competitive as they began to better predict fires and manage their risks. As a result, insurance companies like Aetna and ICNA cut down or cut off their contributions to fire companies. An Aetna official in 1829 denied a request for funding on the grounds that to accept one would be to accept all, an expense the firm could not sustain. Insurance companies were increasingly evaluating their relationship with fire companies on economic bases.

Aetna pioneered this colder and more pragmatic assessment of the relationship between firefighters and fire insurance. Aetna realized that better fire protection meant fewer fire losses, which lowered premium rates and could hurt their bottom line. Insurers did not want to pay twice for fire protection, once in funding fire companies, and a

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127 Tebeau, 69-70.
128 Ibid., 81-82.
second time in lower premiums. In the 1850s, Aetna began including fire protection in its rate calculations, instituting a cost/benefit analysis that valued its bottom line above the quality of urban fire protection. If the protection in a district was efficient, rates were lower. If the protection was poor, however, Aetna was not going to donate funds. They merely raised their rates.

This new perspective allowed national insurance companies to take less interest in local fire protection, attending instead to the community that was their risk portfolio.129 This new thinking betrayed the cooperative spirit of civic protection that fire insurance and fire companies had fostered almost a century earlier. To Aetna and other leading firms, however, “the face-to-face social relationships on which those obligations had been based were becoming anachronistic.”130

Insurance underwriters were taking a new approach to fire protection that had little or nothing to do with civic responsibility or preventing fires. New methods of statistical reasoning, new classification schemes, and new mapping techniques gave underwriters at mid-century the predictive control over fire they had sought for decades. By approaching fire as an abstract economic problem, they “turned an incalculable social threat into something to be scientifically studied, controlled, and managed.”131 Moreover, they completed the century-long process of turning fire into a profitable commodity. Aetna and ICNA had customers all across the country. The relationship between customer and underwriter was never personal. Thus, the underwriters’ concern for fire safety in places as far away as St. Louis or as close as Philadelphia became purely

129 Tebeau, 81-82.
130 Ibid., 83.
131 Ibid., 90.
economic. The old partnership with fire companies as brothers in the fight against the great destroyer was dead.

Philadelphia’s volunteers suffered for this in several ways. First, fire insurance was placing the city’s economic elite in active opposition to the firemen. While once upper-class citizens would have led a fire company, now they were running insurance firms and attempting to figure out exactly what the city’s volunteer fire companies were costing them in high or low premiums. It also subtly diminished the firemen’s cherished public prestige. Insurance was offering a new conception of fire protection, as something individually gained through the marketplace. The gratitude of a property owner whose home caught fire was now split between the firemen who saved the second floor, and the insurance company that paid for the first floor. If the firemen brawled instead of fighting the fire, insurance was there with money to repair the damage. Yet insurance companies disavowed any responsibility for public safety. Thus firemen retained the responsibility but lost the reward, the first to be blamed for bad fires, but no longer with the excuse that they were the only ones doing anything about them.

It was only natural, then, that fire insurance companies began to actively promote civic and legislative initiatives that improved fire safety without compromising their bottom line. And as insurance companies became more profitable, and insurance more commonplace, their clout increased. One manifestation of this new leverage was their promotion of steam fire engines, which improved departmental efficiency in part by reducing company rosters. Philadelphia’s firemen resisted, then embraced, steam fire engines even as the engines contributed to the firemen’s growing obsolescence.

132 Tebeau, 83, 85, 90.
133 Ibid., 8.
Steam engines used for playing water onto fires had been around as early as 1829, when British engineer George Braithwaite designed one that could pump twice the volume of a hand-pumped engine.\textsuperscript{134} The first American steam engine was commissioned by fire insurance companies in New York City in 1841. The underwriters convinced the Pearl Hose Company to use it, but other city companies were offended by the machine and refused to supply the engine with water. They opposed the engine for a variety of reasons: it affronted their manhood because it did not require masculine brake pumping, it took too long to begin playing water, it was too heavy and cumbersome, it could blow up, and the sparks from its stack could start fires.\textsuperscript{135} The engine was a failure in New York City, and hand-pump engines remained the standard apparatus.

It was the violence of some Cincinnati volunteers that jump-started the American steam engine movement. An 1851 Cincinnati mill fire turned into a thirteen-company brawl that lasted until dawn, killing six men while the mill burned to the ground. This happened at a bad time for Cincinnati fires. During the previous year, 123 fires had destroyed $600,000 worth of property, a two hundred percent increase over the previous year. Insurers raised their rates; meanwhile, the firemen brawled.\textsuperscript{136} Exasperated city councilmen, business leaders, and newspaper editors began a campaign to discredit the volunteers and find a new solution to the city’s firefighting needs.\textsuperscript{137} Part of this campaign was investigating the possibility of using steam fire engines, which required many fewer men to operate. Local inventors and engineers Abel Shawk and Alexander Bonner Latta were commissioned to design and build a steam engine.

\textsuperscript{134} Zurier, 71. Not to be confused with steam engines used for other purposes, such as pumping water from the Schuylkill River as part of Philadelphia’s water works.

\textsuperscript{135} Ditzel, 90-93.

\textsuperscript{136} Ditzel, 102; Zurier, 75-77.

\textsuperscript{137} Zurier, 77.
Their first model, a modified rowboat engine, debuted before a large crowd on March 1, 1852. The engine shot a solid stream of water 130 feet, inducing the city council to pay Latta and Shawk $5,000 to build a steamer that could shoot six streams. While firemen jeered and threatened the inventors and the city councilmen, Latta and Shawk built their engine, nicknamed the Uncle Joe Ross. On January 1, 1853, the Uncle Joe Ross was introduced to the city in a competition against Union Fire Company and their powerful hand-pumped engine. The steam engine weighed 22,000 pounds and was pulled by four horses. The volunteers got up a two hundred-foot stream faster than the Uncle Joe Ross, but when it finally went into action, the steam engine shot 225 feet, a distance the volunteers could not match. Mixing humiliation into defeat, the three men operating the Uncle Joe Ross then let fly with all six streams of water, while the Union men sat back, exhausted. To many observers, the demonstration proved steam’s superiority over manpower.138

Riding on the steamer’s success, city council passed a resolution on March 10, 1853 to create a part-time paid department. The resolution went into effect three weeks later, on April 1. Miles Greenwood, a notable local mechanical engineer and volunteer firefighter for twenty-four years, was made chief.139 The city’s volunteers resisted, as many expected they would. At the first fire after the department was created, both volunteers and the Uncle Joe Ross responded. The volunteers cut the steamer’s hose, but Greenwood had turned out with 250 Irishmen carrying shillelaghs, who quickly settled the issue. The next day volunteers began applying for positions in the new paid

138 Ditzel, 104-106.
139 Ibid., 104.
department, and those whose records were clean were hired as part-time firefighters.\textsuperscript{140} The story went out that “a disciplined industrialist and a steam fire engine physically bested disorderly volunteer firefighters and saved the city from being ravaged.”\textsuperscript{141} Steam engines had helped create the first paid fire department in a major American city.

Steam engines were not an unqualified success in Cincinnati. In 1854, the Uncle Joe Ross’s boiler exploded, killing its engineer.\textsuperscript{142} Still, Cincinnati’s citizens, councilmen, and insurance companies raved about the engine and the new department, sparking interest from other cities. Greenwood expressed the engines’ appeal with what became a popular quote: “Steamers never get drunk. They never throw brickbats. Their only drawback is that they can’t vote.”\textsuperscript{143} New York City held a competition on February 9, 1855 between the Mankiller, the city’s most powerful hand-pumped engine, and a Latta-built engine. The Mankiller won on speed and vertical distance, but the steam engine won on horizontal distance and stream duration. New York City was a powerful bastion of volunteer firefighting interests, but the demonstration convinced many that steam engines were the engines of the future.\textsuperscript{144}

In Philadelphia, City Council’s interest was piqued. A committee was established in 1854 to investigate the matter. They traveled to Cincinnati and recommended that Philadelphia purchase two steam engines. In February, 1855, a steam engine called the “Miles Greenwood” arrived for a demonstration, but gave an unsatisfactory performance.\textsuperscript{145} In May of that year, City Council invited three volunteer engine

\textsuperscript{140} Ditzel, 106.
\textsuperscript{141} Tebeau, 141.
\textsuperscript{142} Ditzel, 106.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 108.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 113.
\textsuperscript{145} Scharf & Westcott, vol. 3, 1908.
companies, Assistance, Diligent, and Weccacoe, to a competition with a Shawk-built engine, the Young American. Diligent Engine Company held a reputation as operating the city’s most effective hand-pumped engine. Their company’s engine had been built in the 1830s by Patrick Lyon, a famous public-spirited artisan, and redesigned in the 1840s by John Agnew, the city’s most renowned engine manufacturer. As Tebeau writes, “Philadelphians understood that the company’s apparatus, and by extension its men, embodied the traditions of firefighting in Philadelphia—efficiency, citizenship, physical power, and technological innovation.”

Local newspapers played up the competition, paying respect to both Diligent Engine Company and the Young American. In the contest, Diligent beat the Young American 133 feet to 120 feet. Philadelphia’s volunteers concluded that their strength and skill had triumphed over Cincinnati’s manufacturers. Tebeau writes, “According to all the criteria by which firefighters judged themselves—standards that connected physical strength, technique, and technical innovation—volunteer firemen had vanquished steam technology.” Other voices disagreed, however. The newspaper the Phoenix Ledger argued that the standard of success was not stream length but efficiency, and the steam engine required many fewer men to operate. Others considered the contest simply a failure of Cincinnati manufacturing, and called for Philadelphia’s finest artisans to create steam engines worthy of their proud city. Whereas several decades ago the firemen would have been widely praised for their dedication and prowess, now the allure of efficiency and

146 Tebeau, 142.
147 Ibid., 142.
148 Ibid., 143.
149 Ibid., 143-144.
technology kept the steam engine a real possibility. Firemen and firefighting were no longer synonymous.

Firemen had mixed reactions to the steam engine. “Dix” writing from New York City to the *Fireman’s Journal* ridiculed steam engines. He tied them to the city’s “powerful influences” which were agitating for a paid department, and predicted that New Yorkers would regret letting steam fire engines be used as “an entering wedge” in overturning the paid system. In Philadelphia, volunteers were somewhat open to the new technology. Even after the contest, a small number of the city’s companies viewed steam engines as an opportunity to improve their efficiency. It was a new technical challenge as well, and an opportunity to prove their dedication to the city and their mastery over machines. When a group of citizens put up $10,000 to lease the Young American for five years, and several volunteer companies lined up to use it.

The businessmen who raised the money had a particular agenda for their engine, however. Two of the leading men of the group, J. Cowperthwait and William Pettit, had helped organize in 1852 a committee to investigate creating a paid fire department. Now they dangled the steam engine in front of the city, but attached conditions. Their engine had to be operated by paid city employees, “practical and competent hands,” who would form a new paid firefighting organization. The Young American was an improvement over many of the city’s hand-pumped engines. The businessmen’s unwillingness to let volunteers operate it, however, showed that they were more concerned with removing the volunteers than with firefighting efficiency.

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151 Tebeau, 144-146. The Young American did not see regular service until the end of the decade. The business interests relented only when other city fire companies began contracting for their own steam engines, diminishing the underwriters’ leverage. Diligent Engine Company, the same company which had
Despite the hostile scheming surrounding the Young American, some companies circumvented the city government and contracted for their own steam engines. The Philadelphia Hose Company once again led the way, contracting locally for a steam engine which went into service in 1858. It is interesting to note that alongside PHC’s motives of efficiency and civic duty, the company very well may have sought out a steam engine in order to fulfill its reputation for innovation. In this way the volunteers’ self-created pride and honor came full circle to reinforce the behavior upon which the firemen had based their original concepts of honor. Other companies followed suit, and by 1860 nineteen fire companies had purchased steam engines, making engines into a new field for competition.

Philadelphia’s firefighters’ path toward steam engines can be viewed as a kind of self-destructive but unavoidable inclination. They were drawn to the machines through their genuine desire for innovation and improved efficiency. Steam engines were also an enjoyable new technological challenge. For these reasons, Philadelphia’s firemen made room in their doctrines of masculinity and pride for the steam engine. Yet the steam engine brought consequences which, while perhaps not apparent at first, helped to further antiquate the volunteer system.

beaten the engine in 1855, asked to use the Young American. After making significant mechanical changes, the company put the engine into service in 1859. Tebeau, 146.

152 Ibid., 146-7.

153 The alarm telegraph system for reporting fires was a technological innovation that brought new unity to the city’s fire companies. Before the telegraph system, companies found fires through a imprecise, tense, and slow combination of eyesight, ringing bells, and bystanders’ directions. In 1844, the City Councils adopted an alarm system fashioned after one in Boston. A central alarm station linked 150 alarm boxes scattered throughout Philadelphia with the city’s firehouses. The telegraph told the firemen which box had reported the alarm, shortening response times. The system reduced company autonomy by linking the city’s companies into a cooperative network. Critics also hoped the system would provide moral improvement by discouraging false alarms and racing. Ibid., 26, 122, 150.
First, steam engines were more expensive to maintain, which meant that the fire companies were more dependent upon city funding. The city did not donate freely, but asked in turn that the volunteers further integrate themselves into the city’s administrative organization, diminishing their cherished autonomy. The steam engines also required new forms of expertise for their maintenance and operation. This expertise was increasingly incompatible with the volunteer firefighting system, in which men held other jobs and then rushed off to the firehouse when the alarm sounded. Men with the mechanical knowledge to repair and operate the steam engines had to do so full-time, which meant they needed pay for their skill. This process of division of labor began with the volunteers’ very inception, but only now did it burst forth as an imminent threat to their lifestyle.154

Before volunteer fire companies, the entire community shared the responsibility for fire protection. Every citizen had his bucket and was required to turn out at fires. The creation of volunteer fire companies placed that responsibility with specific men who possessed characteristics helpful in fighting fires. In a crude sense, perhaps distinguished at first only by their willingness to spare the time, the firemen of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were already specialists. Fire companies took the next step in the 1830s, when they created the “honorary” and “contributing” categories of company membership. “Active” members were those men who turned out at every fire. Honorary members were those firemen who had served long enough in the company that they did not have to turn out to fires, but were still welcome in the house and could march in parades. Contributing members did not have to turn out to fires, but paid regular

154 Tebeau, 148-150.
company dues. These divisions honored veterans and raised needed funds, but also placed the actual firefighting into still fewer hands.

Tebeau writes that this increasing specialization “set the stage for the shift from avocation to vocation, mirroring broader patterns of change in the industrialization nation.” The growing factory system of labor meant that workers, tied to the workplace, were not as free to leave work unexpectedly when the fire alarm sounded. An 1852 citizen committee report recommending a paid department noted that Philadelphians “all have our occupations and pursuits, which we cannot drop unless in cases of great emergency.” Efficient firefighting was requiring increasing amounts of not only specialized knowledge but also dedicated time that only paid firefighters could provide.

An 1896 advertising pamphlet for the Silsby Steam Fire Engine combines steam engines’ allure with the problem of expertise. Besides emphasizing the engine’s excellent design, durability, and capabilities, the company also stresses expertise and labor. The engines are built by “thoroughly trained expert mechanics,” and the company sends “a thoroughly competent engineer” out with every engine to “thoroughly instruct the local engineer in the running and proper care of the machine.” While not a surprising advertising technique, emphasizing the manufacturer’s expertise does parallel

155 Tebeau, 16.
156 In turn of the century artisan workshops, men employed as carpenters or shoemakers were more easily able to leave work for a fire. Firemen’s greater social esteem also made their employers more agreeable to such departures. Finally, firemen were also more likely to be their own employers, as a greater percentage of them were upper-class merchants and artisans. Laurie, 83.
158 The Silsby engine was manufactured by the American Fire Engine Company, based in Seneca Falls, New York. Seneca’s location on the New York State barge canal allowed the city to become “the fire-engine manufacturing capital of the world. The industry flourished there until around 1900.” Ditzel, 94.
160 Silsby, 17.
expertise’s prominence in the transition from hand-pump engines to steam engines.

Interestingly, the packet also declares that the Silsby engine is so simple “that any man of
ordinary intelligence can master the running and proper care of it in an hour’s time.”¹⁶¹

And again: “The merit of this extreme simplicity in the ‘Silsby’ make-up is emphasized
by the fact, that an experienced engineer is not required to run it successfully.”¹⁶² The
position requiring expertise had moved upstream, from the firefighter to the engine
manufacturer. Expertise was expensive, and ironically this state-of-the-art steam engine
was simple enough that even volunteer firemen could operate it.

The Silsby packet echoes elements of the volunteer culture that, at time of its
printing, had become ancient history. Small sections near the end titled “Efficiency,”
“Power,” “Reliability,” “Economy,” “Durability,” recall the firemen’s self-attributed
characteristics.¹⁶³ By 1896 they had become characteristics of a steam engine. The
pamphlet contains pictures and statistics from public demonstrations in which Silsby
engines shot water higher than steeples, another volunteer ritual appropriated by the
steam engine.¹⁶⁴ The engine preserves the volunteers’ love of ornamentation by offering
a “handsomely engraved nickel plated name-plate” and assuring the purchaser that “all
painting and decorative work is executed to conform to the demands of the highest art
standards.”¹⁶⁵ Yet these glorified machines dramatically reduced the number of firemen
needed to protect a city. A hand-pump engine required at least thirty or forty men just to
work the brakes, while ten men could operate a steam engine.¹⁶⁶ Philadelphia’s paid fire

¹⁶¹ Silsby, 14.
¹⁶² Ibid., 20.
¹⁶³ Ibid., 18-20.
¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 26-28.
¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 16-17.
¹⁶⁶ Tebeau, 120. Even the Silsby packet brags that its “rotary” steam engines require one fewer man to
department listed four hundred men on its rolls, a small troupe compared to the approximately three thousand volunteer firemen prior to the switch.\textsuperscript{167} In Philadelphia, the volunteers’ genuine love of innovation and efficiency brought them to embrace a new technology that rendered many in their brotherhood redundant.

Criminal fire companies, fire insurance, steam engines, labor specialization: all of these things pressured cities to get control of their volunteers, and pressured volunteers to reform or lose authority over their avocation. Debate over the proper way to organize a fire department might have remained theoretical if fire had not reached disastrous proportions by mid-century. As cities became larger, taller, and more dense, the possibility of conflagration increased, as did the amount of life and property at stake. In a little more than a decade, major American cities suffered devastating fires that shocked governments and underwriters. Charleston, South Carolina suffered a $4 million dollar fire in 1838. Mobile, Alabama lost 600 buildings the next year. In 1845, a fire in New York City burned 300 buildings and killed 30 people, including four firefighters. The same year 900 buildings burned in Pittsburgh. Most of Nantucket’s waterfront was destroyed in an 1846 fire, wrecking its whaling infrastructure. An epic conflagration in St. Louis in 1849 destroyed 430 buildings and 23 steamboats, representing over $3 million in losses, or approximately 75 percent of the city’s accumulated capital.\textsuperscript{168} In 1850 Philadelphia lost 400 buildings and 39 lives in one fire. Insurance companies suffered heavy losses. New York City underwriters reported that their losses jumped from $720,689 in 1839 to $4,567,838 in 1840. It was clear to many that the current

\textsuperscript{167} The newspaper the \textit{Public Ledger} estimated in 1853 that six to eight thousand men served as volunteer firemen, and that a steam engine-based department could run on less than 400 men. Tebeau, 121.

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 21-22.
system of hand-pumped engines operated by volunteer fire companies was unequal to the task of urban fire protection.\textsuperscript{169}

\textsuperscript{169} Ditzel, 90, 94-96. Zurier, 75.
**Response and Reform**

The violence of the 1840s shocked Philadelphia’s civic and economic elite into serious debate over how best to quickly and permanently restore public order. Such debate centered around new systems of police and fire protection. One prominent Philadelphian, Thomas Pym Cope, submitted a plan for a paid department to City Councils in October, 1844.170 Cope’s plan would establish a to-be-determined number of fire and hose companies, each consisting of “20 or 25 able bodied men in the prime of life, & of good moral character, to be annually elected by Councils.”171 Each firemen would be paid annually, and would double as a policeman. The system would be placed under the control of the mayor, to be run by a chief engineer and subordinate company engineers. Cope’s concern was for public order. Cope was almost eighty years old in 1844, too old to join a fire company, but still an active participant in the city’s political and economic dealings. He had lived through the turn of the century and the founding firemen’s popularity, and yet his plan refashioned the fire department along new principles of specialization and centralized hierarchy. He understood both schools of thought, and decided that the business of firefighting could no longer be left up to free associations.172 The plan did not make it out of Councils, but the discussion of a paid fire department continued.

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170 Cope was a successful Quaker merchant with a variety of ties to the history of the city’s firefighters. He served on Select Council and the Board of Directors of the Insurance Company of North America, making him a member of both the city’s political and economic elite. He also was instrumental in creating the Schuylkill water works at the turn of the century. Among his most laudable accomplishments was helping to found Haverford College, which became a stellar liberal arts college known for its spunky and charming student body.

171 Thomas Pym Cope, "Personal Diary, 1844-1851." Special Collections, Magill Library, Haverford College, Haverford, PA, 10/24/1844.

172 Cope, 10/24/1844.
City insurance underwriters like Cope believed that the current system of bloated firefighter rosters, wasteful and counterproductive rituals, and increasingly inadequate hand-pump engines was both inefficient and costly. The seriousness of fire protection required a department “organized in a more economically rational fashion, akin to the organization of factories.” Merchants, manufacturers, and other property owners, once the volunteers’ admirers, supported this view. Another way to frame the debate was one between the city’s older, community-centered society versus the industrial economy. The firefighters were local, increasingly immigrant or working-class, and embodied a tradition begun in a smaller Philadelphia concerned with civic duty. The underwriters and other property owners, while frequently old Philadelphians themselves, proposed “an alternative vision of social organization in which economic rationality characterized community, masculinity, and social relationships.” Fire protection was restated as an individual, not a communal enterprise.

A spectrum of citizens including property owners and other economic elite formed a committee in 1852 to examine the propriety of changing the city’s firefighting system. Their recommendations, which they published in 1853, represent an articulation of the day’s most influential arguments for a paid department. Their report reminded the reader of the good old days, when the public easily praised “the disinterested and gallant exertions of the public spirited young men” who volunteered to fight fires. Now, however, Philadelphia suffers both “frequent and disastrous fire” and “disorder and
violence manifested by a portion of the firemen.”\footnote{Report of a Committee..., 4.} \footnote{Ibid., 3, 4.} Conditions are an embarrassment to the city, “have produced a feeling of distrust and insecurity” among the residents, and have cost the city money in fire damage and lost investment. Thus, the committee members “have become impressed with a deep conviction that the thorough change contemplated by the enquiry is of the most pressing and urgent importance.”\footnote{Ibid., 3, 4.}

The committee’s report is divided into ten sections, each covering a subject of concern or an area of recommendation. Insurance premiums stand out as an important reason for reform. The report states that it is unconnected to the city’s insurance offices, but it reads like a big supporter. The recent insurance companies disbursements for arson and accidental fire show “the great benefit that owners have derived from this kind of security.”\footnote{Ibid., 5.} Unfortunately, the underwriters have lost money on these policies and will have to raise rates.\footnote{Ibid., 5.} For “insurance is not a work of benevolence; it is a matter of business.”\footnote{Ibid., 8.} The report continues, “And we may be thankful to have their protection on these terms, even though the tax be an onerous one.”\footnote{Ibid., 8.} This illustrates the degree to which fire insurance was appreciated for fire protection but not resented for its own costs. The implication is that fire companies, as works of benevolence, could be held to different standards.\footnote{Ibid., 8.}

On standards of benevolence, the report finds the city’s firemen failing badly. The report details the city’s “exceedingly expensive” department and its affliction of

\footnote{The committee predicts that a paid fire department would be much less expensive to the city’s private and public donors. While not providing an estimate for the cost of a paid department, the report states that municipal governments gave $18,000 to the city’s volunteer fire and hose companies in 1852. Ibid., 9.}
“runners and hangers on…to whom arson and murder are but pastime and amusement.”\textsuperscript{185} The lawlessness of this group, together with the “well-known rivalry” between certain companies, “their frequent collisions,” and the “fatal consequences of them” all threaten “our civil organisation[\textit{sic}] and government.”\textsuperscript{186} The city’s riots and fights have become so notorious that they attract not only reproach, but ridicule and contempt.\textsuperscript{187} The problem, the report decides, is that “we have outgrown” the system.\textsuperscript{188} When the city was smaller and relationships more intimate, the department served well and was praised for its “respectability, activity and efficiency.”\textsuperscript{189} Now, in a dense city where “our relations are more complicated,” the current system of men leaving work to answer the alarm is outdated.\textsuperscript{190} Like the police and every other occupation in the city, firefighting should be run like “a special business.”\textsuperscript{191} The report compares the system to a militia, while the city requires an army with a general.\textsuperscript{192} It is interesting to note that the report does not praise the firemen for strength, bravery, or civic duty, traits of exertion with which the volunteers founded their avocation. Rather it praises them for respectability, activity and efficiency, characteristics of restraint possessing more social capital in the 1850s.

The report also identifies more subtle moral problems with the current system. The volunteer system holds a dangerous fascination for the city’s youths, who are drawn into a world of “idleness, profanity, intemperance, rioting, and bloodshed” which lands

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\textsuperscript{185} Report of a Committee..., 6, 7, 9.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 11. The reorganization of the police department, occurring around this time, will be discussed later on.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., 12.
\end{flushright}
Forty years ago, boys’ admiration was part of the firefighters’
deserved public tribute. Now, the boys’ behavior has changed, their parents’ values have
changed, and the tribute has become a reason for criticism.

The committee believes that most of the city’s firemen are “ordinary fellow-
citizens…more bound by what they suppose to be their duty as citizens, than by any
attachment to orders, occupation or profession.” They perform their duty admirably
and desire law and order as much as anyone. In the last several elections, parties running
firemen candidates did not receive many more votes than parties without firemen
candidates. This is proof that firemen are citizens first and firemen second. Thus, the
report predicts that when the firemen realize the necessity of changing the system, they
will wholeheartedly support it. This assertion is important. At the turn of the century,
being a firemen was proof that one was a citizen, and a citizen of particular worth.
Firemen justified their public prestige on the grounds that they were virtuous citizens. By
1853, the “firemen” identification had become a secondary characteristic of these men,
subordinate to their role as ordinary “citizens.” Firemen and citizenship were separate
identities, and whether the firemen agreed with this view is not considered. The report
does not argue this fact, but rather takes heart in it, suggesting that the distinction was
unquestioned to the middle and upper-class men advising city policy.

For actual recommendations the report looks to the fire departments of Boston,
London, and Paris. Boston had “some years ago” placed its firemen under municipal

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194 Ibid., 14.
195 It is the minors associated with the system, the “evil disposed persons,” who wreck havoc, and they
cannot vote, and thus “cannot corrupt our laws.” Ibid., 15.
196 Ibid., 14.
control and there has since been no news of riots or fights in that city.\textsuperscript{197} The report recommends forming a committee that will visit and study other cities’ systems while applying American ingenuity to the problem. The result will be a firefighting system that inspires envy in the world and induces low insurance rates from insurance companies.\textsuperscript{198} The new system should use horses to pull carriages, minimize water use with Parisian firefighting techniques, and establish a hierarchical organization of superintendents and lieutenants.\textsuperscript{199} When implemented, the city will “have the advantage of discipline, order, efficiency, and security, in the highest possible degree, and at the lowest possible cost.”\textsuperscript{200}

The city’s firemen responded to this pressure with a combination of self-defense and compromise. Richard Vaux, in his speeches to the PHC, reminded his audience of the firemen’s noble founding goals, “to protect life and property.”\textsuperscript{201} The first fire associations were not selfish; “their objects were benevolent—their purpose conservative—their existence a necessity—their organization republican—their services most signal—their vitality the volition of volunteers—their numerical augmentation natural.”\textsuperscript{202} Vaux attempts to reinvigorate benevolence and necessity as valuable characteristics in order to employ the memory of fire company nobility in response to their current reputation as antiquated, inefficient social clubs.

\textsuperscript{197} Report of a Committee..., 16.
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid., 18, 19.
\textsuperscript{200} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{201} Historical Sketches..., 15.
\textsuperscript{202} Ibid., 16.
Vaux’s defense of firefighting does not extend far past his own company, however. He calls the PHC’s “unsullied” character a “relic” in the city, and vouches for no other company. 203 Vaux makes it clear that the PHC “neither created, cherished nor controlled” the “causes of decay” now threatening the “Fire Department.” 205 He disassociates the PHC from the city’s firefighting establishment in order to “survey with calmness” its problems and offer remedy. This shows that, despite growing criticism and despite his own use of the term “fire department,” Vaux and the PHC were not focused on a unified department. 206

Thus Vaux’s recommendations to preserve the institution are for companies to implement individually. Vaux asserts that “the remedy for all present dangers is within the power of the institution itself.” 207 The Fire Department (so articulated) must “recur to first principles, and first associations, and first objects, and first motives. The public good first, private interest last; but the common honor, fame and usefulness always.” 208 He advises the city’s companies to “crush all disorders” by severing “connection with the disorderly.” 209 These words concede that disorder is the problem and reform is required. Efficiency, a far more dangerous critique of the volunteer firefighting institution, is not mentioned. 210 Vaux implicitly rejects the notion that a unified, bureaucratic “fire department” is required, and asserts that the responsibility and power for reform lies with

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203 *Historical Sketches...*, 17.
204 He identifies these “causes of decay” only as general lawlessness and disorder, echoing the concerns of other prominent Philadelphians in the 1850s.
205 Ibid., 17.
206 Ibid., 17.
207 Ibid., 48.
208 Ibid., 47.
209 Ibid., 47.
210 Nor is this surprising. Richard Vaux, a man with political aspirations, was not fool enough to stand before the company and acknowledge that eighty percent of the men gathered were not required for effective fire protection.
the firemen themselves. This highlights one critical tension between the firemen and their critics in the 1850s: all acknowledged that reform was required, but the firemen wanted to retain control of firefighting and its reform, while business interests believed that reorganization had to be imposed from without.

While the city’s firemen considered internal changes that would appease their critics, the city instituted reform not directly related to firefighting. The riots, plus the audacious gang violence, “convinced almost everyone that a much enlarged and professionally trained police was necessary.”211 In 1850, the state legislature passed a bill creating a new police force for Philadelphia and the surrounding districts. The region was divided into five police districts, run by a police marshal and a police board of commissioners, and patrolled by one policeman for every four hundred taxable citizens of the area. The new force would act with or without the existing police, and “was charged specially with maintenance of the peace of the police district, or might go beyond it into any part of the county if necessary.”212 According to Scharf & Westcott’s history of Philadelphia, the new force was an immediate success. Ably run by police marshal John S. Keyser, “the lawless clubs and associations which had for years committed disorder and crime were subdued and broken up. In a few months scarcely any of them pretended to exist.”213 The importance of this new force was twofold. First, its ability to move from one district to another prevented gangs and criminals from taking shelter across district lines. Second, it was a success for those advocates who favored a bureaucratic, centralized vision of city government. If the government could efficiently run the police, it was only natural (came the argument) that the fire department be organized similarly.

211 Nash, 178.
212 Scharf & Westcott, vol. 1, 694.
213 Ibid., 694.
City consolidation is another example of the bureaucratic reforms common across the country that centralized management and staffed it with professionals.\textsuperscript{214} Again, the public concern for order encouraged the change. The various independent districts posed a problem both for policing and for criminal prosecution. Proponents of the plan, as well as most successful political candidates after consolidation, subscribed to the notion that consolidation helped restore order.\textsuperscript{215} There was vehement support and opposition to the plan, but a bill was finally pushed through the state legislature and passed on February 2, 1854. The plan enlarged Philadelphia to include all the territory inside Philadelphia County. The new government was to include a mayor, a police marshal, city treasurer, city controller, a receiver of taxes, three city commissioners, plus Select and Common Councils.\textsuperscript{216} The success of these centralizing civil reforms provided the volunteers’ critics with even more ammunition and energy with which to pursue their goal of a paid fire department.

While Philadelphia’s elites were actively working against the firemen, the middle class’s shifting values began to clash with the volunteers’ competitive and physical culture.\textsuperscript{217} Tebeau writes that by mid-century the middle class was increasingly viewing masculinity and propriety along rational, economic, and efficient lines. They opposed the “rough-and-tumble world of the streets and the darker impulses of competitive industrial

\textsuperscript{214} Tebeau. 128.
\textsuperscript{215} Russell F. Weigley, “‘A Peaceful City’: Public Order in Philadelphia from Consolidation Through the Civil War.” In The Peoples of Philadelphia..., eds. Davis and Haller, 156-157. For some years after consolidation, all of the city’s political parties stressed “the diligence they displayed in the search for order.” Weigley, 156.
\textsuperscript{216} Scharf & Westcott, vol. 1, 713-714.
\textsuperscript{217} One large source of changing middle-class values was the religious and moral reform movements which peaked in the 1840s but influenced urban life from the 1830s through the end of the century. Philadelphia led the nation in penal reform, and sustained numerous temperance societies and associations for the creation of public schooling. Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, and Quaker communities were the largest participants. Nash, 179.
culture," preferring to focus on white-collar work and the doctrines of sobriety and efficiency.\textsuperscript{218} As Tocqueville wrote fifteen years earlier, "whenever men gather to form a particular society, a characteristic form of honor immediately springs up among them."\textsuperscript{219} This form of honor was changing, from the collective responsibility of the bucket brigade and Franklin’s property owners, to the individualism of fire insurance and the factory wage. While Richard Vaux and the PHC reemphasized their commitment to their neighbors’ welfare, the middle class paid increasing attention to wealth and economic well-being. Fire and riot threatened such material gains.\textsuperscript{220} To the middle class, the rough-and-tumble, increasingly immigrant and lower-class fire companies were a threat.

Newspapers were partially responsible for the growing disconnect between the city’s middle class and its firefighters. Once a source of praise, newspapers in the 1840s gave firemen brawls “inordinate coverage” while they “complained of firemen’s riots alongside lurid descriptions of ‘lower-class’ life.”\textsuperscript{221} The city’s newspapers were “firmly aligned with business interests, fervid boosters of the city, and skittish about offending their largely middle-class clientele.”\textsuperscript{222} The brawls turned firefighter coverage from entertaining news to fodder for hostile moral outrage. When firemen became popularly connected to both disorder and the working class, city newspapers reflected and reinforced this association.

One example of the newspapers’ incorporation of middle-class values into an evaluation of city life was the writing of George G. Foster. Foster wrote a series of articles called “Philadelphia in Slices,” which appeared in the \textit{New York Tribune} between

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{218} Tebeau, 128-129.
  \item \textsuperscript{219} Tocqueville, 730.
  \item \textsuperscript{220} Tebeau, 129.
  \item \textsuperscript{221} Ibid., 128.
  \item \textsuperscript{222} Nash, 164.
\end{itemize}
October 21, 1848 and February 15, 1849.223  Foster pays respect to Philadelphia’s middle class, describing them as “one of the most substantial, most reliable, most intelligent and altogether respectable commercial communities in existence.”224  Foster then offers his view on the proper route of civic improvement: “Nothing but capital and energy are required to carry out, here and everywhere else, schemes of commercial prosperity and public improvement.”225  The ingredients tossed aside as not required are the skills of the firemen: strength, heroism, devotion to civic duty, cooperation.  This reflects the way in which money and efficiency had, by mid-century, become the standards by which many people judged the value of civic projects.

One of Foster’s articles pays special attention to the city’s firemen and their reputation for “rowdyism and brutality.”226  Foster blames this reputation in part on newspapers’ tendency to “distort occurrences for the purpose of attaching odium to whole classes and communities for the acts of a few wicked individuals.”227  This is an interesting admission of newspapers’ role in the downfall of the noble firemen.  Foster identifies these “few wicked individuals” as “gangs of ruffians and rowdy apprentices, who do not regularly belong to the Fire Companies” and are seldom even Philadelphia citizens.228  These gangs took over the rosters of several companies and “drove away the respectable members.”229  Foster’s solution is a rigorous enforcement of the penal code,

224 Ibid., 30.
225 Ibid., 30.
226 Ibid., 34.
227 Ibid., 34.
228 Writing before consolidation, however, Foster does not consider the districts to be part of the city. The districts, especially Moyamensing and Southwark, were the location of some of the most widespread villainy.
229 Ibid., 35.
but he spends little time on the solution, for despite his indictment of the newspapers’ penchant for scandal, Foster writes more for color than for content.230

While their opponents formed committees and made public recommendations for a paid fire department, Philadelphia’s firemen took their own steps towards reform. Volunteers defended their values by predicting that paid firemen would lead to worse fires through their lack of dedication to the public and to each other. Paid men would exert themselves only as much as they thought they were paid to do so. Firemen commissioned a series of prints that ridiculed the notion of a paid department. These prints showed immigrants and blacks lying around unused steam engines. The prints played into the city’s strong racism towards Irish and blacks, suggesting that a paid department not staffed by native-born artisans would be worse than inefficient.231 At the same time, a series of Currier & Ives lithographs buttressed the romanticism of the volunteer firemen, showing firemen in various heroic poses and situations. These lithographs helped preserve some support for the volunteer system in both New York City and Philadelphia, two bastions of volunteerism.232

While pressing the public attack on paid departments, firefighters experimented with organizational reform. These efforts were inspired by sincere desires for greater efficiency and respectability, and were designed to find some middle ground between the status quo and a paid department. Internal support was not unanimous; some firemen resisted the reforms, while others supported them merely out of expediency, realizing that

230 Foster also blames Mose the fireman, a popular stage character of the period and “that most odious and disgusting of all characters,” for bringing firemen an undeserved reputation for violence and debased working-class morality. First featured in the 1848 Broadway play A Glance at New York, Mose was a proudly-lower class firemen with coarse manners, quick fists, and boundless heroism in the rescue of women and children from burning buildings. Ditzel, 98-101. Foster, 35.

231 Tebeau, 133, 147.

232 Ditzel, 107.
change was necessary to keep city firefighting on their terms. A “Firemen’s Convention” in 1853 resulted in a “Board of Directors of the Philadelphia Fire Department.” This board attempted to combine thirty-nine represented companies into some measure of political clout. The board asked for political autonomy to manage its own spending, divided the city into three fire districts, elected officers, and provided mediation between companies.

This new organization was something of a concession to the critics and reformers who were arguing for increased municipal control over firefighters. Yet the firemen were not immune to their times, and had adopted, wittingly or unwittingly, some of the business community’s perspective. Firemen saw themselves as firefighting specialists, and they embraced technology and other paths to greater efficiency which moved them closer to the underwriters’ vision of a fire department. Despite the charges of inefficiency and disorder, firemen saw themselves as good workmen.

These reforms attempted to reign in rowdy companies and appease critics. Self-imposed rules forbid racing and brawling, laid out regimented roles and spheres of activity at fires, and forbid companies from responding to fires outside their district. The new bureaucratic structure distanced companies from their communities in favor of a departmental emphasis. This also dampened company identity, which in turn reduced the volatile potential of company interactions. The reforms had a noticeable effect. Tebeau writes that “the expression of political and social differences became less pronounced and

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233 Tebeau, 135-138. Earlier attempts at regulatory firefighter associations had generally failed. The 1807 Fire Hose Association grew into the 1817 Fire Association, which attempted to represent the city’s firemen in dealings with municipal governments. Municipalities did not recognize its authority, however, and it had difficulty keeping its coalition of companies together. While the FA persisted for decades, it came to include a smaller and smaller percentage of the city’s fire companies. The Board of Control of the Philadelphia Fire Department formed in 1839, but it also failed after a few years. Ibid., 49-50.

234 Ibid., 134-135.

235 Ibid., 127, 133.
provocative.” Fights were less common, and the department punished the participants. Parades and other exhibitions of avocational pride became more formal and received official sanction.

With such changes, the firefighters were understandably surprised to discover that the city’s business interests were vigorously against the board’s reforms. Firefighters watched as the legislative bill which would have granted the board legal legitimacy was killed at the last minute by a coalition of business interests. This was a significant defeat. The bill’s near-miss signified that the firemen were capable of mustering political clout, a fact which reformers employed to scare the middle class. Their defeat also meant that the reform-minded firefighters, the ones who wanted to see their avocation survive modified rather than abolished outright, had failed to publicly and politically separate themselves from the rowdy firemen who opposed all oversight and reform.

After consolidation the new city government enacted reform of its own, and initially did not consult the firemen. Consolidated Philadelphia adopted a plan in 1855 that for the first time brought firefighting under official city supervision. The plan divided the city into seven districts, to be overseen by a chief engineer and seven assistant engineers. Each company that accepted the plan would receive $400 annually, and had to elect a director who would report to the city. Besides the frustration of not being consulted, several aspects of the plan made it unpopular with a majority of the city’s companies. The chief engineer was a political appointee, and contributing members were

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236 Tebeau, 150.
237 The coalition was led by prominent Philadelphians Horace Binney and Stephen Colwell. Binney was a prominent Philadelphia lawyer, director of the United States Bank, and member of the US Congress from 1833 to 1835. Colwell was a lawyer, iron merchant, philanthropist, and member of many committees and associations concerning local and national political and economic policy. Both men were the types of civic leaders who, fifty years ago, might have formed their own fire company.
238 Ibid., 137-138.
barred from company life. After months of contentious debate, the two sides reached a compromise. The firemen’s board reconstituted itself under the city government’s oversight, taking with it seventy percent of the city’s fire companies. In return, the city changed its firefighting ordinance, making the chief engineer elected directly by the companies, and allowing contributing members to participate in company life. Those companies that refused to participate rejected all city funding and attempted to form their own board, but by 1860, most of the city’s resisting companies had applied for admission.

Philadelphia’s reform was part of a national trend. Cincinnati led the way by creating a paid department in 1853. Major American cities followed suit. St. Louis switched in 1857, Baltimore in 1858, Boston in 1860. Far from being violent, many of these switches were facilitated by the volunteers themselves. It should be remembered that emphasis on efficiency and the gradual adoption of hierarchical structures rendered many volunteer departments not so different from the paid departments which replaced them. Supervisory positions in the new departments helped ease the transition. While most volunteer firemen did not become paid firemen, significant portions of cities’ new paid rosters were former volunteers. Cities concerned with efficiency could not overlook the fact that their most efficient firemen were the volunteers themselves. In Cincinnati, volunteers published a letter recommending the creation of a paid department. In St. Louis, volunteers occupied most of the top positions in the new department, which induced volunteer companies to donate men and supplies to the new organization. True,

239 Tebeau, 122-123, 139.
240 Ibid., 139-140.
241 Zurier, 78.
some volunteer companies remained in service, attempting to beat the city’s paid companies to fires and hydrants.\textsuperscript{242} The assistance (or at least acceptance) which many volunteers exhibited shows the degree to which the arguments for paid departments had settled with men who decades earlier had been the standard bearers for a very different conception of city life.

The Civil War slowed down the path of reform as the nation focused on larger issues. Entire companies of Philadelphia’s firemen enlisted – eleven thousand in all by the war’s end - and steam engine production dropped.\textsuperscript{243} Philadelphia did not experience draft riots like New York. Instead, there were signs of growing urban order. In 1863 Republican Congressman William D. Kelley became the first major Philadelphia public figure to address a mass meeting of blacks in the company of black leaders.\textsuperscript{244} Concerns about national order minimized concerns about urban order. In April, 1864 a city ordinance created the office of fire marshal.\textsuperscript{245} After the war ended, the triumph of military organization and administration likely acted as a further inducement to the professionalization and bureaucratization of civic services.\textsuperscript{246}

Scharf and Westcott’s history of Philadelphia have relatively little to say about the switch to the paid department. They write that “it was no child’s play to destroy an organization which the habits and needs of years had made a living thing, and which was endeared to the people by acts of the noblest heroism.”\textsuperscript{247} Indeed, those favoring a paid department were unable to create one in a single stroke. It took more than twenty years

\textsuperscript{242} Tebeau, 158-163.
\textsuperscript{243} Ditzel, 114. Zurier, 80.
\textsuperscript{244} Weigley, 168.
\textsuperscript{245} Scharf & Westcott, vol. 3, 1910.
\textsuperscript{246} Zurier, 80.
\textsuperscript{247} Scharf & Westcott, vol., 3, 1912.
of argument and gradual change. The paid system’s proponents, however, “asserted that a volunteer department and acts of lawlessness were concomitants.” An ordinance creating a paid department passed in 1870, the board of commissioners met and organized on January 3, 1871, and the department went into effect on March 15, 1871. Scharf and Westcott note that some companies made “turbulent efforts to prevent the establishment of the reform,” but nothing else is mentioned. The new department paid its chief engineer $2,500 a year, while firemen received $800 and hook-and-ladder men $750 a year. The historians praise the new department, calling it “a model in every particular, a source of pride to the city, and a credit and honor to those who compose it.” In this respect the citizen’s committee of 1853 would have been proud.

The paid department inherited the existing volunteer system, changing some aspects while leaving others untouched. Paid companies were built around chains of command, and gave themselves organizational names like “Engine 1.” The old decorated sitting rooms became more simple meeting halls. The new companies still grounded themselves in notions of service and battle against fire’s disorder, and established their worth through competence, skill, dedication, and innovation. Company competition remained, but it was closer to the constructive spirit which Vaux had identified in the turn-of-the-century companies as having “the effect to stimulate to greater exertion.” Like in other cities, Philadelphia’s volunteers ultimately played a prominent role in the

249 Ibid., 1912.
250 Scharf & Westcott, vol. 1, 836.
251 Scharf & Westcott, vol. 3, 1913. Leadership positions in paid departments were frequently staffed by former volunteer firemen. They were paid well because the men who filled them “possessed both diagnostic and practical technical skills.” Thus, expertise’s new importance rewarded a very small percentage of the men who it helped to render redundant. Tebeau, 162.
253 Historical Sketches..., 41; Tebeau, 162-3.
paid department. Less than five percent of the city’s volunteers “chose or were given the opportunity to earn wages as firefighters in 1871.”254 Yet about 165 of the 400 paid firemen had been listed as volunteers in 1868.255 Some volunteer companies lingered and rivalry existed between the two types of companies, but they eventually faded away. Philadelphia was the last major American city to institute a paid fire department, New York having created one in 1865.

254 Tebeau, 158.
255 Ibid, 159.
Conclusion

The history of Philadelphia’s volunteer fire department is not just a story about social reform, or the changing nature of civic associations, or industrial business practices and their effects on civic services. It is some combination of all of these, plus other threads of nineteenth century social history, each of which deserves its own recounting. The story of the volunteers’ retirement is also not simply a story about fire insurance, or urban violence, or gender.256 Philadelphia’s firemen attempted to keep control of firefighting, but their success was incomplete. Irresistible outside forces changed both firefighting and firemen. Forms of reorganization, like the alarm telegraph, meant that “firemen no longer worked in communities defined by them, but in neighborhoods organized by the city.”257 Philadelphia’s growth during the first half of the nineteenth century prompted insurance underwriters and other civic leaders to reject as outdated the face-to-face relationships on which firemen had related to their communities. As firemen compromised to keep firefighting on their terms, they lost the aspects of their culture most incompatible with reformers’ vision of a paid department.

Benjamin Franklin in 1736 and the Philadelphia Hose Company in 1803 established firefighting in Philadelphia as among the city’s most noble civic activities. The men who shouldered community safety did so out of their sense of duty as republican citizens. The public paid them with homage and funding, and boys dreamed of growing up into firemen. Two or three decades into the century, however, the

256 See Tebeau for an exhaustive history of the relationship between fire insurance and fire fighting in America. See Andrew Neilly’s dissertation, “The Violent Volunteers” for an account of Philadelphia’s troubled companies. See Amy Greenberg’s Cause for Alarm for an interpretation of the volunteer fire department as filtered through gender.  
257 Tebeau, 122.
companies began to change. The rewards for selfless service became the reason to join up. City expansion increased the number of companies, and the era’s ethnic, religious, and political differences manifested themselves in volatile company identities. Then, those tensions exploded into riot and violence in the 1840s, and the volunteers’ reputation for rowdyism made them targets for a public suddenly concerned with restoring public order.

Concurrent with these social changes was fire insurance’s maturation, and its steady undermining of the volunteers’ monopoly on public gratitude for fire protection. Philadelphia’s underwriters developed a system of new organizing principles that made fire insurance profitable. Their success provided an alternative conception of fire protection that made no promises of safety, but accepted thanks for protection. Seeing the underwriters’ financial success, business and civic leaders found new areas in which to apply the persuasive principles of economic efficiency, bureaucratization, and expertise. Fire protection was an obvious target. The firemen resisted these changes, but the technology of steam engines and telegraph alarms which the underwriters promoted proved to be an “entering wedge” by which the firemen came to accept the new criteria for judging fire protection. The division of labor inherent in the firemen’s very creation came to require a paid department; the process which gave birth to the firemen also killed them.

All of these forces came together in the 1850s to challenge the firemen’s dominance of city fire protection. Despite their continuing service, to the public they “became obstacles to [a] vision of a well-ordered society in which” “economic rationality
characterized community, masculinity, and social relationships.” Firemen attempted to alleviate this pressure with internal reforms, but the firemen may have been unaware of just how much they had already bought into the new organizational rhetoric. Their reforms moved them closer to their critics’ vision of a paid fire department, but they did not go far enough for the uncompromising reformers who pushed their agenda through to the end. No one pressure may have been enough to dislodge the entrenched firemen. Together, however, these various pressures forced the volunteer firemen into retirement, in part because many of the firemen themselves, citizens of their era, accepted the need for change and worked to achieve it. Philadelphia’s volunteer firefighting, built upon neighborhood identity and personal interaction, gave way to the new industrial doctrine of skilled and departmentalized labor, and a colorful community institution melted into what is today a skilled and unquestioned civil service.

258 Tebeau, 123, 124.
Bibliography


