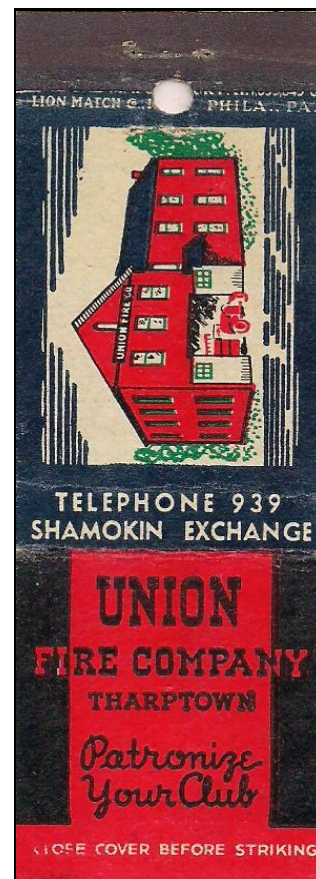


Fire Companies

The history of organized firefighting began in ancient Rome while under the rule of Augustus. Prior to that, there is evidence of fire-fighting machinery in use in Ancient Egypt, including a water pump invented by Ctesibius of Alexandria in the third century BC which was later improved upon in a design by Hero Of Alexandria in the first century BC.

The first Roman fire brigade of which we have any substantial history was created by Marcus Licinius Crassus, who acquired an enormous fortune through (in the words of Plutarch) "fire and rapine." One of his most lucrative schemes took advantage of the fact that Rome had no fire department. Crassus filled this void by creating his own brigade—500 men strong—which rushed to burning buildings at the first cry of alarm. Upon arriving at the scene, however, the fire fighters did nothing while their employer bargained over the price of their services with the distressed property owner. If Crassus could not negotiate a satisfactory price, his men simply let the structure burn to the ground, after which he offered to purchase it for a fraction of its value. Augustus took the basic idea from Crassus and then built on it to form the Vigiles to combat fires using bucket brigades and pumps, as well as poles, hooks and even ballistae to tear down buildings in advance of the flames. The Vigiles patrolled the streets of Rome to watch for fires and served as a police force. The later brigades consisted of hundreds of men, all ready for action. When there was a fire, the men would line up to the nearest water source and pass buckets hand in hand to the fire. Rome suffered a number of serious fires, most notably the fire on 19 July AD 64 and eventually destroyed two thirds of Rome.

The first fire brigades in the modern sense were created in France in the early 18th century. In 1699, a man with bold commercial ideas, François du Mouriez du Périer solicited an audience with King Louis XIV. Greatly interested in Jan Van der Heyden's invention, he successfully demonstrated the



new pumps and managed to convince the king to grant him the monopoly of making and selling "fire-preventing portable pumps" throughout the kingdom of France. François offered 12 pumps to the city of Paris, and the first Paris Fire Brigade, known as the Compagnie des gardes-pompes (literally the "Company of Pump Guards"), was created in 1716. He was appointed "director of the City of Paris's pumps", i.e. chief of the Paris Fire Brigade, and the position stayed in his family until 1760. In the following years, other fire brigades were created in the large French cities. Around that time appeared the current French word pompier ("firefighter"), whose literal meaning is "pumper." On March 11, 1733, the French government decided that the interventions of the fire brigades would be free of charge. This was decided because people always waited until the last moment to call the fire brigades to avoid paying the fee, and it was often too late to stop fires. From 1750 on, the French fire brigades became para-military units and received uniforms. In 1756, the use of a protective helmet for firefighters was recommended by King Louis XV, but it took many more years before the measure was actually enforced on the ground.

In North America, Jamestown, Virginia, was virtually destroyed in a fire in January, 1608. There were no full-time paid firefighters in America until 1850. Even after the formation of paid fire companies in the United States, there were disagreements and often fights over territory. New York City companies were famous for sending runners out to fires with a large barrel to cover the hydrant closest to the fire in advance of the engines. Often fights would break out between the runners and even the responding fire companies for the right to fight the fire and receive the insurance money that would be paid to the company that fought it. Interestingly, during the 19th century and early 20th century volunteer fire companies served not only as fire protection but as political machines. The most famous volunteer firefighter politician was Boss Tweed, head of the notorious Tammany Hall political machine, who got his start in politics as a member of the Americus Engine Company Number 6 ("The Big Six") in New York City.



Napoleon Bonaparte, drawing from the century-old experience of the gardes-pompes, is generally attributed as creating the first "professional" firefighters, known as "Sappers-Firefighters", from the French Army. Created under the Commandant of Engineers in 1810, the company was organized after a fire at the ballroom in the Austrian Embassy in Paris which injured several dignitaries. [http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_firefighting]

The professionalization of American firefighting was largely a result of three factors: the steam fire engines, the fire insurance companies that demanded the municipalization of firefighting, and an ideology which suggested that payment of wages would naturally result in improved service. As of 2011, the US had 1,100,000 firefighters [344,000 (31%) career firefighters and 756,000 (69%) volunteer firefighters] in 30,145 fire departments with 55,400 fire stations. Fire departments responded to 30.1 million calls in 2011. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Firefighting_in_the_United_States]

[covers courtesy of Loren Moore, CA]