Preface and Acknowledgments

My father was a firefighter. I remember feeling pride when he visited my second grade class on fire prevention day. I remember telephoning and speaking to him at the engine house every night before I went to bed. I remember the “firestorm” of 1976 and the burn he received. I remember his coming home in the morning to fix me breakfast, sometimes smelling of smoke.

Although he never spoke of his work, I knew what he did. In a world where job titles mean little, my father’s said a lot. After twenty years on the job, he retired, abruptly and without much fanfare. He took another job with one of those meaningless titles—control operating engineer, or something like that, at an electrical utility. We moved to a larger house, in the suburbs. We achieved the American dream, but at what cost? I wondered, at the time, what did he give up? What did the change mean to him? Can you stop being a fireman?

I returned to these questions as I foraged for a dissertation topic. In that I was interested in gender, technology, and cities, it occurred to me that writing a history of firefighting and fire protection might be a good idea. Amazed when I discovered that no historian had examined the topic in great depth, I found an engrossed audience when I sheepishly suggested the vague outlines of this project. My father even inspired the title when we had one of our few conversations about firefighting. He mentioned off-handedly that many firefighters really disliked wearing their breathing apparatus, and that “old-timers” in particular believed that real firemen would not wear them at all.

The personal meaning of this work increased when, as I made final revisions on the manuscript, terrorists attacked the World Trade Center. My first thought as I watched the buildings collapse was of the hundreds of firefighters who were dying, and of their fatherless children. Although I was a child of a former firefighter, my research had taught me something that I never knew as a kid. After years of studying fire protection, I had learned about the job’s many dangers: I had read countless stories in which falling walls had killed firemen who struggled to penetrate to the interior of buildings to perform rescues and throw water on the fire.

This project began as a dissertation, and was nurtured also by public historians.
working in history museums. Joel Tarr, John Modell, and Rick Maddox advised me and read this work. They encouraged me to freely explore issues that other professional historians thought uninteresting and unimportant. Each brought something special to the project and made it better. Joel has guided my professional development, and helped to ground this story in the history of American cities; John’s eclectic but rigorous approach to scholarship promoted creative thought and allowed me to experiment with ideas, methods, and sources; Rick’s ability to move between theory and history proved inspiring; his close reading helped me to find this book’s argument. As the project developed, I also discovered sources and colleagues in historical societies and libraries. Public historians shared with me their craft, and they enhanced this work by making me more sensitive to sources other than the printed documents on which historians almost exclusively rely. By introducing me to the richness of American material culture, these historians—such as Cory Amsler at the Bucks County Historical Society—transformed my understanding of this subject and improved this work.

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In many respects, this book is about my family; it is about the world my parents—Ralph and Lois Tebeau—created. They respected knowledge and encouraged me to follow my heart. They made many sacrifices so that I might have an easier path. Few of us have the privilege of knowing our parents; working on this project allowed me to learn more about their lives, especially part of my father’s.

Kristin Mickelson has lived with this project longer than anyone. She saw it arrive, take its first steps, and then meander in the academic wilderness. She supported me in more ways than I can count, offered her expertise as a statistician, and encouraged me to find a voice with her own wit and style. She makes the world more imaginative, beautiful, and moral; best of all, she gave me Amelia and Eli.
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Eating Smoke