Eating Smoke
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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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Workshops of Democracy
The Invention of Volunteer Firefighting

Shortly before midnight on a tranquil May evening in 1849 the bells of docked steamboats and ringing of fire bells awoke St. Louis residents to the danger of fire. Hardly stirred by the commotion and grumbling about the late hour, residents slowly turned out to watch firefighters battle yet another steamboat fire along the city’s main artery, the Mississippi River. Indifference quickly gave way to interest and excitement, and then to dread. A burning steamboat, the *White Cloud*, had broken from its moorings and, propelled by the current, floated down the wharf. It crashed into other boats, setting them ablaze. As boat after boat flared, the riverfront became a raging furnace for nearly a mile. Then, suddenly, twenty-two kegs of gunpowder loaded on one vessel exploded in a pyrotechnic display. The repeated blasts transformed the city into “a scene of horrifying confusion.” Embers set structures along the riverfront ablaze. Northeasterly winds sent flames along the levee, toward the warehouses located adjacent to the river. Sparks alighted “on the merchandise lying on the wharf and the housetops.” Fearing the worst, bystanders joined firefighters working to check the blaze. The battle surged back and forth for hours.

Unfortunately, by the time that night had turned to day the blaze had gained the upper hand. When the city’s water supply failed, firefighters could do little to
stop the conflagration as it raced from square to square. Given the dire situation, a forty-one-year-old merchant and the leader of the Missouri Fire Company, Thomas Targee, took drastic measures to save the city. Targee ordered that gunpowder be brought forward as he prepared to destroy buildings in the path of the fire. As the chaos mounted, men carrying kegs of powder to the foot of the blaze along Market Street dodged flaming embers, which rained down and spread the fire. Racing against time, volunteers used axes to open buildings. Targee rushed into fiery structures, threw in the powder, and quickly darted away. He blew up five buildings before he died. As one witness recalled, “I watched Captain Targee, smoke begrimed and haggard, stagger and run past me with another keg of gunpowder on his shoulder. . . . Targee entered. Almost immediately there was a terrific explosion.” Targee became the first firefighter in St. Louis to die in the line of duty, and his efforts failed to check the fire. The blaze expired only after the wind changed direction, and not before it claimed over 450 buildings.¹

Such conflagrations were not extraordinary events in nineteenth-century America; their relative frequency speaks volumes about one by-product of urban and industrial growth in the United States. Fire threatened the social order of the urbanizing nation literally and metaphorically, and, as a consequence, this problem greatly interested urban residents. Efforts to bring the fire hazard under control demanded sustained attention. They sometimes required extraordinary measures, like Thomas Targee’s last-ditch and fatal effort. Celebrated in the newspapers and later on canvas by local St. Louis artist Mat Hastings, Targee’s heroics represent the remarkable public service that volunteer firefighters provided to their neighbors. Although relatively few volunteers died in the line of duty in the years before the Civil War, and although their deaths were primarily related to saving property, firefighters protected society by endangering their bodies. The juxtaposition of virile manhood and horrible death, captured in Hastings’s painting of Targee, can be found in countless images and stories from the period, including the celebrated prints of Currier & Ives and the poetry of Walt Whitman. Whitman’s elegiac tribute to firemen in Song of Myself expressed well the particular danger of fire and the nobility of the service performed by the firemen attempting to master nature run amok. With great indifference and surprising swiftness, fire could threaten to engulf the built landscape, sap the vitality of the social order, and destroy the vibrancy of the men fighting against it. In the early years of the nineteenth century American urban dwellers constructed a system of fire protection in which the skilled bodies of volunteer firemen—as individuals and companies—assumed the risks that fire posed to industrial and urban growth.²

Volunteer firefighters celebrated their service quite publicly, creating mythic
narratives that valorized their efforts on behalf of their neighbors, communities, and the state. Such stories have been burned indelibly into the popular imagination as they have been retold and reinterpreted for nearly two centuries. In St. Louis, accounts of Thomas Targee’s death have been repeated often since the city’s great fire. In the decades following the Civil War, his fellow volunteers remembered their youthful service by forming a veterans association, saving memorabilia, and commissioning the painting of Targee. As the former volunteers died in the early twentieth century, their collections were donated to the local historical society, where Targee’s portrait periodically graced the walls. By this time, professional firemen in St. Louis had appropriated Targee’s image and his story as their own and commemorated him as a forebear in a line of men whose use and invention of progressively more sophisticated technologies culminated in the creation of professional firefighting. In the 1990s, Targee’s portrait again found public exhibition in the headquarters of the St. Louis Fire Department, where it educated St. Louis firemen about their service.

The history of volunteer firefighting has been obscured by decades of storytelling that has caricatured volunteers—as community-oriented leaders, fire-
obsessed deviants, or fun-loving pranksters. In actuality, the history of volunteer firefighting is more complex and often contradictory. If volunteer firefighters exhibited a playful culture, they did more than frolic. If they sometimes fought among themselves, they were no more contentious than their neighbors, and they fought fires more frequently than one another. If they advocated public spirit and civic responsibility, they rarely lived up to the democratic ideals identified by Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*. Paradoxically, early firefighters volunteered their labor but nonetheless transformed a communal responsibility into a public service performed by specialists. They placed the actual work for firefighting into fewer and fewer hands, a trend that intensified during the nineteenth century. As volunteers argued for the distinctive importance and nature of their service, they divided the labor of firefighting into increasingly specialized tasks. In the process, volunteer firefighters set the stage for the shift from avocation to a vocation, mirroring broader patterns of change in the industrializing nation.

This story begins in the nineteenth century, when urban residents reorganized fire protection and invented a new approach to putting out fires. They produced a system of labor based on specialized work activities that both preserved order and encouraged urban growth. They removed responsibility for the problem of fire from the entire community, and reorganized it almost exclusively into the body of their organizations (volunteer fire companies). With tacit community approval, fire companies’ reimagined danger, civic duty, and invented themselves as embodiments of the body politic. They constructed a culture of manliness that valued physical virility, technological innovation, and commitment to the polity. That culture of manhood contained dramatic contradictions—between competition and cooperation, between self-discipline and expressive personal/team style, between public labor and private interest, between the continued work specialization and the desire to retain traditional communal identity. As firemen struggled to improve their efficiency and embraced social and technological change, their manly culture became less able to contain its contradictions. Increasing demographic and social differences within cities and between volunteer fire companies eroded firemen’s shared culture. As such differences grew more pronounced, especially after the 1830s, firefighting became less an avenue to restore order than a theater in which firemen contested for social and political power.

Despite many contradictions, volunteer firefighters helped to make rapid urbanization and industrialization a reality, and as they organized and transformed firefighting, volunteers’ beliefs about gender and technology structured urban landscapes, as well as conceptions of the public good and public order. As fire threatened the material viability of nineteenth-century communities, citizens sup-
pressed the danger in a manner consistent with prevailing attitudes about man-
hood, technological progress and efficiency, ethnicity, and race. Their strategies—
embodied in voluntary fire associations—literally allowed the dominant social sys-
tem to thrive and made urbanization into a reality. However, the organization of
fire protection also played an equally important symbolic role in preserving com-
munity. As fire threatened to destroy order—and its economic, political, and moral
bases—fire companies preserved the social order metaphorically, by representing
themselves as bastions of virile male virtue, whose members voluntarily performed
an obligation of citizenship. More importantly, as volunteer firefighters embraced
both the specialization of their labor and technological innovation, they offered
support to industrialists’ vision of the future. They championed a vision of a social
order in which each individual and group held a functional niche (which some-
times contradicted their rhetoric). In so doing, volunteer firemen pioneered and
reinforced the process of industrial and urban change.  

Specializing Civic Obligations

In 1803, several young Philadelphia apprentices established the Philadelphia
Hose Company and altered how urban communities confronted the problem of
fire. They literally reinvented volunteer firefighting by adapting hoses for use in
firefighting, and the company transformed volunteer protection into specialized
public labor. Of course, hose was not new, but the Philadelphia Hose Company
became the first fire company in North America to adapt it to fire protection. Hose,
especially the high-quality variant developed in Philadelphia’s workshops by arti-
san firemen, spawned a new division of labor that allowed firemen to remove re-
sponsibility for fire extinction from the community and to locate it in their orga-
nizations. Furthermore, volunteers recognized the significance of the new mode
of organizing, and they established a new rationale to govern their service. They
argued that firefighting was a special calling, through which volunteers demon-
strated their capabilities as men, innovators, and citizens.

The formation of the Philadelphia Hose Company transformed what in the
eighteenth century had been understood as the responsibility of the entire com-
munity. Based upon European (especially English) methods of fire protection that
were modified by North American colonists, eighteenth-century Americans relied
on community organization, buckets, and occasionally explosives (gunpowder) to
check the spread of fire. Additionally, many municipalities created ordinances that
mandated fire preventive practices, such as laws that asked property owners to
sweep their chimneys regularly. Extinguishing a blaze often required hundreds of
urban residents organized into bucket brigades. Additionally, in many places, municipal law allowed private citizens to form voluntary associations to help in this struggle. These associations often purchased, maintained, and operated primitive fire engines. When available, such engines would stand at the head of the bucket brigade, intermittently squirting water onto fires. Although such associations frequently played a central role in fire extinction, the civic responsibility for fire protection nonetheless fell to all urban residents, especially property holders. Every member of a community—including perhaps women and slaves—donated physical labor and/or buckets in the struggle to preserve community.5

Against this backdrop, Rueben Haines, Roberts Vaux, and the other young men
who founded the Philadelphia Hose Company envisioned a more efficient and specialized method of fire protection. The company used hose, made of leather and joined by copper rivets, to conduct water from the newly constructed system of water pipes (built in 1801) to fire engines. With exacting calculations, an early company member and printer, James P. Parke, quantified the efficiency of hose: “A hose of 600 feet in length, would, perhaps, deliver as much water . . . as 3600 men, with common fire buckets . . . . The benefit of hose may perhaps be seen in a clearer light, when we say, that 120 [fire company] members can deliver as much water at 1800 feet distance as 11,000 men with buckets from each bucket.” Hose companies reduced the labor needed to extinguish fires by as much as 99 percent. If the innovation promised to reduce the amount of labor needed to put out a fire, it also promised to increase the speed in which water was applied to a blaze. Parke reported that “an accurate observer, long accustomed to attend at fires” had informed him that hose reduced the time needed to fill an engine from fifteen minutes to ninety seconds. With this argument, firefighters established the standard for measuring the effectiveness of their work for decades (and also created a norm that what would return to haunt them in the 1850s).6

Hose companies had reorganized a formerly communal responsibility into a job for a small cadre of men. According to Parke, as few as 120 men could handle the work that had once been performed by 11,000 urban residents. Although it seems certain that Parke overstated the efficiency of hose companies, his claims nonetheless are stunning. According to his calculations, as much as 25 percent of Philadelphia’s population (which at the time was just over forty thousand residents) could be called upon to fight fires. Even if he exaggerated by a factor of ten, there can be little doubt that by adapting hose to firefighting, the Philadelphia Hose Company dramatically shifted how the city’s residents dealt with the problem of fire. This shift signaled the start of a long, gradual transformation in how the responsibility for restoring order and providing fire safety would be constituted. Although forms of collective organization would continue to play an important role, the associations responsible for fire protection became ever more particularized.7

In Boston, where hose technology was adopted in 1823, citizens’ reluctance to cede responsibility for fire protection proves instructive about the stakes involved in embracing this new division of labor. Bostonians feared the consequences of placing firefighting in the hands of just a few men. As one fire company leader stated, “Do you think sir, that the citizens of Boston will ever be prohibited from assisting a fellow townsman in distress?” Yet such complaints ring hollow to some degree because hose was introduced at a time when Bostonians lamented the lack of adherence to community obligation in time of crisis. There had been, observers noted, poor community turnout at fires, which had increased in severity. Nonethe-
less, Bostonians—even some firemen—appeared to have been hesitant to position such a crucial public responsibility in so few hands. The manner of reorganizing fire protection proposed by the Philadelphia Hose Company altered how urban residents throughout the nation would approach the risk of fire in the nineteenth century. As firemen connected hoses to the city’s burgeoning water systems, the Philadelphia Hose Company discerned that it had altered significantly the division of public responsibility for the problem of fire. The company recognized that fire literally and figuratively symbolized disorder; it provoked bewilderment, confusion, and chaos, in which “stentorian strength of lungs” too often replaced “cool and accurate judgment.” As a result, prior to going into service, the company considered a number of questions. How could the new arrangement obtain support from proponents of the previous method? How could it manage operations at fires in a fashion that inspired public confidence? How could the company justify its service? How could it convince neighbors and peers that it was capable of handling the severe crisis of firefighting? Sensitive to these social implications, the company devised a plan to legitimize the repositioning of firefighting authority within a body of specialized workers. The company adopted a strategy rhetorically based in the democratic principles of the young nation and a faith in rationality and collectivity; the company proclaimed that it would discipline itself under “the dominion of government and order in time of fire.”

The Philadelphia Hose Company constituted itself as a democratic body by establishing an organizational structure that balanced authoritative leadership with the company’s communal sensibility. Company members elected their own officers, to short terms. At fires the association appointed “directors,” vested with sufficient authority to require “obedience.” At the same time, the company also sought “to prevent a monopoly of the office [of director]” by holding elections every six months, which limited leaders’ power. Through democratic election, as well as rotating leadership, the company further hoped to prevent private interest from overwhelming its and the public’s goodwill. In addition, the company believed that rotating leadership posts fostered collectivity of action—a principle that carried over into the methods that fire companies used to organize work activities.

The men of the Philadelphia Hose Company believed that the order provided by firefighters transcended the problem of fire, and went to the very core of the polity. As firefighters inscribed the nation’s ideals into the organizational structure of the company, they became exemplars of democracy. Likewise when firefighters protected the built environment, they preserved the core values of American soci-
The Invention of Volunteer Firefighting

ety. At moments of extreme environmental turmoil—when Philadelphia stood on the brink of chaos—firemen brought discipline to the city through their rational and democratic action. The company removed power from the hands of sometimes unruly mobs and placed it exclusively into the collective rationality of a male society. James Parke recalled, “It was their duty to preside with a cool, deliberate judgment... when tumult would suspend their faculties, and when the prejudice of a mob—a vulgar and motley herd, among whom, all are, or wish to be, masters, and none scarcely will be servants—would prove a strong and almost insurmountable barrier to their success.” When it fought its first fire on March 3, 1804, the company not only preserved the built environment but it reordered civil society. The Philadelphia Hose Company had taken the first tentative steps toward recreating the city’s and the nation’s methods of fire extinction.11

Public Duty and Community Support

Across the nation, firefighters adopted the Philadelphia Hose Company’s innovative new mode of organizing at the precise moment when cities and industries began to grow intensely in America and when fire became an increasingly significant threat to societal stability. Structures built of flammable materials gradually clustered more densely within city limits. Ironically, in mercantile cities like Philadelphia and St. Louis, the very lifeblood of the widening economic networks—riverboats—became a source of great danger, as in the 1849 conflagration in St. Louis. Indeed, during much of the century, nearly every fire threatened to erupt into a conflagration. Though firemen often did manage to forestall conflagrations, judging from the ledgers of the Missouri Fire Company, they were far less successful at confining flames to a single structure. Most cities recognized the severity of this threat and codified their respect for the flammability of their built landscape into city ordinances. In the 1830s, for example, Boston authorized the fire department to destroy buildings adjacent to a fire to prevent its spread.12

Of course, the large number of well-documented nineteenth-century conflagrations, which affected most industrializing cities, attest to how often severe fires became reality. Philadelphia experienced several sweeping fires, including those in 1839 and again in 1850. In the latter blaze over one hundred structures burned in the city’s commercial district, along the Delaware River. Yet Philadelphia was spared a conflagration of the magnitude of the one that struck St. Louis in 1849. Fire raged out of control for nearly two days and destroyed over $3 million in property and goods—approximately 75 percent of the city’s accumulated capital. More broadly, inadequate insurance coverage by many merchants, small manufacturers,
and homeowners—not to mention the limited financial reserves of insurers that forced firms into bankruptcy—exacerbated the economic consequences of fire in the antebellum United States. Moreover, fire did not just threaten a city’s economic future, but it also menaced the financial stability of local governments. For instance, the great fire in St. Louis severely impaired the city’s financial stability—approximately two-thirds of city revenues had been collected from property taxes.\(^\text{13}\)

In this volatile context urban residents endorsed the technological and social innovation of the Philadelphia Hose Company. Over the course of the next several years, men in Philadelphia and other cities formed hose companies and reorganized engine companies, meanwhile remaking the engines to operate with more efficient flows of water. Most importantly, though, urban dwellers legitimized the new division of labor through moral and financial support. When the Philadelphia Hose Company formed, its members took out a “subscription.” That is, they appealed to their neighbors for financial support to purchase equipment and cover operating expenses. Through a circular letter, the company collected over $700 from “the insurance companies and citizens generally.” During the first several decades of the nineteenth century, such contributions were commonplace. In 1809, for instance, Phoenix Assurance, a London insurance company, awarded Philadelphia’s nine hose companies $100. Shortly thereafter the Insurance Company of North America regularly donated $25 to each of Philadelphia’s fifteen engine and hose companies. Besides pecuniary support, communities offered other intangible forms of assistance. In addition to providing a steady stream of men to serve in fire companies, communities also dispensed food, coffee, and alcohol to hungry volunteers at fires, or they spontaneously made donations—especially when their property had been saved.\(^\text{14}\)

As the nineteenth century progressed, companies more frequently used subscriptions and/or held balls to collect money to finance much-needed projects—to procure new engines or hose, to improve engine houses, or to purchase other accoutrements of firefighting, such as alarm bells. Sometimes these requests were tainted by hints of extortion. In 1828, for instance, Philadelphia’s Hibernia Engine Company told its neighbors, “Never having but once before asked for assistance, they [the company] trust this call will be a successful one; should it fail, the engine must of necessity be abandoned, and the public deprived of the services of the company.” However, more often than not, local residents and businesses willingly filled the coffers of their favorite companies. This further cemented the bonds between companies and communities and encouraged a redefinition of fire’s dangers. Through such regular donations, urban residents continued to transfer their civic obligations onto the shoulders of firemen; fire buckets became relics of a bygone age.\(^\text{15}\)
Municipalities, too, supported the new distribution of risk. They sustained fire companies in many ways, including cash donations—a phenomenon that became more pronounced over the course of the nineteenth century. Though they did not bear the entire cost of fire protection, or its risks to life and limb, cities routinely contributed to companies. For instance, public funds accounted for half of the St. Louis fire department's operating revenue in the years before 1850, totaling over $110,000. The Philadelphia Council established a city waterworks in 1801 and began supporting volunteer fire companies in 1811—a practice that was formalized in municipal laws throughout the region by the 1830s. In addition to sometimes exempting volunteers from taxation, state and local governments often excused volunteers from various responsibilities of citizenship, including jury duty and military service. A generous symbol of support, the exemption for firemen was predicated on several years of service to a company. In 1844, for instance, the Perseverance Hose Company of Philadelphia presented William Thorp a membership certificate that announced his exemption from military service as a result of a state law passed in 1842. During the Civil War New York volunteer firemen protested the draft precisely because this exempt status had been lifted.16

As urban residents surrendered participation in favor of efficiency in the battle with fire, fire companies construed service in a multitude of ways that emphasized their connections to their neighbors and/or obscured the increasingly specialized division of responsibility. For instance, many firefighters clothed their service in the language of republicanism—the idiom of reciprocity and public good so pronounced among urban artisans and journeymen and that seemingly existed everywhere in the early republic. Companies expressed this affinity by choosing slogans or images, such as the goddess liberty. Other companies, though, selected symbols that could be identified with nineteenth-century liberalism, such as the metaphoric image of the beehive. Yet others chose symbols that resonated exclusively within their local community, as was the case of the Shiffler Hose Company in Philadelphia, which chose an anti-immigrant rioter to express its values. Whatever their costumes, firefighters clothed themselves in a variety of political and social symbols, especially those that appealed to their neighbors and supporters. Somewhat paradoxically, these symbols concealed the degree to which firefighting was becoming less community based, as increasingly it was carried out by specialists. Firefighters began to forge a collective interest that superseded their connections to their neighbors.17

More broadly, firefighters obscured the shifting responsibilities of fire protection by cloaking their service in the rhetoric of democratic citizenship and public spirit. For instance, when companies incorporated, their state-issued charters of-
ten likened the organization of firefighting associations to the “body politic.” This sentiment captured the full dimensions and complexity of firefighters’ claims on the public imagination—especially the degree to which democratically organized fire associations protected the nation’s physical, as well as political, order. Conflagrations threatened many different types of bodies, from the general to the particular: the state, urban communities, fire companies, urban residents, and individual firemen. Each body perceived and responded to the threat of fire differently. Fire threatened municipal governments’ solvency, vitality, and authority, and through legislation the state devolved that responsibility onto all citizens. Urban residents also feared fire, and they contributed to specialized organizations of firemen through financial donations and moral support. Fire companies, collectives of individual men, shouldered the community’s and the state’s collective risk by

_The American Fireman. Always Ready_, 1858, Louis Maurer (artist), Currier & Ives (lithographer/publisher). This 1858 portrait of a volunteer firefighter pulling a small hose reel captures firefighters’ romantic perception of their public service. Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, Home and Community Life
constituting an image of the body politic. The labor of firemen and fire companies symbolized a broader conflict between the nation’s democratic collective and disorder, even as it offered a model for how society should be organized.18

Firefighting Work: Physical Prowess, Danger, and Technological Competence

Although their efforts had far-reaching effects on the social order, firefighters engaged in very immediate and very taxing labor. Indeed, firefighters’ material labor stood at the center of their relationship with their communities. Firefighters performed a demanding physical enterprise that required an array of technology and skill; they also placed themselves at personal risk while working in difficult, if not exceptionally dangerous conditions. Volunteers divided their work into two components: work involving engines and work with hose. Typically, they split these functions into separate work groups with different apparatus, responsibilities, and traditions. Engine companies drayed apparatus, which sometimes weighed several thousand pounds, to fires and operated it by pumping brakes attached to the sides. Meanwhile hose companies brought hose and used spanner wrenches to connect it to nearby plugs and engines.

Indeed, firefighters organized their labor in a manner that reflected widely held understandings of manhood and work in the early nineteenth century. They placed a special emphasis on the physical power needed to operate engines and the technical skills needed both to keep their apparatus working properly and to improve equipment. Moreover, firefighters balanced individual skills, strength, and commitment to community against the demands of the need to be part of the larger collective, to work in tandem with other men. If volunteers acquired their competence primarily while fighting fires, they also learned and exercised them publicly in informal settings. Firefighters argued that spontaneous competitions improved efficiency and provided a forum to practice skills. These contests also served as tests of firefighters’ manhood. Gradually, over time, competitions and work at actual fires took on the air of sporting events, although the gravity of the work remained a sobering and persistent undercurrent. Volunteer firefighters believed that their labor, skill, teamwork, and efficiency, not to mention the dangers they faced willingly, made them into firemen, and marked them as especially able and valuable citizens.19

Successfully arresting fire necessitated that firefighters arrive at blazes quickly—a pressure they felt keenly because fire spread quickly through densely clustered wooden cities. Promptly receiving word of an alarm was essential. Before cities be-
gan to adopt fire alarm telegraph systems in the 1850s, alarms spread via word of mouth and/or by tolling church and fire bells. When firemen “repaired” to their engine houses and headed toward the fire, they often had difficulty in locating the fire. They relied on directions from bystanders or followed trails of smoke—sometimes a difficult prospect, given widespread use of fire in industrial shops. Unpaved, crowded, and narrow streets or alleys impeded their speed. Pulling engines proved hazardous under the best conditions, and it grew more harrowing at night or in inclement weather.\textsuperscript{20}

Upon the alarm of a fire, hose companies whisked two-wheeled hose tenders out of their houses first. Next they pulled larger, four-wheeled hose carriages—loaded with as much as several hundred feet of leather hose—to the blaze. Using the two-wheeled tender, hosemen established the initial plug connection, which became easier as urban infrastructures developed. Prior to the construction of efficient water systems, some cities established networks of cisterns, filled with water, for use in firefighting. Hosemen sought the nearest plug connections, and they connected hard leather suction hose—joined by rivets on the seams—to the hydrant and waited for the arrival of an engine. Hardened hose allowed the suction engines, commonly used after the 1830s, to draw water from the hydrants into the engine box. Hose carriages conveyed leading hose—constructed of riveted leather, and later on of soft hemp. Firemen connected this hose to a fire engine’s external output valve. Once linked to a water source, firefighters began to operate engines, expelling water onto the fire.\textsuperscript{21}

If getting to fires required great effort, the work needed to operate hand-pumped engines demanded significant amounts of physical strength and stamina. Firemen pulsed the levers or “brakes” attached to the sides of the engine vigorously in order to generate streams of water. In order to create the vacuum pressure necessary to generate a continuous stream of water, they had to pump the brakes continuously with a steady cadence, and in order to keep water pouring onto the blaze they had to stroke for long periods of time, with little rest. Although the machines used by firefighters varied greatly by the 1830s, most engines, such as those manufactured by John Agnew of Philadelphia, operated optimally with as many as forty men working the brakes at any given time. Companies divided into two or three work groups, each taking a turn on the brakes; sometimes companies accepted or even solicited assistance from bystanders as they struggled to generate consistent water pressure. Even with the concerted effort of scores of men, arresting a blaze sometimes took many hours. An 1839 news report from \textit{Niles Register} about an especially large fire in Philadelphia underscored the intensity of firefighting labor, which could even last for days. The fire, which broke out at 11 P.M.,
continued to rage at 3 a.m. the next night, and “had spread to such an alarming ex-
tent, that . . . not less than 45 houses [had] been laid in ruins.”

Recognizing that pumping engines was their fundamental work activity, fire-
fighters typically measured company effectiveness and their individual competency
as firemen by regularly and constantly evaluating the performance of their com-
pany and engine. At times, firemen assessed their performance in terms of the
amount of time they and their company worked at a fire, pumping water onto it.
More commonly, though, firemen measured the efficiency, power, and stamina of
the team by assessing the length of the engine’s stream. During a trial of its newly
purchased engine, for instance, the Missouri Company reported that it “threw one
hundred and ninety four feet from the end of the nozzle one inch [in diameter]
through a ten foot section of hose. My opinion of the engine is that she is a pow-
nerful engine, she throws well but she is a perfect mankiller to work, give her as
much water as she can use and it would take a company of two hundred men to
keep her working steady.” The trial attested to both the manliness possessed by in-
dividual firemen and the technological skill of the collective.

Besides reinforcing firemen’s sense of themselves as virile and robust, working
an engine’s brakes encouraged mutuality and reciprocity. Companies required
their members to rotate continuously on the brakes, since a single man could
muster the strength to work for no more than ten or fifteen minutes. When few
men turned out, company secretaries gnashed their teeth at the company’s lack of
commitment. Phillip Branson, the secretary of the Missouri Fire Company, noted
that on one cold February night “St. Louis did not get out of the house. Missouri
had only 6 members out.” On another occasion, Branson sarcastically reported that
the company had “seven members out. Company is improving fast, Damn Fast;
next fire she will go out the back door.” More commonly, though, companies turned
out more than enough men to operate the apparatus. Although a St. Louis ordi-
nance limited company membership to seventy-five, company ledgers often re-
ported that many more men than the legal number showed up to battle the flames.
In one instance, the Missouri Fire Company recorded “engine on the ground, plaid
[played] first water, had a very large turn out; 69 men on engine, 34 hosemen and
if ever an engine went over the ground fast the Missouri Engine did this night. We
past tenders and Engines the same as throwing your hat.”

The reciprocity fostered by teamwork at fires also nurtured firemen’s relation-
ships to their communities. Indeed, many men and boys from local neighborhoods
helped to man the brakes, dray engines or hose carts. Fire companies in St. Louis
encouraged these “runners” to attend fires, perhaps because they added substan-
tial manpower to a company—sometimes propelling the numbers of workers at
fires above legal limits on membership. Occasionally these unofficial “volunteers”—sometimes boys as young as twelve or thirteen—created hose companies associated with officially sanctioned volunteer fire companies. Naming themselves after swift ferocious hunting animals, like “Tigers” and “Hounds,” these young men dragged the crucial two-wheeled hose tender to fires. On one occasion, the Missouri Company reported, “Missouri on hand; our tender past [sic] the Tigers, Hounds, and Grey Eagles, and got a first rate plug.” Such informal understandings between fire companies and their communities cemented the bonds between them, and also trained the young men of the community about male civic responsibility and about the techniques of firefighting.25

That antebellum volunteer firefighters so emphasized pumping engines and dragging apparatus as key work activities reveals much about their priorities; in particular, it strongly suggests that these volunteers did not attempt to save their neighbors’ lives as much as they protected property. In contrast to the lifesaving narratives of heroism so common later in the nineteenth century, antebellum volunteer firefighters rarely described their work in terms of rescues. Indeed, of the hundreds, if not thousands, of extant images commissioned by fire companies in American cities of the time, very few depicted firemen actively saving lives. An equally small number displayed firefighters entering or working inside burning buildings. Rather, the art commissioned by volunteers prior to the Civil War emphasized the mundane physical work of pumping and pulling engines. Membership certificates, for instance, portrayed firefighting through allegorical images of service, representations of company engines or speaking trumpets, illustrations of men pulling hose carts, or views of apparatus positioned outside of blazing buildings dumping water into upper-story windows and onto roofs. Images of the time sometimes showed hooks, ladders, or axes but rarely depicted them being used by firefighters. Additionally, the term ventilate, which denotes action that involves climbing onto a building’s roof, was not in volunteers’ lexicon of work techniques, at least as described in their ledgers. Moreover, antebellum volunteer firefighters rarely formed and sustained active hook and ladder companies, which further underscores the primacy of hose and engines before the Civil War. Of course the character of the built landscape prior to the Civil War—in which buildings rarely exceeded three or four stories—and limitations in hose and engine technology contributed to the strategies used by volunteers. Thus the indication is that antebellum volunteers typically attacked blazes from outside of structures, rarely venturing into building interiors to face fire at close range.26

Even so, the amount of physical risk to firefighters intensified, reinforcing their seriousness of purpose. Typically, volunteers set up their apparatus in close prox-
imity to buildings, for maximum effectiveness. At such nearby positions, especially when the burning structure was large, firefighters found themselves exposed to death. In Philadelphia, for instance, a member of the Diligent Fire Company died when the wall from a downtown building fell onto the company’s apparatus. All in all, however, such cases were highly unusual. Few volunteer firefighters died in the line of duty, and those who did typically faced exceptional circumstances, as the story of Thomas Targee indicates. Actually, volunteer firemen faced the greatest physical danger when racing to fires, pumping engines, or sparring with one another. In St. Louis all of the injuries reported by the Missouri Fire Company occurred when firemen rotated on the engine’s brakes or fell under the wheels of a moving apparatus. Minute books and “official” department histories in New York, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati contain similar reports. Of course, in antebellum America the possibility of serious injury could not be taken lightly. Although volunteers faced fewer hazards, relative to those who later fought fires, they made much of the dangers. Physical risk defined their relationship to other firemen, bonding them as “brothers” facing a common peril. More broadly, volunteers emphasized this exposure frequently; they claimed to be noble and public spirited because of the hazards they confronted.27

In order to mitigate the impact of workplace hazards, volunteer firemen created and sustained disability pensions beginning in the 1830s—often with the support of local municipalities and fellow citizens. Precursors to the relief associations formed by professional firefighters and to disability pensions, these funds received warm support from local political leaders and the community. They represented popular appreciation for firefighters’ specialized labor and acknowledged the particular dangers faced by firemen in protecting their neighbors’ property. In 1835, for instance, firemen in Philadelphia established the Association for the Relief of Disabled Firemen in Philadelphia, which provided a pension to men injured or disabled while serving the city. The mayor spoke at the organization’s inaugural benefit, and community members, firemen, and merchants subscribed to the fund. Although the extent of the membership in such associations is not entirely clear, their development both underscored that firefighters faced very real danger and that communities were aware of those risks. Importantly, by demanding and receiving such special recognition, firefighters separated themselves as men whose service to their communities deserved special approbation. Danger—or “exposure” as one observer put it—gave firefighters a common rallying point and a basis for a shared culture as firemen.28

In addition to emphasizing the physicality and danger of their service, firefighters also celebrated its links to the culture of urban craftsmen, especially their
ability to deploy complex equipment. Firefighters placed a particularly high premium on possessing technological acumen. Like other workers of the early nineteenth century—especially those laboring in artisan shops—firefighters constantly improved upon and tinkered with their equipment. Not surprisingly, many significant innovations in equipment drew directly from the work and experience of the volunteers. In Philadelphia firemen like George Mason, Patrick Lyon, John Agnew, and John Parry built or designed apparatus. Other firefighters experimented with new hose design. Led by the firm Sellers & Pennock, Philadelphia volunteer firemen introduced leather hose held together by metal rivets. This new hose stood up better to the higher pressures of city water systems and was indispensable to ongoing attempts to develop and use of more powerful fire engines during the first decades of the nineteenth century.²⁹

Firefighters invented and built many of their work tools, and they constructed
a connection between artisanal competency, innovation, and public service. They
devolved and expressed such values when companies of firemen met informally
at local workshops to build their apparatus. Some companies in particular took spe-
cial pride in the connection between the technical labor of firefighters and their
service. For instance, the Mechanics Company of Philadelphia celebrated mem-
bers’ occupations and the role artisans played in constructing public safety by rep-
resenting itself using the well-known 1830s painting *Pat Lyon at the Forge*, which
showed a muscular man, working a steel forge, controlling fire to create machin-
ery. Not only was Pat Lyon a prominent artisan, he also pioneered the manufac-
ture of hand-operated fire engines in the United States. Consequently, when the
Mechanics Fire Company adopted his image, it honored the involvement of vol-
unteers in conceptualizing and manufacturing fire suppression technologies—in-
cluding objects as seemingly mundane as wrenches or hose.30

Of course, not all firemen possessed close connections to manufacturing shops,
but they nonetheless valued technical competence and a culture in which skills and
technologies were shared. For example, fire companies frequently corresponded
with other associations located throughout the nation, especially exchanging in-
formation about improvements in firefighting apparatus. Through such commu-
nication, fire companies—especially those in small towns that might not have been
able to afford the latest and most expensive technology—learned where to buy an
excellent or inexpensive machine. Other companies published newspapers and dis-
seminated a wide variety of news. For instance, a circular sent by a Baltimore com-
pany included reviews of the latest firefighting technology on display at New York’s
Crystal Palace. Such discussions make clear a process through which companies
emulated, often with great swiftness, the successful innovations of their peers.
Even after the construction of engines became more specialized, fire companies
continued to specify their designs. St. Louis fire companies, for instance, corre-
sponded regularly with manufacturers like John Agnew over specifications and re-
quested special designs, colors, and features on their apparatus. When such en-
gines needed repair or modification, companies took them to a local manufactory
or fixed the machines themselves.31

Firefighters further demonstrated technical competence by operating and
maintaining their apparatus. Even what seemed to be the most basic and dreary of
tasks, such as pumping an engine’s brakes in unison, required technique learned
over time and honed through contests and in battle with fire. One firefighter re-
called, “The easy and successful working of the machine was of great considera-
tion.” Rotating in and out of the team operating an engine’s brakes required adroit
timing and skill. If firefighters did not carefully coordinate this switch, the strength
of an engine company’s hose stream could be diminished or a hapless volunteer could sustain serious injury. Firefighters drilled regularly, and especially prior to contests, to assure their fitness for this aspect of their labor.\textsuperscript{32}

Additionally, firefighters kept apparatus operational with constant care. They developed an intimate mechanical knowledge of their tools and work by regularly tinkering with and cleaning their equipment. Company by-laws sometimes codified the routine maintenance activities, and working with the engines kept them running smoothly; but more often than not firemen tinkered with their apparatus to prove their “inventive genius.” Especially before contests, firefighters fiddled with engines to gain advantage. As a New York firefighter remembered, “The works of an engine would be all taken apart, each screw, joint and valve thoroughly examined and studied to see if some arrangement could not be adjusted whereby greater power could be achieved.” Reconfiguring apparatus took on an importance apart from the functional need to keep equipment running well. The words of the fictional fireman Mose—a well-known character that appeared in New York theaters in the 1840s and 1850s—captured firefighters’ intimate connections to their technology. In one drama, Mose effused, “I love that ingine better than my dinner; last time she was at de corporation-yard, we plated de brakes, and put in new condensil pipes; and de way she works is about right, I tell you. She throws a three-inch stream de prettiest in town.”\textsuperscript{33}

Firemen identified with their equipment in a manner that transcended even the pride artisans felt for items they produced. For many firemen, their apparatus and more basic tools, such as spanners, hose, axes, and speaking trumpets, embodied company identity, linking their beliefs about technical competence, physical power, and service. Fire engines became works of art as firemen maintained and decorated them with an obsessive devotion. Firefighters zealously burnished, repaired, and cleaned their engines. They commissioned paintings of heavy wood to adorn apparatus, primarily during parades, but sometimes art remained on apparatus at fires. Volunteers also transformed certain work tools—especially speaking trumpets—into ceremonial gifts presented to firefighters for notable service or meritorious actions. Made of bronze or sometimes silver, these ordinary items became significant markers of manliness and firefighting prowess. In a similar vein, firefighters decorated themselves, their membership certificates, and engine houses with images of their apparatus, as well as other equipment. For instance, on the ornate borders of certificates, firefighters depicted their machines and tools, thereby connecting them to their public service. These certificates offer a pictorial history of technological progression, as firefighters adopted the latest and most efficient equipment.\textsuperscript{34}
The effort to master and to improve upon firefighting technologies also was intertwined with the larger ethos of competitiveness that drove firefighters, relentlessly pushing them to perform effective service and to outdo each other. At every fire and in frequent contests, firemen measured themselves, their companies, and apparatus. Informal and formal equipment trials transformed daily work activities into rituals that underscored firefighters’ commitment to their task. For instance, the imperative to reach a fire quickly became an informal expression of firefighters’ competence and a test of collective manhood. Reaching a fire first—usually with the specially designed two-wheel hose tender—signaled that a company possessed discipline, team spirit, and physical prowess. In ledgers, companies regularly expressed pride at arriving first or dismay at being outrun. In St. Louis the Missouri Fire Company reveled in besting a rival: “Union suction tried to pass us but we ran away from them and had water on the fire before they had their lead hose off.” Alternately, for firefighters across the nation, being “passed in the engine house” was a great ignominy. The Missouri Fire Company’s minutes suggest how seriously it took such informal competitions when it related the company’s dismay at being passed: “The St. Louis, Union, & Liberty all past [sic] the Missouri in the house. This is the first time the Missouri has been past [sic] for 2 years & 3 months and I hope it will be the last.” Firefighters had transformed daily work activities into ritualized competitions that carried great significance. Winning such contests meant more than getting to fires quickly; it indicated a company’s fitness as men and as public servants.35

The most significant competitions involved “throwing” water high into the air, in vertical streams. Firefighters judged—usually against a point on a tall building—the length of the hose streams, and elaborate rules specified the length and size of hose and contest duration. The company whose stream went the greatest distance (usually measured vertically, which most mirrored work at a fire scene) was deemed the victor. In Philadelphia, for instance, after putting out a large fire on Market Street in 1850, the city’s volunteers stayed on the scene and tried to outdo one another by arching their streams high over the burned-out building. Two years later, the most powerful hand engine built and operated by Philadelphia firemen, the Diligent Engine, competed against the pride of Baltimore’s fire department. The Diligent triumphed when it threw water more than 170 feet into the air. As with informal races, fire engine contests developed as the number of fire companies increased and as firefighters both improved upon and became more invested in their tools and apparatus. By the 1840s in St. Louis, there was a tradition of challenging rival companies to assess which company possessed the best equipment and members; of course, challenges rarely went unanswered. Companies
sometimes met for weeks prior to competitions to debate and clarify arcane rules. Over the course of several meetings rivals decided on judges, stakes, and standards for victory.\textsuperscript{36}

Losing these contests could be devastating. For nearly a decade, St. Louis’s Union Fire Company No. 2 (using an Agnew engine) fended off all challengers; the company dubbed its engine “Emperor” because it won one contest after another. Before the Emperor vanquished the Missouri Fire Company’s “Old Bull” engine in 1847, the Missouri Fire Company had held the honor of having the city’s best engine—and the reputation as its most effective and powerful company. The Missouri company so coveted the honor it had lost that, for the next decade, it purchased a series of engines, even asking Philadelphia’s John Agnew to build a new pumping mechanism for the Old Bull. Left gnashing their teeth by repeated failure, the disconsolate company questioned not only its technology, but also the potency of its members.\textsuperscript{37}

Firefighters transformed competitiveness into a shared male virtue by rhetorically casting competitions with one another (and with nature itself) in terms of sexual domination over women. In descriptions of their work, firemen sometimes used sexualized language to describe their control over nature and equipment, and they often described their apparatus as being feminine. Firemen “played on” fires with hose, and company leaders encouraged the volunteers to work on an engine’s brakes with phrases like “up and down on her, men.” This was especially true of contests. In one form of competition—more typical in New York than either St. Louis or Philadelphia—fire companies connected their engines in a line, as they might to combat a fire a long distance from a hydrant. Joined by hoses, the first company pumped water into the second company’s engine box, which then pumped water into the third company’s engine, and so on. The company with the least water in its engine compartment was declared the winner. A company was declared “washed” if its engine box had overflowed, and its washed engine was said to have lost its “virginity.” Filling virginal engine boxes and spewing copious amounts of water provided tangible evidence of firefighters’ manhood.\textsuperscript{38}

If engine competitions represented firefighters’ most visible and significant battles, firemen’s combativeness emerged in a host of more mundane and less tangible ways. In the 1810s, for instance, several Philadelphia fire companies litigated the type and construction of bells attached to engines. During the 1840s and 1850s, the Hibernia and Hand-in-Hand engine companies of Philadelphia battled over which company had the right to the designation “No. 1,” which signified the company that had been in continuous service to Philadelphia for the longest time. Eventually settling the issue in court, each company produced a lengthy company
The Invention of Volunteer Firefighting

history as evidence of its lineage. In the 1850s, Philadelphia’s Hibernia Engine Company instituted a competition within its own ranks in regard to attendance at fires. The company divided its members into two groups and recorded each team’s appearance at fires. Similarly, the emergence of “bunking” as a tradition likely had its roots in the competitiveness of firefighting culture, not to mention the economic vicissitudes of everyday life. Indeed, this intense competitiveness literally colored firemen’s other expressive activities, including especially ornate displays at parades, exorbitant costumes, and ornate member certificates.

Passionate competitiveness frequently led to long-term disputes and exacerbated standing animosities that existed for reasons of class, ethnicity, or politics. Indeed, even at fires, long-standing rivalries often threatened to erupt into conflict. Keen competition sometimes led rival companies to cut towropes or to jam carriage spokes, and may have impeded quick arrival. In addition, the competitive aspect of volunteer firefighters’ culture resulted in dramatic street brawls. If the frequency and scale of such fights have been overemphasized in previous studies, physical confrontation did play an integral role in firefighters’ culture. Often a response to real or imagined slights, melees between companies typically involved only a few men. Just as frequently, company confrontations resulted in attacks on an engine, which amounted to a blow against each member of the opposing company.

More often than not, however, competitiveness confirmed firefighters’ common sense of public duty, especially at fires, when they usually forgot their animosities, at least temporarily. As was true in other cities, firemen in Philadelphia and St. Louis impeded their brothers’ work at fires only rarely. In striking contrast to well-publicized brawls, firefighters’ cooperation appears to have been pervasive—even between bitter rivals. For instance, when fireplugs were not available nearby to a blaze, companies put aside difference and pumped water from engine to engine. Whether frivolous or calculated to improve the efficiency of service, during the first forty years of the nineteenth century competition colored disparate aspects of firefighting—its physicality, technological skill, and public spiritedness—and unified firefighters. And, indeed, firefighters’ intense combativeness matched the roughhewn character of early-nineteenth-century masculine norms, and fit well a society driven increasingly by individualism and a capitalist economy. Somewhat paradoxically, the ethos of competitiveness served to unify firemen, helping them to define the boundaries of their increasingly specialized work culture. However, by the 1840s, the ability of firefighters’ competitive brotherhood to contain differences had begun to diminish, especially in cities that experienced rapid demographic change.
When onlookers witnessed firemen in competition, as they did along Market Street in Philadelphia in 1850, they watched a wide cross-section of the city’s male population assert contrasting beliefs about order, public service, and manhood. Volunteer firefighters purposefully wore different costumes, employed varying symbols, and shouted orders in the unique patois of their communities. The contrasting apparel and dialects revealed firefighters’ vastly different ethnic, class, and political backgrounds. In Philadelphia and other American cities, volunteer fire companies represented a cross-section of increasingly diverse urban communities. As the century progressed, these social and demographic fissures grew more profound, and by the 1840s and 1850s differences between companies within the same
city had become quite significant. In the decades after they had created firefighting as a specialized communal public service, firefighters began to imagine their service in contradictory ways. Paradoxically, as firefighters ordered their work around a common ideal of male duty, they also organized themselves in a manner that undermined the unity of that vision of service.

Whatever their differences, volunteer firefighters uniformly agreed that firefighting was the purview of white men, and their beliefs about race explicitly structured how they provided service. With few exceptions, firefighters denied African Americans the opportunity to join fire companies or to establish their own companies. As early as 1818 in Philadelphia the city’s free black community attempted to form a fire company—the African Fire Association—in the same manner that other communities formed fire companies. Through a series of published circulars, the company sought subscriptions to finance its organization, which brought an immediate response from nearly all of the city’s twenty-five fire and hose companies. If not all firefighters rejected the claims of their African American neighbors, a majority of the city’s companies opposed the formation of the association, under the guise of preserving the public good. Opponents of the organization circulated a statement that argued against “the formation of fire-engine and hose companies by persons of color” because it would produce a “serious injury to the peace and safety of citizens in time of fire.” They further urged “the citizens of Philadelphia to give them no support or 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.”

Philadelphia firemen ultimately sought legal sanction against the African Fire Company, asking the “proper authorities” to prevent the new company from taking water at the city’s fireplugs. Much to their chagrin, the city council reported that it did not have discretion in the matter; any fire company could use city hydrants. The municipality did not reveal hidden support for the African Fire Company or abrogate its interest in fire protection, but it underscored a broader civic principle of the time: authority over and responsibility for fire protection lay within the community more broadly. Volunteer firefighters thus were obliged to achieve their goal through the power of social sanction. Eventually, strong community pressure swayed—perhaps intimidated—African American community leaders, who urged the company to disband. They feared public reprisals or worried that fire companies would not help to extinguish fires in the homes of black Philadelphians. Just weeks after its formation, heeding the remonstrance of their community leaders, the men who had formed the African Fire Association disbanded the company.
Although firemen in Philadelphia, and northern cities more broadly, made systematic racial exclusion an integral element of firefighting service, firefighters in some southern cities had a more complex relation to the labor of African Americans. For instance, firemen in Charleston and Savannah relied on African American labor—both that of free blacks and slaves—to help restore order at times of fire. In both cities, black workers pumped engines under the supervision of white officers. For instance, in Savannah, nearly six hundred African Americans performed firefighting service. “Free persons of color” earned exemption from the poll tax for their service, but slaves also carried out firefighting tasks, earning a small wage for their owners. Given the high premium that firefighters in most American cities placed on the skill and strength required to operate engines, it perhaps comes as a surprise that some white southerners gave this responsibility to African Americans. However, in neither Charleston nor Savannah did black firefighters operate independently of the authority of white firefighters. By placing the labor of African Americans under the watchful eyes of white overseers, southern volunteers replicated the division of labor in the American South more broadly.

Variations in the ways that firefighters of different regions excluded people from service underscores the complex demographics of volunteer firefighting in the decades prior to the Civil War. In that records are incomplete and membership patterns varied from town to town, generalization is difficult. Yet we can see that firemen did not simply use community pressure to exclude others from participating in the fire service, but created membership practices that included rules about sponsorship, lengthy discussions of prospective candidates, and arcane voting paraphernalia that allowed one voter to block someone’s membership. Through this structure, members of individual fire companies very consciously chose those people with whom they served. Not only do firefighters appear to have excluded African Americans but they also sought to restrict membership along class lines, with artisans, journeymen, and the middle class being the most well-represented groups in volunteer fire departments. Attempts to limit the participation of unskilled laborers may have achieved a boost from the fact that these workers found it difficult to leave their jobs to fight fires or that they were more likely to be transient. Likewise, firefighters in different cities and regions appear to have attempted to restrict membership based on ethnicity or politics, though this strategy appears to have been relatively unsuccessful.

The tensions over membership in fire companies were exacerbated when the demographic composition of American cities began to change dramatically in the 1830s. Indeed, the fracturing of American society along class, ethnic, and political lines resulted in the emergence of significant diversity in volunteer firefighting, the
particulars of which varied by city and region. For instance, by 1850, volunteer firefighters in Philadelphia and St. Louis represented nearly every neighborhood, ethnic group, and class of workers, not to mention the different political constituencies that may have crossed such divides. In St. Louis, according to departmental historian Edward Edwards, the Liberty Company consisted “almost entirely of mechanics, the nucleus being formed of foundry employees of Gaty, McCune & Company.” Likewise, French and German men in south St. Louis formed the Washington Engine Company and “well-to-do citizens of the extreme Northern part of the city” incorporated the Mound Fire Company. Additionally, membership in the Missouri Fire Company included a variety of merchants, clerks, and “first-class” mechanics. Approximately three-quarters of the men serving in the Franklin Fire Company worked as artisans, although the remainder split between laborers and white-collar occupations. Similar differences partitioned the fire service in Philadelphia. The Hibernia Fire Company, for instance, consisted of Irish Protestants who had emigrated in the eighteenth century, while the Mechanic’s company was dominated by artisans. The Pennsylvania Fire Company was composed of non-manual laborers in the 1840s, and judging from the Philadelphia Hose Company’s membership roster, artisans and white-collar workers dominated the organization from its founding in 1803. Likewise, in the Southwark neighborhood diverse groups of men banded together in particularized, homogeneous firefighting associations to enact their obligations as citizens. For example, located just blocks apart, the Weccacoe Engine Company and the Weccacoe Hose Company espoused different political beliefs, the former advocating nativist politics and the latter Democratic, antitemperance values.46

Ethnic, political, and social divisions developed or were accentuated by rapid industrial and demographic changes associated with immigration and urban growth, which occurred at different times in various cities. The 1830s and 1840s, respectively, were decades of such change in Philadelphia and St. Louis, and the composition of the cities’ fire protection changed during these chaotic decades; as each locale grew in population, the number of fire companies increased substantially. For instance, in 1817 a core of approximately twenty fire companies served Philadelphia, but by the 1840s, the department had more than doubled in size; in 1855, seventy-five fire companies operated in the expanding region. St. Louis experienced a more dramatic population explosion and corresponding shift in the number of fire companies. In 1845, eight fire companies protected St. Louis, up from two such associations before 1832.47

The formation of new fire companies and the expansion of firefighting services generally followed a distinct spatial logic. Not surprisingly, in both St. Louis and
Philadelphia, companies formed in areas of rapid population growth and substantive development. For instance, comparing company locations with their dates of formation in Philadelphia between 1817 and 1856 suggests much about the social and political geography of the fire department. Of the twelve companies located in the central portion of the city, ten were created prior to 1817 (nine prior to 1811). The other two, the Schuylkill Hose Company and the Warren Hose Company, formed in 1833 and 1838 and located themselves very near to the center point of the city at that time, what is now the intersection of Broad and Market Streets. Other older companies moved away from the city’s center, though they remained proximate to the Delaware River (the city’s eastern edge). This allowed them to continue to play an important role in defending the large concentrations of merchant capital amassed along the river. And, generally speaking, they remained adjacent to the locations in which they were founded. This pattern fits the region more broadly, as well. During and after the depression years of the 1840s, much of the expansion of Philadelphia’s volunteer fire department occurred along the edges of the city, where the population was exploding. Companies tended to form in recently settled, populous districts such as Spring Garden, Southwark, Kensington, and Moyamensing—precisely where the city’s working-class and immigrant population was settling.48

The increasing ethnic and class diversity so evident in the growing urban population did not manifest itself within the ranks of particular companies. Rather, it appeared across the spectrum of all the city’s companies. Put another way, membership in individual companies remained relatively similar, but the body of firemen came to include a more diverse mixture of fire companies, each of which included homogeneous groups of men from varied political, ethnic, or class backgrounds. Once again, it is difficult to make a simple generalization about how fire companies came into being and developed because every company produced a distinctive identity based on where it was founded, when it was organized, the composition of its initial membership, and its particular historical trajectory. The history of the Philadelphia Hose Company, which remained relatively homogeneous between 1810 and 1850, argues for continuity of membership, rather than change. In this instance, the company remained demographically homogeneous from its founding, having been created in a particular neighborhood and developing a rich tradition. A longitudinal examination of the Philadelphia Hose Company’s membership records shows that professionals, merchants, manufacturers, clerks, or artisans accounted for at least 90 percent of all members throughout the period. By contrast, other companies experienced membership transitions, in which men of one background replaced those of quite different circumstances. For instance, the
Delaware Fire Company had a relatively diverse membership in 1824, but by 1858 working-class men dominated the company, reflecting the demographic composition on the city's western edge, where the company had relocated its engine house. Similarly, middling Philadelphians dominated the United States Hose Company at its formation, but manual laborers controlled its membership at midcentury. Although the histories of individual companies varied, evidence suggests that most firefighters served in companies composed of men very much like themselves in the 1850s. Firefighting was enacted in the context of small groups whose membership was bounded by occupation, ethnicity, or geography.49

Although no single pattern easily describes changes in urban fire service, by the 1850s, firefighting had become an increasingly mixed-class and multiethnic endeavor in cities across the nation. Whether firefighters served in New York, San Francisco, Cincinnati, Chicago, New Orleans, or St. Louis, even though they worked in companies populated by men much like themselves, they battled flames alongside men from diverse groups of fire companies. This diversity certainly holds for Philadelphia, which enumerated its volunteer firefighters in 1868. The majority of firemen labored as artisans or journeymen, and approximately 30 percent of firemen labored in white-collar occupations—clerks, professionals, or prosperous merchants. Fewer than 10 percent of the city’s firefighters worked as wage laborers. The enumerators did not collect data on ethnicity, but there is no reason to think that Philadelphia’s fire department did not mirror the city in this regard, which is confirmed by anecdotal evidence that points toward significant ethnic diversity. More broadly, although firefighters engaged in a common labor, they increasingly interpreted that duty differently, depending upon their class, ethnicity, or political beliefs. Clothing themselves in the idioms of their communities, volunteers struggled to balance their particular identities against their shared brotherhood.50

Symbols and Streets: Balancing Brotherhood and Neighborhood

As the century wore on, volunteer firefighters saturated the public sphere with richly colored symbols that articulated a contradictory message—of difference and commonality. On one hand, firefighters sharply distinguished themselves from one another, in a variety of ways. They commissioned or composed playful musical scores and lyrics about their companies; they selected costumes and colors for their associations, and debated political and social issues through their choices of company symbol. On the other hand, volunteers developed more common activities
for their fire companies. They marched together at parades, transformed informal competition into formal contests, visited and exchanged gifts with other associations, and held balls to raise money. Although firefighters had a difficult time balancing company identity against the interests of their emerging brotherhood, their expressive public performances nonetheless served several important purposes. Firefighters continued to assert, more boldly than ever before, the critical importance of their increasingly specialized public service, and volunteers reassured property holders, politicians, and neighbors that the urban environment was protected from fire. Finally, and perhaps most critically, when they began to expand gift exchanges beyond their home cities in the 1840s, firefighters began to develop

*Central Fire Company No. 1* (n.d.), Mat Hastings, watercolor on paper. Prior to the Civil War, firefighters controlled blazes by taking positions outside buildings. Volunteers pumped levers, or “brakes,” located along the sides of an apparatus to produce enough pressure to force water onto a fire. They rotated onto and off the brakes in short bursts of five to fifteen minutes and worked continuously for long periods of time. Courtesy, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis
a notion of brotherhood that transcended local and regional peculiarities, establishing a framework for a national community of firemen.\textsuperscript{51}

Firemen invested an unusual amount of time decorating themselves, their engines, and their engine houses. At monthly company meetings, firemen discussed all aspects of company business from membership to finances to upcoming drills. In particular, they spent a significant portion of their time deliberating on issues involved with their dress. Companies held protracted debates about which hats members should wear to upcoming parades, what symbols should be painted on those hats, what types of costume should be worn. Quite often, volunteers adjourned special meetings just to consider issues of costume left unresolved at regular meetings. Perhaps companies spent so much time discussing costume because they had such a wide variety of choices in their extent and substance. For instance, they could choose between hats of pressed velvet and helmets of molded leather with high tops, short bills, and sloping projections off the rear of the cap. Companies also coordinated shirts with pants, belts, and other accoutrements that varied in color and style. In addition to these items, firemen sometimes wore oilskin capes, specially purchased coats, and leather belts. They further emblazoned their costumes with the company’s name, motto, and/or number. Firefighters selected images that reflected their differing interpretations of firefighting service: political figures, patriotic icons, and more particularized, local emblems.\textsuperscript{52}

Although the choice of company symbols varied widely, they typically placed firefighters’ local connections in the context of a broader symbolic universe. For instance, many companies—such as Philadelphia’s Northern Liberties Hose Company and United States Hose Company, and St. Louis’s Liberty Fire Company—chose the goddess Liberty as their symbol to underscore the importance of firefighting within the polity. These images suggested that when firefighters protected property and community they also preserved democratic values. In Philadelphia, the “Young Ladies of Spring Garden” commissioned a five-by-eight-foot banner of Liberty for the Western Fire Company. On it, Liberty treads upon a crown and shackles, symbols of tyranny and oppression, as she gestures heavenward to a bright break in the darkened clouds. A sword in her right hand points to the Declaration of Independence; to her left rests a shield painted in the colors of the American flag, which is surrounded by the motto “E Pluribus Unum.” The banner connected the members of the Western Engine Company to the politics of artisanal republicanism so prevalent in Jacksonian America. St. Louis’s Liberty Fire Company varied its portrait of Liberty on hats acquired in 1851. It placed Liberty on a rocky crag overlooking a steamboat floating down the Mississippi River, which signified both the social and economic link between St. Louis and the rest of the
nation and represented city boosters’ beliefs about the role of commerce in the city. By depicting Liberty guarding the city and its economic fortunes, the Liberty Fire Company articulated the loftiness of its responsibilities, and at the same time expressed its commitment to the political principles of the young nation.53

Likewise, company mottoes and names reflected the diversity of fire companies, often expressed a commitment to unified service, and frequently implied that firefighters’ service was a distinctly male endeavor. Some mottoes expressed national pride and others captured the public-spirited sentiments that drove firefighters’ culture. In Philadelphia, the Neptune Hose adopted “to save our fellow citizens we hazard ourselves,” and in St. Louis the Washington Hose Company chose “all private duties are subordinate to those which we owe to the public.” In addition, other companies chose symbols with multiple meanings. The Western Engine Company’s slogan, “e pluribus unum,” suggested the unity of the nation and the ideal of brotherhood so important to firefighters. The St. Louis’s Union Fire Company also chose a phrase of double intent—“in union there is strength.” It eloquently underscored the connection between masculine physical prowess and firefighters’ specialized responsibility to protect property and the state. For the most part, companies chose names, mottoes, and symbols that articulated a commitment to a broader brotherhood of public service.54

In much the same way, balls and social events confirmed the unity of a city’s fire department, reinforced common principles, and also served as a vehicle for establishing a national culture among firemen. For instance, a poem written by Washington Fire Company foreman Charles Kumle and read at the St. Louis firemen’s ball in 1844 shows how ritual and symbol interacted to affirm volunteer firemen’s understanding of their culture. Performed at a fundraiser and attended by city luminaries, and friends and subscribers to the department, the poem followed the public presentation of a ceremonial trumpet to a company officer.

So gentlemen, I beg you stop the ball,
For I don’t mean to make a speech at all
Brothers fare well! Had you but notice spread
I might have said, Long may the Central stand
The nucleus of a protecting band.
Rouse every heart! Let every arm be nerved,
and Let the Union ever be preserved.
Alert and pure as were the Thessalonians;
The Washington may boast for Washingtonians;
Still may St. Louis City laugh at flaws
While the machine St. Louis holds her name
When Mount Aetna’s burning comes again about
Let Old Missouri on, She’ll put it out.
From tyranny, destruction, misery,
We find our guard in glorious Liberty.
And last not least among the honored names
The Phoenix stands triumphant o’er the flames.
All this I might have said but now, I lump it
Into few words: Friend Wilgus have your trumpet,
Another section there; now man the brakes
Down on her men: hurrah she takes, she takes;
Hosemen, real up! now man the rope my men
The fire is out; and hie for home again.

Kumle celebrated firefighters’ prowess and bravery, their place at the center of the system of fire protection, and their position as guardians of the polity. His declaration also united the city’s diverse fire companies into a single cause, bound by a common brotherhood. Such poetry, as well as the social life of the engine house, preserved harmony among companies, and intense physical competition subsided at social events. Dinners, balls, saloon gatherings, or picnics helped to cement ideals of brotherhood. Firemen exchanged stories and created myths; they assigned reputations—to men, companies, and equipment. Of equal import, such gatherings served an important community and public relations purpose. They confirmed firemen’s readiness to confront the danger of fire and validated firefighters’ importance.55

Perhaps more significantly, ritualistic gift exchange bound companies across geography and underscored a developing vocational identity that transcended locale. Firemen frequently contacted firemen in other places simply because they shared the same company number, the same name, or the same engine make and model. As early as the 1830s, fire companies invited other units from nearby cities to parade or drill with them. In addition, many companies traveled great distances to “visit” firemen in other cities. In 1856, for instance, the Hibernia Fire Company of Philadelphia spent several weeks visiting cities on the eastern seaboard from Boston to Charleston. In their book commemorating the occasion, the company secretary related anecdotes of the various dinners, drills, and balls thrown in honor of the visit. More common were yearly visits between cities; every year during the 1840s and 1850s, before the dissolution of their volunteer departments, Union No. 2 of St. Louis and Relief No. 2 of Cincinnati visited each other’s home city. In these
exchanges of greetings and warm wishes, many companies exchanged daguerreotypes, plaques, and fire hats. Gifts and messages would also accompany a tragic fire or the death of a fireman. Firemen gave many gifts, but ceremonial speaking trumpets were especially popular. Made of silver, these firemen’s trumpets, duplicates of the speaking horns used by company officers at fires, were usually engraved with gilt or ornate images of flowers and/or firefighting. In a more practical vein, such visits, correspondence, and gift exchange served as a conduit through which firemen often shared notes about new technologies and departmental organization, and helped to establish a market for secondhand equipment.56

Despite startling displays of unity, the romantic idiom created by firefighters should not be overstated to suggest that firefighters’ identities as firemen superseded their particular connections to local communities. From the very first firemen’s parades held in the 1820s and 1830s—usually as part of celebrations of national identity—firefighters’ symbolic culture became a prime locale for interpreting the political and social order. More broadly, firefighting symbolism grew more expressive as American urban life became increasingly fractured, and “private,” to use Sam Bass Warner’s phrasing. The pace of urbanization, immigration, and industrialization divided the city into increasingly atomized communities, and the expression of particularistic identities undermined firefighters’ unity. Asserting differences increasingly moved from the realm of ritualistic debate into physical confrontations between firemen. On the streets of Philadelphia, strife between fire companies grew as ethnic and class competition became more pronounced and levels of urban violence rose. This was especially true during the 1830s and 1840s. Perhaps the most exceptional instances involved conflicts between the Shiffler Hose Company and Moyamensing Engine. Composed of nativists and emulating its namesake George Shiffler—a “Native American” killed while burning Irish Catholic churches during the 1840s—Shiffler Hose frequently skirmished with the Irish immigrants of Moyamensing Engine, whose famed leader William “Bull” McMullen was notorious on the streets of Philadelphia. Symbolic competition boiled over into street melees, and despite calls for brotherhood, firefighters could not contain the increasing social and cultural friction between companies.57

Yet physical confrontations between firemen do not appear to have been any more frequent than other neighborhood disturbances. For instance, in Philadelphia, fighting between firemen appears to have increased in proportion to the intensification of violence on the city’s streets. Not surprisingly, fire companies participated in some of the region’s most acute crises, but more often than not firemen played a crucial role in restoring public order. With a few notable exceptions, fire-
fighters helped to quell riots, protect property, and restore the peace. For instance, in 1838, when antiabolitionists burned Pennsylvania Hall, a mob tried to prevent firemen from reaching the building. Several of the city’s companies battled their way to the blaze and received commendations from the community for their service. One local church presented a silver ceremonial trumpet to a member of the Good Will Fire Company with the inscription, “Reward of Merit, Presented by a Portion of His Fellow Citizens as a Mark of Their Approbation of his Gallant and Meritorious Service During the Recent Convulsions in this City and in which he periled life itself for the protection of private property amidst the threat and intimidation of an infuriated and exasperated mob.” Likewise, in 1849, a notorious street gang, and at least one fire company, instigated the “California House riots,” but the department performed with élan in the incident. Most firefighters stood against the rioters. On balance, even if they sometimes gave their critics ammunition, firefighters played an active role in preserving order. In fact, during the tumultuous 1830s and 1840s, some of the most ardent opponents of volunteer firefighters defended them, reporting that firemen protected property with great zeal. In 1841, for instance, businessman Sidney George Fisher effused, “The fire department here is very energetic and efficient.”

Volunteer firefighters struggled to balance brotherhood against the particularistic expressions and beliefs of individual companies and their communities. These tensions seemed natural to firefighters and their neighbors, but have been misunderstood by historians, who have emphasized to the point of caricature either the differences that firefighters expressed or the mythic brotherhood to which volunteers claimed membership. When viewed in the context of the work performed by firefighters, and their functional and symbolic role in shaping and restoring the social order, the roots of these contradictions become apparent. In the context of battling the problem of fire, firefighters shared and expressed a common understanding of what constituted manhood, service, and order. Take, for instance, the New York firemen who challenged the draft in the 1860s. Volunteers began the day protesting the draft, but, once rioters set fires, they literally clothed themselves in the garb of firefighters and protected the social order. At the same time that firefighters protected and maintained society, they expressed widely divergent understandings of how order should be constituted and where power should be located. Indeed, firefighters were powerful and public advocates of diverse political and social opinions. Constraining these seemingly competing impulses was not an easy task for firefighters, and it became increasingly difficult as immigration and industrialization fueled the growth of American cities.
Maintaining Order: Management Associations and the Problem of Unity

Balancing public service against particular company interests remained an issue for volunteers, whose identities continued to be circumscribed by social, cultural, and political realities. Indeed, volunteers’ sense that they belonged to a distinctive “fire department” was emerging only slowly at midcentury, and it often was subordinate to their affiliation with a company, community, or political unit. The clearest sense of how volunteers gradually unified into a well-defined political collective—and became part of a volunteer fire department—appears in efforts to manage service at fires and conflicts between companies. Early in the nineteenth century, companies organized leadership associations for practical reasons, espe-
cially to direct firefighting work. These administrative bodies forged harmony between companies and represented the needs of all firefighters before elected political bodies. However, except for some limited successes in the first decades of the nineteenth century, these associations largely failed. They could not transfer—at least regularly—the unity of firemen’s brotherhood to the political arena.

In Philadelphia, as early as 1805, volunteer firefighters formed management associations to prosecute the common interests of firefighters, to settle disputes, and to resolve jurisdictional issues that arose in the region’s fractured political structure. The city’s hose companies formed a Fire Hose Association to represent members’ interests before the municipal government and city merchants. Just a decade later, in 1817, firefighters established a more powerful but specialized management institution designed to coordinate their labor, govern conflicts, and represent their common interests to the polity. An outgrowth of the Fire Hose Association, the Fire Association (FA) renamed, reorganized, and restyled itself as the leadership body of the entire department. The FA represented fire companies before the municipal government; mediated disputes between companies; encouraged parading; and eventually fostered the formation of an association for the relief of disabled firemen and a board of control for the department. It also planned for company self-sufficiency and independence. Indeed, the FA hoped to finance companies through dividends earned from its business as an insurance company. Although it is unclear just how significant the FA’s donations were, by 1859 the organization distributed $738 to each of forty-nine member companies.60

The Fire Association succeeded less well in its other ambitions. As a mediator of disputes between companies it failed. In the 1810s, for instance, the Philadelphia Hose Company and the Good Intent Company became embroiled in a protracted dispute centering on the patent of an alarm bell. Philadelphia Hose asked the FA to determine if Good Intent’s bell infringed upon its design. After the management association decided in favor of Philadelphia Hose, the Good Intent Company withdrew from the FA (but remained in active service). Only after the Court of Quarter Sessions ruled against it did Good Intent reconcile with Philadelphia Hose and petition to rejoin the FA. The inability of the FA to settle disputes demonstrated the limitations of its authority—a recurring problem faced by later management associations. Other factors limited the organization’s influence as well. Over time, the FA included proportionally fewer of the region’s fire companies. And, if few of its own members recognized the FA’s authority, nonmembers felt even less compelled to abide by its decisions. In addition, the region’s various municipalities did not recognize the FA’s authority over firefighting. Thus the FA became less and less relevant.61
In 1839, firemen renewed efforts at self-discipline, forming a more ambitious board of control. Over twenty companies formed the Board of Control of the Philadelphia Fire Department according to the same plan as member fire companies. Adopting constitutional language and procedures, the board elected officers and “directors” whose duty it was to “superintend the operations of the Controllers in times of fires [and] place the members in whatever situation they may deem necessary.” In addition, the board created a system of fines that it meted out for not attending meetings or fires. Like its member companies, the board expected such penalties to foster unity by establishing common institutional responsibilities. In addition, democratic elections and rotating committee leadership encouraged cooperation without obliterating the individual identities of member companies. The board further codified informal intercompany relationships into formal processes, including printed work rules that required members to cooperate. The constitution also demanded that controllers report any “violation of the peace or principles contained (in the constitution) . . . or infraction upon the rights of others.” Abrogation of communal interest—such as refusing to share a plug connection, racing, or failing to recognize a leaders’ authority—met with stiff penalties.

The Board of Control, like the FA, never fully realized its goals. Within several years, it disbanded. A number of factors impeded its success: intense local and regional political divisions, firefighters’ reluctance to accede to centralized authority over their division of labor, and the existence of many informal modes of resolving disputes. The Board of Control’s authority resided within the narrow corridor of Philadelphia’s central city, where twenty-five of its twenty-nine members were located. In this part of the region, the board’s power expanded beyond a mere advisory role. Over time, Philadelphia’s councils gradually invested the Board of Control with increased power to shape the department—especially at fire scenes. It provided the board with influence over municipal appropriations made to fire companies. In addition, the state gave the board limited power to act as police at fires and to “protect property and quell riotous behavior.” Outside Philadelphia, where over thirty-five of the region’s seventy-plus companies were located, geography, demographics, and political divisions weakened the board. Fire companies and communities in those districts, such as Southwark, Kensington, and Northern Liberties, jealously guarded their political prerogatives against encroachments by interests associated with the larger and more economically powerful city of Philadelphia. After one company joined the board, it later resigned because its members “found [themselves] placed so far from the city” that they were “deprived of the benefits of the Board and for the same reason our Controller is of little or no service to you.” In 1840, the Pennsylvania Hose Company remon-
strated against a plan by the Kensington Board of Commissioners to recognize the board’s authority. The board, which craved such legitimacy, sent a delegation to “refute the charges.” Its lack of control beyond Philadelphia underscores the extraordinary demographic and political differences between the districts and the central city.63

Informal modes of dispute resolution also impeded the Board of Control’s efforts to govern fire companies. When companies found themselves at odds, they followed several routes to resolving their problems: formal contact between company leaders, physical retaliation, public appeal, and informal legal action. For instance, sometimes companies appealed to local municipalities and neighborhoods to redress grievances and force foes into submission. Only rarely did firefighters turn to formal organizational bodies to resolve disputes. In September 1839, for instance, the America Hose Company sent a letter of complaint about the Philadelphia Hose Company to the Board of Control, which subsequently enjoined both parties to testify before it. After failing to appear on several occasions, Philadelphia Hose informed the board that it “declined complying with the requests as this company is not represented in that Body and cannot therefore acknowledge its jurisdiction.” Even so, the Philadelphia Hose Company agreed to meet with members of America Hose to “assuage the misunderstanding satisfactorily.”64

Fire companies, like ordinary Philadelphia residents, made little distinction between legal modes of settling conflicts and other methods. In practice, Philadelphia courts provided litigants with extraordinary control over a system ostensibly designed to discipline them. In the hurly-burly of the courtroom, disputants jockeyed for favorable negotiating positions using a host of techniques, such as counter-suits, or “cross-bills.” As a result, few cases ever went to trial. Such a seemingly rag-tag system of justice worked effectively for residents in the politically and socially divided region. It also worked for fire companies. As Allen Steinberg argues in his study of Philadelphia criminal justice, “In gambling and fire riot cases most private prosecutors were not interested in convictions or even punishment. Instead, they sought the restitution of a desired balance in a private relationship.” The city’s courts became another arena in which firemen competed. Companies used the legal system to avoid facing contradictions inherent in their relationship to the collective body of firemen.65

If firefighters did not redress grievances through a centralized authority, they nonetheless continued to establish management associations to prosecute their political and social interests. In fact, fire companies in Kensington, Northern Liberties, and Southwark established management associations akin to the Board of Control. In 1842 fifteen fire companies in Northern Liberties and Kensington es-
established the “Firemen’s Convention for the Incorporated District of the Northern Liberties and Kensington” to nurture firefighters’ claims. Firefighters organized such associations much like the Board of Control, right down to its rules of conduct. Yet, many companies remained hesitant to allow these management associations to limit their autonomy. And, indeed, few nineteenth-century volunteer firefighters conceived of themselves as members of a “volunteer fire department” even though they had developed a sense of brotherhood around their specialized service. A formal bureaucratic vision of firefighting had not yet emerged. In the years before the 1850s, as firefighters struggled to balance their interests as firemen with those of their local communities, they experimented with, but did not fully embrace, more formalized management bureaucracies.66

Conclusion: The Atomization of Service

As firefighters struggled to discipline themselves, they continued the trend toward specializing their civic obligations. Beginning in the 1830s, more than half of Philadelphia’s fire companies introduced innovative new membership strategies that distinguished between types of service. Hose and engine companies alike, including such departmental stalwarts as the Diligent Engine Company and the Hope Hose Company, diversified membership into several grades—active, honorary, and contributing. Active members extinguished fires (and sometimes paid minimal dues). Honorary membership was given to men who performed notable active service; such firemen had the right (but were not obligated) to attend fires, and also paid a small amount of dues. However, when companies allowed contributing members, they radically changed the conditions of service. Unlike active and honorary members, contributors did not have to fight fires. Rather, contributors paid heavy dues, and they were allowed to participate in parades and company functions, and sometimes received voting privileges. Men holding this membership grade did not have to perform physical labor, which transformed the very fabric of firefighting service. Some men worked while others served as firefighters in name only, as a reward for their financial contributions. A new set of beliefs—based on the amount of dues a member could pay and/or his predilection toward dangerous physical work—began to define firefighters’ brotherhood.67

The roster of the Philadelphia Hose Company illustrates this trend. The company began accepting contributing members in 1837, and by 1841 contributing members accounted for over half of the membership; by 1853, contributing members comprised nearly 75 percent of the company’s strength. The experiences of the Philadelphia Hose Company mirrored trends in firefighting more broadly, and
the proportion of nonactive firefighters in Philadelphia fire companies increased steadily through the 1860s. In 1842, 60 percent of all fire companies in Philadelphia had accepted contributing members into their ranks. And, there were as many contributing and honorary members in Philadelphia’s fire department as there were active firemen. In other words, in the early 1840s, only about half of the men serving as volunteer firemen in Philadelphia expected to perform firefighting labor.68

The gradation of service levels corresponded to the intensification of firefighters’ cultural differences as well as the heightening of differences within the department, which also began in the 1830s. The coincidental timing of these shifts is revealing. By increasing income, a company would have been able to afford to commission expensive engine engravings, new costumes, banners, or other symbolic items like trumpets. Likewise, a steady revenue stream from contributing members could help to defray the constant expenses of new hoses, tools, and apparatus. In addition firefighters could make bolder statements of company identity—making it possible for active members to express the group’s male bravado and technological acumen. Moreover, by adding contributing members, companies increased the available labor pool as well as the representation of their communities.

The reorganization of firefighters’ labor illuminates the broader manner in which Americans ordered their lives and their cities. As the problem of fire grew, firefighters argued that controlling the problem was an important public function that should be performed by particular groups of skilled men—whose service was characterized by technological competence, physical strength, and selflessness. Rhetorically, firefighters and their neighbors advocated discipline and unity in the face of danger. However, increasing demographic differences and intense competition confounded the efforts of firemen to create a single brotherhood of firemen. Firefighters increasingly interpreted their service in the many different idioms of urbanizing America. Furthermore, beginning as early as the 1840s, the many symbols and rituals that allowed firefighters to negotiate the contradictions in their manhood and their culture—between competition and cooperation, between communal orientation and individualistic expression—lost their effectiveness under the strain of industrialization and immigration. Well before urban America began regularly to erupt in riots, resulting from the dislocations of industrial conflict, cities faced a crisis of order in how they organized against the problem of fire. Firefighters adopted an approach to danger and safety that predicted the broader societal trend. Specialized niches and particularistic loyalties—to neighborhood, class, ethnicity, or politics—governed the ways that Americans disciplined themselves, arranged their economic activities, and structured their communal life.