When Truck Company D arrived at St. Louis’s Southern Hotel in 1877, it found the building engulfed in flames. Above the pyre, almost a dozen people dangled from windows. The company hurriedly maneuvered its ladder truck along Fourth Street—impeded by streetcar tracks and blocked from the hotel’s upper reaches by porches. Phelim O’Toole, a former sailor and twice commended fireman, scurried up the ladder only to find himself five feet away from the ledge where six stranded people anxiously balanced. Drawing upon years of experience, O’Toole demanded their only clothing—the bedding they had hastily wrapped around themselves. One man—a professor of English—balked, demanding, “What do you want with them?” Above the din of flames and wind, O’Toole yelled, “You pass them down and I’ll save your lives.” True to his word, O’Toole fashioned a rope and lifted himself to the ledge. Battling choking smoke and blinding heat, he methodically lowered the professor and his family, one by one. Then, moving to another sill, O’Toole removed another man and two women to safety. He recalled, “It got pretty hot and smoky up there, but I did my best.”

If the firemen thought that their night’s work was finished, the blaze had other plans. Fire Chief Lindsay spotted a man hanging in another window about to be consumed by the raging flames, and he ordered Truck Company D to reposition
its apparatus. But, again, the ladder could not reach the stranded man. As O'Toole worked frantically to get to him, the man, frightened by the impending flames, threatened to jump. O'Toole implored him to stand pat, until the company maneuvered its truck closer. As O'Toole recounted, “We ran the truck into a shape that a truck never did work in this country, or any other, and never will again, though it did that time. It had nothing to support it; so we threw her against the wall some distance below the window.” Without solid support, O'Toole ascended the ladder. He commanded the man to dangle from the sill. As the window cracked and exploded, O'Toole took firm hold of the ladder with his legs and feet, and leaned forward to gain better purchase. He grabbed the man's feet, and yelled “drop.” Down he went, but O'Toole grasped him, struggling against gravity for nearly a minute. O'Toole remembered that the man “was very much excited, and we were hard set to get him off the ladder.” Only moments after the company withdrew, the Fourth Street side of the Southern Hotel cascaded onto the street.¹

Phelim O'Toole's heroism came at a time when firefighters in American cities were reorganizing their work and establishing the boundaries of their occupation. O'Toole's story illustrates some of the skills, tools, and apparatus that firefighters adopted as they refined their work techniques in relation to the physical and cultural dimensions of rapidly changing nineteenth-century cities. Firefighters remade the labor and the mission of urban fire departments when they fought fires more aggressively and faced an increasing amount of hazard as they penetrated deep inside the shakily built urban infrastructure. Firefighters also discovered a framework and rationale for their occupation as they began to rescue more and more people trapped by flames. Encouraged by a popular press that celebrated their work, firefighters became icons. Thus narratives of firefighting heroism defined their occupational boundaries, providing firemen considerable social and political authority, and justifying their interventions in the landscape. Firemen made possible the headlong rush of urban development even as it was routinely threatened by environmental catastrophe.

Repeated failures of public officials, insurers, engineers, and capitalists to protect urban America from fire fostered disorder in cities and provided the space in which firefighters established heroic credentials. Further accentuated by the headlong rush of capitalist development, this crisis was felt perhaps most acutely in working-class communities, which often had to face harrowing choices between economic survival and safety. These neighborhoods shouldered a disproportionate amount of the risk of industrialization and urbanization, including the problem of fire. At a time when insurers and engineers made great strides in developing safety for isolated industrial and commercial properties, in other areas
firefighters stood as the first and only line of defense. As a result, firefighters’ provision of safety resonated among their neighbors, and in popular culture more broadly.

Just as concerns about fire danger were written into insurance policies and drawn onto maps, they also were represented by the bodies of firemen. Firefighters established an occupation that became an integral part of municipal bureaucracies and urban life. By protecting both people and the infrastructure against environmental devastation, they preserved the system of social, economic, and political power. In the process, firefighters transformed themselves into heroes, but occupational formation occurred unevenly and incompletely. Following the Civil War, firefighters began to identify and to champion new work techniques and skills that had particular efficacy in the dynamic built environment, characterized by taller, larger buildings that magnified the danger of fire to citizens as well as property. The changing urban landscape and its ever-shifting dangers concerned firefighters greatly, and in 1872 they formed the National Association of Fire Engineers to represent their interests. The NAFE conceived of firefighting as a profession, and it used yearly conventions to establish the jurisdictional boundaries and work activities of the occupation. These meetings also became forums, like firehouses themselves, in which firefighters—from pipemen to chief engineers—implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, discussed how gender, race, and class mattered in the performance of their work. Over time, firefighters adopted increasingly similar work practices and asserted their claims as professionals. Even so, by the last decades of the century, firefighting culture varied remarkably according to local differences between and within cities, as the stories of firemen in Philadelphia and St. Louis make abundantly clear. Uneven training, insular male work groups, and machine politics inhibited the spread of professionalism and the full realization of a common occupational identity.2

The Built Landscape, Fire Danger, and Occupational Authority

Firemen created their occupation within the rich social, cultural, and political milieu of American cities, and they formed their identities as professionals in a complex relation with the urban built landscape. Compared to factories and other work environments that employers often controlled tightly, urban landscapes were more dynamic and complex. The process of urbanization and capitalism continually altered and transformed American landscapes. Firefighters discovered that their workplaces constantly were being reconstructed. New spatial arrangements
not only complicated their labor, but also placed firefighters in ever greater danger. If firemen observed that the built environment imperiled themselves and their comrades, they especially expressed concern about the hazards faced by ordinary people. As firemen spoke out about the dangers facing their neighbors, they discovered a central organizing principle for their occupation.  

After 1872 the National Association of Fire Engineers set the standards for firefighting. To fire engineers, the firefighter was obligated to preserve his community’s general welfare in a disinterested fashion. Such general welfare extended beyond mere control over firefighting labor; it included the broadest authority over the problem of fire. At the NAFE’s first meeting, fire engineers outlined the new organization’s agenda. Divided into two broad categories—“fire prevention” and “fire extinguishment”—the agenda covered eleven topics in great detail, many of which would reappear regularly at future meetings. Eventually, the nation’s leading firemen initiated a program that centered on five components: (1) scientific firefighting, (2) standardization—of tools, fire department organization, and urban infrastructure, (3) codes for construction and design of buildings, (4) removing politics from fire protection and making the public’s welfare a priority, and (5) organizing and directing the collective action of other specialized communities with an interest in fire safety, such as fire underwriters, engineers, and architects. The NAFE asserted its jurisdiction over urban fire protection by disseminating its Annual Proceedings to city governments, fire departments, and the National Board of Fire Underwriters, which regularly sent participating delegates. The NAFE later named as official “organs” of the association several prominent independent publications—Fireman’s Herald, Western Firefighter, and the widely read Fireman’s Journal (which later changed its name to Fire and Water)—through which the NAFE kept the pressure on others in the fire protection field to adopt its recommendations.  

Fire engineers observed that the shifting structure of the urban environment produced different, if not entirely new, dangers to urban residents. Increased use of new construction techniques, materials, and technologies—such as masonry and, later, steel-frame construction—changed the structure of cities, especially their downtowns. Buildings grew ever taller and spread horizontally, which also transformed warehouses into structures of remarkable size. Although the increased size of urban structures is difficult to measure, and was not uniform across the nation, buildings of major cities nonetheless gradually extended upward from between four and six stories before the Civil War to routine heights of eight, nine, ten stories, and beyond, by the turn of the century. This extension in scale is perhaps best symbolized by the appearance of skyscrapers in the 1880s, such as the
Home Insurance Building in Chicago, and the expansion of building scale in warehouse districts, such as those structures still present in St. Louis’s Lucas Avenue Industrial Historic District. Not surprisingly, these rapidly expanding landscapes remade the danger of fire. Fires in such large structures burned differently depending on a variety of factors, including both construction materials and techniques, as well as building contents. Blazes often burned hotter and longer, producing intense heat and smoke that made fighting fires difficult. Sometimes fires lasted long enough to cause structural elements to lose their strength, triggering massive building failures. Towering walls toppled, falling onto firefighters or bystanders. The dangers even extended underground as deeper, larger, and more elaborate basements and subbasements warehoused goods and became smoky tombs for firefighters.5

Although these dangers were visible only to ordinary citizens at moments of crisis, firefighters were acutely aware that cities were becoming more hazardous. Experiences in burning buildings made them sensitive to how changes in construction methods, design, and building size altered the problem of fire, creating diverse “fire environments.” Not surprisingly, fire engineers used their annual convention as a forum to discuss the new dangers, especially the materials and techniques which were used to increase the size of cities and which were often labeled as being “fireproof.” Though these new materials were fire resistant, firefighters argued that fireproof construction techniques did not make buildings safer nor did they inhibit the spread of fire. Beginning in the 1880s, with the appearance of skyscrapers and the spread of fireproof construction, firefighters routinely raised important questions about the techniques. The editors of Fire and Water, for instance, asserted that fireproof structures “are somewhat of a delusion. They may be constructed throughout with non-inflammable materials, such as stone, iron, and plaster; but as long as the building contains material sufficient when on fire to cause the stone to split and fly, the iron to become redhot and deteriorate to a point below its breaking strength, and the plaster to crumble and fall, the building cannot be considered fireproof.” The NAFE argued that most fires originated in a building’s contents, not its frame, and that once weakened by fire so-called fireproof buildings became death traps. Thus, fire engineers argued, such structures constituted “one of the chief dangers to life, which firemen have to contend against.” Adding to this problem was the fact that during the latter decades of the nineteenth century many fire departments did not have ladders long enough to reach upper floors of buildings and many cities did not have water supplies up to the task of propelling water into high-rise buildings. Even as new modes of construction altered dangers, older problems remained—including the common use of wood.
The NAFE remained concerned about the persistence of such construction methods and linked building practice to the larger structure of the North American natural environment: “The superabundance of wood mainly affords the principle [sic] of excuse in this country for its use in building purposes, and the troubles will continue as long as the supply lasts.” The NAFE even conceived this sort of “tinder box style of construction so universally practiced” to be a problem of national character.

Gaining a measure of control over this shifting built landscape increasingly became an issue that helped to set the boundaries of firefighting as an occupation. Firefighters agitated to diminish the growing danger, demanding that builders use construction techniques that made buildings safer or, at least, produced spaces that were easily susceptible to firefighters’ physical intervention. At one of the NAFE’s earliest meetings, reducing fire hazards in the landscape became a topic of intense attention, as the title of one discussion suggested: “The limitation or disuse of combustible material in the structure of buildings; the reduction of excessive height in buildings, and the restriction of the dangers of elevator passages, hatchways, and mansards.” Such themes recurred over and over at subsequent meetings, and with each passing year discussions grew more expansive, nuanced, and detailed. However, the engineers’ principal concerns remained focused on inhibiting the transmission of fire between buildings or within them rather than preventing ignition altogether. Through the 1870s, the NAFE received reports from its membership regarding the specifics of the relation between fire and particular structural features of the urban environment, and after 1880 the NAFE routinely solicited comment from experts outside the organization. Guest speakers included prominent underwriters and engineers such as George Hope, president of the NBFU, Edward Atkinson, perhaps the leading expert among civil engineers (and employed by New England Factory Mutuals to reduce their fire risk), Charles Knowles, president of the Southeastern Underwriters Tariff Association, and C. C. Hine, publisher of the *Insurance Chronicle*, and one of the leading industry experts on fire insurance practice. As early as 1876, again in 1884, and repeatedly at meetings through the 1890s, the NAFE transformed its discussions of environmental dangers into increasingly detailed recommendations for building.

The NAFE examined risk in an exceedingly detailed manner, and, like others concerned with fire danger, it used a progressively more common and specialized language. For instance, the organization’s members discussed the hazards posed by construction materials, both inside and outside buildings, openings within and outside buildings, and firewalls. The NAFE found fault with multiple and seemingly irrelevant points of construction. It challenged the use of aesthetic detailing
fashioned of wood as well as other wood features on buildings. The organization noted that even buildings with brick or stone exteriors proved exceptionally vulnerable if internal features had been made of wood. It advocated use of iron shutters instead of wooden shutters, building “fire walls” between buildings that would extend five feet above roofs, and “compartmentalizing” buildings to help isolate fires. Along the same lines, the NAFE repeatedly expressed concern about how the structure of shaftways and other gaps within buildings—such as those for elevators and stairway—facilitated the spread of fires. The language also grew more specialized as the organization categorized and named fire risk. For instance, in 1874, one fire commissioner distinguished between dangers “of origination” and of “communication and extension”; what he identified as the “danger of communication” later came to be called “exposure.”

The NAFE’s discussion of familiar hazards also became increasingly tied to considerations of how the new technological innovations were incorporated into the built environment. Indeed, as the NAFE critiqued the landscape, it realized that practicalities of construction potentially hindered progress on safety. For instance, noting that using metal in construction was expensive, the NAFE urged industry to develop fireproof materials that were inexpensive and practical. Likewise, the organization discussed the manner in which electricity, tall buildings, structures covering a greater area, and even fireproof construction techniques affected the danger of fire. Firefighters focused on a plethora of new threats that appeared in the landscape, including the presence of fumes and deadly gases that could collect and explode. In particular, the introduction of electricity became a new source for fires, even as the network of wires that crossed the urban landscape hindered efforts to extinguish fires. According to a report in 1889, “the present system of aerial wires presents the most difficult obstructions to gaining access to the upper portions of burning buildings.”

Fire engineers especially attended to the increasing height of cities and area (square footage) of buildings, which they feared were outstripping the ability of fire departments to reach. In 1887, New York City’s fire chief reported to the NAFE, “We find mammoth structures being steadily erected to a height that the longest portable ladders fail to reach, and to which the most improved pumping machinery fails to deliver effective streams of water. . . . Even those constructed of slow-burning, or so-called fire-proof materials, are liable to be seriously damaged or even destroyed by intense heat from the burning contents, where water, the only known combatant of open fires, cannot be applied.” Such fires developed uncommonly high heat (aided sometimes by slow-burning construction) that made extinguishing them all but impossible and facilitated a fire’s spreading to adjoining
structures, even those as far as sixty feet away—sometimes beyond the width of a street. Moreover, unless buildings had properly constructed “anchoring” walls, they were liable to collapse, thus spreading fire to adjoining structures. According to many experts, including influential insurance journals, more blazes were caused by exposure to fire in adjoining buildings, despite the introduction of fireproof construction.10

Firefighters were a skeptical group that, as discussed above, questioned the latest innovations in construction technique. Recognizing the variable nature of fire risk, a committee of fire engineers argued that many of the building technologies labeled fireproof merely altered the dangers of fire; they did not eradicate them. For instance, instead of burning like wood, these materials—such as stone, marble, iron, and brick—could be heated to the point of losing their strength altogether—causing massive structural failures and building collapses. Moreover, common firefighting practices, such as the use of water, affected certain building components in dramatic fashion, sometimes causing them to explode into shards. If engineers’ insights showcased shortcomings in fireproof practices, they did not reject them altogether. Instead the committee advocated more research and the extensive use of multiple layers of fire-resistant materials and/or proven design strategies. The committee suggested such redundancy, which it obsessively detailed: “I would divide [warehouses] into compartments as small as circumstances will admit with brick division walls, and openings in same to be protected by metal covered door, that all floors be made solid by concrete or plaster, and if not feasible then all floor timber to be lined with fire-proof material such as magneso calcite, plaster, terra cotta or any material that will insure the greatest amount of fire resistance.” The NAFE repeatedly argued that fireproofing could help reduce an external hazard, but that it did not necessarily negate the internal hazard caused by heat from extremely flammable contents.11

Just as the NAFE sought to modify the urban environment to reduce danger, it also sought to alter the protective infrastructure to gain an advantage in the war against fire. For instance, from its inception through the end of the century, the NAFE promoted its vision of safety by recommending the improvement of, among other things, urban water systems. The NAFE contended that urbanization and industrialization had caused cities to grow beyond the abilities of fire departments to protect property and human life. It argued that many urban water pipes were too small to provide sufficient water for more than one or two steam engines at a fire, causing engines “connecting further away from the source” to “find only a vacuum in the pipes.” In addition, the NAFE recommended erecting “standpipes” in all large buildings. Standpipes ran from a building’s base to its roof, creating
hose connections that allowed firemen to play water on a fire efficiently and quickly. Also, firefighters developed “siamese connections”—which forced water from two hose lines through a single nozzle—to recover water pressure lost from friction as it traveled through worn leather hose lines. Along with other recom-
mendations, including cautious support of automatic sprinklers, fire engineers urged cities to build an infrastructure that assisted them in preserving public safety. The official publication of the NAFE even changed its name to *Fire and Water* in 1886 (earlier *Fireman’s Journal*, later *Fire and Water Engineering*) to emphasize the important role that water, engineers, and the “waterworks man” played in improving urban fire protection.¹²

Firefighters advocated for adding inspections to their responsibilities in order to help them to become more familiar with the dynamic landscape, and therefore more effective at fighting fires. As one fire chief stated in 1893, “There is no more important feature connected with the fire department than the inspection of buildings.” Systematic inspection of the urban landscape by firefighters contained the problem of fire across all its domains. It would serve as an important way of preventing fires because building owners could be informed about deficiencies in construction and dangers in the structure, which would result in the removal of hazards. Fire department leaders supported the creation of specialist fire inspection bureaus, but they also underscored the importance of firefighters themselves getting into the field, in that this provided firemen with critical data about the environments where they might someday work. Inspection, they explained, makes “the firemen acquainted with the building; shows him how best to enter and what to do in case of fire; discloses dangerous openings and faults in construction, which may save life if known and avoided.” Through inspections firefighters became more effective at “subjugating” a blaze, and knowledgeable about the dangers they faced in each particular structure in their district. Ultimately, however, examination of urban hazards allowed firefighters to do more than help builders or themselves; they could become “instructors of the public in the prevention of fire.”¹³

Indeed, believing that safety could be built into the landscape, the NAFE took an early leadership role in promoting a national municipal building code more than two decades before the insurance industry published its model building code. In 1876, the NAFE recommended an eleven-point plan for safe building construction. In 1877 the discussion grew in scope when engineers discussed “The enactment, by all State Legislatures, of good and wholesome building laws to be applied to the larger cities and towns.” Legislating safety received attention yearly through 1882, when the NAFE established a formal committee to consider a legal code. By 1884, the committee on laws made recommendations that it hoped would become the basis for “preparing a code of laws which might be justly applicable to the different sections of the country.” The code’s seventy-four sections included the vast range of topics considered by the NAFE since its inception and included provi-
sions for enforcement. According to the “practical” code, a coterie of city-appointed building inspectors would supervise new construction, and “reconstruction,” of urban environments. All buildings would include relatively simple design characteristics meant to arrest the spread of fire. Moreover, the law required that fire escapes be provided in all buildings of two or more stories in which workers were employed above the second floor. The code represented the state-of-the-art in building construction in the 1880s.14

At least three factors limited the systematic implementation of the NAFE’s proposals. First, although the NAFE found the insurance industry sympathetic to its concerns, firemen found underwriters to be tepid allies. Insurers supported proposals regarding firefighting infrastructure such as fire hydrants, water pipes, and telegraph systems, but they appear to have been relatively uninterested in systematic urban building codes. Secondly, even if underwriters were supportive, their ability to effect change was questionable. The insurance industry remained internally fractured and does not appear to have possessed an exceptional amount of cultural sway. At a meeting of the NAFE in 1894, an NBFU representative explained that the insurance industry sought to use the marketplace to coerce better construction but lamented that the NBFU’s lack of authority over nonmember insurance companies limited its effectiveness. Even the activist Boston Manufacturers Mutual Insurance Company, which was created by a partnership of New England textile mill owners unable to obtain commercial insurance, primarily focused its research activities on textile mill construction, and only secondarily on other issues related to industrial design. The scope of its ability to intervene in the built environment was relatively limited and derived mostly from intimate economic ties to its clients in the textile industry. Mill mutuals, after all, were organized to improve the profitability of textile manufacturers, not to improve the general public safety. Additionally, they comprised a tiny portion of the insurance industry and held limited authority. Nonetheless, the mill mutual companies’ laboratories produced research that could be transferred beyond mills, although their insights did not automatically generate a systematic program of safe construction in urban settings. The unwillingness and/or inability of the insurance industry to actively support a comprehensive legislative agenda was compounded by the fact that efforts to transform building practices remained mired in local regimens of political, social, and economic power.15

If the NAFE’s jurisdiction over matters of building practice was limited, its efforts gradually had an impact as the organization repeatedly challenged Americans to build more safely. In particular, the NAFE repeatedly criticized the insurance industry because it believed that underwriting practices promoted fires and did not
prevent poor construction practices. In a pointed exchange at its 1894 meeting, one fire engineer goaded an NBFU representative to admit the industry’s failures to regulate building activities using the marketplace. Despite such frictions, by 1891 the NAFE had helped to organize a coalition with the American Institute of Architects, the National Association of Builders, the National Association of Building Inspectors, and the National Board of Fire Underwriters to establish a “Model Building Law.” Although it is unclear if the coalition ever produced a model building law, the impetus for framing a code was gaining momentum. In 1892 the New York State government proposed a “model building law” for medium sized cities which the NBFU reprinted in pamphlet form and distributed to various local insurance boards as well as fire chiefs. By 1896, the NBFU began to consider the tenets of a code, which it published in 1905 and which became the national standard shortly thereafter.¹⁶

The NAFE’s attempt to frame a systematic national building code during the 1870s and 1880s failed, but the principles behind it became central to the reconstruction of firefighting identity. In particular, firefighters increasingly associated fire danger with its human cost, whereas fire underwriters saw fire as a primarily economic risk. Even in the realm of economic matters, firefighters argued that the insurance industry behaved with a foolish abandon that threatened lives. Fire and Water reported, “There are any number of large buildings in this city, wherein dangerous occupations are pursued, that the firemen would hesitate to enter them in case of fire occurring for fear that the walls would fall upon them or that the fire would spread so rapidly that retreat from the interior would be impossible; instead of striving to improve the character of the structures in the city, the underwriters virtually offer a premium for inflammability and poor construction.” To the NAFE, the NBFU’s unwillingness to promote safe building and its apparent lack of concern about human safety in the face of profit were reprehensible. The NAFE was especially critical of imprudent underwriting practices that placed firemen at risk. It reported, “Firemen’s lives, which are exposed to danger every moment from the time a signal is received until they return to quarters, should not be thus placed in jeopardy, because careless or dishonest men hold indemnity from insurance companies.”¹⁷

Indeed, the NAFE increasingly justified its professional jurisdiction according to matters of human safety. In the 1870s, Henry Clay Sexton urged a “balcony system” of safety; he advocated that all buildings have outdoor balconies on high floors as places where people could congregate during a fire and be reached for rescue. By 1884, safety features like Sexton’s balconies and fire escapes became a key component of the NAFE’s suggested building code. Of course such lifesaving
concerns also colored the NAFE’s view of building height and of new technologies, such as electricity. As electric wires gradually crisscrossed the landscape, fire engineers identified them as dangers to firemen performing rescues. Firefighters’ personal vulnerability to poor planning and/or construction also became a rationale for the NAFE’s intervention in the landscape. In 1889, as a prelude to a discussion about appropriate wall construction, the NAFE argued that “of the great number killed each year by falling walls not a few were firemen.”

Ultimately, matters of human life gradually emerged as a consistent theme—both explicitly and implicitly—running through firefighters’ dialogues about their occupation. This concern developed directly from their experience working inside buildings. As firemen labored to put out blazes, they discovered more and more that people were trapped in the upper stories of buildings, sometimes beyond the reach of their ladders. They also encountered falling walls, collapsing floors, hidden gaps in floors, and sudden explosions caused by built-up gases or fumes. Underlining the unstable urban environment, fire department leaders, firefighters, and firefighting publications often repeated heroic narratives, like that of St. Louis fireman Phelim O’Toole, which was repeatedly used as an example by the influential St. Louis fire chief Henry Clay Sexton in the 1870s. During the 1880s and 1890s, Fire and Water routinely reported on large fires, fatal fires, and rescues. For instance, in 1886, Fire and Water noted, “New York and Chicago are running a close race this year for the honor of saving the greatest number of lives.” Rescues became integral to defining firefighting as an occupation, and firefighters justified their claims to public authority by emphasizing the danger faced by themselves and their neighbors. The ever-changing fire danger, and firefighters’ efforts to protect their neighbors, affected how they organized their daily work activities in the closing years of the nineteenth century.

Eating Smoke, Saving Lives, and Professionalism

Ironically, when firefighters redefined their occupation around human safety, they made their labor more acutely dangerous. As their workplaces changed along with the urban environment, firefighters faced more dangers because they adopted new tactics; firemen channeled their aggression more directly toward blazes themselves. Mastering fire no longer meant pumping water onto it from afar, or simply checking its spread. Rather, fighting fire became an intimate and personal experience. Firefighters saved victims by scaling buildings whose heights extended beyond the reach of their ladders. They also penetrated deep into burning structures whose mammoth scale and varied construction created ever changing, compli-
cated, and more hazardous fire environments. Urban journalist Jacob Riis de-
scribed this new ethos, which was fully articulated in the NYFD and other de-
partments nationwide by the 1890s: “New York firemen have a proud saying that
they ‘fight fire from the inside.’ It means unhesitating courage, prompt sacrifice,
and victory gained all in one.” In the 1870s, this strategy had emerged from the
daily work of firefighters in many large cities. It expanded through urban fire de-
partments via the meetings of the NAFE and through the earliest manuals of the
incipient occupation, which emphasized the importance of battling fire up close.
Instructional guides urged firemen take action from a position “as near the fire as
the heat and condition of the building will permit.” Company foremen were told
to place “pipemen” strategically, in such “position that water will strike directly
upon burning materials.” This aggressiveness engendered a host of new attitudes,
work techniques, and tools, such as hooks, ladders, axes, and other equipment—
which, as they became routinely used, distinguished professional firefighters from
their predecessors.20

In the 1870s, as firemen moved their work to the inside of buildings, they en-
countered many new hazards, and chief among these was a primary byproduct of
fire. Smoke became almost a singular concern, even an obsession—at times ob-
scuring the emphasis on performing rescues. Smoke emerged as a more prominent
hazard in part because the built environment grew in scale and durability, thus
trapping gases and literally shrouding victims, as well as the fire itself. Indeed,
smoke—not fire—would turn out to be the principal reason that people died in
burning structures. Against this intensifying threat, firemen adopted the strategy
of “ventilating” buildings with axes, hooks, and other tools. As one chief told col-
leagues at an NAFE meeting in 1895, “My first action on arrival is to ventilate the
building.” Removing the smoke and heat allowed firefighters to locate the blaze
more quickly, and it facilitated the rescue of disoriented victims. Additionally, it
prevented disastrous “backdrafts,” which occurred because superheated smoke and
gases that had collected inside confined spaces exploded when oxygen was intro-
duced to the closed area, usually by firefighters opening a door. It is perhaps not
surprising, then, that ventilating buildings became so critical, or that smoke be-
came a defining aspect of firefighters’ culture. As Jacob Riis explained, “The fire is
the enemy; but he can fight that, once he reaches it with something of a chance.
The smoke kills without giving him a show to fight back. Long practice toughens
him against it, until he learns the trick of ‘eating the smoke.’” Eating smoke would
become almost as central a marker of a fireman’s prowess as saving lives.21

Confronting the consuming element, according to observers, demanded a stun-
nning combination of gifts—of physical strength, intellectual vigor, and of charac-
ter. It was these attributes that energized firemen in this grand drama to control nature; indeed, the NAFE demanded that firemen possess the “inventive genius, tireless devotion, ceaseless watchfulness, unfailing wisdom, strength and endurance to show that we are able, in God’s strength to meet every instrument of destruction with superior skill, alacrity and tact, until . . . fire shall no longer be a terror to mankind.” Listed among the skills of firefighters were a host of physical characteristics—including dexterity, strength, technique, teamwork, and precision—all of which are evident on the pages of firefighting manuals and in the discussions of fire engineers. As Jacob Riis described it, “Firemen are athletes as a matter of course. They have to be, or they could not hold their places for a week, even if they could get into them at all. The mere handling of the scaling ladders, which, light though they seem, weigh from sixteen to forty pounds, requires unusual strength.” Likewise, the work of the fire department, according to the NAFE, demanded firemen with “the skill necessary . . . to reach dizzy heights, or to apply recently invented machinery.” Yet, to the NAFE, skill implied more than operating equipment or being technically knowledgeable. It also included “courage, endurance, quick perception, [and] common sense.” Additionally, being a fireman required “that mental vigor, that intellectual keenness, without which man cannot vie to deeds of bravery, without which he is unreliable.” And, finally, none of these attributes mattered if a fireman did not possess innate personal qualities that predisposed a man to being brave; according to the NAFE, “a mind that receives inspiration in time of public calamity and danger [reflects] the natural qualities that form the foundation of an ideal fireman’s character.”

Phelim O’Toole’s actions at the Southern Hotel Fire in 1877 embodied the physical abilities, technical skills, and daring that were emerging as the hallmarks of the fire service. O’Toole, foreman of the city’s Skinner Truck (a type of ladder vehicle) Company, saved over a dozen people from the burning hotel. As the press reported, “It was Phelim Toole [sic] who carried Charley Kennedy, the New Yorker, down the Skinner ladder from a fourth story window when the walls of the building on that side were in danger of giving away. . . . The window from which Kennedy had been taken five minutes before was buried in a mass of smoldering ruins below.” O’Toole and his fellow laddermen frequently received commendations for saving buildings and people from destruction through their exceptional skills. Using conventional ladders, ropes, and various climbing techniques, they also took hose directly to the base of fires located on buildings’ uppermost floors. If O’Toole and his colleagues demonstrated high levels of skill, they displayed even more bravery. During one fire, O’Toole directed the hose nozzle at the fire’s base until he fell unconscious and had to be carried from the building. At another fire,
he saved an adjoining building from damage by dangling several floors in the air to “remove a firebrand” from its roof.23

O’Toole’s legend grew with the telling, reaching an apex when he died and became an icon of heroism and professional duty in the STLFD, and throughout the nation. According to a report after his death, O’Toole performed countless acts of “unusual heroism” at over “one hundred” fires. His heroism embodied the ideal of disinterested public service characteristic of professional firemen. Henry Clay Sexton eulogized O’Toole as “one of the bravest men who ever lived—the bravest of the brave.” And, several years later, Sexton related the O’Toole incident to the NAFE as part of an appeal for stricter building laws and pensions for firemen. Even after twenty years, when the NAFE’s annual meeting again was held in St. Louis, a keynote speaker recalled O’Toole’s “daring deeds,” offering them, as well as those of the city’s other martyred firemen, as a model for the fire service. For in 1877, shortly after the Southern Hotel fire, O’Toole became the fourth member of his company to have been killed in three years. Although O’Toole’s legend grew with each successive generation, such narratives reveal the very real danger that lurked at every fire.24

Firefighters’ headlong rush into burning buildings depended as well on their ability to command technology, the particulars of which changed as firefighters recast the priorities of their occupation. For example, when steam engines were the focal point of fire department labors, the “practical machinists” who operated them were the most highly compensated of rank-and-file firefighters. By 1900, however, the premium placed on this particular skill gradually diminished as departments redefined the basic lexicon of firefighting work and expertise. Traditional impulses among firefighters to arrive early at fires and to play first water eventually reappeared in innovations such as the quick-hitch harness and chemical engines. More critically, though, the drive to save lives and to fight fire up close generated renewed interest in the importance of hose, as well as rarely used tools such as hooks and ladders. The development of specialized apparatus that facilitated rescues—such as Hayes, Skinner, and Leveritch trucks, or the Cronin portable platform—underscores the emphasis that firefighters placed on human life as their work techniques shifted along with the environment. Furthermore, the fact that these innovations were developed by (and frequently named after) men who served as, or later became, fire engineers reveals the link between firefighting competence and innovation. Fire and Water; as well as other firefighting publications, routinely published the latest in firefighting technology, providing a service to firefighters, waterworks employees, and business interests alike. By the late 1880s, some issues of the journal contained more than twice as many pages devoted to advertising—
classified and placed ads—as it did to pages about fire protection. In particular, regular features on “patents,” books for firemen and engineers, “contracting news,” and “business specials” kept the field abreast of the latest technologies. Likewise, demonstrations, displays, and conversations about new workplace innovations occupied a significant part of the NAFE’s convention.25

The importance of ladders—as well as associated work techniques and rescue tools—cannot be overstated. Indeed, fire engineers routinely challenged firefight-
ers to scale new heights of innovation, goading them with pointed questions, such as: “Who will be ingenious enough to find the ability to get to 130 feet?” At its second convention in 1874, the NAFE bemoaned the fact that “truck companies”—also termed “hook-and-ladder” or “ladder” companies—had received little attention among firefighters. It further argued, however, that such companies and their equipment were increasingly necessary as “the constantly increasing height to which buildings are now carried requires a radical change in this respect, to bring the departments up to their former comparative standards of efficiency.” The NAFE recommended that all departments should have at least one truck company and that cities with populations greater than 25,000 should have two. In 1877, William Lewis, then publisher of the influential Fireman’s Journal, recommended a more dramatic increase in the proportion of truck companies in his Manual for Volunteer and Paid Fire Organizations, advocating that every department have at least two “truck” companies for every three “engine” companies. By the 1880s, as most urban fire departments began to increase the number and use of ladders at fires, the ratio of engine companies to hook and ladder companies in American cities declined. In St. Louis, the ratio went from 10:1 in 1870, to 5:1 in 1880, to almost 3:1 in 1900. In Philadelphia, the ratio of engine to truck companies remained steady at about 6:1 from the department’s inception in 1871 through the 1890s, when it began to decline; by 1906, it had lowered to less than 3:1. More broadly, in American urban centers with populations greater than thirty thousand the ratio of pumping apparatus to ladder apparatus had declined to nearly 2:1 by 1917.26

The formation of specialized life-saving units—the pompier corps—in American fire departments accompanied the proliferation of trucks. In 1877, following the devastating Southern Hotel fire, two German immigrants to St. Louis, Zero Marx and Christian Hoell, developed a plan to rescue people trapped high up in buildings. Having learned scaling techniques in his native Germany, Hoell instructed a corps of gymnasts, German turners, on the use of the simple apparatus, which they demonstrated to the fire department, city leaders, and a crowd estimated at fifty thousand. The St. Louis fire chief, Henry Clay Sexton, quickly incorporated the plan into the department because of these units’ extraordinary ability to gain access to buildings regardless of structural impediments, such as electric wires, narrow alleys, and high buildings. Using scaling ladders, a special climbing belt, climbing techniques, and rope, pompier corps could carry hose to a “commanding position” or lower people to safety. Hoell and his pompier corps became a model rescue unit, but according to Sexton and the NAFE, ordinary firemen also possessed the required skills. Even so, employing pompier techniques required
great dexterity and discipline. Firemen lifted the iron-hooked end of the pompier ladder, caught it to the sill of a first-story window, and then scurried up the scaling ladder’s narrow rungs. Next, the firefighter straddled the sill, and once again lifted the hooked end to the next story. Followed by other firemen, the corps formed a chain of ladders from which they could use ropes to pull up hose or to perform rescues. Fire departments sometimes used hose guns to propel a line of rope onto a building’s roof into the hands of a waiting pompier fireman. As one observer noted, “It stirs one to see a 200 pound man run up a wall of a four-story building by no other means than a skeleton ladder, twelve feet long—a device that appears to be unable to bear the weight of the average youth.” Creating a unit of specialist rescuers dramatically reflected the new emphasis of firefighting late in the nineteenth century, as removing people “out of the jaws of death” came to define the fire service.

The rapid spread of pompier techniques throughout American fire departments underscored not only the importance of lifesaving in the new occupation but also the growing influence of the NAFE’s emphasis on professionalism. Shortly after its formation, the St. Louis pompier corps traveled to a fireman’s tournament in Chicago, where one of the original pompier corps, Thomas Mayer, won first prize for rapid climbing and Phelim O’Toole and Patrick Conway won the prize for pairs climbing. Fire departments in New York, Chicago, Boston, and Cincinnati quickly emulated the innovation, and by the 1890s pompier corps had become standard in American fire departments. In 1882, at the request of the New York Fire Commissioners, Hoell trained New York firefighters on pompier technique, presenting what was perhaps the nation’s first formal training program. Soon pompier training became a significant part of firefighting drills across the nation—in Kansas City, St. Louis, Chicago, and New York. The training varied, but the instruction techniques helped to make pompier skills commonplace, if not widely used in firefighting. In Chicago, for instance, firefighters learned about the techniques as city instructors toured engine houses; in New York City some thirty-five thousand firemen had passed through the city’s sixty-day training course by 1903. The spread of Hoell’s innovation reveals the paths through which new firefighting techniques were transmitted.

The pompier corps reflects, too, the internationalization of firefighting late in the nineteenth century. Although pompier techniques journeyed from Europe to the United States with waves of immigrants, they would return in a new form, as part of the NAFE’s agenda for professionalism. Firefighters and fire chiefs took a more expansive interest in global firefighting during the 1890s as part of the organization’s broader agenda to spread the science of firefighting to the world. For
instance, in 1893 fire engineer George Hale led an American delegation to the International Fire Congress in London. Recognized as a great inventive genius among firefighters, the Kansas City fire chief developed a swinging harness that cut the time required to hitch horses to steam engines, a “tin roof cutter,” the “Hale electric wire cutter,” and the “Hale water tower,” which *Fire and Water* described as being one of the “most important additions to fire apparatus of the nineteenth century.” Hale’s inventiveness and the efficiency of the American team not only brought home prizes for their performance, but also thoroughly stunned the world audience. According to the *Fire and Water* correspondent, “The American fire team, by their display in London of the American method of fire craft, have surely entered the leaven into the British loaf that will in time leaven the whole foreign system.” As the firefighting trade journal would make clear in successive issues, American firefighting techniques proved far more advanced than those practiced elsewhere around the globe, in no small part because U.S. firefighters had to respond to a decidedly more dangerous urban environment. Just as American capitalism would infect the globe, so too would the professionalism of American firefighters.

In 1896, the NAFE transformed itself into an international organization, becoming the International Association of Fire Engineers. Recasting firefighting also entailed the transformation of the individual and collective bodies of firefighters, and the occupation’s leaders began to codify the component tasks and skills of firefighting. One of the first such efforts, Lewis’s *A Manual for Volunteer and Paid Fire Organizations*, published in 1877, revealed the outlines of the new occupation just as it emerged as a distinctive line of public service in large American cities. Lewis emphasized that firefighters battle blazes up close and provided specific instructions on how best to put water on a fire, including more than ten pages of instruction, with over forty specific recommendations regarding the use, handling, and care of fire hose. Lewis especially urged foremen to strategically place “pipemen” in such a “position that water will strike directly upon burning materials.” He advocated fortitude on part of foremen, who, like pipemen, would take action from a position “as near the fire as the heat and condition of the building will permit.” The manual, however, devoted little attention to saving lives or to innovations in the use of ladders, offering only two, relatively vague, instructions about their operation. This omission underlines the degree to which the occupation of firefighting was a work in progress during the 1870s. Although Lewis recognized the importance of ladders and other tools, the techniques and tactics for using them had not yet become part of the lexicon of firefighting. Nonetheless, the manual reflected the shifts in firefighting work.

A decade later, in 1887, the NAFE became interested in establishing standard
work practices for firefighters, and it commissioned Andrew Meserve to illustrate and describe firefighting work. Meserve’s *The Fireman’s Hand-Book* introduced firefighters to a host of new skills and practices that had emerged in American fire departments and that had been publicized at NAFE meetings in the 1880s. It discussed techniques for rescues, the use of ladders and pompier equipment, and innovations in departmental management procedures, including “organization,” “tactics,” “drills,” and “funeral honors.” Most significantly, Meserve devoted nearly one-third of the *Hand-Book* to the techniques needed to use, move, and climb ladders. Well illustrated, the volume discussed how to use various “respirators,” detailed the proficiencies needed to get a hose close into a fire, and taught knot-tying techniques as well as the competencies required to “rescue insensible persons.” In addition, it even documented cultural practices, such as parading, competing, funerals, and the “pleasant drill” of how to give and to receive a kiss. Later instructional books expanded on the lessons taught in Lewis’s *Manual* and Meserve’s *Hand-Book*. In 1898, Charles Hill published a manual modeled after firefighter training in New York City that updated firefighters on the latest innovations, especially those competencies used to perform rescues or to fight especially difficult blazes. Fifteen years later, in 1913, New York fire chief John Kenlon continued this trend when he publicized the culture, history, and training routines of the NYFD. Along with the NAFE’s regular attention to firefighting labor, these training manuals would become the basis for courses of fire department instruction, which emerged late in the nineteenth century and appeared more formally in department training schools in the twentieth century.  

As firefighters defined their service, they established the boundaries of their occupation, and many began to describe firefighting as a calling worthy of professional status. Such claims began with firefighters’ recognition of the seriousness of fire as a national problem and gained momentum when firefighters emphasized the characteristics and skills of the job itself. The NAFE argued that their occupation was part science and part craft, acquired only through disciplined training and years of experience. Firefighting demanded precise knowledge of hydraulics and engineering, but the application of that knowledge varied at every fire. Only through experience, forged in direct contact with the flaming landscape, did firefighters’ become experts. Yet, expertise was gained only through discipline. Recognizing the role that formal education played in defining the boundaries of other professions late in the nineteenth century, some firefighters sought to establish a college for firemen, so that firefighting would be recognized as a “science.” At the same time, others wanted to take the process further, seeking to “establish under the law that fire extinguishment is a profession and can only legally admit those of
proper qualifications.” To be sure, transforming firefighting into a profession conferred an elevated status on firefighting, but it also became a panacea for many of the issues that firefighters faced: incomplete training regimens, poor wages, widespread differences in organization, management, and work both between and within departments, and the persistence of rough cultures in engine houses. A college for firemen would transform the experience of lifelong firefighters into practical and meaningful lessons—at once science and craft; it would elevate and make standard the practice. Mostly, though, it would help firefighters combat political intervention in fire departments by elected officials. As one proponent explained, until firefighting became a profession “one of the most humane, ennobling and self-sacrificing professions will be looked down upon as a degraded, unsystematized and uncertain service.” Not only would firefighting become free of outside interference if it were elevated to an independent and objective profession, but also firefighters would acquire social and political capital, helping them to become more effective advocates for fire prevention.32

Although obtaining professional status received wide approval, the NAFE and firefighting leaders typically fought political intervention and perceptions of lax discipline with a more easily obtainable solution: training firefighters themselves. Using instructional guides, such as Meserve’s Hand-Book, fire departments used drills to inculcate discipline and to establish common work practices in all departments, regardless of whether they were volunteer or professional. Departments embraced this strategy because they discovered that lack of “thorough and systematic drill in the different branches of the fire service” rendered advances in firefighting equipment useless. The NAFE noted, “When the extension ladders were first introduced, it was almost impossible to get men enough around a seventy-foot ladder to raise it in any reasonable time and with safety.” Additionally, manuals taught physical drill at a time when many fire department leaders wondered whether contemporary firemen possessed the endurance of their predecessors who acquired manly power working “the brakes of the hand engine.” Despite making bold claims about firefighters’ innate qualities, the NAFE recognized that firemen were made, not born. Drilling produced discipline, which made men amenable to following orders and placing themselves in danger for the good of the company and the public. Training further helped to distinguish between those firefighters who could and could not handle the difficulties of firefighting—revealing those who “lost their nerve.” Training regimens also developed a framework for the occupation, at once encouraging the creation of common bonds and challenging the informal aspects of local cultures. The NAFE did not want men to “trifle away their time in games and story-telling.” Training firefighters kept them focused; it
allowed fire department leaders to answer the NAFE’s concerns about their technical and physical competence—“Do we keep our men up to the line of progress with the machinery?” By disciplining themselves, firefighters defined the tasks and expectations of their occupation, which bolstered their claims to possessing a “calling,” if not a profession.33

Gender, Race, and Class among Firefighters

As firefighters brought discipline to the chaotic process of urbanization, they established an occupation characterized by their particular understandings of gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Most obviously, firefighters’ beliefs were expressed in the preeminent symbol of their occupation—the heroic body of the life-saving fireman. This dashing figure physically and metaphorically restored order at every fire scene—a point not lost in a popular culture that celebrated the heroism of firemen regularly. The coordinated elements of firefighting provided security to urban residents in a highly visible way, and in clear contrast to the individualistic culture and sense of manhood that characterized late-nineteenth-century businessmen and capitalism. As performing rescues elevated firefighters in the eyes of their neighbors, it also became connected to popular understandings about manhood, race, and social class.

Artists, local newspapers, and national magazines furthered this identity when they depicted the omnipresent dangers of fire and the manly heroism required to preserve lives and the social order. In the 1860s, Currier and Ives produced a popular print series, The American Fireman, which depicted professional firefighters at work. As early as the 1870s, firemen also graced the cover of Harper’s Weekly and appeared in other national magazines in poses that replicated firemen’s understanding of their manhood. Fire chiefs formed a professional association and firefighters read publications printed exclusively for them beginning in the 1870s and expanding during the 1880s. Local newspapers regularly reported nearly every fire and featured the heroic exploits of firemen on front pages. Crowds of thousands gathered at fires. Sheet music publishers recorded the heroics of firefighters, and vaudeville performers incorporated firefighting heroism into their productions. By the 1890s, firemen made their first appearance in the movies, as Thomas Edison selected the spectacular fire exhibit at Coney Island as an early subject of his new motion pictures. By 1900, stories of firefighters heroics had become standard in their presentation, much as the NAFE hoped firefighters actions would become when faced with harrowing situations. The press valorized firemen who demonstrated physical strength, technical competence, and public spirit by vanquishing
fire or saving a damsel in distress. The fireman became an icon of heroism at a time when, in the face of industrialization, manhood itself seemed to be in decline.  

Although the nineteenth-century media played a critical role in constructing firefighters’ heroic culture, it was ultimately firefighters who authored this cult of manhood. News accounts almost always began with the actual work of firefighters, who often described their labor with a remarkably self-effacing personal style. Constructed as self-consciously as the other elements of firefighters’ culture, this unassuming quality seemed to encourage journalists. As Jacob Riis noted, “I have sometimes wished that firemen were not so modest. It would be much easier, if not so satisfactory, to record their gallant deeds.” Although journalists often exaggerated, the day-to-day activities of firefighters did not really need much embellishment. For example, it does not seem to be a stretch to believe Riis when he says, “The first experience of a room full of smothering smoke, with the fire roaring overhead, is generally sufficient to convince the timid that the service is not for him. No cowards are dismissed from the department, for the reason that none get into it.”

Firefighters put such modesty aside, however, when they deliberately placed themselves into a grand life-saving struggle—a battle that they transformed into a test of their mettle as men. When the environment went amok, firemen rushed into buildings. They saved people, especially women and children, with all the cultural resonance that they possessed. As Andrew Meserve recommended in his firefighting manual published at the behest of the NAFE, “Always give precedence to women and children in rescuing lives.” Not only did firefighters adopt strategies that stressed protecting the “innocent,” but they put themselves at significant risk in the process. The intensity and danger of their labor heightened the contrasts that firefighters relished—between their steely nerves and muscled physiques and those of the people they rescued, who generally were soft, weak, and frightened. As one firefighter recalled about saving a woman, “I wish that she hadn’t fainted. It’s hard when they faint. They’re just so much dead weight. We get no help at all from them heavy women.”

As firefighters forged their identities in the battle with fire, they seemed intuitively aware of the metaphorical dimensions of their struggle. Long the object of dread fascination, fire has evoked a complex series of contradictory symbolic associations between the physical and spiritual, good and evil, and destructive and regenerative forces. Control over fire has been perceived, at least metaphorically, as a marker of manhood. As historian Robin Cooper has argued, conquering fire was critical in order that man “ensure mastery over himself and his property (including human property) and to secure general stability and order.” Urban journalists
such as Jacob Riis picked up on this drama with a patterned story that always began with a moment of disorder—the outbreak of fire. Professional firefighters of the 1880s, though, changed that narrative fundamentally when they dashed to do battle with the devouring element up close, inside buildings or saved human lives. As they saved the day and rescued innocent victims, firefighters returned as heroes. Tapping into the conventions of heroic myth underscored firefighters’ singular purpose and asserted their control of the elements and cities. As Riis suggested of firefighting, “It was the fancy of a masterful man and none but a masterful man would have got up the ladder at all.”

If struggle to contain fire underscored firefighters’ ability to command nature as
well as themselves, winning that battle—and especially rescuing people—frequently demanded that firemen behave with reckless abandon. Becoming the bravest of the brave, as O’Toole had done, often meant taking chances that no reasonable, or even altruistic person would; being a noteworthy firefighter demanded that firemen put themselves at high risk. Such impulses certainly derived from the pressures of the occupation. As a reformist firefighter in Philadelphia recalled, “All wanted to be heroes in the eyes of their associates or who ever [sic] was in a position to observe them, with the consequence a great number received serious injuries or lost their lives.” Yet, as firemen redefined their occupation in the second half of the nineteenth century, the heroic character of the work may itself have attracted men predisposed toward danger. As Riis described, “Doubtless there is something in the spectacular side that attracts. It would be strange if there were not.” At times, journalists even suggested that firefighters took special pleasure in the adrenalin rush of their job; according to Riis, “The one feeling that is allowed to rise beyond [their occupation] is the feeling of exultation in the face of peril conquered by courage.”

Recent social psychological research on heroism, including that of firefighters, would appear to confirm Riis’s conclusions. James McBride Dabbs has found that hotshot firefighters—those most likely to perform rescues or take dangerous assignments—possess personality traits associated with skill mastery as well as an abundance of testosterone, the hormone linked both to male physiology and high levels of aggression and competitiveness. In fact, mastery of self and firefighting skills do not appear to be enough to inspire firefighters into heroic acts. According to Dabbs, “Testosterone is needed to translate that motivation into action.” Of course this is not to suggest that there is some biological basis to excellent firefighting work or to heroism; rather, it reveals the critical importance that both aggression and competitiveness have played in the creation of firefighting as an occupation. In the nineteenth century, when firefighters attacked fires up close and placed a premium on performing rescues, they had laid the groundwork for a high-risk culture. Firefighters created an occupation in which an aggressive recklessness coexisted uneasily with mastery of skills and self. On one hand, the job demanded athleticism, technological skill, and self-control; on the other, success sometimes depended upon excessive risk taking, thus drawing men who had either technical skill or courage to the point of foolhardiness—and in some cases men possessed both qualities simultaneously. Firefighters of the 1870s and 1880s had redefined what it meant to be a fireman; not only had they given their occupation a well-defined boundary but they forged a transcendent and frequently contradictory identity as heroes.

Peering yet further beneath the veneer of heroism reveals a more complicated story about firefighters’ definition of manliness, one colored by broader under-
standings of class, race, and ethnicity. In fact, the professionalism advocated by firefighters carried with it a somewhat contradictory message, with appeals to characteristics of male behavior commonly associated with both working-class and middle-class manhood. On one hand, when the NAFE adopted the rhetoric of professionalism as the best means to discipline firefighters and cities, it asserted the hegemony of middle-class cultural mores. Not only was the language of professionalism increasingly a cultural construct, but the NAFE advocated middle-class values of sobriety and self-discipline as a way to discipline the working-class expressiveness of firefighters’ everyday work cultures. Professional behavior demanded that firefighters replace rough working-class activities with more decorous behaviors befitting self-sacrificing heroes. Moreover, the NAFE clearly intended virtuous professional firemen to become examples in their communities. Fire engineers fashioned themselves as “representative men engaged in one of the grandest professions in the land.” As sober and efficient firemen, as well as “good husbands” and “good fathers,” fire engineers influenced urban residents better than “ten ministers.”

On the other hand, fire engineers injected elements of working-class populism into their vision of professionalism. According to advocates of professionalism, firefighters should possess strong physicality, and be able to engage in extremely dangerous and intense labor. Moreover, accounts of heroic firefighters rescuing the middle class, which was not accustomed to the rigors of physical activity, provided an object lesson about the values of a strenuous life. The stories of O’Toole’s rescue of a university professor and his family echoed the language of the middle-class sporting community, which itself sought the physical “virtues” of working-class life. The NAFE argued that that physical virility could inculcate moral character, thereby assuaging concerns that contemporary life had sapped men’s vitality. Drilling and regular exercise provided discipline that invigorated firemen “physically and morally.” Such recommendations predicted the way that the middle class appropriated the rough physicality of the working class to create a new norm of manliness that would ultimately gain ascendancy during the Progressive Era in figures like Theodore Roosevelt.

Firefighters’ calls for safety carried not only the evangelical spirit of the middle class but also the reformist zeal of working-class agitators. Firefighters believed that their manliness could counteract the corrupting values of unfettered laissez-faire capitalism. The NAFE contrasted firefighters’ heroism with the dangers that builders and underwriters created as they built cities higher and higher. “Let the engines of destruction multiply; let the mercenary spirit build for the flame fiend; let the skill of men continue to invent material to send life into death . . . we will
endeavor by our inventive genius, tireless devotion, ceaseless watchfulness, unfail-
ing wisdom, strength and endurance to show that we are able, in God's strength, to meet every instrument of destruction with superior skill, alacrity and tact, un-
til . . . fire shall no longer be a terror to mankind."42

Furthermore, firefighters' occupation benefited from and utilized the racial stereotyping common to late-nineteenth-century society to define heroism as the exclusive domain of white men. Such a definition was reflected in nineteenth-century popular culture and was buttressed when the NAFE promoted and perpetuated those images at meetings and in publications. Stereotypical caricatures of African Americans appeared in firefighting imagery during the 1880s. Currier and Ives, which had produced the heroic print series The American Fireman and Life of a Fireman, issued nearly 550 comics during the firm's seventy-five year history. Approximately half of those prints belong to a subcategory known as the "Darktown Comics." Located in a tradition of "comic" prints ridiculing African Americans, dating from the 1820s and 1830s, one set, titled The Darktown Fire Brigade, derided the notion that African Americans could serve as effective firefighters. Whereas The American Fireman and The Life of a Fireman valorized the heroic white bodies of volunteer and professional firefighters, The Darktown Fire Brigade infantilized African Americans as simpletons, incapable of skilled labor or coherent action.43

Ostensibly set against a backdrop of rural volunteer firefighting in the South, The Darktown Fire Brigade carried significance beyond those work and regional communities. Thomas Worth, who made the prints, depicted African Americans as bungling circus clowns incapable of performing tasks that had become routine among urban, professional firefighters. In fact, he portrayed African Americans failing to use tools, such as hooks and ladders, which were essential to firefighters' occupational identity. The point could not have been lost on urban and rural audiences throughout the nation: African Americans lacked the physical and mental dexterity necessary to be firefighters. Just as had been the case fifty years earlier when Philadelphia volunteer firefighters pressured African Americans not to create an independent fire company, professional firefighters excluded blacks from their ranks. Furthermore, firefighters routinely used racial caricatures to depict inefficient, inelegant, and "primitive" firefighting activities. Such drawings appeared in the preeminent fireman's professional journal, Fire and Water, which in 1891 published a pictorial history of "old time fire apparatus" tracing the development of hose from ancient Egypt through early modern Holland. The drawings of Egyptian firefighting, titled "The Friendly Serpent," depict sambo figures strikingly similar to those shown in Currier and Ives's The Darktown Fire Brigade. The
figures display such ineptitude that only after a snake hiding in a tree assists them, by becoming their hose, can they extinguish the fire. In striking contrast, *Fire and Water* showed several models of European firefighting traditions under the title “Some Types of Old Fire Engines,” which portrayed heroic European (white) firefighters using evolving technology. These forebears of American firefighters are shown as innovators, initiating a cycle of technological progress.\(^{44}\)

Such prejudices, which reflected the racial politics that underpinned firefighters’ occupational culture, sometimes exploded at the NAFE’s annual meetings. In 1885, for instance, during a session on “politics,” Richmond’s Chief (G. W. Taylor) turned the discussion from party politics to racial politics. According to Taylor, the issue was not a political fight but a war between the races. He explained, “We don’t wage a war with the Republican Party; we wage a war against the black man. Unfortunately the black element in our country is allied with the Republican Party, and we are heralded forth as ku-klux, simply because we want to maintain our rights.” In the era immediately following Reconstruction and during the early years of Jim Crow, Taylor asserted that much more was at stake than simply firefighters’ skills and proficiency. White male hegemony, especially in southern states where blacks often outnumbered whites, depended upon controlling the machinery of the state. As Taylor and his peers sought to bar African Americans from social and political power, they denied them the opportunity to protect the public interest. They connected firefighters’ manly service to white racial identity by negating the possibility of black participation.\(^{45}\)

Advocates of firefighting professionalism may also have used the notion of whiteness to limit ethnic identification among firefighters. By underscoring the firefighters’ common background—their shared “race”—whiteness added another layer to the brotherhood of firefighters. And, indeed, overt expressions of anti-immigrant or ethnic bias were rare occurrences. Interestingly, at the 1920 IAFE meeting, in the wake of the expression of anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiments, Chief John Kenlon of New York City resigned his post as the organization’s president. However, when he appealed to his fellow firefighters “on the broad grounds of Christian unity and firemanic brotherhood,” his colleagues insisted that he remain head of the IAFE, and his status in the occupation remained untarnished. Likewise, it would appear that ethnicity and immigration rarely became issues within local fire departments, which were heterogeneous institutions. In St. Louis, for instance, about 15 percent of all firefighters who served in the department in the nineteenth century reported having been foreign born. Moreover, if surnames are any indication, there was a diverse mix of firefighters of Irish, German, Eastern European, and Southern European heritage—likely the children of immi-
grants, if not themselves recent transplants—in the departments of both St. Louis and Philadelphia. Undoubtedly, these backgrounds found expression in engine houses, and may have tightened the bonds between firefighters of certain companies and/or their commitment to the fire service more generally. For example, in St. Louis firefighters who served more than thirty years were more often foreign born, predominantly immigrants from Ireland or Germany. In ethnically diverse fire departments, the language of a common brotherhood may have helped to ease any ethnic differences between firefighters, without completely overshadowing firefighters’ links to their local ethnic communities or their families. Being heroic white firemen harnessed them more tightly to the occupation, and certainly fomented brotherhood.46

The notion of being part of a white brotherhood also may have buffered firefighters from being identified with either working-class militancy or middle-class capitalism. In the nineteenth century, especially as they developed a clear occupational identity, firemen remained relatively separate from both their working-class neighbors and middle-class professionals. First and foremost, they were white male heroes, dispassionate in their service of the community good. Heroism offered firefighters a seemingly neutral position that stood outside the class conflicts that so cleaved Americans during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Even so, the tension between being a professional and living and working within chaotic and diverse urban neighborhoods could not be resolved easily. In fact, balancing community, career, and occupational identity in engine houses and at fires proved precarious for many firefighters as they sought to preserve order.

Politics, Professionalism, and “Bully-Boys”

How did the tensions between professionalism, working for municipal governments dominated by urban political machines, and day-to-day work activities play out in the lives of firemen? What were the everyday experiences of firefighters, battling a changing problem of fire in American cities? Answering these questions, peering beneath the hyperbole and dust of time into the work lives of nineteenth-century firefighters, suggests that their quotidian experiences differed from the cult of manly heroism touted by advocates of professionalism. On the surface firefighters appear to have created a powerful occupational identity, judging simply from the average length of their careers. Firemen entering service in St. Louis in the nineteenth century averaged more than twenty years; in Philadelphia they averaged over fifteen years. Additionally, in cities elsewhere in the United States firefighters appear to have commonly worked careers of this length. According to a
survey published by the NAFE in 1889, over 36 percent of the nation’s professional firefighters had at least fifteen years of experience in their departments. As the NAFE and American popular culture more clearly defined firefighting as a heroic service, successive cohorts of firefighters worked longer careers. Nevertheless, although such longevity suggest firefighters’ affinity for their jobs, their careers varied greatly. Differences in experience existed between firemen in the different cities as well as firemen within the same department. This variability suggests that local working conditions mattered as much as, if not more than, the NAFE’s vision of firefighting as a professional calling.47

Evidence of frequent dismissal from departments underscores the instability of firefighting work. In St. Louis, for instance, of the firefighters that exited the department prior to 1880, nearly 75 percent were discharged, and 11 percent resigned by choice. Over the next twenty years 46 percent were dismissed, and a paltry 17 percent resigned. In Philadelphia, about 40 percent of all firefighters exiting in the nineteenth century were discharged; by the same token, nearly half resigned. In contrast to firefighters in St. Louis, then, Philadelphia firemen would appear to have exercised a greater degree of control over their employment. More broadly, comparative data suggests that firefighters’ work patterns in the nineteenth century seem to have resembled those of industrial workers more than they differed from them, except in terms of average career longevity. Although precise comparisons are difficult to make because of the paucity of the data and differences in its collection, there can be little doubt that during the nineteenth century firefighting was capricious and volatile employment, although the level of arbitrariness varied by locale.48

The NAFE’s goal of making firefighting standard across departments was not achieved by the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the technical aspects of firefighting advocated by the NAFE—and represented by the heroic proficiency of Christ Hoell and Phelim O’Tóole—filtered very slowly into fire departments, and even more gradually into local engine houses. For example, when James Gilbert joined the PFD in 1885 he reported that he received little training from his colleagues about proper work techniques. Perhaps worse, few companies used the same nomenclature for standard equipment. Gilbert noted that “there was no preliminary instruction given... fire service tools that were carried on the different apparatus would be known in many instances by names coined by the men of the different companies.” Although Gilbert’s reformist agenda may have led him to hyperbolize, a report by Philadelphia’s mayor in the twentieth century repeated similar sentiments, and a *Fire and Water* decried the inefficiency of the PFD in 1892. Just as common training methods developed slowly (with the NAFE not is-
suing a standard manual for drilling until 1889), common practices and rituals made their way into engine houses very gradually. Indeed, with the exception of New York City, firefighter training typically occurred at individual engine houses, with relatively little centralized authority or instruction in technique. The Chicago Fire Department, for instance, described its training as a “school system” in which instruction took place at individual engine houses: “New firemen are initiated and old ones skilled in the dangers and necessities of their calling at the engine houses where hook and ladder companies are stationed.” To the degree that training regimens remained centered in engine houses, they reinforced intense local connections as much as they provided a vehicle for creating common work practices. Not surprisingly, on the eve of the new century, firefighters’ experiences varied widely, even in the same city.49

Firefighting may have had heroic cachet, but everyday work conditions tell another story, perhaps accounting for some of the instability in firefighters’ careers and experiences. When compared with other nineteenth-century jobs, firefighting did not offer especially appealing salaries, work, or benefits. Firefighting publications noted the salary disparity when compared to other “workmen whose work calls for special knowledge, skill, and training.” Yet, firefighters earned slightly more than laborers, and they experienced little seasonal change and were relatively unaffected by layoffs resulting from economic fluctuations. Even so, the terms of firemen’s employment were daunting. Firefighters worked twenty-four-hour shifts, six days per week, with only two or three one-hour breaks for meals. Additionally, during the nineteenth century firefighters had not yet received many of the benefits—such as pensions and civil service protection—that would become common among municipal employees in the twentieth century. On top of this, firefighting was dangerous labor, in which the possibility of death constantly loomed and injuries were common. Indeed, in a profile of the Pittsburgh Fire Department in 1896, Fire and Water reported that the city’s 303 firefighters suffered 54 “serious” injuries that resulted in over a thousand lost workdays during the previous year. All of these factors—low wages, extreme working conditions, localized regimes of power, and intense danger—diminished the likelihood that a man might remain a firefighter for a long period of time. Paradoxically, these very same conditions may have reinforced the singularity of firefighting culture, by winnowing department membership to men with particular social or cultural predilections—and those who possessed particularly aggressive qualities. Relatively poor working conditions may have fostered employment of men inclined toward excessive risk taking or physical activity.50

Work conditions reinforced the localized pattern of power in fire departments;
intense connections to community, neighborhood politics, and small all-male work groups dominated the life of most firemen, making life difficult for outsiders or men with different cultural backgrounds. The insular work cultures evident in engine houses grew from a competitive, rough notion of manliness characteristic of working-class life and evident in the hurly-burly of machine politics. To a large degree, the strength of these cultures buffered firemen from the NAFE’s message of professionalism. Such strong work groups possessed their own customs, making it difficult for the NAFE to disseminate training techniques. As a consequence, daily

Fire at 717–721 Arch Street, Philadelphia, 1886. As the twentieth century dawned, firefighters attacked blazes ever more aggressively, using ladders to gain access to upper floors and dragging hoses deep into buildings.

Courtesy, Fireman’s Hall Museum, Philadelphia
life at engine houses only rarely evoked the heroism portrayed in the popular press; it was more characterized by a visceral physicality, jocularity, and community parochialism.

The structure of firemen’s work groups facilitated localism and insularity by enforcing long-term, close contact with the same group of men, as well as the same urban neighborhood. For example, St. Louis firemen who entered the department before 1880 worked and lived with the same colleagues, and within the same neighborhood for much of their working years, as they were only rarely transferred away from the firehouse to which they were initially appointed. This pattern of workplace immobility did not change significantly until about 1890. After that, each subsequent cohort (by decade) grew increasingly likely to be transferred, with the mean number of transfers increasing to over four per career for firemen appointed after 1930. Additionally, the nature of firefighting work, with men laboring together for twenty-four hours per day, six to seven days per week, intensified firefighters’ relationships to their colleagues—for better or worse. Each day, firefighters received three one-hour periods to return home for meals. Such scheduling made it difficult for them to spend much time with their families, unless they resided very near the firehouse. Some lived so far away that an hour was not sufficient time, although in some cases firemen were allowed a single three-hour period for meals and home visits.\(^{51}\)

The insular, all-male world of the engine house encouraged rough behaviors commonly attributed to working-class male sociability—such as drinking, fighting, and gambling. Qualitative assessment of STLFD personnel files reveals that drinking was an endemic part of firefighters’ culture. Although one fireman was dismissed for “canning beer next to the engine house,” it does not appear to have been very common for firefighters to be dismissed for intoxication. It appears that firemen accused of drinking on the job usually received reprimands or fines. In Philadelphia, reformist firemen—such as James Gilbert, who would later head the city’s fire training school—complained of endemic insobriety at the city’s engine houses. According to the Gilbert, the gravest danger faced by firemen was their own drunkenness; he even suggested that most deaths in the line of duty occurred because a man had been drinking.\(^{52}\)

Gilbert further described the rough culture of the PFD as the “bully-boy” system, in which firefighters coerced a common behavioral code through physical violence or collective recrimination. In his memoir Gilbert wrote, “Each company was a law unto itself.” Each work group had a pecking order and diverse cast of characters. Being hired into the department was the first step in becoming a fireman; the second required negotiating the complexities of the work group. When Gilbert joined Engine Company No. 36 in Philadelphia’s Holmesburg neighbor-
hood, a fellow fireman promptly told him “that I could not remain as a member of the company . . . he informed me that the station was in the 35th Ward and only men of that Ward could serve in it. As I was from the 33rd ward, the inference was that I would have to get assigned to some Fire station located in the ward that I lived in.” Though prohibited by rules, Gilbert did not back down and fought with his antagonist, who it turned out had been backed into a similar corner several years earlier. By besting his opponent, Gilbert gained the respect of his fellow firemen and remained active in the department.53

A decade later, Gilbert took the same approach to assert his command authority after he was promoted to replace a foreman who had been driven out of the department. The company to which Gilbert had been appointed had systematically challenged the previous foremen’s authority by not obeying commands. Eventually, one fireman set fire to the hay in the engine house; the incident drew attention to the company and the foreman resigned. As a result, the leadership of the PFD appointed Gilbert to lead the troubled company. In order to best the collective strength of the men, Gilbert used existing departmental rules to divide the members against themselves and to defuse their collective power. He assigned each man a particular responsibility within the engine house and recorded that responsibility in the appropriate “watch book.” In this way, any incident created by the company to embarrass and disgrace Gilbert could have harmed their fellow company members.54

The competitive culture of the engine house never relented, and the rough manliness carried over to fire scenes as well. Gilbert’s success at taming tumultuous fire companies had placed him at odds with many of his fellow firemen, and he felt the consequences firsthand at a blaze. During 1912, after taking command of another disorderly company, Gilbert reported that he earned the enmity of his fellow officers in the process of making it one of the city’s most efficient companies. He recorded in his memoir that because that he had shown up his fellow officers in the department, they placed him in an untenable “position” at a fire, which severely tested his abilities as a man and leader of men. As he had done two decades earlier, Gilbert took the challenge and fought his enemies on their terms. Within a month, he returned the favor. Gilbert placed one of his earlier antagonists in an equally difficult situation. When the man could not “hold” his position and “retraced from the fire,” Gilbert achieved his victory. According to Gilbert, “It was the day of the Bully Boy tactics in the Fire Bureau and the Lord help those that could not hold their end up on the Fire ground.”55

Late in the nineteenth century, fire departments gradually introduced bureaucratic rules to their departments, but those rules appear to have had little impact
on the daily experiences and careers of firefighters. By the 1880s, most Philadelphia fire companies kept a ledger into which foremen chronicled the daily roll call, requisitions for materials, the care of hose and/or apparatus, and fire runs. Rarely very detailed, these records suggest a simple level of accountability and do not appear to have been scrutinized closely by departmental leaders. Moreover, although it seems almost certain that fire officials, especially the fire engineer, issued commands to the entire department, it is not clear how those orders were transmitted or if they were recorded. Judging from company watch books, the level of departmental coordination appears to have been minimal, perhaps helping to explain why fire companies in Philadelphia used different names for common tools. Likewise, recording disciplinary incidents does not appear to have impeded promotion, as evidence from the New York Fire Department (NYFD) suggests. As with other departments, the NYFD rewarded exemplary courage and the experience gained from length of service with promotion, but being disciplined or charged with insubordination did not preclude career advancement. By the first decade of the twentieth century, all but one officer in the NYFD had at least fifteen years experience, and more than two-thirds had received a commendation, being placed on the “Roll of Merit.” Additionally, a striking number—almost 40 percent—had at some point been brought up on charges of having violated departmental rules.56

The intransigence of local work cultures was deeply connected to broader understandings of manhood and politics. Advocates of reform—such as Gilbert—believed that training and discipline could transform local engine houses but worried that the connections between politics and everyday life in American cities posed a more serious threat to effective professional firefighting. Indeed, the importance of political connections and the influence of local regimes of power on departments were of special concern to advocates of firefighting professionalism. In fact, to firefighting professionals, local regimes of power—such as Philadelphia’s bully-boy system—were interconnected with political practice and manliness. Reformers frequently criticized the coupling between politics and firefighting, which resulted in ineffectual firemen. The NAFE identified the connections between politics and engine houses as perhaps the most powerful inhibitor of the dissemination of regular, routine work habits. At meeting after meeting, it considered the negative impact that political intervention had on efficient, professional firefighting.57

The intimate connections between politicians and fire departments are perhaps most evident in the hiring and promotion of men to the position of fire chief. Most late-nineteenth-century fire chiefs had worked in their departments, generally in increasingly more responsible posts, for many years. However, that experienced firefighters became chiefs does not necessarily indicate a “triumph of profession-
alism.” Indeed, although most chiefs were veterans who had the requisite skills and savvy to be chief, the vast majority nonetheless acquired the position through political considerations. Fire engineers came to head the department precisely because of their political connections, although many chiefs fancied themselves as representative firemen and the firefighting press typically described chiefs as men who had risen through the ranks. In fact, most chiefs appear to have been political appointees, including a large number that championed the professionalism of the NAFE. For instance, the STLFD’s reformist chief, Charles Swingley, experienced just such a rise through the ranks, earning his first four-year term as chief when his predecessor, John Lindsay, “was retired.” According to department personnel files, Lindsay was appointed to the department in 1867 and “dropped” in 1895. Being dropped by the department was not much different from being discharged. Lindsay’s being dropped coincided with a political change—it occurred two years after St. Louis residents elected a new mayor in 1893.58

More striking than his replacement of Lindsay was Swingley’s extraordinary rise through the ranks. Biographical statements contained in Swingley’s scrapbook noted his rapid promotion but insinuated that the promotions had come over a long period in a career marked by his “devotion to his duties, his skill and intrepidity.” In actuality, after being appointed in 1869, Swingley languished as a pipe-man—his position of entry—for his first twenty-four years in the department. Twice transferred, Swingley questioned his future prospects at least once. In 1882, he resigned for several months before returning to the department. Although he later earned his reputation as a proponent of merit and efficiency, Swingley’s rapid promotion resulted from his close political connection to the city’s pro-business Republican business elite, represented by Cyrus Wallbridge. Swingley did not receive a single promotion until after Wallbridge won the mayor’s office. After that date, he was promoted through the ranks with extraordinary rapidity. He received an appointment to assistant foreman on May 1, 1893, and was promoted to foreman December 14, 1893. Then in February 1894, he became assistant chief. Swingley succeeded Lindsay on May 15, 1895—moving ahead of other men such as assistant chief Eugene Gross, who was widely lauded for his long and meritorious career. Gross had been appointed to assistant chief in 1881 (after being appointed in 1869 and promoted at regular intervals). According to prevailing practice, as “first” assistant chief in 1885 Gross had been first in line to succeed Lindsay (whose term had started in 1885).59

If the rough world of turn-of-the-century urban street life and the individuated nature of job competition in industrial society nurtured the bully-boy system, urban politics provided the glue that bound it together. The paternalism of machine
politics tied firemen to ward leaders and structured their relationships to their local communities. In return for assistance during elections, ward officials rewarded firemen and other municipal workers with employment. In Philadelphia's fire department this sometimes resulted in hiring and promoting men with severe physical disabilities, such as blindness or consumption, or men who had little experience. Even Gilbert’s promotion to assistant foreman had depended upon his connections to the mayor; otherwise he may have been passed over. Being promoted because of favoritism so haunted Gilbert that he proclaimed that he never again would support corrupt machine politics, but his close connections to reformist politicians certainly aided his career in the long term.60

At the heart of the relationship between local politics and the fire department was the patron/client relationship between the political boss and his community. In the context of the broader labor market, the exercise of such connections to gain employment conformed to common job acquisition strategies. At a time when most men gained their first job through personal or family links, it is not surprising that being hired and promoted in both St. Louis’s and Philadelphia’s fire departments depended upon relationships to ward politicians or the political machine. For instance, in St. Louis, a man became a fireman after “a man, or his friend or friends” presented an application at the chief’s office. Even though Swingley boasted of his disinterested hiring practices, all applicants required “persons who know him and can vouch for him.”61

The benefits of possessing political ties went beyond finding a decent-paying job. The fortunes of firefighters often rose or fell with that of their patrons. Just as James Gilbert achieved considerable status—and promulgated reform—when a reform mayor took office, firefighters supported their benefactors with gusto. According to Gilbert, on election days few firefighters showed up at the engine house because most served as foot soldiers at the polls. In fact, a man’s ability as a political operative sometimes counted more than firefighting skill. Gilbert reported that “there were some of the members of the Fire Department that had no aptitude at all as Political workers, they were out of luck and had to watch their step unless they were the relative of some politician.” Whereas men without vote-getting skills had short careers, those with campaign ability found themselves beyond their superiors’ discipline. Company leaders, even those who had acquired positions through favoritism, could not reprimand such men without being subject to potential political backlash. Ironically, even those firefighters who lacked personal connections supported the machine indirectly. Well into the twentieth century, Philadelphia’s Republican machine extracted regular contributions from municipal employees’ paychecks. In Philadelphia, the Republican political ma-
chine coerced campaign contributions from municipal employees amounting to as much as $2 million dollars annually in the first decades of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{62}

The connections between firefighting and politics, between firefighters’ work cultures and urban political machines were not accidental. Both shared certain fundamentals, especially a common understanding of what constituted manliness. Firefighters and political leaders identified themselves according to similar rules of dominance, physicality, and competitiveness. Machine politics demanded an effervescent personality, charisma, and a rhetoric of public service, and it depended upon a competitive spirit. Its participants strove to dominate rivals in the frequent sparring and jousting of campaigns, backrooms, and council floors. Indeed, most political bosses considered themselves as the man among men. Likewise firefighters competed incessantly; whether they struggled for company leadership, control at a fire scene, or departmental hegemony, firemen who could not stand up to such contests found themselves discredited, dismissed, overlooked for promotion, or simply embarrassed. Perhaps more viscerally, there was a certain romance to firefighters’ conflict with nature that appealed to the popular culture and elected officials. As urban father figures and nominal fire department chief executives, mayors frequently attended fires and basked in the heroism of the city’s firemen. Symbolically (at the least) they claimed credit for having restored order through harnessing firemen’s vitality. As much as firefighters and machine politicians shared a common sense of manliness, a common struggle to order and control the urban environment especially bound them together.\textsuperscript{63}

Conclusion: Manliness, Order, and Public Safety

By 1898, when Jacob Riis celebrated the “Heroes Who Fight Fire,” firefighters had already given shape to their occupation and defined its organization and labor. Firefighters had become life-saving heroes, prominent in the public imagination. Of equal importance, firefighters had refined their work techniques; they no longer battled blazes from the outside, but from inside buildings. Firefighters also sought status by calling their work professional, and they participated in the dramatic expansion of governmental bureaucracies in the United States. As cities grew and their residents demanded improvements in the urban infrastructure, municipalities negotiated with private corporations, engineers, and other professionals to build waterworks, sewer systems, and public health organizations. Like the development of other nascent municipal bureaucracies—such as health, police, and water departments—the development of fire departments occurred gradually and as a result of constant negotiation between capitalists, firefighting professionals, and
the state. The expansion of municipal fire departments paralleled the growth of other urban services, but it differed in important respects.64

When firefighters and department leaders used the rhetoric of professionalism to organize their efforts to restore order, they claimed status as one of many communities of experts that began appearing in the United States following the Civil War. Firefighters never achieved the formal institutional authority bequeathed to the professional societies established by engineers, lawyers, and physicians, however. Yet, even without formal legal sanction, they wielded nearly as much influence as engineers, and were invited to weigh in on the development of the technological infrastructure. Although firefighters’ claims to be professionals blended into broader efforts to reform municipal employment and preceded attempts to make police departments professional, such influence distinguished firefighting from other blue-collar pursuits, helping to elevate the occupation. By clothing themselves in the values associated with middle-class professional organizations—discipline, rationality, and sobriety—firefighters obtained broad social respectability, despite their working-class and immigrant origins.65

Firefighters’ claims to stature often came at the expense of the fire insurance industry, against which firefighters contrasted their service. Firefighters’ ability to expand their authority occurred, in part, because of the complex role that insurers had in public fire protection. Unlike the expansion of other municipal services, such as sewers, electricity, and transit, where the role of capitalists in providing those public amenities was usually quite clear—usually as a contractor, partner, or innovator—insurance firms were significantly less visible in fire protection. Underwriters offered little direct economic pressure on or assistance to firefighters in the nineteenth century. They chose instead to leave the operation of fire departments in municipal hands. Additionally, insurers almost completely excused themselves from any role in public fire safety. Even setting aside insurers’ flippant remarks that conflagration could be managed, the differences between firefighters and insurers could not have been more stark.

Firefighters and underwriters generated two very different visions of safety. Underwriters’ labor existed as part of the larger capitalist endeavor, in which entrepreneurs transformed American cities and brought striking and intense new dangers. Insurers created an economic means by which industrial society could control the problem of fire by protecting and preserving capital, if not the material infrastructure. Underwriters—like corporations, professional organizations, and the growing middle class—sought to manage the economy and risk. Fire danger became an abstraction, represented on maps and in statistics. Insurers removed the hazard from the physical world even as they wove it into the fabric of industrial so-
ciety. Danger became a commodity that could be bought and sold. At the close of the nineteenth century, insurers’ efforts to control the problem of fire remained marginal and relatively ineffective. A significant number of Americans did not or could not purchase fire insurance to protect their financial interests. But, more significantly, at a time of dramatic conflagrations, most Americans understood the danger of fire in terms of its physicality and material meaning to their lives—a concern to which fire insurers devoted little public attention. Most importantly, however, the fire insurance industry also was failing to provide basic economic protection to policyholders. Adopting the ethos of laissez-faire capitalism, underwriters seemed unconcerned about the large numbers of firms going out of business—even encouraging the failures in the belief that this made the industry stronger. Fire losses mounted yearly in the decades following the Civil War, and “the engines of destruction multiplied”—to borrow firefighters’ phrasing. The problem of fire remained one of the most potent dangers facing American cities.

Into this vacuum firefighters stepped, often casting themselves as heroes. Yet, firefighters remained rough and flawed characters, as life in their engine houses suggests. In truth, the ability of firefighters to discipline cities, much less themselves, was limited—perhaps as imperfect as that of fire underwriters. Firefighters strayed far from the ideals expressed by the life-saving fireman. Their work cultures remained expressive, tied to local communities, and relatively unfettered by bureaucratic procedure. Despite their rhetoric, they were anything but trained professionals. Local political regimes and the work cultures of local engine houses frequently prevented firefighters from developing standard work habits or tools. At the same time, evidence suggests that the heroic fireman was sometimes a bully and occasionally drunk.

Nonetheless, urban Americans appear to have forgiven firefighters’ foibles because they offered protection at a time of mounting danger. Urban dwellers watched as firefighters raced into fires, saved lives, and prevented conflagration. Although they certainly offered an icon of elevated white manhood, firefighters claimed a place in the popular imagination mostly because they so visibly struggled to control the problem of fire when nobody else seemed able to do so. Indeed, the fireman rushing from a burning building carrying a woman or child distinguished firefighters’ interest from the economic concerns of middle-class underwriters, providing authority derived from moral, not economic power. Although firefighters’ legacy contained no small amount of hyperbole, there can be no doubt that firefighters placed themselves in great danger as they struggled against fire. *Fire and Water* captured the degree to which firemen’s bodies literally embodied the legacy of their struggle when it described the Chicago fire chief who “escaped
death on several occasions by the narrowest of margins, and, as a consequence bore on his body the marks of an infinity of burns and cuts.” In much the same way, firefighting as an occupation came to be marked by tales of valor, danger, and personal sacrifice. In the nineteenth century, at a time of great instability in American cities, firefighters provided a sense of security, though not absolute safety, which reassured urban dwellers and capitalists alike. By the time fire engineers discussed “a practical plan for mutual identity” in 1898, firemen had already defined their occupation as heroic and selfless—so successfully, in fact, that they continued to be judged through the late twentieth century as disinterested figures of security. Well before progressive reformers dreamed a rational city or the insurance industry sold fire prevention, firefighters offered a vision of urban order. Firemen established the first systemic standard of fire safety in the United States when they made themselves into heroic icons.66