Eating Smoke

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When St. Louis firefighters arrived at the Simmons Hardware Company in the summer of 1911, no smoke or flames were visible from the street, but below ground in a basement vault a mixture of hay and excelsior sat smoldering. Firefighters entered the building looking for the blaze, and they discovered acrid smoke emanating from the basement, up elevator shafts. As quickly as they began to enter the basement, with nozzles blasting water, they began to drop, one by one, from the fumes. Thousands of the city’s residents watched the “weird scene”; smoke slowly seeped from the building and waves of firefighters entered the building, only to be dragged out moments later by their comrades. Gradually, the smoke thickened and billowed; ambulances arrived to care for firefighters—ten or twelve of whom sat gasping on the sidewalk at any given time. The department’s chief, Charles Swingley, became “annoyed at the failure of the men to penetrate the basement.” He entered the fray. But, he too was soon carried out. Gradually, a strategy emerged from the chaos; newspapers reported, “the ‘smoke-eaters’ of the department, the veterans at combating such conflagrations, were sent first, and others wearing face masks held the nozzle into the vault.” Firefighters worked in relays of five-minute shifts, entering and exiting the basement, where the water became so deep that they feared drowning. By the next morning, when the blaze was
finally under control, nearly seventy firemen had been overcome, some more than once, including Chief Swingley. The *Post-Dispatch* reported that “until he was carried out the sixth time, and went to the City Dispensary, [Swingley] refused to admit that he had found a new thing in firefighting.”

Although the calculations of underwriters and fire prevention campaigns made headway in the battle against fire, firemen remained the most visible standard of safety in American cities. In fact, fire insurers sought firemen out as advocates to visit schools during fire prevention week, on the premise that “a fireman in uniform is a hero to the average child.” The apparent simplicity with which children viewed firefighters belied the reality of their work lives. Firefighting was growing yet more complex in the twentieth century, as shifting urban environments continued to generate new hazards—automobiles, chemicals, and new construction materials—and contained more familiar threats, such as falling walls, electrical wires, and tall buildings. Facing mounting dangers, firefighters reorganized their work, created extensive training regimens, and introduced new technological tools and techniques. In a culture obsessed with technology, firefighters transformed themselves, at least rhetorically, into an efficient machine. By the 1930s the advent of rescue squads in Philadelphia and other cities signaled that a more constrained professional heroism was developing among firemen—one that became more rule-bound and tied to technological acumen and teamwork. Though they emphasized the rational and technological, they nonetheless continued to identify saving lives as the single most important facet of their service. Indeed, the ideal of the male hero crossing a flaming threshold, baby in hand, disappeared neither from popular culture nor from fire engine houses. And firefighters continued to define their service on a continuum—between the physical and technological, between individual acts of courage and brotherhood.

With support of political reformers and the insurance industry, firefighters once again remade their service. As fire department leaders negotiated the rocky world of Progressive politics, they produced extensive changes, consistent with the recommendations of professionalism made by the International Association of Fire Engineers (IAFE.) Department leaders demanded that the urban technological infrastructure be updated, and bureaucratic structures be streamlined, and they established formal firefighting work procedures and rules. As firefighting became highly regular and standardized, firefighters thrived. They acquired more routine careers, better pay, improved working conditions—all without losing status as popular icons. Even so, the new administrative regimens circumscribed the power and eroded the cohesive culture of firemen’s small all-male work groups. Wherever one looked in the 1930s—in engine houses, on fire grounds, in training
schools, and administrative offices—departments emphasized technology, efficiency of action and procedure, and sober work discipline.

Significantly, the new work discipline did not eradicate the heroism or love of danger that previous generations of firefighters had made so much a part of firefighting. If anything, it pushed the contradictions so evident in engine houses to the fore, and in many respects fire chiefs came to embody the tension between discipline and daring that characterized twentieth-century firefighting. For instance, the St. Louis Fire Engineer, long a champion of reform, personified the contradictions inherent in firefighting. Swingley epitomized the local traditions of firefighting, especially its roots in the visceral physicality of working-class life, but also represented values of sobriety and efficiency, normally associated with the middle class and ideals of firefighting professionalism. As firefighters struggled to make careers amidst departmental reform, they undoubtedly negotiated the same slippery cultural terrain as their leaders. Rather than accept a risk-averse vision of manhood, they appear to have done the opposite, embracing greater amounts of danger. For instance, at the turn of the century, the New York Fire Department developed rules about eligibility for its “roll of merit” that defined heroism more narrowly—only acts in which firefighters placed themselves in personal danger. Balancing judgment against reckless abandon, firefighters attempted to get closer and closer to fires and higher and higher into buildings to save lives; they ate smoke in larger and larger quantities. And, in the face of increasing dangers, they introduced “rescue squads” into the lexicon of their occupation. Staffed by the best and brightest firefighters, rescue squads embodied a new, more modern ideal of firefighting: the melding of men and technology into an efficient, lifesaving machine. Firefighters’ sense of their manhood helped them to negotiate contradictory tensions that recurred again and again in twentieth-century society—rationalism verse expressiveness, efficiency verse passion, and modernity verse tradition. Long before astronauts personified such contradictions, firemen had created a culture of rational heroism.  

Reforming the St. Louis Fire Department

Providing fire protection to American cities remained contested political terrain crowded with the interests of business and insurance capitalists, firemen, and machine politicians. A common goal for years, improvements in fire protection came slowly and unevenly. Reform did not occur systematically until the cusp of the twentieth century, when its pace intensified during the Progressive Era. Although fire department reform mirrored Progressive change more broadly, there
were nonetheless important differences. Unlike debates about safety and the environment, which often pitted the interests of industrial capitalists against local communities, debates about fire protection created strange bedfellows. Local communities, firefighters, capitalists, and politicians all struggled to improve fire protection because it was perceived as such an unassailable social good. Indeed, the language of fire as a bad master and good servant remained prevalent, and social and political leaders continued to use the battle against fire to assert their mastery over nature and the urban environment. Although the emphases of their reform programs often varied, capitalists, politicians, and firefighters nonetheless found themselves working alongside one another—forcing both temporary and long-term alliances to suit their needs.

Urban political leaders and firefighters wielded the most direct power over fire departments, but the cause of reform advanced only with the support of insurers and local merchants. Local businessmen and insurers supported calls for higher wages, better working conditions, and more rational departmental management because they did not bear directly the costs of reform; municipal governments and taxpayers (including businesses) paid for the maintenance and operation of fire departments. Additionally, businesses and insurers agreed philosophically with the ideas behind reform efforts—an increased reliance on technology, rational management, and improved efficiency. Lastly, as insurers shifted away from simply indemnifying property toward preventing fires, they became interested in improving fire defenses, especially stopping small blazes before they became conflagrations. Commercial interests owning property in cities recognized that improved fire defenses could reduce or maintain fire insurance rates, and their business costs, especially as evaluations of departments and urban infrastructure crept into insurance rating schemes.

Reform-minded firefighters seized on the insurance industry's support and the opportunity presented by the political climate of the Progressive Era. They advocated for departmental changes consistent with those championed by the IAFE. Reformist firefighters especially targeted political interference in fire departments, but also sought to improve wages, working conditions, and pensions. In their effort to circumscribe the meddling of politicians and to achieve independence, they frequently allied with insurance and commercial capital in order to gain sway in the shifting sands of urban politics. Yet, paradoxically, job survival and/or promotion continued to depend upon political connections, and firefighters remained active players in local political arenas. Ironically, many firefighters and fire chiefs had been appointed or promoted by boss politicians, against whom they later agitated. As fire chiefs negotiated this slippery terrain, the twin ideals of professionalism and
brotherhood advocated by the IAFE provided a compass indicating what constituted appropriate organization, work routines, and protocol. Chiefs especially argued that departments should be rationally organized, staffed by well-paid men who trained regularly to maintain physical vitality and to acquire technological proficiency.

Charles Swingley’s twenty-year tenure as St. Louis fire chief shows the savvy with which one professional fireman transformed the landscape, institutions, and culture of firefighting during the first decades of the twentieth century. Swingley’s skill at winning political fights and his ability to cultivate a relationship with insurance and business interests made his tenure as a reformer possible. As he negotiated a tightrope of competing interests, the career of this consummate professional fireman was emblematic of the tensions between efficient meritorious service and political skill, and reveals the complex interrelationship between labor, capital, municipal governance, and urban growth in turn of the century American cities. In 1898, an especially tumultuous period of politics in St. Louis, Republican Mayor Henry Ziegenhein pressured the Republican-appointed Swingley to increase patronage hires. According to one local newspaper that cited a well-connected politician, Swingley had been told by the administration to dismiss all men who violated departmental rules. This, the paper reasoned, would winnow the large number of Democratic firemen (which it estimated at approximately 85 percent of the department) because, according to the same source, “those who are dismissed under this system will be replaced by Republicans.” This action would recast the character of the fire department, presumably making it more favorable to the Republican machine, which threatened to replace Swingley if he did not comply with its wishes.\(^5\)

Although Swingley had been put in a bind, he and other department leaders were not without recourse. And, in the case of Swingley, the mayor and his lieutenants underestimated the chief’s political savvy. As his rapid rise through the ranks suggests, Swingley was a seasoned veteran of the city’s political maneuvering. When he did not comply with the mayor’s demands, he drew upon that reservoir of experience and used his connections to control the situation. Ziegenhein’s administration exerted pressure on the chief by using local newspapers to announce Swingley’s impending removal as his date of reappointment neared. At the same time, within the department, Assistant Fire Chief Gross emerged as a rival, as did Julius Wurzburger, a political appointee to the job of assistant street commissioner. Swingley’s removal seemed so certain that local newspapers anointed Gross the city’s next fire chief.\(^6\)

Swingley did not bend to the machine. He turned to his patrons in the business
and insurance communities, whom he had cultivated in previous years. In response to his call for help, over one hundred prominent local business leaders advocated for Swingley’s candidacy with letters and cards. In addition, the St. Louis Board of Fire Underwriters publicly supported Swingley. Other mercantile interests also expressed their preference directly to the mayor and in city newspapers. Such backing turned the struggle in Swingley’s favor, in part because Ziegenhein did not want to alienate the primary constituency of the Republican Party. In behind-the-scenes maneuvering, the Democratic council and Republican mayor reappointed the chief. Swingley's victory underscored the authority wielded by the insurance community and local merchants, an influence that they would exercise repeatedly on his behalf.7

Not more than four years after his battle with Ziegenhein, Swingley entered another protracted debate about departmental leadership that again tested his ability to negotiate among the city’s mercantile interests, reform concerns, and the rough world of firemen. This time, however, a less favorable political context complicated his effort to control the department. A reformist Democrat, Rolla Wells, had been elected mayor, negating much of the influence of Swingley’s Republican connections. Additionally, the year began badly when, following a season of unusually heavy fire loss, over twenty insurance companies abandoned the city, and the remaining companies raised rates 20 percent. After a particularly disastrous blaze, local insurers and business leaders expressed dismay at the increasing losses and met with the mayor (the aggressive reformer and pro-business Democrat Wells). They expressed concern that the city’s firemen were “lying down” on Swingley. According to one account, assistant chief John Barry had directed the city’s firemen in a manner that increased fire damage. Moreover, Barry apparently had petitioned local business leaders to work against Swingley’s reappointment, and had used the fire to discredit the chief further. Whether true or not, such claims frightened business and insurance leaders as much as firefighters. Everyone knew that politics mattered, but such reports raised a significant question. Had the work of the department been compromised in a struggle for control? Was the city being protected adequately; were firemen’s lives in jeopardy? The business community demanded action from the men whom they had supported several years earlier.8

Swingley quickly responded with characteristic savvy by reaching out to both the business community and to rank-and-file firefighters. Almost immediately he met with the mayor accompanied by a small group of loyal business supporters that included local insurance leaders. The chief demanded two reforms: enlarging the city’s firefighting service and increasing the amount of protection in the commercial district. His advocacy of expanded fire defenses quelled the dissatisfaction of
the city’s commercial interests. It also won the support of the St. Louis Fire Prevention Bureau, which offered vocal public advocacy for Swingley’s proposals. Equally important, the chief defended the city’s firefighters as heroic and brave workers and urged the city to increase the department’s budget. Firefighters repaid Swingley’s loyalty with unequivocal support. A fireman reported, “There is not a man on the whole department who would not face death rather than disobey Chief Swingley’s orders.”

With the business community and firemen squarely in his corner, Swingley struck at his political opponents using the nearly unchecked power that fire chiefs held prior to the regularization of department rules. Swingley shook up the department’s leadership, effectively removing his political competition and quelling any doubts about his authority. In particular, he removed two assistant chiefs, including John Barry, who it had been rumored was scheming to replace him. Barry, however, speculated that his close relationship with Eugene Gross—who Swingley had forced to resign after Gross sought to be appointed chief in 1898—led to his discharge. Whatever the reasons for his removal, Barry refused to resign. He demanded intervention by the mayor and city council, questioned the broad license given to Swingley, and speculated that his political affiliation caused Swingley’s action. Barry’s appeal succeeded. Within days of Barry’s discharge, Swingley backtracked. Pressed by Democratic Mayor Rolla Wells, Swingley reappointed Barry. And, in an attempt to stifle criticism, he told local newspapers of his support for a nonpartisan trial board. Both actions temporarily defused the crisis and

Truck Company No. 2, Philadelphia, 1900. Fire departments continued to add more ladder or “truck” companies in the early twentieth century. Firefighters themselves helped to develop many new ladder apparatus, such as the eighty-five-foot Hayes/La France aerial ladder truck, which the Philadelphia Fire Department acquired at the century’s end. Courtesy, Fireman’s Hall Museum, Philadelphia
may well have been a compromise between Swingley and Wells. The end to the controversy restored order to the city by quelling the political dispute and fears about the adequacy of the fire department. In addition, Swingley’s capricious power as fire department boss had not become a public issue and he retained, perhaps even expanded, his authority over the department. At the same time, Wells reassured property owners and business leaders that the city had settled any outstanding departmental issues. More importantly, Wells ended a distracting political battle that detracted from his other goals. An erstwhile reformer, he and other reformist Democrats moved to confront a larger issue—the power of Democratic Party boss Edward Butler.¹⁰

The three-way contest between reformers, machine politicians, and the city’s commercial interests did not end, however. It reappeared ten months later when Swingley came up for reappointment, and the battle lines remained familiar. Machine leaders (associated with the Democratic Party) led by Butler expressed dismay at the inability or unwillingness of the pro-business and reformist Democrats, such as Mayor Wells, to replace a Republican appointee (Swingley) with someone more amenable to their interests. Wells’s own reformist Democrats—who had termed themselves the Jefferson Club—also questioned the mayor’s choice of Swingley. The machine supported the assistant chief, John Barry, and the Jefferson Club urged the appointment of former fireman Thomas Finnerty. Meanwhile, the city’s “insurance men and wholesale business interests” supported Swingley as they had previously.¹¹

As had happened four years earlier, the department’s reform-minded fire chief and the commercial interests won the day. Wells went against the interests of the reformist Jefferson Club and nominated Swingley for reappointment, which the St. Louis Globe-Democrat labeled “sound business judgment.” Nonetheless, the battle over the reappointment raged for weeks. Jefferson Club reformist Democrats even considered expelling the mayor from membership and temporarily joined with the machine to block Swingley’s confirmation, which languished long after the mayor’s other nominees were confirmed. The council eventually confirmed the chief, although the explanation for the outcome remains locked in the political backroom. Democrats and Republicans, however, took credit for keeping the department out of politics and igniting reform. Republicans asserted that they initially appointed Swingley, who had introduced merit into the department, and Democrats claimed the high ground for reappointing a Republican, thereby avoiding partisanship and underscoring reformers’ arguments that politics should not shape urban services, especially fire protection. Swingley triumphed again.¹²

Even as he survived treacherous political waters, Swingley dramatically trans-
formed the St. Louis Fire Department, often in a manner closely modeled on the IAFE’s reformist agenda. For example, the IAFE—which elected Swingley as its president in 1898—advocated adding new equipment, especially truck companies, expanding department size and geographic coverage, as well as budgets. On these and other points, Swingley succeeded, especially when the interests of firefighting professionalism overlapped with those of local merchants in St. Louis. During Swingley’s tenure as chief and later as director of public safety, the STLFD experienced its greatest sustained growth, more than doubling in size. By other measures, too, Swingley improved the position of the department. He increased the total number of operating engine companies from forty-one to seventy-one, and expanded the numbers of hook-and-ladder companies dramatically. In fact, the ratio of engine companies to hook-and-ladder companies decreased from 3.6 to 2.6, allowing firefighters to be more effective in venting buildings and rescuing people trapped in upper floors. Swingley also initiated practices designed to diminish fire danger in the city’s commercial districts, such as having company foremen and assistant foremen inspect buildings, and, as early as 1895, Swingley himself routinely toured the heart of the city’s business district to assess the fire danger and the adequacy of fire defenses.13

Likewise, Swingley emphasized training and efficiency in a manner consistent with IAFE recommendations, and according to local newspapers he succeeded in improving departmental discipline. Early in the twentieth century, for instance, most fire departments established formal training methods, but their approach varied widely, from the formal training course used by the NYFD to the less rigid, though equally pervasive, drilling methods developed in St. Louis. Beginning in the 1890s, Swingley initiated a program of drills aimed at increasing firefighters’ proficiency. Each morning, the city’s fire companies spent one hour practicing hitching horses to the company’s apparatus. According to the St. Louis Post Dispatch, “after two months of practice the time of company hitching had been reduced from [between] eleven to fifteen seconds to [between] six to nine seconds.” Thereafter, during the first two decades of the century companies performed regular exercises, learned scaling techniques, practiced raising ladders, and manipulated hose. Such drills provided a means to exercise horses and initiated new company members into the camaraderie of an engine house’s firefighting team. Newspaper accounts of training exercises also depicted firemen acquiring and practicing lifesaving skills and underscored the heroic culture of firefighters in the popular imagination. By 1906, such drilling grew increasingly commonplace in the training towers that were erected behind many of the city’s engine houses.14

Swingley, in addition, supplemented training procedures with administrative
routines that made the department’s daily operation more rational. A primary administrative change in the department involved the creation of more elaborate disciplinary procedures, which supported the expansion of departmental rules. For instance, around 1895, he supplemented the departmental ledger with a card file that documented promotions, disciplinary action, and transfers. This process would continue long after Swingley’s retirement. By 1933, the department instituted an even more complete card file, which meticulously recorded health and pension information in addition to other career data.

Likewise, Swingley improved discipline by establishing a “court” to try firemen who violated department rules and principles. At least two other departmental officials—such as the assistant chiefs or district chiefs—served as judges at the trials, in which firemen faced their accusers. For first or second convictions, the department levied a fine; a third or fourth offense brought suspension without pay. Typically, the chief discharged a man only after several offenses. Of all the rules, only drunkenness appears to have been unforgivable, at least in those cases in which a man was reported for it. In 1895, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch wrote that Swingley refused to reappoint a man discharged for continued drunkenness. More importantly, though, departmental personnel records reveal that Swingley used the entire range of punishment options—including reprimand, suspension, fine, reduction in rank or pay, or, finally, discharge. Disciplinary action became an ordinary part of firefighters’ everyday work lives; those appointed after 1886 experienced, on average, more disciplinary actions than previous cohorts. In part, the sudden increase may have been the product of improved record-keeping procedures, or perhaps resulted from the formal enumeration of departmental employment practices or rules of conduct. Whatever the explanation, the very act of recording disciplinary incidents in a personnel file indicates an expansion of management and administrative procedures, and suggests the regularization of firefighting employment more broadly.15

The expanded administrative regimen brought St. Louis’s firefighters toward greater efficiency by means of a carrot as well as a stick. The IAFE had long advocated rewarding firefighters’ daring with generous benefits, and reformers also supported pensions, better pay, and more regular working conditions. The organization believed that it would improve the quality of recruits, encourage older workers to retire, and perhaps increase the quality of work. In fact advocates of firefighting professionalism believed that such changes would foster departments whose members were younger, more physically robust, better educated, and less susceptible to political corruption. In St. Louis, Swingley followed the lead of his predecessor when he championed such causes before the municipal government,
advocating higher pay, better pensions, and more generous work rules as well. After the turn of the century, the department’s pension fund increased in size and dispensations became more generous. In addition, pay advanced steadily; rank-and-file firefighters received 10 percent increases and officers were given 25 percent raises. And, although it would not be realized until after Swingley’s tenure, his proposals for a second shift of firefighters eventually would reduce firemen’s hours (but not their pay) and would increase the numerical strength of the department by about 20 percent.16

A relatively high degree of professionalism and bureaucratic rationality gained sway in St. Louis early in the twentieth century, despite the lack of a formal civil service system and the relatively unfettered power of fire chiefs. In fact reform had been taking place for twenty years following in the footsteps of Swingley’s predecessor Henry Clay Sexton, who had vested hiring, firing, and disciplinary procedures solely in the office of the chief. In 1880, for instance, Sexton argued that the only way to reform firefighting was to give the fire chief unprecedented authority—mirroring the NAFE’s arguments about professionalism. He argued that “members of a Fire Department, more than, perhaps, those of any other public service, should be under the immediate and only control, both in matter of discipline and of being retained in their positions, of the Chief of their Department.” Just two years later, at the IAFE’s annual convention, a special committee advised that the best way to keep politics out of fire departments would be to “appoint Chiefs of fire departments for life, or during good behavior, and the Chief to appoint members of the department under the same conditions, and the Chiefs and members to be . . . [prohibited] from taking part in politics, except for the right to vote.” If such a mode of organization did not itself embody reform, it nonetheless served successive chiefs in St. Louis well, especially as they advanced the IAFE’s professional agenda.17

Swingley adopted his predecessor’s and the IAFE’s stance that the chief had undisputed authority over the department. Although he often boasted about the department’s administrative rules, many procedures remained ambiguous or unwritten. For instance, the chief told local newspapers that he promoted firefighters when they proved “qualifications as an officer.” Swingley deemed a man qualified if he had demonstrated “sobriety, efficiency, and ability” while serving as an “acting” officer. But how did one become an acting officer? What precisely were the attributes of efficiency and ability? Did this refer to demonstrated acts of heroism, particular technical skills, leadership qualities, or simply a commitment to Swingley’s reformist agenda? Firemen seeking clear guidelines found few written administrative procedures. Published to support the firemen’s pension fund, the History of
the St. Louis Fire Department: With Review of Great Fires, and Sidelights upon the Methods of Fire-Fighting from Ancient to Modern Times, from which the Lesson of the Vast Importance of Having Efficient Firemen May Be Drawn was likely the primary avenue through which the department socialized new recruits. Nonetheless, the History did not discuss specific rules; it only suggested broad policies and ideals.18

With or without a written code of conduct, Swingley effectively conveyed a distinct message in the History. New recruits and seasoned veterans alike received this message clearly: the department would not tolerate behavior that ran against the ideals of efficiency and sobriety. The History did not need to outline regulations to make this point. At every turn, the narrative adopted the rhetoric of progress and reform. For example, it did not offer a subtle interpretation of the transition from volunteer firefighting to a professional department. To the contrary, it adopted the language of professionalism to explain the change, arguing that professional firefighters replaced volunteers precisely because volunteers had been too rough and too undisciplined. It did not matter that many volunteers had directed the new department and forged many of its work values. No, indeed, the History was not written to elucidate the past. It was commissioned—as so many fire department histories were—to guide the process of professionalization in American fire departments early in the twentieth century. Indeed, the History affirmed the message of the IAFE when it urged firefighters to innovate and to gain better control over themselves, their tools, and the environment. The History buttressed the reformers’ belief in fire department progress by supporting the message of forward-thinking chiefs like Swingley. It praised the contemporary department for advocating drills, rational practices, and sobriety, so as to encourage discipline and moral courage.19

Fire Chiefs, Manly Risks, and Rational Heroism

The apparent contradictions between Swingley the reformer and politician, and Swingley the heroic fireman illuminates the broader tension between firefighters’ occupational culture, which often carried a professional and reformist message, and firefighters’ work culture, with its rough-hewn manliness. Reformers applauded Swingley for material reasons (protecting capital and urging partisan “dis-interest”) as well as cultural reasons. Swingley represented competing definitions of manhood prevalent among fin-de-siècle American men and firemen. On one hand, he embodied bold, almost reckless, heroism; on the other, he stood for the increasingly hegemonic values of efficiency, rationality, and technology. Swingley’s political struggles were emblematic of the contradictions inherent in the two sets of beliefs. At the turn of the twentieth century, firefighters’ heroic manhood be-
Firemen training in Philadelphia, ca. 1925. In 1913, Philadelphia established a formal training school for firemen, thus introducing common procedures and standard terms for tools in a city where firefighting technique had varied from engine house to engine house. Courtesy, Fireman’s Hall Museum, Philadelphia
came increasingly complex—and difficult to negotiate. Commitment to service, physical virility, and daring-do did not suffice; firemen were increasingly called upon to demonstrate efficiency and sobriety.

The depth and extent of Swingley’s support in local business and reform communities undoubtedly grew not just from his reputation as a reformer, but also from performances as a man. As Swingley attempted to discipline the city’s firemen, he embodied the manliness characteristic of the sober, professional middle class. In fact, a feature story in a local newspaper distinguished Swingley from his predecessors using language commonly reserved for middle-class business leaders: “Swingley is methodical, cautious, and reserved—not at all the jovial sort we used to know and lionize, men like Clay Sexton and John Lindsay.” With administrative responsibilities akin to those of middle-class reformers and urban businessmen, Swingley did not seek “glory”; in other words, he did not affect the rough-and-ready cultural displays of working-class men. The newspaper also reported, “He has an office and stays at it when he’s not at a fire.” Strikingly, Swingley worked from an “office”—a symbol of middle-class male work, and he executed his duty in a dependable, “emotionally unflappable” fashion. Even so, Swingley’s vitality and active manliness protected him from what many popular commentators described as the greatest danger facing office-bound middle-class men: physical weakness. Tempered by self-control and rational leadership, Swingley’s interpretation of firefighting manhood struck a chord deep within a middle class concerned about the changing nature of manliness.20

If St. Louis’s business leaders and middle-class reformers supported Swingley because he represented values of efficiency, rationality, and technology, the city’s working-class and ethnic firemen embraced Swingley because of the abandon and ferocity he demonstrated at fires. Like Phelim O’Toole and other heroes from the department’s past, Swingley battled fire close-up, saved lives, and performed hard labor to vanquish fires. Time and again during his tenure as chief, local newspapers reported on Swingley’s bravery. In 1901, he saved a fireman’s life as he worked his way through a fire scene; on several other occasions, he suffered injuries and barely escaped death, as in the Simmons Hardware fire, in which he was dragged unconscious from the acidic fumes six times. One firefighter described his respect for Swingley: “He rose from the ranks himself and he is therefore just the man who knows how to treat those in the ranks now. He has seen thirty-six years of service and during that time has never had any trouble with any one on the department. Another thing, he will never send one of his men to a part of a building where he himself would not go. And as a rule he usually goes first. We all know he is fearless and all the firemen follow his example.” Swingley repeatedly demonstrated
moxie and battled the elements alongside rank-and-file firefighters, which endeared him to his men.21

Like Swingley, most fire chiefs faced the same hazards as rank-and-file firefighters. Furthermore, chiefs certainly knew about the dangers from department records of the hundreds of firefighters treated by the department’s physician. In Philadelphia, a department that kept such extraordinary records, Chief James Baxter nearly perished as he evacuated his men and rescued one fireman from the falling walls of a factory blaze; fourteen firefighters died. In Chicago, James Horan and over twenty other firemen died when the walls of a beef warehouse fell. Though their work was usually neither lethal nor heroic, in the normal course of a day firefighters engaged a world made chaotic by environmental danger; simply entering a flaming structure required courage and the ability to eat smoke. Although fire chiefs may not have used ladders, axes, claw tools, and ceiling hooks along with their men, fire engineers entered deep into buildings, directing firemen, searching for victims, ventilating structures, and drenching fires with water. Choking smoke, chemicals, falling walls, and a growing list of hazards in the unstable and densely built urban environments hampered but did not deter firefighters and their leaders.22

To a large degree, fire chiefs embodied the contradictions so inherent in firefighting—the tension between rationality and heroism. Although political considerations continued to play important roles in the selection of fire chiefs, fire service lore almost always reported that chiefs received their positions because of merit and mettle. As a result, to the general public and even to their men, fire chiefs exemplified the complex skills that twentieth-century firefighters used to control the problem of fire. For instance, when the PFD rewarded forty-year veteran and fire chief James Baxter by appointing him fire inspector, local newspapers simultaneously lauded Baxter’s judgment, experience, bravery, and connection to his men. The Telegraph celebrated his ability to maintain control even during “trying excitement”; he was “never reckless” and “always brave,” further noting that he had saved “many thousands of dollars for merchants, which would have been lost under a less experienced mind.” Baxter showed both prudence and courage; more importantly, according to once source, “he asked none to go where he would not go himself.” The chief suffered more than a dozen injuries, but reportedly never left the fire scene until the blaze was under control; “his bravery was a great magnet around which his men did much splendid work.”23

Although such accounts have the saccharine taste of hyperbole, such veneration had a basis in Baxter’s career, with which local firefighters would have been familiar. Baxter had served with the city’s volunteer fire companies in the 1860s and later
became one of the first appointees to the newly reorganized municipal fire department in Philadelphia. He had been instrumental in shaping the PFD, helping to transform firefighting from an avocation into a vocation. As chief, he propelled it toward the ethos of professional efficiency long championed by the IAFE. Even so, like other firefighters, Baxter remained rooted in the work culture so present in engine houses, seeking to fight fires up close. Just months before his promotion, Baxter narrowly escaped the falling walls of a factory that killed fourteen Philadelphia firemen. Leading the attack from inside the flaming structure, Baxter suffered injury while rescuing a brother fireman as the wall collapsed around them. After he supervised the removal of the firefighters’ bodies, he then led the city’s efforts to create a relief fund—eventually over $100,000 was raised—for the families of the firefighters. Philadelphia firemen knew that Baxter came from their ranks, and they shared much in common with him. Like so many fire chiefs and fireman, Baxter straddled the line between being a rational protector of urban order and having what it took to enter burning buildings for a living.24

As men everywhere in the nation struggled with changing definitions of manliness, the brotherhood of firefighters possessed and exemplified an almost transcendent vision of what it meant to be a fireman and a man. Although their self-assuredness and extraordinary work differentiated them from their fellow urban dwellers, their stories nonetheless spoke to people. And, in many respects, the labor issues that firefighters faced resembled those faced by other American workers. For instance, firefighters confronted rapidly shifting workplaces—terrains changed by technology and industrial development. They found their work lives affected by new management and administrative technologies, and they were persistent in demanding better terms of employment. Also, firefighters dealt with an increasingly complex array of tasks that ran the gambit from the physical to the technical and evaluative. They defined themselves and their craft in the face of the most basic issues confronting Americans society in the early twentieth century. Thus, perhaps even more so than in the nineteenth century, profiles of firefighting courage provided American men with a model of how to negotiate the contradictions between team efficiency and individual expressiveness, between bureaucratic rationality and physical strength, between prudence and aggressive action.25

Civil Service Reform and the Philadelphia Fire Department

As in St. Louis, reform of the PFD occurred at the intersection of the interests of firefighting professionalism, local politics, and insurance capital. Unlike St. Louis, however, Philadelphia implemented a civil service system in 1885, long be-
fore most cities. The city’s regimen of civil service produced a fire department with more formal written rules and bureaucracy earlier than in the STLFD. Even so, specific reforms implemented in Philadelphia mirrored those in St. Louis in spirit, if not in letter. But, because Philadelphia’s municipal government codified so much of its reform program, the department produced a host of records about how fire departments were reorganized during the Progressive Era and how the work of firefighting became more regimented.26

Before Rudolph Blankenberg’s mayoralty transformed municipal employment in 1912, there had been two previous attempts to build a systematic civil service. In 1885, the Pennsylvania State Legislature passed a new charter for Philadelphia, and reform groups there, such as the Philadelphia Civil Service Reform League and the Committee of One Hundred, proposed legislation to curtail the power of the city council, to strengthen the mayor’s office, and to implement merit-based hiring practices. Led by the city’s business, academic, and church leaders, reformers obtained a law that included a civil service board charged with instituting testing for job applicants. After the city’s reformed charter failed to garner significant change, reformers mobilized once again and secured a bill establishing a revamped civil service commission. Although that legislation would be overhauled twice over the next half century, it provided the basic framework for municipal employment through the 1950s. Managed by three people appointed by the mayor (with no more than two being members of the same political party), it administered competitive examinations, arranged for job placements, and published yearly results. The commission spent its first years creating written exams to test general skills; by 1912 it instituted practical testing to measure actual skills.27

After 1906, the civil service commission made the process of gaining employment in the city’s burgeoning municipal bureaucracy more rational, but it did not diminish the power of individual departments in matters of hiring, firing, and promotion. In order to gain employment, candidates had to pass an examination. Test dates appeared in public newspapers and were mailed to applicants. To become eligible, candidates requested (in person) and filed an application with the civil service commission. They registered their vital information, as well as the position to which they were applying, at least five days before the examination date. The commission called for examinations at the behest of departments interested in hiring new employees. However, final employment decisions resided solely with municipal departments; the civil service commission had “no jurisdiction whatever over appointments.”28

The new regimen did not make municipal hiring into a meritocracy. To be sure, the system rewarded those who scored highest on written tests, but it did not guar-
antee employment or promotion early in the twentieth century. Prospective employees, such as firefighter James Gilbert, appear to have understood this reality, which was laid out in publications available to prospective applicants. Those guides noted that everyone who scored over 70 percent passed the examination, but only the top four names were placed on an “eligible list,” which was submitted to the respective departments. The list was “certified” by an “appointing power” that hired one of the four candidates. For the next job opening, the name of the applicant with the next highest score was added to the list. Once again, one of the four candidates on a certified list was hired. If a candidate’s name appeared on four consecutive certified lists, it was removed and another name was added. As a result, scoring well on an examination did not guarantee employment, but it did increase the likelihood of being hired. In fact, it was possible that only one of the top four scorers on a test would receive an appointment. By the 1920s, the hiring rules were changed substantively to favor those who scored well, but test performance still did not assure promotion or hiring.29

As Philadelphia regularized its employment practices, the city elected a galvanizing force behind municipal reform (especially for professionalizing city services): Mayor Rudolph Blankenberg. Blankenberg’s administration made the provision of municipal services more efficient in a fashion consistent with Frederick Winslow Taylor’s theories of scientific management. It especially advocated removing political considerations from the provision of municipal services. In 1912, the director of public safety noted, “As in other Bureaus of the Department, a war has been waged against employees with political affiliations and obligations.” Although the city banned employees from paying or collecting political assessments, it achieved only marginal success in removing political influence from municipal departments. Nonetheless, Blankenberg and his lieutenants had begun the process of reform, and their efforts augured the direction of change in all areas of city governance, including the fire department. In fact, Philadelphia’s Fire Department experienced an extraordinary period of reform between 1912 and 1930, especially of bureaucratic procedures, training regimens, and firefighting tactics.30

The process of making Philadelphia’s fire department more rationally organized intensified after the Committee of Twenty (of the NBFU) assessed the city’s fire conditions in 1911. Finding that the department was organized “fairly well,” it urged dramatic improvement in other areas. It argued that supervision was “unsatisfactory,” promotion and hiring decisions were made in a “political” manner, discipline was “lax,” drills and training were “lacking,” and “individual efficiency [was] low.” A committee of Philadelphia’s Board of Trade examined the NBFU’s charges and supported the organization’s claims, noting that the city should spend
more than $2 million to modernize the department. According to the Board of Trade, Philadelphia spent less per capita on its fire department than seven other leading cities. In addition, the NBFU and the Philadelphia Board of Trade offered specific recommendations for the department’s improvement, which meshed with the IAFE’s agenda of firefighting professionalism. Almost immediately, the city responded, and the city upgraded the fire department within the context of its ongoing civil service and bureaucratic reform. During these first waves of change in Philadelphia, the number of firefighters grew by nearly 30 percent (between 1905 and 1917). The PFD’s manpower again increased in 1918 when it implemented a two-platoon system and hired over nine hundred new firefighters.31

At the same time, the Blankenberg administration initiated a program to reduce the city’s “fire waste”—a move that both involved changes in firefighting and galvanized the support of firefighters, local businesses, municipal leaders, and insurers. In 1912, to shore up fire defenses, Philadelphia established a fire prevention commission, which advocated prevention efforts and improving fire defenses. The commission warned that “American cities are safe from conflagration only by the...
smallest margin, and sometimes, by reason of extraordinary conditions, that margin disappears entirely and then the best fire department in personnel and equipment may become helpless.” Toward this end, the Philadelphia Fire Prevention Commission championed a variety of reform measures, and worked with the fire department to improve fire defenses. For example, along with the department, the commission made building inspections—performed informally—into a formal job responsibility of firefighters. As firemen inspected their neighborhoods, they became agents of safety, making fire prevention recommendations. The fire prevention commission also hoped to improve the department’s efficiency by encouraging the purchase of motor-driven fire apparatus, which drew upon the advice of the NBFU and firefighting professionals. The IAFE argued that “automobile fire engines” were more efficient and equally reliable, decreased response time, required fewer men to operate, and were less expensive than horses. Although firemen were loath to give up their horses, whose service they celebrated, they adopted the new technology, continuing to prioritize efficiency and innovation. The PFD purchased automobile engines beginning in the 1910s, and like other departments it procured the new technology as fast as manufacturers could produce them.32

As an unlikely coalition remade fire departments, another new voice entered discussions about firefighting reform early in the twentieth century when firefighters in cities across the nation began to form unions. By 1918, rank-and-file firefighters’ influence increased substantially as formerly independent efforts at unionization culminated with the formation of the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), which counted about one quarter of the nation’s forty thousand firemen as members. Initially, this act of formalizing the brotherhood of firemen into a labor union met with some consternation at IAFE conventions. However, fire engineers’ fears about work stoppages eventually dissipated and they disappeared altogether in the 1930s, after the IAFF amended its constitution to include a no-strike pledge. Although issues surrounding workplace autonomy and control remained, the IAFF also lined up with fire engineers’ recommendations about professionalism. Ultimately, then, the IAFF did not develop in opposition to the IAFE, but rather it became an alternative avenue for promoting the interests of firefighters. The organization served to amplify firefighters’ voices, and it provided firemen with additional political pull, which became especially critical in a century with increasingly formal negotiating environments and interest group politics.33

This move for unionization shaped efforts to reform the Philadelphia Fire Department, as firefighters chartered Local 22 and joined their leadership in press-
ing for better working conditions. In fact, Philadelphia firefighters initiated the union at a time when Philadelphia Fire Chief Engineer William Murphy had organized a “committee on increase in pay and shorter working hours.” Murphy drew upon their numbers when he used the incipient bureaucracy to mobilize firefighters, engine house by engine house, to sign written petitions that were sent to the city council, demanding both higher wages and shorter hours, via the implementation of a “two-platoon” system. This became a popular reform ideal in the 1910s and was promoted by the IAFE and NBFU on the grounds that it improved fire department efficiency. Firefighters favored the double shifts because usually their salaries remained constant but their work hours were reduced significantly, sometimes by as much as half. Political leaders, however, were ambivalent about this change because of the costs involved in financing fire department expansion. The support of Local 22 turned the tide in the drive for a second platoon in Philadelphia. After the city dragged its feet over implementing the changes, firefighters used their new organization to compel the city to comply with the state legislation that had mandated the reform. As a result, by Christmas 1918, Philadelphia firefighters worked shorter hours and received a 10 percent increase in their wages.34

Concurrent with the expansion of civil service the department developed new methods of personnel management, revised work rules, and established administrative routines—all of which became powerful tools for change. In 1912 the director of public safety updated the fire department’s “entire system of records and forms... to meet the demands of an increased and growing force.” Through this new regimen of communications, programs of reform had a direct impact on the city’s firemen. For instance, by using “General Orders” that were typed, reproduced, and distributed to all fire companies, the chief engineer took an important step toward making life and work practices more standard across engine houses. From 1916 through 1919, Chief Engineer William Murphy issued over four hundred general orders on a range of topics related to company management, departmental organization, and personnel practices. Murphy issued new regulations and provided information to firefighters about the fire service. He and later chiefs created and continued to refine procedures for updating personnel data; chiefs delivered instructions on caring for hose and maintaining and operating new technological apparatus, and they recommended changes in firefighting tactics. Additionally, general orders clarified company responsibilities when alarms came in from fire boxes, thereby diminishing confusion at fire scenes.35

By the 1920s, this bureaucratic regimen intensified and a had a more direct impact on firefighters as the PFD implemented systematic reporting methods. The
department created more than sixty different reports for recording information about company and firefighter performance and communicating that to headquarters. Company leaders filled out this myriad of daily, monthly, and annual reports on several different forms, sometimes submitted in duplicate or triplicate. By the 1940s, the department even listed which officers should receive which of the growing number of forms. To help firemen keep tabs on the expanding volume of information, the department continuously provided company leaders with instruction on which forms to use in different circumstance, and published a guide to completing them properly. As standard procedures gained momentum, companies and firefighters came under increasing scrutiny from a leadership interested in managing resources more effectively and in developing more coordinated firefighting strategies. The department’s administrative procedures gradually reduced the differences in the informal culture of the city’s engine houses, and departmental leaders acquired more control over firefighting operations.  

Training Firemen’s Bodies and Standardizing the Heroic

During the twentieth century, firefighters also made systematic training a foundation of their professionalism. The IAFE and firefighting leaders developed and disseminated standard tactics and work routines designed to create common practices in all fire departments, whether volunteer or paid. In 1913, over two decades after the occupation’s first sanctioned guide had been circulated, one-time IAFE president and New York City fire chief John Kenlon published a history of fire department organization and training modeled after the New York Fire Department. In 1920, Fire & Water Engineering published The New York Fire College Course, and the IAFE held a focused discussion of practice and training at its annual meeting, which emphasized the elements of the New York Fire College Course. Using its guidelines, the IAFE especially urged departments to establish formal training schools to familiarize firefighters with the latest innovations in firefighting, such as motor-guided apparatus, scaling techniques, and breathing equipment. As a result of the IAFE’s efforts, city after city established fire schools early in the twentieth century. Not only did such academies become common by the 1930s, but also volunteer firefighters had begun to lose their amateur status and to qualify as professional firefighters, because they too underwent extensive training. A 1917 Department of Commerce report on the conditions of fire protection in the United States underscored the importance of training schools in making firefighters into specialists. It noted that firefighting had become far more complex in dangerous urban centers, with high buildings and electrical wires, and that it had
grown increasingly technical. Moreover, the report echoed the message of the IAFE, emphasizing training as the basis for firefighting professionalism. It argued that “the largest degree of cooperation between the fire departments of the cities and educational institutions would be in keeping with the spirit of the age, which calls for both specialization and breadth of training as essential to the highest efficiency.”

Like other departments, the PFD took up the IAFE’s agenda and sought to make firefighting standard by implementing systematic training. In 1914, the department issued an administrative manual, codified the job responsibilities of firemen, and established a training school. Even the most mundane aspects of firefighting became subject to this discipline. According to both James Gilbert and the director of public safety, this remedied a long-standing problem with the city’s fire protection; there had been confusion at fires because many firemen did not understand the meaning of orders given by their superiors, in part because there had been no standard nomenclature for tools and equipment. Reformers believed that standard training made firemen more effective; the director of public safety boasted, “New Men are better equipped for their duties, following their course at the training school, and when they arrive at the fire ground are no longer greenhorns who are more apt to be in the way than to be of assistance.”

An ongoing conversation among the service professionals divided and subdivide firefighting work into multiple individual tasks, which were taught at training schools. For instance, as the Los Angeles Fire Department Fire College curriculum reveals, firefighters had separated their work into two thousand separate tasks by 1935. In addition, new strategies and approaches appeared in the occupation’s leading journal, Fire and Water Engineering, and at the IAFE’s annual meeting. Reformers typically adopted these training and organization suggestions quite literally, an approach taken during the reform of the PFD. For instance, in 1913 Philadelphia’s director of public safety reported that the fire departments in New York and St. Louis required that firefighters hook into building sprinkler systems as a means to quash blazes in the commercial district. The director noted that although Philadelphia was “filled with sprinkler systems, there has been no such connection on the part of the firemen for years. We unqualifiedly recommend that such an order be issued at once.” The expansion of firefighting professionalism, then, developed in the context of a national conversation, as the IAFE set the agenda for training, organization, and administration in departments.

When the Philadelphia Bureau of Fire identified the general organization of, and specific functions performed by, rank-and-file firefighters, it took a major step toward making firefighting practice more efficient and more routine. As the de-
partment organized a training school and published *Information for Firefighters*, job responsibilities became codified along much the same lines as the professional mission put forth by the IAFE. In 1920, for instance, the city's compendium of job classifications defined firefighting in terms of extinguishing fire, saving lives, and preserving property, as well as assorted other tasks:

Placing ladders; operating hose; guiding a fire truck on the streets from the rear seat; operating the hand chemical apparatus; assisting in saving lives; doing salvage work at fires or after fires are extinguished; on occasion acting as driver or chauffeur for a horse-drawn or motor-operated piece of fire apparatus; cleaning windows and floors; polishing bright work; washing wagons; drying hose and drying and cleaning covers; taking care of horses; making adjustments and minor repairs to harness; doing floor duty during an assigned portion of the day or night; connecting and disconnecting hose and turning water on and off; giving instructions to owners and occupants of buildings in the district as to fire hazards and fire prevention and making reports as to bad conditions.

In addition, the rules made it clear that participating in drills and attending regular training sessions also were included in every firefighter's duties. The job description further placed firefighters within a hierarchical chain of command under the direction of the fire chief, the director of public safety, and the mayor. By the late 1920s firefighters reported to superior officers, who were themselves receiving specialized training in the skills of diagnosing the best manner to extinguish any fire.  

The PFD organized firefighting into several primary components used throughout the fire service in the 1920s. Philadelphia firemen typically worked in engine companies or truck companies—the two foundations of departmental organization. Hosemen or pipemen working in truck companies established connections to urban water systems and commanded hose streams. Laddermen serving in truck companies raised ladders and ventilated structures, allowing smoke and gas to escape. Far less frequently, firemen worked as members of service companies organized around specialized equipment or tactics, including water tower companies, rescue squads, fireboats, or in other support services, such as the machine shop. The work activities of firefighters—whatever their company—revolved around several primary activities, including: the use of tools to “open up” or “ventilate” a building and to combat special hazards in the landscape, the use of hose to extinguish a fire, and the use of ladders to gain access to upper floors and to perform rescues. Each of these tasks required further knowledge of a number of particular tools and specialized work routines. For example, at the Philadelphia Fire Train-
ing School firemen learned and then drilled on eleven different “rescue exercises,” each involving several different positions or movements. Similarly, the fire department provided examples of “hose line exercises” designed to make firemen proficient using basic equipment such as “stretching in 2½ inch hose lines; taking lines up ladders and the use of ladder straps, and hose rollers; the care and protection of hose on the streets; the removal of burst lengths of hose from various points in a line which has been stretched up and over a building.” Just as firefighters acquired increasingly specific instruction in work techniques, so too they received more and more detailed training in the tactics of battling blazes in diverse urban environments; different classifications of buildings and situations increasingly generated different conditions and hazards, requiring varied approaches to fire extinction.

Fire at Mill Waste Company, Philadelphia, 1945. Philadelphia firefighters scurry away from a falling wall while fighting a five-alarm blaze in 1945. The scene illustrates well one of the most profound dangers faced by firefighters. Courtesy, Fireman’s Hall Museum, Philadelphia
remain familiar with this changing environment, and to mitigate its hazards, the IAFE continued to recommend inspection as an important element of firefighting, a tactic that the PFD embraced.\textsuperscript{41}

Fire service experts codified body motions and work strategies using techniques and pedagogical strategies reminiscent of industrial efficiency experts. For example, in 1920 the \textit{New York Fire College Course} and the IAFE described the basic components of firefighting work in abundant diagrams, photographs, and text. About the same time, instructors at Philadelphia’s training school divided basic skills, such as hose or ladder work, into specific component techniques. These activities were further broken down into motions and movements that instructors demonstrated to firefighters. For example, firemen learned how to use hook ladders (pompier-style ladders), 18-foot, 20-foot, 25-foot, and 35-foot ladders. Instructors subdivided use of each type into simple procedures, such as raising, extending, and positioning them. In the PFD’s training materials approximately a dozen photographs depicted each of the motions needed to become proficient with each type of ladder. After their lessons, firefighters were tested on the technical proficiency and speed with which they performed each task. Between 1922 and 1925, over 250 firefighters—all of the city’s recruits—attended the Philadelphia Fire Training School, and by 1940 over 3,000 firemen, most of them rookies, had graduated from the academy.\textsuperscript{42}

In addition to making work procedures more regular, training schools also introduced firefighters to the occupation’s customs and lore, and they socialized each generation of firefighters entering departments after the 1920s and 1930s. In fact, transforming training into a formal procedure, by taking it out of engine houses and removing it to special schools, had a profound impact on life in engine houses. If academies disciplined the bodies of individual firemen and molded them into a team unit, they also furthered the development of a common occupational identity in other subtle ways. For instance, firefighters learned the importance of efficiency and sobriety. In addition, they also developed their principal loyalty not to the men of their engine houses but to their fellow firemen more generally. In 1922, the PFD taught its forty-second training class this lesson in a somber fashion. The young men were “instructed and exercised in formation for a funeral detail.” At the funeral, the training class escorted the fallen fireman along with his engine company. Thus recruits learned what it meant to be part of the brotherhood of firefighting and at the same time came face-to-face with the real dangers of their new occupation.\textsuperscript{43}

About this time, beginning in the 1890s and continuing through the 1940s, firefighters wrote the histories of their fire departments, and in the process interpreted the history of firefighting according to the doctrine of efficiency and profession-
alism. For instance, Philadelphia’s manual *Information for Firefighters*, like the *History of the St. Louis Fire Department*, placed the development of firefighting as an occupation within a historical framework that emphasized continual progress toward an increasingly rational organization of firefighting. The volume included a brief departmental history that began with an anecdote about the superiority of steam engines to hand engines. This narrative explicitly placed the firefighting techniques of twentieth-century firefighters along a continuum that began with the advent of steam technology. To distinguish twentieth-century firefighters from their forebears, the story explained that firefighting had once been the purview of ruffians who set fires for the sport of extinguishing them. According to the manual, until the advent of steam technology, bands of undisciplined volunteer firemen threatened the stability of the city. Steam engines and a small cadre of professional firefighters had transformed firefighting service, making it more effective. Through digesting this pithy narrative—with its emphasis on progress and efficiency—firefighters came to perceive themselves as a vanguard leading the way toward the future. Although it is not clear to what degree firefighters internalized such histories, these narratives gradually became part of the broader historical record. Elements of this story cropped up in popular writing about the history of firefighting, and even in the interpretive scholarship on the subject.

Expanded record-keeping and bureaucratic procedures also supported the mission of the training academy. The increasing and voluminous communication helped to facilitate the spread of common firefighting methods and a common culture within the department. Fire department leaders recognized that if they wanted to make firefighting standard, then they would have to make training an ongoing activity in engine houses. Toward this end, the PFD demanded that companies practice various techniques during roll call. Specifically, the department recommended that firefighters review a host of basic skills, such as “knots & hitches,” “physical exercise,” “hoisting ladders,” and “tools & their uses.” It also urged discussion of more advanced methods and broader firefighting strategies: “gas mask exercises,” “ventilation of buildings,” removing people from burning structures, improvising a “cellar pipe” to fight smoky basement fires, and various questions about the use of hose, hydrants, and nozzles for the best water pressure. Finally, the department asked companies to review basic aspects of department culture, including the “funeral drill,” “receiving officers,” and answering questions for the proficiency exams, which undoubtedly would have included knowledge of departmental history.

Companies also sent a steady flow of reports back to headquarters, which underscored the department’s efforts to inculcate a common culture. Indeed, the
avalanche of paper and forms made the work of each company leader and each firefighter subject to scrutiny by providing a window into the daily life and work of the company. Much of the flood tended to mundane personnel matters: address changes and updates, resignations, vacation time, sick days, and injury reports (under newly enacted worker’s compensation laws). Others documents gave leaders methods for managing insubordinate firefighters, such as recording misconduct, including intoxication. To the degree that such methods of personnel monitoring and record-keeping reminded firefighters of their obligations as workers and firefighters, they also formally made firefighters members in the city’s and the nation’s firefighting brotherhood.  

Likewise, the PFD disseminated orders about the best methods for attacking a fire, proper maintenance of equipment, and departmental organization, and it also required that fire companies document their work in the field. By the mid-1920s, fire companies provided detailed accounts of the specific tasks they performed during each call. Each time the fire department received an alarm, a fire company responded and investigated the situation; even if firefighters encountered no blaze, they inspected the site and returned a report to headquarters. Returning these two forms—a “Report of False Alarm” and “Defection of Buildings”—advanced significantly efforts to make the built environment less susceptible to fire. Not only did the PFD use its inspections to push for the construction of fire escapes, but Fire Chief Ross Davis used them to create a “fire-spotting” map, to identify hazards and to prevent conflagrations in especially dangerous or congested districts—long a priority of the department’s allies in the insurance industry. During the late 1920s, this type of inspection activity even became part of the battle to enforce prohibition.  

Communications between headquarters and fire companies especially helped to refine firefighting techniques and to make them standard across the city. After each fire, fire companies returned a comprehensive written description of the call. The account included plenty of mundane descriptive information: the company and platoon, the names of the men who fought the blaze, as well as the commanding officer, the time, date, duration, and location of the call, how the alarm came to the company and at what alarm box it originated, and the number of alarms sounded. In addition, it included information about the built landscape, including: data on the fire hydrant, the pressure at the hydrant at the beginning and at the end of the fire, and a detailed description of the building. Finally, the report asked the company officer to report on the strategies, methods, and equipment used to extinguish the blaze. For instance, in April 1927, Engine Company No. 56 recorded its 101st alarm during the year when it spent an hour extinguishing a fire
at a two-story brick building. The company stretched over eight hundred feet of hose with several different types of nozzles to extinguish the cellar fire. Likewise, in April 1939, Truck Company No. 29 answered its 190th call of the year and spent over two hours bringing a fire under control, and then extinguishing it. Judging from the report, the company followed usual procedures; it reported that the commanding officer “ordered to ventilate the entire building, after which [he] ordered to stretch $2 \frac{1}{2}$ [inch] water line to the 2nd floor via stairway, after which [he] ordered to attach $1 \frac{1}{2}$ [inch] line to $2 \frac{1}{2}$ hosepipe to wet down and do general truck work.” The company used “4 fire axes, 2 claw tools, 2 6-foot ceiling hooks, 2 $12$-foot ceiling hooks, 1 $8$-foot & $20$-foot portable truss ladder, and 1 $18$-foot & $28$-foot solid bean portable ladder” in the process of fighting a fire.\footnote{The process of recording, writing out, and then submitting such detailed information greatly assisted in the process of training firefighters in a variety of ways. At a most basic level, the forms produced a record of departmental practice that could later be reviewed. Whether or not such reports were carefully scrutinized matters little; the possibility of such assessment forced officers to follow procedures as laid out in manuals, at the fire training school, or by general orders coming from headquarters. This allowed the chief engineer to assess whether their directives were being followed. In 1927, for instance, Davis ordered companies to make better use of basic tools—axes, claw tools, and ceiling hooks, perhaps as a response to reports returned to headquarters. Ross also offered advice on the best methods for stretching hose line to improve water pressure (i.e., by selecting the hydrants closest to a fire), and instructed companies on how to use the “Ross Thawing Device” to keep water flowing from hydrants during winter. Several years later, in the 1930s, the department modified its forms, asking for more detailed information about company actions at fires, especially regarding their use of basic firefighting tools. Additionally, the process of writing reports encouraged company leaders to reflect on their work and the methods used. Ultimately, this reporting system helped to change firefighting; it placed firefighters under a behavioral discipline similar to the values that fire underwriters had begun to encourage in the general population. Firefighters, like the built environment they protected, were becoming standard.\footnote{The new administrative and training regimens appear to have had a contradictory effect on five departments. On the one hand, the erstwhile rogue work cultures in fire engine houses came under the framework of a common occupation. On the other hand, by creating guidelines for firefighters’ work, dividing it into particular tasks, and teaching it in schools, fire departments threatened to demystify the almost mythical elements of firemen’s life-saving profession. Not only had...}
firefighting been transformed into a standard job, with regular and often banal work responsibilities, but even heroism became subject to the department’s reporting system. In Philadelphia, for example, officers recorded deeds of “meritorious service” on report number 25, which was completed in duplicate on a standard form. In 1926, Captain Harry Jones reported that ladderman Rockhart of Truck Company No. 2 saved two trapped citizens from a third floor “front room,” by “tying rope around chimney, sliding rope to window, entering window, lower[ing] person with rope, and slid[ing] same himself.” The account also credited two of Rockhart’s fellow firefighters with assisting in the rescue. However, when these sorts of written descriptions adopted the self-effacing style with which firefighters often reported such gallantry, they made heroism seem mundane. Certainly, detailing rescues does not mean that firefighters became less dashing or that the press stopped reporting the incidents. Rather, the reports captured a subtle shift in how firefighters and the press created narratives of firefighting. Accounts of valor grew less dramatic; they emphasized that firefighters’ extensive training had enabled them to be heroic. Ironically, as firefighters emphasized and became more proficient at performing rescues, training for and formally recording them seemed to diminish some of the élan of firefighters.50

Reconstructing Firefighters’ Careers—A Quantitative Analysis

As departments and firefighters reformed and disciplined themselves, careers became more standard and increasingly longer—an effect that manifested itself in the personnel files of the Philadelphia and St. Louis fire departments. Not only did careers increase in length, on average, but firefighters increasingly chose the time and reason for their final exit from service. A growing similarity in career patterns suggests that the message of professionalism profoundly shaped firefighting as an occupation. Although difficult to pinpoint, a combination of factors led to the standardization of firefighting careers. More formal work rules, better wages, more generous pensions, and improved training all contributed to the shifting work patterns. In addition, the IAFE’s advocacy of professionalism facilitated the development of a common occupational identity among firefighters, as did the support of underwriters and Progressive Era reforms more broadly.51

Generally speaking, several major changes occurred in firefighters’ employment in the century following the Civil War. The length of firefighters’ careers serves as the starting point for any analysis of the occupation. With each passing decade, firefighters worked for a longer period of time in both St. Louis and Philadelphia. The lengthening of careers suggests that firemen exercised a remarkable degree of
control over the terms by which their employment would end. This is confirmed by the fact that increasingly firefighters could choose to retire or resign from the department, as opposed to being dismissed or working until they died. At the same time, firefighters’ career patterns became less variable within particular departments, and patterns between departments converged, though not completely. In addition, the amount of bureaucratic activity experienced by firefighters, such as disciplinary procedures or transfers between houses, increased over time. Taken together, changes in career rhythms suggest that firefighters’ choices became more and more structured and thus more similar.
The degree to which firefighters increasingly determined how they would exit the fire department is remarkable. In St. Louis, firefighters appointed in the first decade of the twentieth century left the department by dismissal about 18 percent of the time. Of firemen appointed a decade later, in the 1910s, only 11 percent were fired. And, finally, of cohorts appointed after 1930, less than 8 percent of firefighters left because they were dismissed. Concomitantly, the number of men who resigned from the department increased with each successive cohort. Of the men appointed in the 1940s, few worked until they died (6.5 percent), and most followed the rules and avoided being discharged (4 percent). The vast majority, nearly 90 percent, chose the time and manner of their exit. Similar patterns also became the norm in Philadelphia—especially when compared to the work experiences of firefighters in the nineteenth century. Of the men who joined the PFD after 1910, over two-thirds left of their own volition, and only about 10 percent were discharged. Except for the striking proportion of Philadelphia firefighters who worked until they died—over 20 percent—career patterns of men working in the PFD and the STLFD were converging.

Such overwhelming and consistent data underscores the increasing benefits of firefighting employment, especially improvements in the working conditions of firefighters across the nation. Moreover, when compared to other jobs in the American economy, working as a firefighter carried with it many attractive conditions. For instance, even though firefighters did not earn especially high salaries, working for the municipal government, and in such a critical occupation, buffered them from the vagaries of economic instability, especially layoffs and unemployment resulting from recession, as Alexander Keyssar points out in his study of unemployment. In fact, many workers left better paying positions for spots on urban police and fire departments, and census records confirm that firefighters and other municipal employees suffered less unemployment than most of their contemporaries from the nineteenth into the early twentieth century.

Undoubtedly, firefighters’ increasing control over the conditions of their employment, especially the terms on which they exited the fire service, contributed to this remarkable record. Consider, for instance, the Philadelphia labor market, as a point of comparison. Between 1870 and 1936 approximately 38 percent of all workers left their jobs involuntarily in Philadelphia. Of course, this data covers workers in the region’s entire labor market, but it sets a context against which to judge firefighters’ career patterns. Alternately, the situation of workers in a single industry or corporation might offer a better comparison. Although such data is difficult to come by, workers who labored in Amoskeag’s textile mills between 1912 and 1921 involuntarily left their positions over 34 percent of the time, which in-
creased over time. Finally, the best comparison might be to contrast the experience of twentieth-century firemen to their nineteenth-century colleagues. In the nineteenth century, firefighters in St. Louis and Philadelphia, on average, were discharged over 30 percent of the time—a figure consistent with the experience of other industrial workers. By contrast, firefighters who entered the STLFD or the PFD after 1910 could expect to be dismissed infrequently, not more than 10 percent of the time. During the twentieth century, then, the careers of firefighters became more similar, even as they began to differ more and more from the work lives of their neighbors.\textsuperscript{54}

Administrative reform fostered the creation of this common occupational experience and identity in St. Louis. The STLFD personnel files document the degree to which formal bureaucratic rules replaced informal procedures. Take, for instance, the administrative practice of reducing firemen in rank. Relatively common in the nineteenth century, this practice decreased over time. Examples of “reduction” in rank abound in the personnel files and were occasionally reported in the local media. For instance, in 1899 Chief Swingley reduced several firemen “due to charges brought against the men which, to his mind, impaired their efficiency in the department.... Both of these men admitted their inability to do all the work required of their positions.” Such reductions, coming as they did on the heels of the controversy surrounding Swingley’s reappointment, might have been punitive, or the men did not fit the department’s work culture. Either explanation would seem to fit the profile of D. R. Rowe, who was “reduced” by Swingley. Appointed at age thirty-four in 1889, Rowe was only forty-four when Swingley reduced his rank; four years later Rowe resigned from the department.\textsuperscript{55}

However, reducing a firefighter’s rank may have had a functional purpose; it might have been both a form of humanitarian aid to a brother fireman and a way to upgrade a department’s firefighting capabilities. Fire chiefs appear to have used the practice to retain the experience of long-serving firemen without endangering their lives or the lives of their fellow firemen. At the same time, keeping an old-timer on the payroll could have provided a surrogate pension to men with unusual ability, need, or circumstances at a time when such pensions were neither generous nor widely available. Indeed, this practice was consistent with the proposals of the IAFE and other proponents of firefighting professionalism that recommend improving or establishing pensions as a way of improving departments. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that most reductions appear to have occurred toward the end of firemen’s careers and involved demoting a man to the position of “watch.” This was the case of the second firefighter reduced by Swingley in 1899. Appointed in 1871 at age twenty-four, William Connors served the department
for over twenty-eight years and was fifty-two years old when reduced. However, unlike Rowe, Connors’s employment card notes that he was reduced to watchman. As a watchman Connors would no longer be expected to perform active physical labor but would serve the critical function of operating the company’s fire alarm telegraph, which meant staying awake at night, maintaining the equipment, interpreting telegraph messages, and directing the company to fires. After his demotion, Connors served another nineteen years in the department, resigning after nearly fifty years of continuous service.56

Seen in this light, the practice of reduction may have benefited fire departments as well as the men affected, especially in the nineteenth century. Reductions appear to have been an informal mechanism through which the department retained experienced firemen. Before fire departments had formal training facilities, keeping old-timers on the force also served socialization purposes, such as acquainting new recruits with the department’s culture. Unfortunately, personnel files do not say why some men were reduced at old age and others were not. They do reveal, though, the prevalence of the practice in the nineteenth century. In St. Louis, for instance, approximately one in six firemen could expect a reduction in rank if he was appointed in the 1860s or 1870s, and the likelihood of a reduction increased to just under one in four for those appointed in the 1880s. About one in three of those men appointed in the 1890s could expect to be reduced in rank. At a time of limited disability or retirement pensions, firemen reduced to watch retained their income, comrades, and culture. In turn, their experience and skill continued to benefit and serve the city’s fire service.

However, as employment conditions in the STLFD became more standard, the practice of reducing firefighters in rank disappeared. After peaking for firemen appointed in the 1890s, the proportion of firefighters who were reduced decreased with each successive cohort. Few firefighters appointed to the department after 1920 experienced a reduction in rank. Several reforms, concurrently advocated by the IAFE, explain this. First, the advent of more generous pensions, both for retirees and those who had been injured on the job, allowed the department to replace older firemen with younger more robust men without abandoning the old-timers to poverty. Second, the codification and dissemination of firefighting expertise into written documents made the information possessed by experienced firefighters widely available, reducing their critical training role in the department. Similarly, by removing older firefighters, departmental leaders also eliminated the informal cultural lessons taught by them—training that sometimes emphasized the particular work community over common departmental identity. Lastly, the
implementation of the disciplinary court replaced reduction as a punitive measure with a range of bureaucratic procedures and punishments.

When departments established work rules and training procedures, they helped to foster a common occupational identity, but they also changed the demographic profile of their fire departments. In St. Louis, for example, the department gradually became younger, and men left the department at an increasingly young age. Although, over time, firemen left the department at more or less the same rate, each successive cohort retired at a younger age. The distribution of firefighters’ age at final exit demonstrates this trend strikingly, revealing that approximately 66 percent of all firefighters who entered the department between 1930 and 1950, exited before their sixtieth birthday. Work conditions and occupational identity had once prompted firefighters to toil until they died or were discharged. However, by the 1950s, though firemen continued to dedicate a remarkable portion of their lives to firefighting, they began to temper their devotion to that calling. Work conditions had improved dramatically, and firemen increasingly retired while still relatively young to pursue other opportunities—or a new possibility being afforded to many Americans, retirement.57

More striking, perhaps, is the degree to which firefighters’ careers in St. Louis grew more patterned over time. The average length of service remained more or less constant for firemen appointed between 1857 and 1950. However, the proportion of firemen serving long (or extremely short) careers decreased dramatically. After peaking at 29 percent among firefighters who began careers during the 1890s, the number who served careers longer than forty years decreased with each successive cohort. The does not mean that firefighters became less enamored of their jobs or benefits. Indeed, a remarkable number of firemen, in all cohorts, continued to work for more than thirty years, and each successive cohort produced more and more twenty-year veterans. This peaked among the cohort that entered during the 1940s; two-thirds of new recruits had careers longer than twenty years. The data suggest that, although firefighters remained devoted to their occupation, they grew increasingly cognizant of the benefits waiting at retirement.

Recruits who joined fire departments after 1945 entered an environment that would have been unrecognizable to firemen of the mid–nineteenth century. Not only would they have learned their skills and regimen at a training academy, but firemen likely would have found that the “bully-boy” culture was less pronounced, though not lost altogether. Working under more stringent and standard conditions circumscribed differences between engine houses and between firefighters, paradoxically helping to foster a common identity but perhaps muting its expressive-
ness. Indeed, from the inside, many firefighters might have mused that their lives seemed more banal and regulated than heroic. Even so, firefighters would have recognized the benefits of reform—a good salary, an excellent pension, and the respect of their neighbors—and welcomed the choices afforded by them. Nonetheless, firemen’s careers and work lives became more standard during the twentieth century.

Rescue Squads and Efficient Heroism

Even as work routines became increasingly standard, firefighters continued to invent new ways of attacking the ever-changing problem of fire. They not only developed more regimented training but demanded that departmental leaders become responsible for developing a much deeper understanding of how firefighting tactics varied in different situations. In 1920, the *New York Fire College Course* provided meticulous instruction about the chemistry of fire, explaining how it reacted to different fuels and conditions. These lessons also translated into particular training efforts for officers, and eventually resulted in the development of a greater complement of firefighting specialists. Likewise, by 1930 Philadelphia instituted a training course for officers that distilled the latest in firefighting tactics. Beyond the mounting number of bureaucratic procedures, officers’ training included detailed instruction in the chemistry of fire, special toxic hazards, such as ammonia in cooling units, the city’s electrical grid, and strategies for firefighting in many particular situations—such as cellar fires. The officers’ training embodied the IAFE’s explicit recognition of the multiple fire environments present in an urban setting. In their response to the changing conditions, the IAFE and professional leaders recommended that departments establish squads of specialists trained in the art of “modern” rescue—a twentieth-century variant of the nineteenth-century pompier corps.⁵⁸

Rescue squads allowed firefighters to reconstruct their occupation within the context of the modern city—according to new arrangements of risk brought by technological change. Developed within weeks of a 1915 New York City subway fire that shook that city, the origins of rescue squads more generally represented firefighters’ concerns about the increasingly dangerous twentieth-century landscape. And, as early as 1920, the IAFE recommended that departments create rescue squads to explore “buildings, subways and similar locations heavily charged with smoke, dangerous gases and vapors.” Departments specifically organized the squads to perform basic firefighting operations in the most extreme conditions, such as reaching “the seat of fire in difficult locations” or “entering and ventilat-
ing chemical plants and other establishments, where dangerous vapors or fumes are being generated.” To help firefighters confront toxic gases or a “deficiency of oxygen,” breathing apparatus became standard equipment on rescue squads, along with an especially prominent emphasis on working in two-person teams. Similarly, rescue squads represented a direct response to new conditions in recovering bodies, resuscitating victims, and rescuing people, especially those entombed by other new dangers, which included train wrecks, trolley wrecks, automobile wrecks, collapses of ever-taller buildings, and elevator accidents. Additionally, they represented a comment on new construction methods, such as the use of concrete. Impervious to axes and trapping superheated and noxious gases, concrete buildings made extinguishing blazes more difficult and dangerous. According to Philadelphia chief Ross Davis, “It is necessary to have a special squad with the newest sort of apparatus to fight the modern fire. Buildings are made stronger and are, therefore, more difficult to tear down when necessity arises.” Once again, firefighters re-created heroism by developing a specialized organization to deal with the increasing fire danger. By the 1930s, following the lead of the IAFF and experiments in New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, departments began to implement this “adjunct to modern firefighting.” 59

Rescue squads signaled an intensification of the role that technology and training played in fire departments. Like New York, Philadelphia in 1926 formed such a crew of elite firemen, whose virtuosity and skill at saving lives represented a shifting definition of firefighting heroism. Three years after its formation, the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin effused: “Rescue Squad Takes Extra Risks; Specially Picked and Trained Experts Fight Fire Through Gas and Concrete; Innovation a Success.” In emphasizing equipment, tactics, and training, the department constructed the rescue squad according to the tenets of twentieth-century firefighting professionalism. When forming the rescue squad, Chief Davis “hand-selected” the department’s best men, evidenced by their excellent performance at training school. He even selected a hero—Lieutenant Alfred Broadbent—to lead the group. In addition, Davis chose firefighters with previous building construction experience—those who had formerly held jobs as welders, plumbers, or builders. Enumerating the squad’s many technological gadgets reinforced the impression that the men of the rescue squad represented the highest level of efficiency, skill, and firefighting professionalism. The squad represented a new and more intense connection between firemen and their equipment. Men and machine came together into a single efficient technological instrument. One physician provided a testimonial to the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin: “Never have I seen a more efficient team. Each man does his job as if he is a part of the apparatus.” 60
Yet, no matter how closely departments adhered to the dictates of professional reform, they could not eradicate the legacy of the nineteenth-century firefighting culture. The power of the all-male work group remained strong and continued to dictate the tenor of life in an engine house despite the creation of multiple shifts, an increased number of transfers, and a more elaborate bureaucracy. In truth, such bureaucratic rules did not annihilate the local customs of individual engine houses. Despite efforts to keep firefighters busy with calisthenics, drills, and basic chores, firefighters continued to have time to socialize, play games, and engage in sport. In many cases, departmental leaders encouraged hobbies “to keep the men from going stale.” In his memoir of African American firefighters, Joseph Marshall affectionately recalled the legacy of Philadelphia Fire Chief Ross Davis. Known as “leather lungs,” Davis, a departmental reformer, would sometimes discipline his men according to nineteenth-century leadership methods. According to Marshall, “he would take a ‘bad boy’ or ‘tough guy’ down to the cellar, close the door, hang his rank on a nail, and mete out the necessary punishment. This method of ‘taking a man to the front’ never appeared on the official record—as a fifteen or thirty day fine or suspension would have.” Davis even abandoned the mantra of departmental efficiency and stuck by one fireman during his “little drinking problem” because that fireman was “able to stay with him when the going was tough—like taking a ‘rich feed’ of heavy smoke.” Surely the dynamics of working in close quarters fostered the continuation of the “bully-boy” system to some degree, even though formal bureaucratic procedures militated against it.61

Likewise, fire companies remained strongly attached to their local communities, although ironically the close ties remained bound to the everyday politics of the department and city. Although firefighters repeatedly received warnings not to work in local elections they appear to have done so anyway, and political considerations remained central to departmental management, as evidenced in the long-running feud between Philadelphia’s Fire Chief Ross Davis and Assistant Chief Charles Gill in the 1930s. During the battle, Gill arranged for the transfer of Davis’s supporters to engine houses away from their homes—what was known as being “sent to Siberia.” Although not uncommon, such shifts threatened firefighters’ ability to render effective service, which firemen felt acutely because they often lived in the neighborhoods in which they worked and quite literally protected their friends and families. Indeed, in 1931 during a similar incident, sixty-eight firemen were transferred away from their engine houses in Roxborough and Manayunk, where ninety percent of them lived. Such transfers complicated the personal lives of firefighters and even imperiled the city’s fire protection. Reportedly,
the replacements did not know the neighborhood and required street guides to respond to calls. By living in the neighborhoods in which they worked and getting out to inspect the community, as was so much a part of their daily work, firefighters developed exceptionally close ties to their neighbors and became incomparable symbols of political power. One example is the “11Is,” which, like other companies in Philadelphia during the 1920s and 1930s, maintained a close relationship with its neighbors. Local shop owners and small merchants gave the firemen “something in their stockings” at Christmas, and a manufacturer located a few blocks away held an annual turkey dinner for the company. Firefighters, then, remained rooted in urban neighborhoods, performing a difficult balancing act. They negotiated the competing pressures of their work groups and occupation, their communities and departments, and heroism and rationality.62

Conclusion: Eating Smoke

By controlling the pace of reform, by taking responsibility for reorganizing their workplaces and job responsibilities, firefighters preserved the integrity of their work cultures and made their occupational identity ever stronger. Although there was sometimes much internal conflict, firefighters subjected themselves to industrial work disciplines—evident in training schools, comprehensive employment manuals, and the drive for efficiency. By leading the pace of change—as they had done for over a century—firefighters retained extraordinary control over their workplaces and skills; they remade the duties and requirements of their work on a continual basis. As they altered the division of the physical and technical characteristics of their work, firefighters also redefined the ideal of manly prowess that underlay their occupational culture. In addition, new civil service rules severed the connection between political leaders and rank-and-file firefighters. Rough competitiveness became somewhat less important than technical skill combined with bravery and team heroics. As they became more sober and efficient, firefighters developed an affinity for the regular career patterns that came with the bureaucratization and rationalization of their workplace. As administrative procedures replaced informal relationships, firefighters achieved careers of unusual longevity, enviable stability, and with excellent salary and pension benefits.

Firefighting became more professional; conditions improved, and the number of firefighters increased—by more than 40 percent during the first two decades of the century. Work conditions improved with the implementation of civil service reforms, second platoons, and pensions. By 1917 over 60 percent of fire depart-
ments located in cities with populations of more than thirty thousand people had implemented civil service reform. In 1919, Philadelphia installed a two-platoon system, following more than twenty-five of the nation’s cities that had implemented the practice. At midcentury, Philadelphia added a third platoon, and St. Louis moved to three shifts in the 1970s. Pensions also became commonplace in departments protecting large cities by the 1920s, whether they had municipal plans or employee-funded programs. As a result of reform, differences—both between engine houses and fire departments—declined as cities prescribed a spate of common work techniques, bureaucratic rules, training regimens, and firefighting strategies. However, unlike other twentieth-century workplaces, making firefighting standard did not lead to a loss of skill or workplace authority. Reform only strengthened a well-defined occupational identity among firemen, and it diminished the authority of the intransigent and insular all-male work cultures of local engine houses. Of course, this does not mean that idiosyncratic firefighting work cultures did not continue to thrive. Rather, those cultures no longer determined the character of firefighting careers, which now offered stable salaries, good working conditions, and generous benefits.63

Although firefighters rhetorically became efficient machines, fighting fires remained an extraordinarily physical job, and the ability to eat smoke continued to determine a man’s worth as a fireman, despite the slow inclusion of breathing apparatus into fire department work routines. Even though such devices became a common feature in training school curriculums and were standard rescue squad equipment as early as the 1920s, firefighters rarely used them. For instance, at a fire in the basement of a Philadelphia upholstery company in 1926, firefighters confronted heavy smoke and fumes from burning leather as they rushed in to fight the blaze and to keep casks of lacquer from exploding. Noxious gas overcame more than fifty firefighters that day, including Battalion Chief William Simler, who was wearing a primitive gas mask. After being revived Simler discarded the apparatus because it impeded his efforts to fight the blaze and to recover unconscious firefighters. Likewise, Joseph Marshall recalled of one cellar fire in which “smoke was so thick you could lean against it” and the men could stay only “as long as two or three minutes” before being relieved. Such fires tested men’s courage and mettle and became measures of leadership; according to Marshall, Philadelphia’s Chief Davis lived up to his nickname “leather lungs.” His stamina, allowing him to remain in the building during the entire blaze, indicated Davis’s fitness to lead the department. Experienced rank-and-file firefighters emulated their leaders and often did them one better, setting a daily example to new recruits and establishing a tone among all firefighters. As the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin reported of one fire
captain, “Chief Waters says that the trouble with Captain Gaw is that he has had
smoke for a steady diet too long. Gaw won't leave a building in flames. Hosemen
in relays always trot at his heels. When Gaw flops over it is the hoseman’s duty to
carry him out.” Even as firefighting grew increasingly bureaucratic, eating smoke
remained a marker of manliness, albeit one that appeared increasingly untenable
within the occupation's culture of efficiency.”64
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