By the 1920s, the insurance industry had established broad authority over matters of fire safety, and the Insurance Company of North America introduced a new icon of fire protection—the White Firemen, who in a broad advertising campaign promised to protect American society in a way no firefighter ever could. Instead of reacting to danger, the White Firemen removed fire hazards proactively. As consultant to municipalities, the White Fireman, representing the insurance industry and the power of “paper,” made fire protection more efficient and effective by providing expertise. He embodied the industry’s new ethos, especially its claims to promoting public safety by sheltering urban centers, businesses, and individual residences from the problem of fire. Through this idealized image, the insurance industry recast itself as heroic; the standards produced by underwriters symbolically replaced firemen. Businessmen, not firemen, saved the day.¹

Of course, the industry did not really want to replace firemen. After all, firefighters occupied a critical position in the fire-protective infrastructure and fire departments were financed publicly and managed by municipalities. Rather, the advertisements reflected the industry’s aggressive prevention agenda, which was based in the standardization of underwriting practices, safety engineering, and the industry’s surveillance of the landscape—all of which were developed during the
nineteenth century. The loss-prevention engineer inspected property, researched fire hazards, and advised society about safe building practices. According to a feature in the *Underwriters’ Review*, the loss-prevention engineer “studies manufacturing processes, and wherever practicable, suggests the substitutions . . . of lower inflammability.” His work extended to the most mundane aspects of prevention, as he searched for ways to reduce the cost of insurance and fire loss. His heroism derived from his rationality, expert knowledge, and selfless protection of the economy.²

Symbolically, as the red fireman placed his arm around the white firemen, he passed the torch of public fire safety from virile, working-class men to rational middle-class men—from one set of specialists who confronted physical danger to experts that battled risk with financial tools. The first step in this process had been taken in the 1850s when control over firefighting had moved from specialized associations of volunteers into the hands of paid experts. As the heroism of firemen was being etched in the popular imagination during the 1880s, insurers focused on mundane business issues and profited from the problem of fire. However, they met with mixed success, as hundreds of companies went bankrupt in the face of escalating fire danger. Nonetheless, the industry developed an alternative standard of safety as it represented fire danger as an abstraction, using statistics and maps. By the twentieth century, insurers began to realize the fruits of their approach to risk, but only after they became advocates for fire prevention. The industry supported improving public safety by promulgating building codes and behavioral values that defined safety as the responsibility of consumers, who purchased safety for their families and community by obtaining insurance. Like underwriters, firemen promoted the drive for more regimented fire protection. Despite making their work more routine and implementing formal administrative procedures, firefighters maintained their identities as heroes, negotiating the contradiction between the bureaucratic and the exceptional. Although the White Fireman did not signal the demise of the heroic fireman, he did reflect a reorientation toward the bureaucratic, systematic, and rational; the locus of control had shifted from local communities to groups of professional experts. Moreover, just as middle-class manhood had gained hegemony over American society more broadly, businessmen acquired authority over the nation’s fire safety.³

The advertising campaign also reveals the broader shift in the societal responsibility for fire safety from experts to individuals. The insurance industry pushed a new standard for safety—one embodied in legal building codes and prevention behaviors. The White Fireman advertising campaign proposed a somewhat contradictory message that touted the importance of safety engineers, but also under-
scored that safety was everyone’s responsibility. As the campaign phrased it, “He wears citizen’s clothes and rides in an ordinary car. He doesn’t answer alarms—he prevents them.” If the choice of language suggested that anyone could perform such work and that everyone should do so, it nonetheless connected the new expectations about fire safety to the accumulated expertise of underwriters and engineers. The industry had transformed safety into a commodity traded in a consumer society. Consumers, for instance, purchased safety when they bought products tested by the Underwriters’ Laboratories, which identified a product as being safe from fire. Specialized experts—be they firemen, fire underwriters, or engineers—created the possibility for safety, but eradicating the hazard became the task of every American. The danger was ameliorated only by living up to the cultural standards of middle-class America, with its idealized gender norms (stay-at-home moms and male breadwinners) and its emphasis on individualism and economically rational decision-making.

Containing fire danger had helped to make urban America a reality and structured its expansion into the suburbs, but the problem remained complex and continued to change in relation to the environment. Indeed, the fire hazard never had a fixed value; it shifted each time Americans remade the physical and cultural spaces in which they lived. Firefighters and underwriters developed a technological infrastructure that helped to bring discipline to the urban fabric—to people and to place. They minimized the problem of fire through institutions, social practices, and cultural beliefs that made city life more regimented and rationally organized, at least in regard to fire danger. In their battle with this hazard, firefighters and underwriters generated two countervailing, though not purely opposing, approaches to the problem that gave structure to the fire-protective infrastructure: a distinction between fire as human danger and fire as quantitative risk, between the physical and the abstract, between safeguarding life and protecting property. The story of fire protection—the shift from smoke to fire to water to paper—reveals how organizational technologies—management techniques, classification schemes, and codes of behavior and law—became paramount. Of course, the physical aspect of this battle remained critical and widely celebrated, but even firefighters came to emphasize the technical and bureaucratic elements of their work by the middle of the twentieth century. Moreover, this story encapsulates the broader history of cities, in which defining danger and safety in terms of risk—in terms of abstract numerical calculations—overwhelmed recognition of their material dangers. And, indeed, this duality between metaphor and physicality expresses well many of the conflicts at the heart of the city-building process.

In the United States, the problem of fire reached a critical point at the turn of
the nineteenth century as cities began to emerge in greater numbers on the North American continent. As if obscured by smoke, Americans had a difficult time grasping the full dimensions of the problem as they altered the landscapes. To combat this ill-defined problem, the Philadelphia Hose Company introduced hose in 1803, and transformed firefighting in North America. The company made firefighting more efficient by replacing communal bucket brigades with volunteer fire companies, which came to be defined as organizations of specialists workers, as well as social clubs. Likewise, when the Insurance Company of North America offered its first fire insurance policy in 1794, the firm created a new industry in North America. Distinguishing themselves from a more communal form of corporate organization—that of mutual insurance companies—newly formed stock firms, such as Aetna and INA, began to use crude business tools to apprehend the problem of fire. Insurers and their agents inspected property, created detailed surveys for policies, and classified the risks that they took into categories of danger and safety. Both groups confronted the problem with new forms of social organization in which specialists took charge of representing and confronting fire. In the uncertain and relatively impermanent world of early-nineteenth-century cities, however, volunteer firefighters provided the most important line of defense against a new and more vexing problem that emerged with increasing population and structural density in cities.

As people flooded from country to city and industrial growth soared, firefighters and underwriters altered their strategies and tools for dealing with fire. Although insurers had long treated the hazard as an economic risk, in the 1850s they dramatically altered their approach by applying statistics to their business—by keeping actuarial tables of fire loss and relating those losses to the premiums that they charged for insurance. Not only did insurers compile quantitative data according to categories of danger that they daily used, but they also organized them spatially and began to publish maps of cities, which classified the built environment visually. By tying together several representational techniques—statistics, maps, and categories of danger and safety—underwriters abstracted fire hazard from its physical setting, completely transforming it into an abstract economic risk. Simultaneously, firefighters updated their organizations; they made them more efficient and rationally organized. Firefighters sought closer alliances to municipal governments, created management associations, and defined their service more narrowly. Additionally, despite some initial ambivalence about steam technology, and after repeatedly outperforming steam engines with hand-pumped apparatus, firefighters introduced steam technology into their organizations. After the Civil War, they redefined their service around the new machines, emphasizing especially
White Fireman Advertising Campaign, 1927, Insurance Company of North America. INA’s White Fireman advertising campaign symbolized the broad changes in urban fire protection under way during the twentieth century. Firefighters retained significant cultural cachet—as heroes, rescuers, and specimens of physical vigor—but underwriters played a more significant role in determining the character of fire protection. Courtesy, ACE America Corporate Archives
the skills required to operate them. In the process, firefighters transformed what had once been an avocation into an occupation of skilled experts.

Getting water onto fires became more difficult for firefighters in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, as the problem of fire grew in relation to the urban landscape—which reached higher into the sky and became more complex with the industrial development resulting from laissez-faire capitalism. To confront this problem, insurers created expansive urban atlases etched with classification schemes that were tied roughly to company actuarial tables and loss statistics. They also established trade associations to enforce discipline within their industry, especially seeking to set rates in accordance with actuarial tables. Yet, the major industry trade association, the National Board of Fire Underwriters, did not prioritize fire-preventive measures. Rather, insurers embraced the market, believing that the capitalist economy would educate people about fire risk and create order in society. Into the 1890s, the fire insurance industry mostly eschewed responsibility for public safety. Meanwhile, firefighters, recognizing the shifting landscape and its increasing dangers, developed new, more assertive work strategies. They channeled the energy they once devoted to pumping apparatus into a struggle that brought them face-to-face with fire on a regular basis. For the first time, firefighters routinely dragged their hoses deep inside mammoth structures and battled blazes “from the inside.” Facing choking smoke and falling walls, firefighting became increasingly dangerous, especially because it was battled so aggressively. Out of this intensely personal confrontation with fiery landscapes—in which hazards were constantly changing—firefighters developed the defining rationale for their occupation. They began to emphasize preserving human life as their most pressing obligation, and became staunch advocates of safe construction practices. However, this new focus was best represented by renewed interest in the use of ladders, the quick spread of truck companies, and especially the creation of specialized rescue units—the pompier corps. Prioritization of human life became the defining character of firefighting work. As firefighters performed rescues, they became firemen; they also transformed themselves into icons of manhood, offering the first systematic standard of public fire safety to Americans.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, however, both firefighters and underwriters shifted strategy, and paper provided the means of triumphing over fire and trumped the use of water in making cities materially safer. In 1905, the fire insurance industry revolutionized its battle to manage fire risk by promoting expansive business, legal, and behavioral practices. The resulting code drew upon the latest techniques of business management and marketing, as well as five decades of loss experience and a growing fund of engineering and construction expense. Accom-
panying the codes was a focused effort to harmonize the industry’s daily routines with its new emphasis on stopping fires before they began. Additionally, there was an equally aggressive push to change how ordinary Americans perceived fire hazard and to encourage new standards of behavior that prioritized fire safety. Altogether, this coordinated program of fire prevention eventually became a significant force in reshaping the American landscape. Firefighters, too, embraced prevention, and because they remained popular symbols of safety, they were among its most effective advocates in schools and everyday life. Moreover, fire departments reorganized how they battled fires, adopting modern management strategies. They developed extensive bureaucracies and standard work rules, codifying firefighting techniques into regimented training schools. Even officers and departmental leaders took formal training on the strategy of battling blazes, which was now available in published form as well as in the heads of long-serving firemen. As firefighters developed a more standard approach to fighting fires, they also earned better wages, secured improved benefits, and developed highly patterned careers. Most poignantly, fire departments established rescue squads that melded men and machines together, and they included breathing apparatus as a critical element in their struggle to bring order to an ever-changing urban landscape. Even so, at least through the 1950s, eating smoke remained a crucial marker of firefighting prowess, even as firefighters had remade themselves, somewhat paradoxically, into rational heroes.

Ultimately, firefighters’ and fire insurers’ battle against the problem of fire— their physical and intellectual labor—created systematic safety for the social, cultural, and physical landscapes of the United States. The impact of their labor can hardly be overstated, since without the ability to control this environmental danger, urbanization would not have occurred as rapidly or as intensely as it did. The significance of this story, however, extends beyond the city; to some degree, the development of systematic fire protection in urban America is the story of the United States writ large. Firefighters’ and underwriters’ struggle to contain fire both predicted and mirrored broad patterns in American history. During the nineteenth century, for example, the organization of fire protection reflected the impact of industrialization and managerial capitalism even as it illuminated the incomplete and contested manner in which these large social processes shaped the nation. During the twentieth century, the expansion of fire prevention was among the most successful of Progressive Era reforms, and this effort to preserve the material foundation of American society accompanied and supported the rise of a mass consumer society. At the same time, both firefighters’ and fire underwriters’ efforts were shaped by common understandings about proper male behavior and
faith in technological solutions. Strikingly, these beliefs became embedded in the institutions of fire protection as Americans readily disciplined their behavior and society. Firefighters’ and underwriters’ definitions of safety and risk—their systematic approach to the problem of fire—had helped to give structure to the process of urbanization, and this ordered physical and cultural landscapes, municipal institutions, and everyday urban life.

**Firefighting in Postwar America**

How did the problem of fire shift in the postwar period as the built environment and American society itself continued to experience dramatic change? Perhaps most obviously, the massive redistribution of the population in the United States following World War II had an impact on the nation’s fire protection, as it did on so many other aspects of the American experience. By the 1970s and 1980s, the shifting population would once again alter the location and character of fire danger in the United States, creating a new set of issues for insurers and firefighters. For instance, the suburban housing boom helped to diminish the threat of conflagration in both cities and suburbs, in part because newly constructed dwellings were being built more safely, according to the codes recommended by the insurance industry, architects, and builders. In addition, new suburban homes were often built on separate lots, detached from one another, and the suburbs themselves developed municipal services according to the advice of professional experts—much of it embedded in updates of the legal codes that were created during the Progressive Era. The long-term process set in motion by firefighters and especially fire insurers had begun to pay its most significant and obvious dividends.6

In the context of this reconfiguration of danger and the expanding housing market, the Insurance Company of North America introduced a new “bundled” insurance policy that soon became common throughout the industry. Capitalizing on the fact that the fire risk to dwellings was more predictable than ever before, and seeking new ways to sell insurance, INA bundled nine different insurance tools together with its fire insurance policies, including tornado insurance and home-accident insurance, to make a single comprehensive policy. Of course, INA’s new products developed in the context of a broader and complex business strategy, including an effort to improve market share in a critical segment of the market. Nonetheless, the introduction of homeowner’s insurance in the 1950s suggests the lessening of fire as a singular threat, at least in the minds of insurers and the owners of single-family dwellings. Other threats now entered into the popular consciousness, competing for attention, and the new policies rendered fire risk invis-
ible, indistinguishable from the other hazards that possibly affected homeowners. Homeowner’s insurance contributed to the process of removing fire risk from the everyday consciousness, which had begun with the introduction of elaborate codes pertaining to building construction in the early twentieth century.\(^7\)

Curiously, the organization of firefighting remained relatively static, despite the changing nature of the fire hazards. Through the 1970s the organization of fire departments in major cities and suburbs continued to reflect a nineteenth-century approach to fire risk, predicated on stopping conflagrations from getting started. Other innovations, such as rescue squads and a continued emphasis on ladder equipment, underscored the degree to which the lifesaving culture invented by firefighters in the nineteenth century remained a fixture of late-twentieth-century fire protection. However, the redistribution of money away from cities toward the suburbs has led to a new organization of fire departments that is “separate and unequal.” Fire extinction resources are moving to wealthier suburban neighborhoods, and overly stressed urban fire departments have less time than ever before to perform building inspections in crumbling urban neighborhoods. In addition, building codes continue to be enforced haphazardly. The net result has been a heightening of danger in older, deteriorating neighborhoods, which often are allocated the least resources.\(^8\)

The shifting nature of fire danger in postwar America also may have reawakened the possibility of conflagration—this time, beyond the suburbs in the “exurban” hinterlands. In 1956, a blaze in Malibu, California, burned 38,000 acres and destroyed 120 buildings. The fire heralded the development of a new fire regime caused by ever-expanding suburbs. Indeed, the lines between rural and urban fire risk have become blurred with intensifying development on the previously rural fringes of cities. Sweeping fires in Malibu (again) in 1993, the hills around Oakland in 1991, and Cerro Grande near Los Alamos, New Mexico, in 2002 reiterated the need to take account of a new type of conflagration and the reorientation of fire danger in the twenty-first century. The Oakland fire destroyed over 3,300 homes and apartments and caused twenty-five deaths. The Cerro Grande blaze destroyed 43,000 acres and 235 homes, although nobody was killed, and over 8,000 threatened homes were spared by dint of good fortune. As the Oakland conflagration demonstrated, in particular, the methods traditionally used by urban and suburban firefighters to subdue blazes are often ill-suited to exurban blazes. Rather than employing techniques commonly used in the battle against rural wildfire—such as setting backfires—firefighters employ the same defensive postures that work so well against urban blazes and in the context of saving lives. They fight exurban conflagrations house to house—a tactic that increases firefighters’ risk and is not
adequate to the task of controlling such conflagrations. Even developers and insurers have come to realize that the dispersed housing patterns so typical of suburban expansion are no longer sufficient impediments to sweeping fires; given the right environmental conditions, suburbs can burn as easily as did nineteenth-century cities. More broadly, the current system of fire protection—divided as it is between urban and rural fire environments—is poorly prepared to deal with the changing conditions. Recognizing this, as well as the intensification of the exurban hazard, after the devastating fire season of 2002, the federal government established a National Fire Plan to deal with the shifting fire environment in a systematic fashion.⁹

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Fire at Hamilton Street, Philadelphia, 1954. When fighting a blaze in a garage in 1954, firefighters encountered heavy smoke. Several used breathing apparatus to enter the building, at ground level, as others climbed ladders to ventilate upper stories. Prior to the arrival of Scot Air packs, few firefighters used breathing devices, and many resisted their use. Courtesy, Fireman’s Hall Museum
Simultaneous with this shift in fire danger has been a change in the demographics of fire departments, which has affected the heroic and relatively autonomous culture of firefighters significantly. Initially in the postwar period, demographic changes may have served to reinforce the singularity of firefighters’ work as a battle against nature. Indeed, the influx of returning veterans and the cold war regimen touched fire departments just as significantly as it affected the broader society. By 1960, over 60 percent of the nation’s firefighters were veterans of the military, creating greater cohesiveness in firefighters’ occupation and binding work groups yet more tightly together. Whereas previous generations of firefighters appear to have earned their training in a variety of skilled blue-collar occupations, firefighters increasingly earned their stripes in the military. Although the proportion of firefighters with such backgrounds gradually declined in ensuing decades, the number of firefighters who had served in the armed forces remained high through the 1980s.¹⁰

However, a more significant demographic shift set in motion the fracturing of unity among firefighters. As African Americans moved into cities in ever greater numbers following World War II, they gradually gained access to firefighting employment. And, in each subsequent decade after 1960 African Americans comprised a larger portion of the nation’s firefighters. This was especially true in large northern cities, where postwar migration and “white flight” created black majorities. Building on the civil rights movement, African American communities demanded greater access to politics, consumption, and employment, including municipal jobs in fire departments. In the 1970s, the women’s movement also helped to create new access to work in fire departments. Although relatively few women cracked the ranks of fire departments, they nonetheless gained a narrow foothold in the occupation. African Americans, by contrast, saw more opportunities in fire departments with each passing decade and entered the ranks of firefighters in growing numbers. By the 1990 census, fewer than 2 percent of all firefighters were women, well below the proportion of firefighters who were African American (13 percent).¹¹

In the last decades of the twentieth century, questions about race and gender became major issues in fire departments, producing discord that resonated within the occupation. In a calling that defined safety, risk, and heroism in terms of white male prowess, how could a heroic identity be maintained as those people defined as outsiders—women and African Americans—entered the work group? For the first time, the cohesiveness of firefighting would begin to crack, as the generation of firemen who entered departments in the 1960s would face the legacy of race and gender created by their predecessors. The issues being confronted by the Wash-
ington, D.C., department in the late 1970s are emblematic of those faced by firefighters in cities throughout the nation. Like many of the nation’s fire departments, Washington employed African Americans prior to World War II, but in small numbers and in segregated engine houses. And African Americans seeking to enter the department faced a number of hurdles, including physical examinations in which candidates were disqualified for bogus conditions. Segregated engine houses, in fact, produced two separate departments and cultures, though they operated according to much the same rules. African American firefighters developed similar occupational values and identities to their white counterparts. They created a culture that stressed physical strength, technical proficiency, and heroic professionalism. African American firefighters felt intense competitiveness with other African American fire companies, and especially with white companies in neighboring districts. Black and white firefighters alike appear to have reveled in this competitive culture much as their predecessors did.\(^\text{12}\)

Yet, African Americans faced pervasive discrimination in these segregated departments, which shaped their experience of firefighting. In New York City, the Vulcan Society emerged as a separate organization of black firefighters to combat pervasive discrimination in the 1920s. With the help of the Vulcan Society, the NAACP documented and sought to redress the systematic racism of the department. In correspondence with the NYFD’s Uniformed Firefighters’ Association and its leadership, the NAACP reported that African American firefighters were not assigned to the most prestigious companies, including NYFD rescue squads, and were not allowed to participate on the department’s band or baseball team. And, even though the department had integrated work units, it remained segregated in subtle ways. Indeed, the department’s integration occurred in a discriminatory fashion that reflected a conscious strategy on the part of departmental leaders, which kept a separate list of black firemen. The NYFD assigned African American firefighters to companies in pairs, but it placed them on different shifts. Further, the African American firefighters were forced to use the same bed and take the same vacation; the arrangement also made it difficult for black firemen to be transferred. Additionally, the NAACP reported that blacks were not made acting officers as warranted by their seniority and they were passed over for special assignments.\(^\text{13}\)

By contrast, other departments, including those in Philadelphia and Los Angeles, segregated black and white firefighters into separate engine houses. In Los Angeles, for instance, in 1953, blacks comprised less than 3 percent of the department (but 10 percent of the city’s population) and worked in only two of the city’s ninety-one engine houses. In an effort to end the discriminatory practices, which limited
the number of African Americans who could be hired, the NAACP pressed the case for ending the segregation of the city’s engine houses, and although the organization received at least tepid support from the mayor, it met with stiff opposition from Fire Chief John Alderson and most white firemen. White firefighters “unequivocally rejected forced integration” because it was “inimical to morale and efficiency and not in the public interest.” For his part, the fire chief appealed to his regional professional association, the Pacific Coast Inter Mountain Association of Fire Chiefs, for assistance. The association attacked the municipal government for “political” meddling, turning the IAFC’s long-standing agenda of professionalism into an instrument of discrimination. After a two-year struggle, Alderson resigned and the mayor appointed William L. Miller as chief. Almost immediately, the new chief sent eight white firemen, who had supported integration, to work in black firehouses, and by 1956 African Americans worked in seventeen of the city’s ninety-one stations. Although the controversy died, reports of hazing and discrimination continued to surface.¹⁴

By the 1970s, overtly discriminatory practices became less common, but other more subtle forms of discrimination remained, often inhibiting the ability of firefighters to perform effective service or to receive sufficient training. For instance, in the Washington, D.C., department, officers refused to recognize the experience of black firemen, and many white firefighters greeted African Americans with silence. In a culture that transmitted occupational lore, techniques, and work culture through informal storytelling, such silence could pose serious impediments to a new fireman’s ability to develop work skills, not to mention his safety. In his study of D.C. firefighters, Robert McCarl reported, “Some of the white firefighters expressed their hostilities toward blacks by breaking the plates and cups used by black fire fighters, refusing to eat or sleep in the same room with blacks, and even cutting television cords so that blacks couldn’t watch television with whites.” On the rare occasion when African Americans rose to leadership within an integrated company, they had to carefully maneuver the minefields of race that threatened to break the cohesiveness of firefighters’ culture. And, as in so many other American workplaces, African Americans could gain entrée into the culture of an engine house only by achieving more than mere competence—only by demonstrating superlative performance.¹⁵

As tensions mounted in fire departments following the turbulent 1960s, and as more African Americans entered into the fire service, black and white firemen found less and less common ground—except perhaps in their agreement that women could not measure up to their job. Women have faced as many and perhaps more obstacles to gaining admission into the rough occupational culture of
for firefighting. Early opposition to admitting women dealt with issues of facilities. This “red herring,” according to McCarl, was in fact only a minor barrier to entrance. To many observers the aggressive physicality of the work poses the most serious limitation on women, although others recognize that effective firefighting requires a diversity of skills, not all of them associated with size and strength. Indeed, teamwork, determination, experience, and other intangible qualities often have counted for more than sheer physical power. Many men, however, have continued to question women’s physical ability, despite the fact that, in some departments at least, fitness levels are not what they should be. Strikingly, black and white men alike provide females little support and even less training in the informal traditions of firefighting culture—so important to learning the occupation. If women are creating emergent firefighting work traditions, the silence they receive from their male colleagues reveals the deep divides that have developed between firefighters. Women’s presence in the work team challenges the tradition of the all-male group, and perhaps the manliness of firemen. As one female firefighter recounted to McCarl, “Our being here takes away from their pride in the job—their egos are deflated having women on the job.”

For more than a century, firefighters developed their occupation in the absence of women and African Americans, and the influx of these groups into departments has tested the cohesiveness of firefighters’ culture more than any other challenge, including the changing risks of urban and exurban fire environments and even the rationalization of departments early in the twentieth century. The cohesive occupational brotherhood forged in the nineteenth century and long defended by white male firefighters has been shattered. Tensions in firehouses have led to the breakdown of significant communal activities, the distribution of racist and sexist propaganda, and even occasional tensions on the fire ground. Just as the NAFE’s ethos of professionalism was used to overcome the parochialism of local communities and work cultures tied to political machines in the nineteenth century, its modern incarnation, the IAFC, is seeking to keep diversity from diminishing the cohesiveness and strength of firefighters’ occupational culture. Judging from the acrimony that attends debates about race and gender in fire departments throughout the nation, a shared culture has not completely reemerged in firehouses, which are divided by multiple understandings of the occupation.

Molding efficiency and heroism, and now racial and gender diversity, into a common work culture will challenge future generations of firefighters as much as the changing built environment. And, like previous generations of firefighters, they too will look toward their past to recreate the future. And, more often than not, that history has been preserved as an integral part of the department’s life. For
example, Thomas Targee has never disappeared from the collective memory of St. Louis firefighters. During the 1990s, a colossal portrait of him—on loan from the Missouri Historical Society—adorned the entrance to the St. Louis Fire Department headquarters, and Phelim O’Toole’s portrait and story occupied a wall just a few feet beyond Targee. In 1995, the St. Louis Fire Department also erected a memorial sculpture to its fallen heroes. The statue, a firefighter clad in full lifesaving gear, appears in running pose and clutches a baby to its breast. The memorial emphasized what firefighters continue to stress, the priority of rescuing people trapped by fires or other hazards. Undoubtedly, the magnitude of this task continues to make firefighters into icons of safety. And firefighters remain heroes precisely because they seem so undaunted by the built landscape, penetrating deeper and deeper into burning buildings and fighting fires from closer and closer range. Although firefighters no longer eat as much smoke as they did—instead they use self-contained breathing apparatus to enter fires—their mission remains the same, and continues to be marked by an emphasis on professionalism, teamwork, technical skill, and physical ability. A continued presence of these values—removed from its historic connections to gender, race, and ethnicity—might someday help firefighters to forge a more inclusive definition of professional heroism, and a new basis for occupational unity.