

The History and Significance of the Firefighter's Badge

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Our modern culture would have us believe that, as an organization, we cannot be progressive while also preserving and protecting the traditions that make us unique. Many lack an appreciation for our traditions or suggest that those of us who cling to them are old-fashioned, curmudgeons. I submit to you that we can be progressive while honoring some of our traditions and that we actually have a moral obligation to do so.

Let me first be clear that I believe the fire service needs to be a modern, well equipped and well-trained organization that takes advantage of advances in technology, science and leadership. We need to continue to address and adapt to more effective measures that protect our firefighters from injury, death and post-traumatic stress. We need to be an organization that more effectively represents the communities we serve and more actively engages with them. And we need to humbly submit ourselves to the idea that some of the practices and policies of today no longer serve the greater good. None of this, however, negates our obligation to understand, to celebrate and to pass on the traditions of this great service.

To understand the importance of a badge pinning ceremony and the significance of the badge itself, I believe you need to understand a little of our history and the roots of the symbols that represent us. Over the next several minutes, I would like to share a bit of that history with you.

The fire service is steeped in traditions, some more than 200 years old. The use of a bell, the adornment of trumpets in our badges and worn about our

collars, the Maltese Cross, which today is the universal symbol of firefighters, are but a few of the symbols and traditions we hold dear. Many of these elements and traditions were created by our fire service forefathers, and we use them to reflect honor on those brave and dedicated individuals who first responded to the needs of others, and that's where we need to start.

History identifies two firefighting origins that permanently left their mark on us collectively and individually. Let's begin with the Order of St John in Jerusalem. In the first century, AD, the Order of St Johns was a Knights Hospitaller, a hospice, providing care for traveling sojourners through the Holy land. During the crusades, amid a battle with the Sarazens, a new weapon of war was introduced; bottles of Naphtha, a highly flammable liquid. These bottles were hurled at the Crusaders and after dousing them with the flammable liquid, flaming arrows were fired into their midst to set them ablaze.

The Knights of the Order of St John took it upon themselves to rescue the Crusaders from the Sarazens, pulling them to safety, extinguishing their flames and treating their injuries. After the loss of the Holy land, the Order of St John was driven from Jerusalem and ultimately settled on the island of Malta where it headquartered for more than two-hundred-and-fifty-years. During this time the order adopted a new crest, an eight-point cross. It is from this cross that our modern-day Maltese Cross was fashioned.

The second historical underpinning also dates back to the first century, when slaves of the Roman Empire were charged with protecting the cities under Roman control from fire. But, as you might imagine, slaves lacked a certain motivation for protecting the assets of their captors. At around 6 AD a group of 7,000 free men were organized into the first organized firefighting force, the Corps de Vigiles. These men were organized into seven, one-thousand-man cohorts. Rome was divided into fourteen zones, giving each cohort responsibility

for two of them. Firefighters kept vigil by patrolling the streets looking for the first sign of fire; and when needed, in order for a more effective response, firefighting equipment was kept within each zone.

We can see remnants of that system still in place today. Our cohorts are Battalions; our zones are first-due areas and our stations placed strategically throughout the city maintains a decentralized distribution of equipment and supplies.

As American settlers began to develop the Eastern seaboard in the late 1600's and early 1700's fire was once again a devastating menace. In 1730, one such fire started on board a ship that was moored to the dock, and before the night had ended, the City of Philadelphia had lost all its warehouses and three neighboring homes. In 1736, Benjamin Franklin, who is considered the father of the US fire service, co-founded the Union Fire Company by enlisting neighbors to help neighbors. The Union Fire Company would become America's first volunteer fire department and their model, although now showing signs of weakness, still protects much of our country today.

Like their Roman counterparts, early American firefighters also kept a vigil by patrolling their streets. Among the duties of our early firefighters, in preparation for their night patrols, firefighters were assigned the responsibilities of lighting the streets using a long shaft with a mounted flaming pot that would ignite the streetlamps.

And finally, an important element of our history relates to the current sense of urgency that we have in responding to the needs of others. Beyond the impact of getting to the fire quickly in order to stop its spread, early fire companies would be paid for their services based upon which company got "first water" on the fire. In other words, the company who first applied water to the fire is who ultimately received payment for their services.

Now, with these historical perspectives and underpinnings as our backdrop, let's look at the badge you are about to be given.

There has been a lot written about the badge and the scramble of tools located in its center. Unfortunately, not all that has been written is accurate. Much of what has been written has been done without a lot of research making it somewhat difficult to discern truth from folklore. But I believe that we can settle on certain explanations as to why these symbols continue to serve us.

The center of our badge includes a scramble of various tools of our trade. Elements of this scramble includes a ladder, a helmet, a nozzle, a trumpet, a hook and a shaft that looks like it has a ball or weight mounted to its end. Sometimes, the scramble includes an axe.

There is very little history on who first created the scramble or when it first appeared. Although the elements themselves require little explanation, I think it is important to understand why they have been included.

The firefighter helmet is one of the most recognizable symbols in American culture. The helmet provides for your safety and is depicted in the center of the scramble as a constant reminder to keep yourself safe. In order for us to serve the public, we must arrive safely and perform our tasks safely.

Ladders, which have always been a part of the fire service and used to rescue trapped occupants remind us of a moral responsibility to rescue those in need.

The hook which, in the early years, would be used to bring down walls and buildings as the primary method of preventing the spread of fire, reminds us of our duty to stop the spread of fire, not just after the first flames but also in our efforts to prevent them in the first place.

The nozzle, which forever has been the medium through which water is applied, reminds us that we still have an obligation to get first water on every fire we encounter and to act with urgency to protect our customer's life and property.

The trumpet, which was once used by officers to communicate with those under their charge, is a reminder that you are under the authority of officers who have trained and have been selected for both their technical and leadership abilities.

And finally, that shaft with the ball mounted on its end is the tool that firefighters would have used to light the streetlamps as they began their tour of vigilance protecting their community as it slept. I believe it is there to remind us to be vigilant in our training, our personal protection, and our focus on protecting the public we serve.

The badge itself represents both authority and protection. As firefighters, you are entering into a field that enjoys one of the highest levels of public trust. We enjoy the privilege of entering homes and businesses almost unencumbered. When you pin that badge on your chest, a place of prominent display, you are showing the public your commitment to stand in their defense against the threats to their lives and property and your vow to ensure that their trust has not been misplaced. This badge should remind you to protect that trust at all costs.

For the officers being sworn in, your badge no longer displays the tools of a firefighter but rather displays a symbol, made from a combination of speaking trumpets, that designates your rank and with it your authority. Your badge serves as a reminder that although you have achieved a higher level of authority, you also have been given a higher level of responsibility. Like those who are admonished to submit to your authority, your badge should be a reminder of your responsibility to forever value the trust that your firefighters place in you and the

responsibility you have to guard their safety. Never forget that authority granted to you by your superiors will not be sustainable without the authority you earn from your subordinates.

In the end, to an outsider the badge may be a simple piece of metal; engraved with symbolism and polished to a bright luster. To those who wear it, it embodies who we are and what we stand for.

