



# The Signevierist

Issue Number 2015 – 3

The Official Newsletter of the Fire Mark Circle of the Americas



FMCA member, Mike Brankowitz, acquired the above insurance sign and asks for the club's assistance. As a recent member, Mike would like to know if this is a fire mark.

The sign is brass, 5 3/4" X 3 1/4", shows both Farmers Mutual Town Fire Insurance Company, and general agent, Michaelson & Hughes Co., and was made by Stronghart Co, Chicago.

Mike promises to bring it to the Philadelphia FMCA Convention. If you're not planning to attend and want your opinion considered, please send your comments to the editor before October 15th.

Fire mark or not, I bet that if Alwin Bulau had this, it would have been in *Footprints of Assurance*.

Also, check out the FMCA website for the items in the 2015 Live Auction. Lot 10 is sure to bring a great deal of interest and questions.

Bob Shea

~~~~~

## MARK YOUR CALENDAR

**K**EEP the dates of October 15-18, 2015 open for the 2015 FMCA Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, at the Wyndham Philadelphia Historic District. Our host, Chuck Barber, writes that Philadelphia has lots to offer visitors and we'll get a chance to visit some of the local landmarks. Please come join us for what is shaping up as a great time.

## FIREMEN'S INSURANCE COMPANIES: FIREMEN'S INSURANCE COMPANY OF BALTIMORE

WITH THE following preamble, the **Firemen's Insurance Company of Baltimore**, organized in 1825, was chartered on February 3, 1826:

Whereas, the members of the several fire companies of Baltimore, taking into consideration their relative situation with regard to society in general, the motive which induce them to establish and become members of these associations, and the beneficial effects resulting therefrom, and to enable them more effectually to perform the duties imposed upon them as members of fire companies, have formed themselves unto an association, under the name of the "Fireman's [sic] Insurance Company of Baltimore..."<sup>1</sup>

A review of the charter's various sections show that the company was organized for the benefit of the volunteer fire department:

### Stock

- The capital stock was set at \$500,000 with 25,000 shares at \$20 each. \$2 was paid for each share at subscription with an additional \$2 due four months later and secured notes for the remaining \$16. [The company was so successful that an 1835 amendment gave the Board of Directors authority to use portions of the profits to reduce the notes.<sup>2</sup> By 1846 with 21,000 shares and \$210,000 paid capital, the remaining notes were cancelled.<sup>3</sup>]
- Business would begin as soon as 4,200 shares were paid for or secured.
  - Only members of a fire company could subscribe to stock and each fire company could subscribe to 1,500 shares. After three years, shares not subscribed by a company could be taken by other companies in equal shares. [Interestingly, there seemed to be no limit on the number of shares an individual could purchase.]
  - A stockholder who ceased to be a member of a fire company had to sell his stock at actual value to a fire company member, the fire company or the Board of Directors.
- Shares of a deceased stockholder became extinct and notes on the shares were cancelled. The actual value of the shares and any profits had to be paid within six months to the heirs. [In 1827 individuals who ceased to be a member of a fire company, or heirs of those who died, were given thirty days to dispose of the stock.<sup>4</sup>]
- The Baltimore mayor and city council could purchase up to 1,000 shares within twelve month of the commencement of business.

### Directors

- The directors had to be stockholders and elected a president from their own body or other stockholders. Previous to entering their offices they had to take the following oath, "I \_\_\_\_\_ do swear (or affirm as the case may be) that I will faithfully, diligently, impartially and honestly fulfil (sic) the duties of my office of \_\_\_\_\_ to the best of my knowledge and ability."

- There was not a stated number of directors. However, each company:
  - with 150 – 500 shares was entitled to one director;
  - with over 500 shares was entitled to two directors.
- The directors were elected in each fire company from among the basis of shares owned:
  - One vote for each share up to five,
  - One vote for every five shares over five shares up to fifty,
  - One vote for every ten shares over fifty,
  - No person could have more than twenty votes.
- No director of any other fire insurance company could be a director of the company.
- The directors and president could appoint a secretary, clerks and other officers to transact business and allow them salaries. [The 1827 amendment also allowed the president to be compensated.]

### Miscellaneous

- The company was authorized to write all types of fire insurance only within the limits of Baltimore. [This was repealed, among many other provisions in 1866, after the Baltimore fire department went paid.<sup>5</sup>]
- The board had authority to set up a fund out of the profits for the benefit of fire company members who became injured or disabled in the discharge of their duty.
- There was a unique provision that deemed a house demolished if it was destroyed by fire from the first floor upwards. [Repealed in 1866.]
  - Disagreement over partial losses would be settled by assessors appointed by the insured and the company. Should the two fail to agree, they would select another disinterested person; and their award would be final.
- 100 stockholders, who together own 1,200 shares, may at any time apply to the president and directors to call for a general meeting of the stockholders. Should the board refuse, the stockholders may on their own call for a general meeting by publishing a two week notice in the newspapers stating the object of the meeting.
- Fire company members were entitled to a 5% discount on their insurance.
- Dividends could not be paid if losses had diminished the capital stock of the company.

The volunteers, operating under the Baltimore United Fire Department, were replaced by a paid department with an ordinance passed on December 10, 1858.<sup>6</sup> Although not in active service, the United Fire Department did not disband immediately. Recognizing the inevitable, the Firemen's Insurance Company inserted the following preamble to its February 6, 1866 charter amendment:

WHEREAS, the city of Baltimore has established a paid Steam Fire Department, and the volunteer Fire Department are about to disband, it becomes necessary to amend the charter....to meet the changes consequent thereon, and to provide for the election of Directors....from

the stockholders at large therein, and also to provide other regulations for the management...., and for the transfer of its stock and ownership....<sup>7</sup>

The sections deleting the payment of profits for a fund for disabled firemen, and the restrictions of stock ownership and directorship to members of a fire company effectively changed the nature of the company from one benefiting the fire department to one benefiting the stockholders.

With a reputation of prompt payment and fair dealings, the 1904 Annual Report of the New York State Insurance Commissioner reported that in 1903 the Firemen's Insurance Company listed \$400,000 of paid up capital stock, assets of \$1,158,324 and gross premiums of \$965,233. Before its failure in the 1904 Baltimore Fire the company wrote since its organization slightly less than eleven million dollars in gross premium and paid cash dividends of \$3,637,533. This is an enviable record for any insurance company, let alone one organized and directed by firemen.

Bob Shea

<sup>1</sup> Maryland State Archives. *Session Laws, 1825*. Volume 402, pp. 34-40, Chapter 55. *Archives of Maryland Online*.

<sup>2</sup> Maryland State Archives. *Session Laws, 1834*. Volume 541, pp. 17, Chapter 168. *Archives of Maryland Online*.

<sup>3</sup> Maryland State Archives. *Session Laws, 1845*. Volume 610, pp. 27-28, Chapter 33. *Archives of Maryland Online*.

<sup>4</sup> Maryland State Archives. *Session Laws, 1826*. Volume 434, pp. 145-146, Chapter 171. *Archives of Maryland Online*.

<sup>5</sup> Maryland State Archives. *Session Laws, 1866*. Volume 419, pp. 47-50, Chapter 33. *Archives of Maryland Online*.

<sup>6</sup> Forrest, Clarence H. *Official History of the Fire Department of the City of Baltimore: Together with Biographies and Portraits of Eminent Citizens of Baltimore*. Baltimore: Williams & Wilkens, 1898, p. 103. *Google Book Search*

<sup>7</sup> Maryland State Archives. *Session Laws, 1866, op. cit.*, p. 47.

~~~~~

## A HISTORY LESSON IN A FIRE MARK: COVADONGA SOCIEDAD ANONIMA DE SEGUROS, Bulau 1681-V-B

I ACQUIRED the Covadonga fire mark from the Max Klein collection a number of years ago and until recently never paid much attention to it, except to admire its colorfulness and elaborate symbols.

I found out that Covadonga is the name of a small Spanish village reputed to be the site of a historic battle in 722 A.D. and the initial defeat of the Moors. Wikipedia mentions that this was the first Christian victory in the Iberian Peninsula, and is considered the beginning of the start to expel the Moors from Spain.

The symbols on the mark tell this story. The royal Spanish crown sits atop an adorned cross that is imposed over the crescent, symbolizing the re-conquest of Spain. The Greek Alpha and Omega symbols emphasize a Christian Spain.

You may want to research the fire marks in your collection to find out what history they contain.

Carl Buerger