



The Signevierist

Issue Number 2016 – 3

The Official Newsletter of the Fire Mark Circle of the Americas

HAVE YOU MARKED YOUR CALENDAR?

OCTOBER 20-23, 2016 are the dates for the 2016 FMCA Convention in Springfield, Illinois, at the President Abraham Lincoln Hotel. Our host, Oldham, has mailed your invitation along with registration information. Don't delay in making your plans to join us for what promises to be a wonderful time. Please check our website, firemarkcircle.org, for additional convention information and both the Live and Silent auction items.

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## BOB SHEA'S BOOKCASE

IN THIS ISSUE I will review the second of the three early Philadelphia authors on fire marks, Harold E. Gillingham's monograph *Fire-Marks of American Fire Insurance Companies*, Philadelphia, 1914.

Mr. Gillingham begins on page three with the following:

I was led into the collection of "Fire-Marks," as the English more correctly style them, or "House-Plates," as they are frequently called in this country, probably from the fact that the majority of those in use in the United States were cast-iron plates with the companies' designs thereon. Many, however, were lead castings...fastened to a wood board or shield...

Right from the start of the monograph, we see discrepancies. As has been shown in previous Signevierist articles, the term "house plate" referred to tin covered sheet iron marks, not to cast iron or lead marks. Up to around 1914 American cast iron and lead marks were referred to as "badges" or "house marks."

After a brief review of the origins of insurance in England, fire brigades and fire marks, on page seven, he specifies what he means by a fire mark:

The term "Fire-Mark" is usually applied to those early emblems of insurance attached to the buildings, at first made of lead, then cast iron, and later the impressed copper and tinned iron ones, which came into use as early as 1820 in England.

A little later, he continues:

About 1825 the tinned iron plates were adopted in England; these were usually painted or gilded, and were quite elaborate, but this style never came into use in this country [United State of America] except for advertising purposes.

And further:

From a true collector's standpoint it is the "Fire-Mark" alone which is worthy of so much attention...

By now we can see that Mr. Gillingham does not consider "tins" to be fire marks and shows his lack of knowledge and appreciation of American fire marks, when later, on page thirty-eight he states:

Several other American companies adopted tinned iron signs, with their names printed thereon, more for advertising purposes than as a "Fire-Mark"; few if any of these signs were used in cities, but they went principally to the country agents who placed them on farm buildings when insured, and it has not been so long ago that one could see in the country districts of Pennsylvania and New York evidences of the success of the farm agents of several companies.

I have quite a few problems with this paragraph. First, rather than "several," I would substitute "hundreds" of American companies adopted tinned iron signs with their names printed thereon. Notice that these are called "signs" and not fire marks. Second, since American fire insurance companies did not sponsor fire brigades, if Mr. Gillingham had asked himself, what was the purpose of American fire marks, he might have realized that their purpose was a much nuanced thing depending on the location and time period. What was true for the Philadelphia English colonists in the 1750s did not necessarily apply to Hartford, Connecticut in 1832 or Saint Louis, Missouri, in 1865. Whether mutual company or stock company, fire marks advertised the company to the public. It did not matter whether the mark had a symbol or name. Third, it's one thing not to collect tin fire marks and it's another thing to relegate them to country agents and farm buildings. We know that tin marks were used throughout the Midwest by the large Eastern insurers down to the local Mutual. I would think that Duane and Carol Lupke would take exception to this. Those of us at the 2013 Cincinnati FMCA Convention were enchanted by their retelling of acquiring tin fire marks from the houses they were attached to.

On page eight Mr. Gillingham lets us know that 110 English, Scottish and Irish fire companies issued 250 variants, while 12 American issued 22 variants. The number of British is quite close to Brian Henham and Brian Sharp's number of 114 in their *The British Fire Mark: 1680 – 1879*, but the number of variants is way off. The actual number of American fire companies and variants is far greater as judged by Alwin Bulau's *Footprints of Assurance* and the subsequent *Addendum* pages issued.

Pages four through six contain an interesting review of the American fire insurance companies which were organized prior to 1800. Gillingham, on page five, maintains that The Mutual Assurance Society Against Fire on Buildings of the State of Virginia issued a fire mark. This company is still in business and there is no evidence that the company issued a mark. Also, like Bulau, Gillingham maintained that the Providence Washington Insurance Company did not issue a fire mark. The Providence Washington mark, B64-X-1, was found in 2006 in the Collection of the Baltimore Equitable Society.

The review of American fire marks begins on page twelve with the Philadelphia Contributionship, where he correctly notes the two different size hands.

The review of the Mutual Assurance Company is quite good. For example:

- He mentions three wood board variants, while the company has four. By using his measurements I was able to identify the described marks as issues one, three and four.
- Gillingham's photo plate No. 2, page 14, is the actual mark No. 23 in *Footprints of Assurance*.
- His measurements for the cast iron marks enabled me to identify three of the four cast iron variants.
- He dates photo plate No. 5, the squatty green tree, as 1810. In a later 1923 article in *Antiques* Gillingham dates it 1825. The company dates it at least 1829.

Gillingham is the first American writer to correctly identify the four early variants of the Insurance Company of North America. His date of 1797 for the copper eagle, photo plate No. 6, is only four years earlier than the company date of 1801.

Gillingham identifies the wood board and cast iron variants of the Baltimore Equitable Society. He is the first to record that the policy numbers on the cast iron marks were in gilt, and correctly dated a third issue as 1839.

His dates for the organization, incorporation and first policy of the Fire Association of Philadelphia are correct. However, 1881 for the paid Philadelphia Fire Department, 1871, is off by ten years.

- He correctly identifies that the FA variants vary in size, material and thickness [convexity].
- He shows seven variants, while we know of nineteen.
- While he notes the black and gilt colors on the marks, it is interesting to note that he does not mention any green grass.
- He also uses the 40,000 marks issued as did the earlier Gillespie.

Gillingham is the first to point out that the fire engine and letters on the Firemen's Insurance Company of Baltimore marks were gilded.

- He correctly identifies two variants. While the shape or presence of the loop describes one variant, the other variant is more accurately described in the number of spokes in the wheel of the engine rather than the handles of the fire engine.

Gillingham's description of the mark for the Penn Fire (sic) Insurance Company of Pittsburgh on pages 26 & 27 is actually of the Firemen's Insurance Company of Pittsburgh, B.129. No doubt, Pittsburgh's Penn Insurance Company was confused with a later Philadelphia company named Penn Fire Insurance Company, 1872 – 1876. Even Bulau made the same error for his B.149. Gillingham also notes that a Federal Insurance Company of Allegheny [City] issued a mark that included the word "Federal." To date, no such mark has surfaced.

The description of the mark attributed to the Firemen's Insurance Company of Pittsburgh on page 28 is actually for the Associated Firemen's Insurance Company of Pittsburgh, B.191. He is the first author to mention that the mark was "highly colored and gilded." Gillingham also notes that the Associated Firemen's is the only American company's mark showing a fireman, while two English companies did. Today we know of three additional American companies that issued a cast iron mark with firemen; City Insurance Company of Cincinnati, B.157, Associated Firemen's Insurance Company of Baltimore, B.166, and the Home Insurance Company of New Haven, B.301. There is also a brass People's Insurance Company of New Orleans, B.427.

The description of the Hope Mutual Insurance Company of Philadelphia, B.252, on page 32 is accurate. However, the dates are not. This is unusual since one year later Gillespie and Walsh's book have the correct dates, 1854 – 1860. His comment that the mark has been considered as being that of the Fame Insurance Company of Philadelphia is also unusual for J. Griswold, in his *Fire Insurance Companies and their Emblems. House-Marks or Badges; Trade Marks, Plaques or House-Plates of Ancient and Modern Times*, The Chronicle, No. 26, Vol. XLVIII, December 24, 1891, attributed the mark to the Hope Fire and Marine Insurance Company of New York City. It's possible Gillingham merely wanted to give a friendly nod to the President of the Fame because he included a photo of the Fame's paper weight on page 40.

Gillingham's dimensions for the raised (beveled) marks of the United Firemen's Insurance Company of Philadelphia agree almost perfectly with the marks in *Footprints of Assurance* and the photo on page 35 clearly shows the two main variants of the UF marks.

On page 36 Gillingham refers to the Lumbermen's Insurance Company of Philadelphia's mark as a "badge" and repeats the story that many collectors considered it an advertising emblem. While earlier insurance writers reported that the Lumbermen's was the last new Philadelphia insurance company to issue a cast iron badge, Gillingham writes that the Lumbermen's mark is the last cast iron mark in America. Today we know that is not true. Even if we limit the term "badge" to only cast iron, there were three; Protection Fire Insurance Company of Charleston, B.468, Eagle Mutual Fire Insurance Company of Boston, B.471 (unverified), and Guardian Mutual Fire Insurance Company of Pittsburgh, B.485.

Below, on page 38, is the last paragraph of the ironically titled monograph *Fire-Marks of American Fire Insurance Companies*. It's clear that Mr. Gillingham is an Anglophile and does not hold American fire marks in very much esteem.

When one compares the British with the American "Fire-Mark," a sharp contrast is shown in the artistic features of the former and the extreme plainness of the latter, which were mostly of cast iron. Little attention was evidently paid to the

artistic feature of the design of American “Fire-Marks,” while considerable merit is, from the writer’s standpoint, shown in the designs of the “Fire-Marks” of THE HAND-IN-HAND OF LONDON, 1696, with the clearly defined crown and clasped hands denoting mutuality; THE WESTMINSTER, 1717, with the portcullis and Prince-of-Wales feathers; THE LONDON ASSURANCE, 1720, the reclining figure of Britannia; THE DUBLIN, 1750, with the arms of the city of Dublin surrounded with graceful ribbon and floral border, and the HIBERNIAN, 1771, with the crown and the harp, so dear to the Irishman’s heart.

There are many firsts and good points about the publication:

- It uses photographs rather than illustrations of the marks.
- It shows many variants of the marks in both photos and measurements.
- He is the first serious collector to document American fire marks.

Overall, I would give the publication a “B” grade:

- I found very little original research. For example, quite a bit of the anecdotes are easily found in Griswold.
- The information on the Pittsburg marks was inaccurate and left me confused.
- He spent too much space mentioning that he possessed examples of the marks.
- His comments on American vs. British marks were out of place, considering the title of the monograph.

With respect to the lack of artistic features on American fire marks, it’s clear that Mr. Gillingham was not aware of the Cincinnati cast iron marks of the City Insurance Company and the Eagle Insurance Company. The Eagle, with its finely cast ornate eagle, shield and arrows, is a symbol that is dear to the American’s heart.

For those interested, Gillespie’s publication is online: Google “hathi trust digital library” and search for “fire marks of American fire insurance companies.” The next and final review of the early Philadelphia fire mark authors will be of the 1915 monograph of Gillespie and Walsh.

Bob Shea

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CITY INSURANCE COMPANY OF CINCINNATI, BULAU 157

THE AD BELOW is as ornate and beautiful as the company’s rowing-type fire mark. Besides, I’m a sucker for advertising with interesting graphics and multiple font styles. Note that the font for “City Insurance Company” in the ad is the same as the font for the lettering on the fire mark. Now that’s a classy company. The ad is from *Williams’ Cincinnati Directory and Business Advertiser, for 1850-1851. Second Annual Issue.* Cincinnati: C. S. Williams, p. 45. *Google Book Search.* Web.



Bob Shea

Dr. Vito Platania

I am sad to report that Dr. Vito Platania has died. He was a well-known collector and historian with a vast knowledge of Italian and Hungarian fire marks. In 1927 he was born to an Italian father and Hungarian mother in Turin, Italy. From an early age he lived in Budapest, Hungary, but in 1948, after two years under the Communist regime, he interrupted his studies to return to Italy and completed them at the University in Florence. In 1955 he joined the Fondiaria Insurance Co., where he met the first major collector of fire marks in Italy, Giorgio Stilli. When Giorgio founded the Italian Fire Mark Club, Vito joined and in 1988 began collecting fire marks on a grand scale. He said he toured half of Italy in person to collect as many as possible, always with the ultimate intention of creating a systematic catalog. During many visits over the years to Hungary, he also put together a large collection of Hungarian fire marks. When in 2005 I had been in Rome and told him there were very few fire marks left on buildings in the city, and the few I saw were common ones, which surprised me because when I was there in 1970 there was a mark on practically every building, his reply was that in 1989 he spent two weeks in Rome and came home with 400 marks!

In 1997 the first edition of his book, "Le Targhe Incendio In Italia" was published, which covers nearly 600 different fire marks used in Italy. In the years that followed, the number of collectors and enthusiasts in Italy greatly increased and so many new discoveries were made that in 2005 his second edition was published, which covers over 770 different fire marks. In 2008 Vito donated his collection of 463 different Italian fire marks to the Mansutti Foundation Library in Milan. In 2014 he purchased an Italian collection which contained 129 fire marks that were not in the Foundation collection, which he donated to them, along with many specimens in better condition. They now have a total of 637 fire marks used in Italy.

Vito also wrote the draft of a book on Hungarian fire marks, but he was not able to publish it. However, in 2012 he donated his collection of 200 different Hungarian fire marks to the Mansutti Foundation Library, together with the results of his research and documentation of the Hungarian fire marks. This can be seen in book form on the Foundation's website.

Since his initial donation in 2008, Vito had spent much of his time helping the Foundation to catalog and document all of their fire marks on their website. Anyone interested can see the results by going to the Foundation's website: www.bibliotecamansutti.it Then click on the site: "Fondazione Mansutti / storia dell'assicurazione". This brings you to a page with 3 blocks of text, where, under the 3rd block titled "La Raccolte Museali" you click on the high-lighted "637 targhe incendio". Then you come to a page where you find 3 photos, where you click on "Le targhe Incendio" under the picture of the LA PATERNA fire mark. This brings you to a page with 6 fire marks pictured above 3 paragraphs of text. To look at the catalog of Italian fire marks, click on the green part of the text in the second paragraph. To look at the catalog of Hungarian fire marks, click on the green part of the text in the third paragraph. When downloaded each allows you to flip through the pages of the book. Unfortunately, Vito was not able to finish his English and German translations of these, so it is only available in Italian. Also the on-line Foundation catalog for the more recent donations of Italian marks has not yet been up-dated to include them.

The fire mark world has lost a knowledgeable historian as well as a kind and gentle person who we are going to miss.

Bill Evenden