



The Signevierist

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BULAU 275



While on a recent visit to the New York City Fire Museum (NYCFM) I had a chance to examine three examples of Bulau's 275, Citizens' Fire, Marine and Life Insurance Company of Wheeling, West Virginia. I laid all three side by side and, at first, they looked the same. However, I noticed that one of the marks, 00.3640, which is illustrated in *Footprints of Assurance* and shown above, looked ever so slightly different. The mark had much more detail. What seems to be an apostrophe after the "INS" is not an "apostrophe" but is actually the letter "E." Also, the periods below the "E" and after "CO" were not round but square. In addition, the fan design in the center of the mark is clearly seen as the sun with its rays.

The details of the "E" and square used as a period were not seen on the two other examples of the NYCFM's 00.3976 and 00.3977. The lack of details is also seen on the mark of the Smithsonian Institute's 2005.0233.0548, which is the same mark shown in INA's publication *American Fire Marks*, page 124. Even the B.275 recently sold on eBay did not have this detail.

When I got home, I wondered why there was an "E" after "INS." I decided to search Google for "inse." Finding nothing, I went to Googlebooks and entered both "inse" and "insurance" in quotes. After searching a number of sites, I found that insurance sometimes was abbreviated both as "ins" and "inse" in English and Irish insurance/legal publications in the late 1800s. This only added to the oddity of this mark. Why would a West Virginia insurance company, whose dates are 1856 – 1877, use the English/Irish abbreviation of insurance on their fire mark?

While not going so far as to say one or the other was a variant, you may want to footnote this article in your copy of *Footprints*." Certainly, Bulau's 275 must be considered the "gold standard" of this mark.

Bob Shea

Photo courtesy of the New York City Fire Museum, H. V. Smith Museum (Home Insurance Co. Collection)

FIREMEN'S INSURANCE COMPANIES: MOBILE FIRE DEPARTMENT INSURANCE COMPANY

The Mobile Fire Department Insurance Company, Bulau 395, is one of the many fire insurance companies organized that incorporated the word "firemen" or "fire department" in its name. Presumably, the public would be more favorable to an insurer that provided both protection and reimbursement from fire.

The charter of the "Mobile Fire Department Insurance Company" was approved on February 21, 1866 and the company operated until 1879, when it retired and reinsured its business. A reading of its charter has some interesting observations. [*Acts of the Session of 1865-6 of the General Assembly of Alabama, Held in the City of Montgomery, Commencing on the 3d Monday in November 1865. Montgomery, Reid & Scrows, 1866. No. 248, pp. 397-403.*]

The charter called for \$100,000 capital stock divided into \$25 shares, with a ten percent down payment and a promissory note for the balance. If the company made a profit, dividends would be entered as a credit on their promissory notes until the notes were fully paid. This seems like a good deal for those who paid only the ten percent down payment, until you get to Section 14, which states that "the company shall allow and pay to the stockholders who have paid money to the company, on account of their subscription in advance of the installments called for, interest on the amount so paid in by them in advance respectively, from the times of such payments, at the rate of eight per centum per annum, and this payment of interest shall be considered a part of the expenses of the company...." Since profits are the excess of losses and expenses, those who fully paid up front receive eight percent interest before profits are determined. Not a bad deal for those with money to invest.

Besides the companies name and its fire mark, Section 6 of the charter is the first indication that the Mobile Fire Department Insurance Company had ties to the volunteer Fire Department of Mobile as it was a requirement that each director had to be "an active or honorary member of one of the companies composing the fire department in the city of Mobile". This requirement is not necessarily a strong tie to the fire department because "honorary" members paid a nominal fee to join and had no voting rights in the fire company. At best, this requirement may have raised some money for the volunteers. Even though the president was a civilian on various fire related organizations and one of the organizers included the Chief of the Mobile Fire Department, the connection to the fire department was still tenuous.

It isn't until Section 18 that the ties to the Mobile Fire Department become more apparent. The first fifteen days to subscribe for the \$100,000 or 4,000 stock shares was open to "all the members of the Mobile fire department... and if this amount of capital stock is not then subscribed for, the book shall be kept open for five additional days, or longer, as the corporators may determine, for the citizens." Consider that before the Civil War Mobile was the fourth largest city in the confederacy with a population of about 30,000 and had suffered for years due to the Northern blockade. Trade was reduced and the city had food riots by the citizens. Before the war there were less than four hundred active members in the fire department. The new company was organized less than one year after the war. It seems a hollow gesture to think that the volunteer firemen could raise \$100,000 or even the \$10,000 down payment.

As if to show how the organizers wanted the participation of the men whose name and symbol the insurance company would bear, Chapter 19 provided "the fire companies of Mobile may severally subscribe in the name of their respective companies.... and the fire department association of Mobile [The Fire Department of the City of Mobile] may also subscribe." However, here's the

kicker; "Provided, That no individual or corporation shall be allowed, during the first fifteen days...to subscribe for more than one hundred shares of stock, except the said fire department association, and it shall not be allowed to subscribe for more than four hundred shares..."

Before the war in 1857 there were eight engine companies and one hook and ladder company. If they were still in operation at the end of the war, the nine companies could subscribe to 900 shares and the association for another 400. Exclusive of the individual member purchases, the fire department in theory would control 1,300 shares out of 4,000. While this sounds good on paper, in actuality, who would own the controlling amount of stock? The civilians. They would be able to appoint the majority of the board and thus run the company.

An excerpt from the 1874 *Baltimore Underwriter* reports that the Mobile Fire Department Insurance Company was a "wildcat" insurer who dragged its feet to pay claims and would not dare to try and write insurance in a state that had an insurance department. However, by 1876 the company decided to spread the risk and was licensed in a number of states including New York, Illinois and New Jersey. For some reason the attempt to expand its business did not work out and the company retired in 1879. It would seem that any relationship of the insurance company to the fire department was strictly business and that the organizers used the name and reputation of the fire volunteers to further their own interests.

Bob Shea

FROM THE PAST

The following is from *The Spectator*, Vol. XCL, September 25, 1913 No. 18, p. 129:

Fire Insurance House Plates

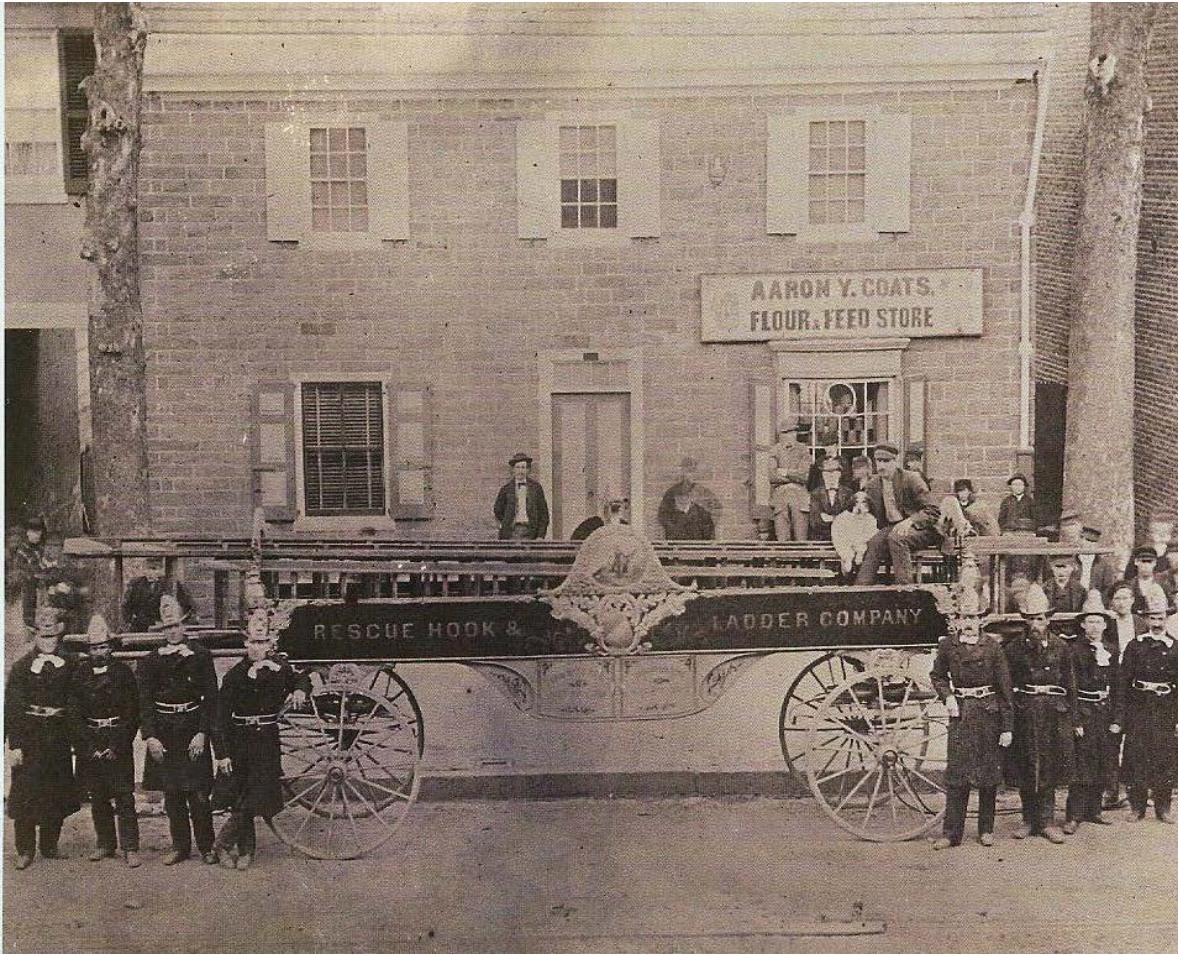
"While the old system of marking insured buildings by means of house plate, attached by the individual companies insuring such property, has long been obsolete, occasionally one of the old plates is found, and Harold E. Gillingham of Philadelphia has made a collection of such plates. He is desirous of securing a house plate of the old Mutual Assurance Company of New York [B.43], and would like to hear from anyone possessing such a plate. He recently secured a plate supposed to have been attached to an old building in Pittsburg by the Penn Insurance Company [B.149] of Pittsburg."

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The following is from *The National Underwriter*, No. 35, August 30, 1917, p. 5:

"The Buffalo German [Insurance Company, B.401] of Buffalo, N.Y., is changing its name to the Buffalo Insurance Company. The Buffalo German has been doing business for over 50 years under its old name and is held in high esteem by all who represent and know the company. However, the board of directors conclude that because of present conditions and the state of war in which the country is engaged the name is deceptive, misleading of the truth and harmful to its best interests and business in many ways. The name has led many persons into thinking that it is a foreign company or a branch of a foreign company and hence the directors thought best to make the change. Local agents, of course, have known the facts, but the public undoubtedly in some instances may have had a wrong impression of the company because of its name."

Fire Marks *in situ*



RESCUE HOOK & LADDER COMPANY
PHILADELPHIA, PA
1853 – 1871

Photo courtesy of Fireman's Hall Museum, Philadelphia

2012 San Antonio Convention of the Fire Mark Circle of the Americas

Remember the Alamo? Not after a stay in Ol' San Antonio! You'll remember the historic Drury Plaza Hotel's stunning architecture, comfortable rooms and the view from the roof top pool. Step out of the hotel and onto the River Walk with its rich cultural history and amazing Tex-Mex fare. Venture a little further for some shopping to fit every taste. Mexican Market and La Villita are home to cafes, art galleries and imported Mexican treasures. You will have a chance to see several historical sites, such as, the Spanish Governor's Palace and the San Fernando Cathedral. Oh, and you might just remember the first mission established in San Antonio, the Alamo! So won't you join us for this year's Fire Mark Convention in San Antonio?



October 18-21, 2012
Registration: \$225
Convention Hosts:
Tom & Pat Hewitt
tdhins@yahoo.com