



# The Signevierist

Issue Number 2020-1

The Official Newsletter of the Fire Mark Circle of the Americas

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## Notes from the President

Many of you may not be aware of the fact, that after many, many years, of single handedly researching, writing, editing, printing, and mailing the Signevierist, Bob Shea has announced that he will be stepping down from those duties. Many members of FMCA may be asking themselves how we replace Bob and continue issuing the newsletter. While we may all agree that it is truly impossible to replace Bob, your Board of Directors came to the agreement at our business meeting in October to form an editorial committee led by Chuck Barber with members Tom Hewitt, Carol Smith, Bob Shea, Linda Anderberg, and myself. It was determined that on an ongoing basis the President would be responsible for contributing an article for each quarterly Newsletter, while Carol Smith generously agreed to provide articles and Bob Shea agreed to provide material for the next few issues.

The editorial committee felt it was important to communicate to the membership via the Newsletter when new members have joined and when current members have passed away. Accordingly, there will be a "Welcome" section and a "Necrology" section of the Newsletter. We will also look into contacting other

sources like fire memorabilia collectors to broaden the types of articles, so they are not just focused on Fire Marks. At this point I would like to reach out to all members and ask if you have any interest in writing articles, have ideas for articles, or know of anyone that would like to write articles, to please contact me or Chuck Barber. The editorial committee would also like your opinion on how the newsletter should be delivered moving forward. More specifically, do you have an opinion on whether we should continue to mail the newsletter or convert it to an electronic format via constant contact?

At this time, I would like to take a moment to thank Bob Shea for all of his years of service with regards to the Newsletter. He has taken so much of his own time and energy into providing the members of FMCA with a quarterly newsletter that is not only educational but also very entertaining. I know I personally could not wait to receive my copy to see what Bob had found during his many hours of research. I think for many years we took for granted all the work that Bob put into this quarterly event. So, while I am sad to see Bob slow his duties with the Signevierist, I am also glad to see that he will get a much needed break. I also think that we as an organization can learn from this situation. We cannot and should not rely exclusively on one person to deal with such important tasks as the newsletter, the yearly auctions, or the planning of our yearly convention. I ask that more members take this opportunity to contribute their time and effort into helping other members that may be in need of help. This will not only strengthen the bonds of our members but also ensure that FMCA is around for many years to come.

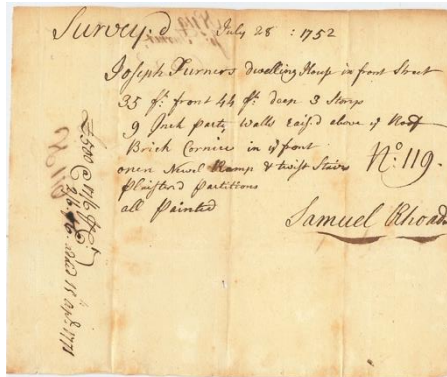
Michael Brankowitz  
Mbranko24@mac.com

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# The Philadelphia Contributionship's Digital Archives

By Carol W. Smith, Archivist, The Philadelphia Contributionship

Over the years the records of The Philadelphia Contributionship have been used for multiple types of research. Homeowners seeking to restore their homes look to see if a survey existed; genealogists check to see where their ancestors lived. Scholars use them for even more varied purposes; architectural historians might



look at the patterns of building, others might investigate the types of businesses that were insured and descriptions of the factories. Labor historians might be interested in the first job description found in the Contributionship's 1752 minutes outlining the duties of the clerk, social historians might be interested in how the

yellow fever epidemics impacted business forcing the dismissal of meetings to give just a few examples. Taken as a group the surveys provide a wealth of information on building materials, demographics and more. In the past those interested in using the records would contact the company directly. That all changed in 2004 as The Philadelphia Contributionship, in conjunction with the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, began the processing of creating a digital archives for the Company's key documents and insurance surveys. This entailed scanning all of the extant early surveys from 1752-1906, the company's minutes from 1752-1842 and key documents



Articles of Agreement or Deed of Settlement. Photo by Will Brown

including the original parchment Deed of Settlement. At more than 44 feet, it required delicate handling and multiple scans which were then digitally stitched together.

These records are available for all to explore through the company's own website <https://1752.com/about-us/history/> Click on the Archive tab which takes you to the Philadelphia Architect and Builders website (PAB) website.

This site has made a huge difference to researchers; now instead of the four or five research requests a month; we have 45 or more researchers a month using the site, a number we'd be hard pressed to handle in house. So if you have a Contributionship fire mark with a policy number you can now look it up yourself and find the survey, location and early owners. Happy searching!

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## FOR SALE

A two-story house, built about 3 years since, brick front and well finished - There are two rooms on a floor, an elegant drawing room in the second story; a good cellar kitchen, flue oven, and cellar. The house is 13 feet front and 34 deep. The lot is upon a lease, 62 years of which are unexpired, at the annual rent of sixteen pounds. The house is situated in Greenwich-street, seven doors above Brannen-street, near the New-market, and may be known by the insurance badge No. 168. For particulars enquire on the

premises, or at No. 7 Chappel-street,  
behind the college.  
The Evening Post, New York, New York,  
February 15, 1802.1

When I first came across the above newspaper advertisement, I figured, with an 1802 date, the house in New York City and an easily seen policy number on a fire mark, the insurer of the house had to be the "Mutual Assurance Company of the City of New York." I also thought that No. 168 is a fairly low policy number for a house that was built three years ago. After I checked Bulau 43 in *Footprints of Assurance* and learned that the company was organized in 1787, I figured that the company would have issued more than 168 policies by 1799. Something wasn't right. I did further research.

First, I checked to see how many other insurance companies there were in New York for the years 1799 – 1802, and came up with five additional companies:

- Columbian Insurance Company, inc. 3/21/1801
- Marine Insurance Company, inc. 3/16/1802
- New York Insurance Company, organized 1796, inc. 4/2/1798
- United Insurance Company, inc. 3/20/1798
- Washington Mutual Assurance Company, inc. 3/30/1802

Next, it had to be determined if any of these early NYC companies may have issued a "badge", also known as a fire mark. I could find no indication that the first four stock insurers issued a badge. When I found that the Washington Mutual Assurance Company was similarly organized as the Mutual Assurance Company with a deed of settlement, and, just like the Mutual Assurance Company, the Washington Mutual Assurance Company operated almost a year before being chartered, I

thought that they may have issued a fire mark. I better do some more research.

After much research I found the following statement about the Washington Mutual Assurance Company in an 1807 travel guide about the New York commercial area:

"The price of the policy and badge with the incidental services is two dollars, and of entering a transfer seventy-five cents." 2

You can imagine my surprise at this finding. Here was another insurance company that issued a fire mark that we had not known existed. I needed to find additional confirmation. After an exhaustive search, I could find no confirmation that the Washington Mutual Assurance Company issued a fire mark. I did find a copy of the 1802 charter along with a set of undated bylaws printed in 1809. Section X of the bylaws states:

"Every person insuring in this Corporation shall pay for each policy, and for the services incident thereto, the sum of two dollars; and for drawing and entering of every transfer, the sum of seventy-five cents." 3

Note that the undated bylaws printed in 1809 do not indicate that the company issued a badge with the policy, while the above travel guide did. At best, the travel guide is a secondary source without any documentation. A closer reading of the 1807 travel guide notes that his source may be a set of bylaws printed in 1802 by E. Belden & Company. 4

A "168" policy number on a 3-year-old house in 1802 may have various explanations for it being from the Mutual Assurance Company of the City of New York:

- It's possible that the new house was built on the same site of the prior house and the Mutual Assurance Company use the same policy number after updating its survey.
- The homeowner may have been a director of the company and transferred the policy on his prior home to the new home.
- Policy "168" may have been cancelled and the insured took the badge, since he paid for it, and put it on his new house.

Since neither the reason for an old badge number on a new house, nor whether the Washington Mutual Assurance Company issued a badge can be verified, I will keep an eye out for more documentation on the Washington Mutual Assurance Company.

## Bob Shea

1. The Evening Post (New York, New York), February 15, 1802, p. 3. Newspapers.com. Web.
2. Mitchill, Samuel L. (Samuel Latham), 1764-1831, John Davis Batchelder Collection (Library of Congress), and Joseph Meredith Toner Collection (Library of Congress). The Picture of New-York, Or, The Traveller's Guide, Through the Commercial Metropolis of the United States. New-York: Published by I. Riley and Co.; sold by Brisban and Brannan, City-hotel, Broadway, 1807, p. 51.
3. The charter, bye-laws, and rates of insurance of the Washington Mutual Assurance Company of the City of New York [microform] by Washington Mutual Assurance Company of the City of New York; New York (State). Act to Incorporate the Washington Mutual Assurance Company of the City of New York. 1809.
4. Mitchill, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

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Pictured above is a fire mark (B.334) for the Pacific Insurance Company. San Francisco, California. 1863-1871. This company, like so many others, was “Burned Out” by the great Chicago fire. This mark recently showed up on eBay and is so rare that Bulau didn’t even list measurements for it. For anyone interested, the measurements are 8 3/16 X 4 3/4 inches.

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### **SAVE THE DATE!**

The 2020 Convention will be held in Indianapolis, Indiana from Thursday October 15<sup>th</sup> to Sunday October 18<sup>th</sup>. The hotel will be Embassy Suites by Hilton Indianapolis North with a rate of \$142/night. Parking will be free. Dave Oldham and Tom Hewitt are co-hosts so if you have any questions please contact them. Finally, Linda Anderberg is working hard to arrange the Auctions so check the website frequently for updates and contact her if you would like to consign or have any questions.



