



The Signevierist

Issue Number 2020-3

The Official Newsletter of the Fire Mark Circle of the Americas

Mechanic Fire Company Hat



One of The Philadelphia Contributionship's most remarkable items in its firefighting collection is the Mechanic Fire Company hat illustrated here. The Mechanic Fire Company chose as its logo an image of the famous blacksmith and fire engine manufacturer, Pat Lyon at the Forge, copied after the famous commissioned portrait John Neagle painted in 1826-27. This is a red stovepipe hat, made of pressed felt, painted and varnished, made by James Hill whose shop at the time was located at 207 Callowhill Street, Philadelphia. On the front of the hat above the portrait of Pat Lyon at the Forge is a banner with the name of the company: Mechanic Fire Company; At the top of the hat are the owners initials R.S. and on the back of the hat is the symbol of the Fire Association to which the Mechanic Fire Company belonged.

This hat tells different stories: that of the fire engine manufacturer and unjustly accused robber of the Bank of Pennsylvania, and the hat's owner, R. Sparks, mortally wounded in the Battle of Gettysburg.

In 1798 Patrick Lyon was a well-established blacksmith working in Philadelphia having emigrated from Edinburgh Scotland in 1793 and working under the tutelage of Samuel Wheeler, a respected Philadelphia iron worker whose gates can still be seen at Christ Church, before setting up his own business. Lyon had previously learned the craft in London. Although he finished with formal education by age 11, he was interested in mathematics, philosophy and astronomy.

On July 4, 1795 Pat Lyon married Ann Brindley at Christ Church in Philadelphia and they had one child, a daughter Clementine; both mother and daughter died in the yellow fever epidemics of 1797. In 1798 the Bank of Pennsylvania foiled a robbery attempt but decided to move into leased space at Carpenters' Hall for their operations. Samuel Robinson built the vaults and commissioned Pat Lyon to remove the doors and install new locks for them in early August 1798. Lyon advised against the locks the Bank's directors wanted feeling they weren't secure but did install them. Lyon then removed to Delaware as a new wave of yellow fever swept the city. On September 1, 1798, the Bank was robbed with the locks undamaged and suspicion fell on Lyon despite his absence from the city. He spent time in the Walnut Street Jail (shown in the background of the painting) without being formally charged. Ultimately it was proven that a local carpenter was responsible, and a grand jury found the charges against Lyon to be not sufficiently proven. He was released after four grueling months but found it hard to resume his smithing business and turned his focus to fire engines. This was a field in which he excelled providing engines for a number of local companies and the quarantine hospital in Tinicum.

By 1803 Lyon's luck was improving. He remarried – this time his bride was Catherine Taggart and again the ceremony took place at Christ Church. In 1805 he won a suit against the Bank for “malicious prosecution and false imprisonment” and was awarded \$12,000 in damages. His fire engine manufactory was flourishing and he began to acquire property. In 1825 he commissioned John Neagle to paint him at his forge, not as a gentleman but as a workman, a “mechanic.” The portrait, Pat Lyon at the Forge finished in 1826 was on view to the public and ultimately Lyon sold it to the Boston Athenaeum for \$400. Neagle did a second copy at Lyon's request which now hangs in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.* Lyon rescued his reputation and his story was well known to those of the day as he succeeded in elevating the position of the worker. Lyon died in 1829 but his memory lived on. The Mechanic Fire Company, established in 1839, chose this painting as its logo to be incorporated into its parade hats.

Members of fire companies traditionally provided their own hats purchased from the hatter of their choice. There are then subtle differences in the depictions of logos and the skills of the artists who painted them. In this case a paper label affixed to the inside of the crown identified the maker as James Hill, at 207 Callowhill Street. Hill worked from this location from 1857-1861 when he moved to 531 Callowhill Street. He is known for other equally elaborate hats including the Hibernia Fire Company hat that the Contributionship also owns.

In the upper righthand corner of this painting are the initials R.B., possibly those of the artist. There is a Robert Barclay painter listed in the 1858 city directory at 705 Little Pine and a Robert Black painter living in Richmond above Emory.

On the inside of the brim, written on the inside of the brim in green marker: R. Sparks Killed at Battle of Gettysburg and other illegible words. Written in pencil at top of crown "72nd Reg... Robert Sparks member of Mechanic Fire Co No 26 / Killed at Battle of Gettysburg July 2nd 1863".

There was no Robert Sparks living in Philadelphia in the 1850s and 1860s but there was a Richard Sparks, a willow worker, who lived at 1441 Ridge Avenue according to the 1861 Philadelphia City Directory and at 1417 Brown (practically next door to the Mechanic Fire Company) in 1862 although by then Richard George Sparks had enlisted in

the 72nd Pennsylvania Infantry, more commonly known as the Philadelphia Fire Zouave Regiment. Sparks joined on August 10, 1861 for a three-year stint but was mortally wounded at the Battle of Gettysburg on July 3, 1863 according to the muster rolls of the Regiment. His rank at the time of death was Sergeant. His widow Catherine applied for his pension (her application notes he was wounded at the Battle of Gettysburg but died on July 6); they had three children. Despite the wording on the hat, it is most likely that Richard was the owner. The Battle of Gettysburg was a bloody one: 192 men were killed, 10 officers and 182 enlisted men. The regiment erected a memorial in their honor on the battlefield.



*For more information on Pat Lyon's history and his portrait see:
<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/patrick-lyon-1769-1829/>

Carol Smith (Special thanks to Lee Ryan for help with genealogical research)
Curator and Archivist for the Philadelphia Contributionship



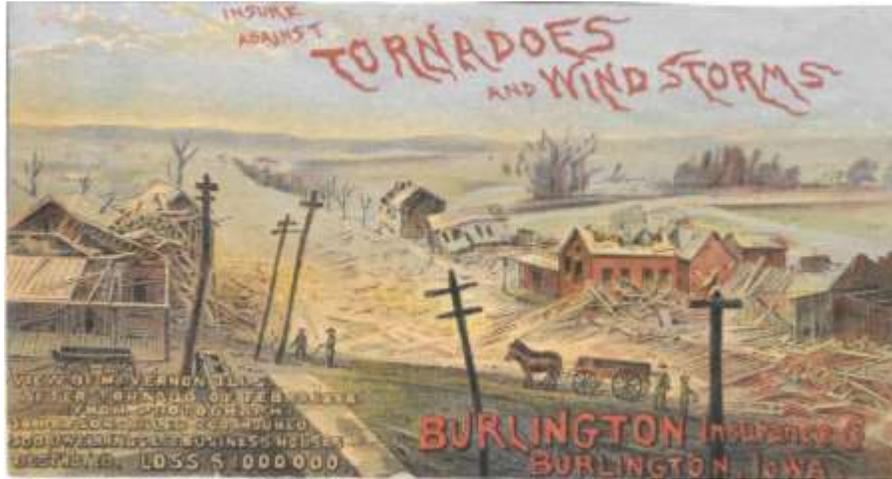
THE ABCs of AMERICAN FIRE MARKS

B is for the Burlington Insurance Company, Burlington, Iowa
Bulau US-BB-1

Refer to the previous articles on the Burlington in the 2004-3 and 2017-2 issues of The Signevierist, which may be found on the FMCA website.

The colorful flyer below depicts the devastating tornado that struck when it cut a path a half-mile wide through the very heart of Mount Vernon, Illinois, on Sunday afternoon February 19, 1888. A few minutes after the tornado, flames burst from the ruins and added more devastation. Aid for the stricken town came from all over the country and the town was completely rebuilt from donations. Rebuilt homes, in some cases, were finer than before the tornado and businesses were even partially reimbursed for their loss of earnings to replenish their goods.

“VIEW OF MT VERNON ILLS/AFTER TORNADO OF FEB. 19, 1888. / (FROM PHOTOGRAPH) / 38 PERSONS KILLED 200 INJURED / 300 DWELLING & BUSINESS HOUSES / DESTROYED. LOSS \$1000000.”



A review of the Burlington's 1888 Annual Statement to the Iowa Insurance Department only lists less than \$65,000 gross losses for the year. It appears the Burlington Insurance Company did not pay much, if any, of the \$1 million loss in Mt. Vernon.

Now that's good underwriting.



THE ABCs of AMERICAN FIRE MARKS

C is for the Charleston Mutual Insurance Company, Charleston, S. C.,
Bulau 62

The Charleston Mutual Insurance Company was incorporated on December 16, 1797 and commenced business in early 1798. Organized as a mutual whose members pledged their own real estate, the incorporators took a huge risk considering Charleston had suffered fires that destroyed large parts of the city in 1740, 1778, and as recently as 1796. Was it optimism or a prayer that the "Badge" adopted by the company depicted a guardian angel hovering over a burning city, sprinkling water onto the fire? Also, note the mark does not include the word "Charleston". Since it was the only mutual insurance company in Charleston, I suppose they thought it superfluous to include "Charleston".

Feeling that the company had not reached its potential, in early 1803 the Charleston Mutual embarked on an advertising campaign to attract new members. First, their operating expenses were low because the president and directors did not receive a salary. Secondly, by comparing themselves to the 1794 similarly Chartered Mutual Insurance Society of Virginia, which had a subscription of \$1,400,000, they pointed out that the cost of insurance would be lower the more members involved.

After a year with little interest, the directors decided on February 16, 1804 to propose amendments that would allow the company to raise \$100,000 capital stock to be added to the existing \$15,600 surplus fund. The new capital would enable the company to compete and insure risks that required limits over their then current \$4,000 maximum. Also included were amendments to reorganize the company to limit liability of the company to "...the capital stock, or whatever may be in the company's fund, at the time such loss happens" and to provide for the payment of two inspectors, secretary, and treasurer.

It is not known whether these changes were adopted, but by November 1805 the company met to consider “discontinuing the benefits of Insurance”, which is a polite way to say discontinue business and retire. While I cannot determine when the company actually dissolved, the stockholders took a year to resolve the distribution of the remaining company funds.

The Old Underwriter

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Newly Discovered Dayton, Ohio Fire Marks

The collection of former member David Musselman, who passed away in August 2019, was auctioned off on August 19th by his family. For those of you not familiar with David, he was a veteran of the US Navy, a collector of fire antiques, and a historian of Dayton and surrounding areas. He retired from the Dayton Fire Department in 1986 as an assistant chief and in his travels personally removed close to 20 marks from homes in the Dayton area. The tin marks were put out for auction at the last minute and sold rapidly so it was difficult, if not impossible, to document any of the marks. After a quick scan I was able to determine that there were 3 undocumented marks in the collection. One of the marks I was able to bid on and win but the other two were sold to buyers that I did not recognize.

Below is a photo of a previously undiscovered fire mark from the Firemen's Insurance Company, Dayton, OH. This will be classified as 292-V-A and the addendum page is attached for anyone interested in printing it out.



Unfortunately, the bottom half of this mark has been repainted, so it is not known if it was done in the original font.

The other two marks that were undocumented were from the Firemen's Insurance company and the Farmers & Merchants Insurance Company. The Firemen's was a very small flat tin mark that had just the word "Firemens" on it, nothing else. The Farmers & Merchants was a much larger tin mark with "Farmers &" in an arc, "Merchants" in a reverse arc, and "Dayton, O." in horizontal lettering along the bottom right. I would ask that everyone please be on the lookout for these marks and if spotted contact myself, or Bob Shea, so that we may properly document them for the addendum.

In addition to the marks at the Musselman auction another Dayton mark was discovered previously at the New York City Fire Museum and has remained undocumented until now. This one is a variant from the Columbia Fire Insurance Company and has been given the number 458-X-1. The page is attached for anyone interested in adding it to their addendum.

Michael Brankowitz

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NEW MEMBERS

Please help me in welcoming our newest members George Spinks, David Rademaker, Rick Halpern, John Cetrino and Andrew Seville. George Spinks is from Kershaw, SC and currently works at the South Carolina State Fire Marshal's Office. He is interested in U.S. fire marks and fire artifacts. David Rademaker is from Summerville, SC and is a retired insurance advisor. His interests include U.S. fire marks, English fire marks, and old insurance company signs. Rick Halpern is from Clayton, MO and currently works at Daniel and Henry Insurance Agency. He is interested in old insurance company signs and was an acquaintance of the late Mort Werner. John Cetrino is from Boston, MA and works for the city as a firefighter. He is interested in fire marks, match safes, glass paperweights, and fire artifacts. Last but not least, Andrew Seville is affiliated with the Davis Library at St. John's University, which took over the College of Insurance in New York City. The Davis Library has an extensive collection of fire marks, insurance signs, and other insurance related memorabilia. Welcome to the FMCA!

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What company issued that door-plate????

"If people will name children John Smith they cannot expect to wholly escape the consequences when we read in our morning paper that John has been committed to the Tombs on a charge of burglary, and wonder if it is the John we know so well. Over in Philadelphia they have an affectionate regard for the memory of Penn, and they have a Penn fire and a Penn life insurance company, and a Pennsylvania life and a Pennsylvania fire company, and they are apt to get mixed. Only the other day we heard the Pennsylvania Fire had failed; next day it was said to be the Penn Fire, and it turns out that it was neither, only some ambitious reporter, thinking the failure of the National was scarcely sensation enough, tacked on two or three more companies by way of making his item more interesting. At any rate, if either of the Penns or the sylvanias have failed, they are unaware of the fact, and are going on just as though they had not. Still if one of them had failed, we could never have relied on the associated press to tell us which one, and so the door-plate would have proved very annoying to the survivors."



Notes from the President

Attention Members!!! There are a few exciting topics that FMCA needs your help with:

1) The 2020 Auction is now posted on our website. Some lots opened on the 8th if you were not aware, but the majority of the lots open on October 13th. Linda and Bryan have worked very hard to make this happen so please log on to our website and BID!!!!!! There are a ton of great items and we need to make this a success!

2) I am currently working on a project to get more FMCA members involved. This will be a new Rarity Guide that focuses mainly on Tin fire marks. More information to come in our next newsletter but I need some help. I'm currently accumulating a list of tin marks in museums and have a good head start but I need to see if any members have contacts at any of the following:

- a) The Baltimore Equitable Society
- b) The Hartford (previously the Hartford Fire Insurance Company)
- c) The Aetna Insurance Company

I know all three of these organizations have had significant collections of fire marks at one point in their history so I need to see if I can talk to a curator or other contact to get specifics. Please email me at mbranko24@mac.com if you can help.

Michael Brankowitz

