



The Traditions and Mission of the Fire Service

by Rick Lasky

**This chapter provides required knowledge items for the following
NFPA Standard 1001 Job Performance Requirements:**

FFI 5.1.1

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- Identify important historical figures and their relation to the fire service
- Describe what it means to be a firefighter
- List at least three fire service-related traditions
- Understand your commitment to being a firefighter

INTRODUCTION

When you look at today's fire service—our apparatus, tools, equipment, and technology—it's hard to imagine how it was way back when. Look at pictures from the olden days or read history books and you'll be amazed at what firefighters used. Considering that they had to carry almost everything to fires, including the first fire pump, we have made amazing advances. We've moved from fire buckets and **bucket brigades** to firefighters pulling their engines, hose tenders, or ladder tenders behind them, to horses pulling steam fire engines (fig. 1-1). Back then, more than just prestige came with saying one was a volunteer or paid firefighter. Firefighters knew they were making a commitment, changing their lifestyle, and joining a family. There was nothing like it.



Fig. 1-1. Horse-drawn steam fire engines were used from the 1860s to the 1920s.

EARLY VOLUNTEERS

There was a time when most volunteer firefighters were socially established or of affluence. Famous volunteer firefighters included George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, even Benedict Arnold. Firefighters were the *who's who* of the community, anyone of importance, and especially those who wanted to climb politically or socially. Let's not forget Benjamin Franklin, often called the Father of the American Fire Service (fig. 1–2). Franklin was born on January 17, 1706. He was the first American diplomat, an ambassador, storyteller, published scientist, postmaster general, inventor, and economist. He organized the first lending library, medical center, scientific society, philosophical society, volunteer fire department, and fire insurance company. He invented the lightning rod, bifocals, the static electric generator, and the Franklin stove. He was the only American founding father who signed all four major documents that established American independence: the Declaration of Independence, the treaty with France, the treaty with England, and the Constitution. (Punishment for signing these documents if caught by the British was hanging.) Showing bravery, intelligence, wit, creativity, and a will to make the world better, Franklin exhibited the personality traits of a firefighter.

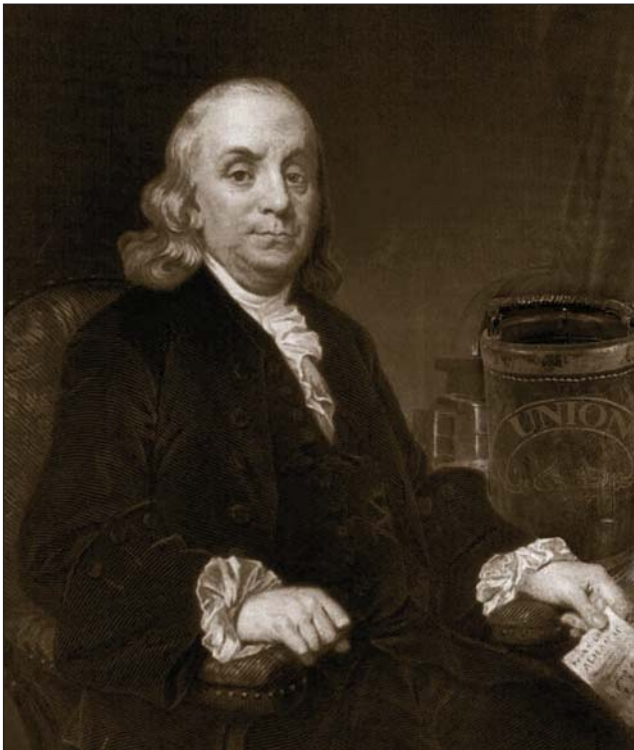


Fig. 1–2. Benjamin Franklin, one of our most revered founding fathers, created America's first fire company.

GLORY DAYS

There was a glamour associated with the fire service. How one's firehouse looked, the detail given to a fire engine, and artwork associated with one's speaking trumpet or company crest were all areas of pride (fig. 1–3). **Musters** and contests determined who had the best fire company, who could get water first, and whose fire stream could go the farthest. All created exciting competition, but sometimes tussles between competing fire companies resulted. Nevertheless, whenever the bell rang, a runner or torchbearer shouted as firefighters ran down the street pulling their equipment to a fire. Residents, business owners, and children gave in to the excitement of watching their firefighters.



Fig. 1–3. The first fire trumpet, or speaking horn, was introduced in 1749 in New York City for fire department officers to amplify their voices. The first “working” trumpets (used at fire scenes) were made of toleware and later made of brass. Presentation or “parade” trumpets were nickel- or silver-plated (as seen in this photograph) or even solid silver or glass. By the 1800s they were only used for ceremonies. The use of trumpets as the insignia of rank is one of our oldest traditions.

With time, the prestige placed upon the fire service by the public began to splinter and fragment. The gallantry of horse-drawn fire engines racing down cobblestone streets, their bells ringing, and the seriousness on firefighters' faces meant a little less to those of high society. Many still held the fire department in high regard, but growing numbers considered firefighting a profession for the poor or those in need of a job. Firefighter and police officer wages were some of the lowest.

BIRTH OF THE MODERN FIRE SERVICE

So began the filling of firefighting positions by people who were not looking for financial gains but rather community service. Those who volunteered at local fire departments soon realized their commitments. When the bell rang, a firefighter was expected to stop everything to help others. Those who joined the fire service to provide a family income realized that a regular paycheck was not necessarily a big paycheck. The fire service has historically fought for every penny to run operations and, in some cases, survive. Firefighters had to be creative in budgeting and acquiring funds to protect those they swore to serve.

FIREGROUND NOTE

Our mission is very clear: to be there for people when they really need us.

As a city's population grew, so did the need to properly and safely protect those who lived there. Civilian and business populations grew steadily, but fire department budgets remained the same or decreased. North American fire departments often found themselves fighting for better equipment and more staffing—a fight we still wage. One case was in New York City. Chief Edward F. Croker served as chief of the Fire Department of the City of New York from 1899 to 1911 (fig. 1–4). When faced with budget and manpower cuts, Croker wrote and read the following statement to the city powers:

I have no ambition in the world but one, and that is to be a fireman. The position may, in the eyes of some, appear to be a lowly one; but we who know the work which a fireman has to do believe that his is a noble calling. There is an adage which states that 'Nothing can be destroyed except by fire.' We strive to preserve from destruction the wealth of the world, which is the product of the industry of men, necessary for the comfort of both the rich and the poor. We are the defenders from fire, of the art, which has

beautified the world, the product of the genius of men and the means of refinement of mankind. But, above all, our proudest endeavor is to save lives of men—the work of God himself. Under the impulse of such thoughts, the nobility of the occupation thrills us and stimulates us to deeds of daring, even at the supreme sacrifice. Such considerations may not strike the average mind, but they are sufficient to fill to the limit our ambition in life and to make us serve the general purpose of human society.



Fig. 1–4. Chief Edward F. Croker

That statement, though dated, still serves to define the passion associated with being a firefighter. “I have no ambition in the world but one, and that is to be a fireman.” Man, oh man, that is the kind of desire you need in your chest to be good at what we do. This job isn’t for everybody. *It takes someone special to be a firefighter.*

WHAT IS THE FIRE SERVICE?

FFI 5.1.1 But what do the words “fire service” mean to you? What does the word “firefighter” mean? The difference in definitions between a civilian and a firefighter might surprise you. Many times civilians ask us what we do, and often we explain about fighting fires, rescuing people, etc. But what is it really all about? How did we get here? First, if you’re not willing to examine our heritage, nothing else about the fire service will make sense to you. That’s the only way to identify what we’re all about. But the fire service has evolved into more than fighting fires. We’re trained in emergency medical services, hazardous materials, specialized rescue, weapons of mass destruction, and just about everything else you can come up with if it involves helping people. We have become journeymen of public service.

The fire service is based on something bigger than any of us realized when we entered our careers as firefighters. Whether you’ll serve as a volunteer, paid-on-call, or paid firefighter, you’ll realize that it takes a special person with special qualities to do what we do. This person must dig deeply into our history to research where we began and how we got here. This person must be willing to protect our heritage, defend our fire service family, and bring the honor that the job deserves. (See fig. 1–5.)



Fig. 1–5. Christian Michael Otto Regenhard, 28, was a probationary firefighter on September 11th, 2001 and was one of the 343 members of the FDNY killed at the World Trade Center. Pictured here are his mother, father, and sister at his memorial service held in St. Patrick’s Cathedral. As a legacy to Christian, the Regenhard family created the “Skyscraper Safety Campaign” which advocates for safer high-rises through better building codes as well as improved emergency responder safety and communications. Will you study the 9/11 disaster and other emergency responses where firefighters have made the supreme sacrifice, and will you learn from them? (Courtesy of Susan Watts/New York Daily News)

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE A FIREFIGHTER?

So what does it take to be a firefighter? What kind of person? It takes a person who lives within a system of values built upon family. Everything we do in the fire service has to do with family, whether it’s protecting someone’s home, children, belongings, or business. Every time we answer a call, it has to do with family. Now, that can be a slight problem for those who don’t live by a set of values. These are the people who constantly seem to be banging into walls. They blame others and have excuses for everything. Fortunately for the fire service, it doesn’t take long for these rarities to realize that family is the foundation of our success. They support it or move on. To expand on that success, you must expand your value system to include pride associated with ownership,

honor bound to loyalty, and integrity, which requires you to be honest and a person of character. Once you grab these values, good things start to happen.

As a rookie firefighter, you must understand that you create your own legacy from the moment you walk into the firehouse. It's hard to make a second first impression. Ideally, you've led a good life so far and haven't muddied your resume by doing something that "seemed like the thing to do" when you were young. Ideally, you've been hanging with the right people. Constantly ask yourself, "Why did I get into the fire service, and why did I want to be a firefighter?" If your answers are to help people, to make a difference, to be part of a special family, then you're on the right track. Remember three things to be successful:

1. Do what's right.
2. Do your best.
3. Treat others the way you want to be treated.

Doing what's right means being a person of integrity. *Doing your best* means giving the job the effort it deserves and remembering why you chose this profession. *Treating people the way you would want to be treated* means treating everyone like family. People are watching. You might think otherwise, but they are. Show your fire department that you will do what it takes to be part of their team and family. Prove that they made the right choice in bringing you on as a volunteer or paid firefighter. Never lose that vision or passion.

You should have one other passion: **safety**. Make no mistake about it—firefighting is a dangerous profession. While vast improvements in equipment and procedures have been made over the last several years, injuries and death are still a part of the business. It is up to you to practice safe habits and to look out for the safety of others. Safety is the job of *every* firefighter.

FIRE SERVICE TRADITIONS

Some fire service traditions go back to its birth in North America. The traditions we must examine created passion for the fire service. Wetting down a new apparatus, pushing out an old rig and pushing in a new one, and opening a new firehouse all have importance. The swearing in and badge pinnings are just a start. It's the first step. Company logos, insignias, and tools all require understanding of their needs and importance.

How about our uniform? Do you know what it represents? It's disappointing when a fellow firefighter at a funeral says, "It's a shame. It seems we only wear our **Class A uniforms** for funerals." My usual reply is, "You're right. It is a shame . . . shame on you. That uniform is not just a funeral uniform. It represents our profession, our heritage. It stands as a symbol for what we are all about and for those who bled, sweat, and went before us. It stands for something bigger than we are. It represents something special. It's a uniform of which few are unfamiliar. When someone sees you standing straight and proud in that uniform, he or she knows you are firefighter, one of America's bravest" (fig. 1–6).



Fig. 1–6. The Class A uniform represents our profession, heritage, and all who came before us.

WHERE DO YOU GO FROM HERE?

So now what? Where do you go from here? Now that you're a new firefighter, what's your next step? You are taking that first step in climbing the mountain we call the fire service. It's full of challenges, tasks, and experiences. But each step comes with a view so awesome that, at times, it's indescribable. Sometimes that feeling will be challenged. Now and then, it will come from someone close to you in your own firehouse.

While addressing a rookie or probationary school academy graduation, I often have the candidates sit right in the front row. I ask them to close their eyes and feel that feeling of uncontrollable excitement, the one that fills them with energy. After all that time spent on classroom work, the drill field, and the physical fitness, it's graduation day. "Where will I go next?" "Where will I go to work?" "Which firehouse will I be assigned?" "Which rig?" "The engine, the ladder truck, a rescue, or

the ambulance?” “Who will be my partner, and who will be my officer?” The excitement is overwhelming. You can feel it throughout your body.

Then I ask them to flash forward about two years when they're sitting at the firehouse, around the kitchen table, or on drill night complaining about the chief or their pay. *What happened to them? What changed? Or maybe the better question is whom are they hanging around? What happened to their passion? What happened to their love for the job? Who poisoned that feeling?* There's one thing I've never understood about firefighters. There is not a firefighter alive who would let a burglar break into his or her home to steal things. There isn't a firefighter who would let somebody break into his or her car and steal from them without wanting the police to arrest, prosecute, and hang the person by his toenails. But firefighters let somebody reach into their hearts and steal their passion. When I was going through such a time, a friend told me that I was being weak and letting the other side win. He said people who are weak let other people steal from them. Never allow anyone to reach into your heart and steal your passion about this wonderful profession. Defend it with everything you have. Don't ever let go of that feeling.

WHAT NEXT?

As you work through this first phase of your firefighting career, ask yourself the following questions. Allow them to guide you into and through this journey.

1. Are you ready for the challenge?
2. If you are, are you ready for the reward the challenge brings?
3. Are you ready to protect what was accomplished by those before us to make the fire service great?
4. Are you ready to defend and protect our fire service family?
5. Will you remember that you represent all of us, in and out of the firehouse, on and off duty? Whether you wear a Maltese Cross on your shirt or not, people will know that you are one of us and base their opinions of all of us by your actions. They will expect you to be a professional. Do not tarnish our image.
6. Are you willing to commit to a lifelong pursuit of continuing education, hands-on training, and mentoring those who come after you with that knowledge and those skills? Will you show them the way?
7. Will you commit to memory that “Never forgetting means never forgetting”?
8. Can you commit to a life led by values such as pride, honor, and integrity and allow those to be served by a foundation on family values?
9. Will you remember to treat retired firefighters with honor and respect, remember what they did for us, and always make them feel welcome in your firehouse? They earned it.
10. Will you train as if your life depends on it? It does.
11. Will you be a brother or sister to our fire service family? It takes a 24-hour, seven-day commitment. It's not a part-time thing.
12. Will you remember what you owe the public, and that the public doesn't owe you jack? When you raised your right hand and took an oath, pinned on that badge, or put on that fire helmet, you became a public servant.
13. Will you develop a list of mentors, people who will steer, train, and develop you, and get you fired up about the job?
14. Will you treat your firehouse like it is your home?
15. Will you take care of your apparatus, tools, and equipment? Remember, it's not just an image thing. Think about it.
16. Will you brag about the fire service both off duty and on duty?
17. Will you be that person of integrity and of character?
18. Will you show up on time for your shift or drill night? It says a lot about you and whether we can count on you. And if you're sick, stay home. If you're not, come to work!
19. Will you wear your uniform and be proud of it? It stands for a lot more than any one person. It represents our heritage.

20. Will you celebrate and participate enthusiastically in the ceremonies and traditions that promote and protect our fire service?
21. Will you always remain physically and mentally prepared to do whatever it takes?
22. Will you become a student of our fire service history and protect our heritage?
23. Will you adhere to the following rules to combat complacency?
 - a. Every time we go out the door, we're going to a fire. No matter what, never let down your guard and always be prepared for the fight.
 - b. When we arrive on the scene, there is no fire only if *we* say there is no fire. Listen to civilians, but don't allow yourself to be snookered or fooled.
 - c. There is nobody in the building only if *we* say no one is in the building. Even when occupants are standing outside, we still search the building for fire and occupants who might be unaccounted for or overlooked.
 - d. The fire is not out unless *we* say it's out.
24. Will you build relationships within your community, city, or township?
25. If you become a company officer, will you lead with distinction, remember it takes courage to lead, and make decisions because they are right, not popular? Popular decisions hurt and kill firefighters. Be their leader first, then be their buddy.
26. If you make it to chief, will you always remember where you came from?
27. Will you learn from the past and study line-of-duty deaths so history won't repeat itself?
28. Will you leave it a little better for the next guy?
29. Will you profess that the fire service is the greatest profession in the world?
30. Will you be as prepared as possible and train, train, train?
31. Will you think safety, safety, safety?
32. Will you do everything you can so everyone goes home?

Will you agree to live up to the high standards of being a firefighter?

If you can't or don't think you can make that commitment, then don't. It's probably time for you to make a different choice. Not everyone can be a firefighter. If you want the kind of life that is dedicated to protecting men, women, children, and their possessions, then welcome, brother or sister!

Good luck, be safe, and enjoy the journey.



LESSON FROM THE FIREGROUND

My love for the job came from people such as Chief Jack MacCastland who taught my Firefighter I class when I was 18 years old. Mac said, “You want to be a good firefighter? You need to know building construction and fire behavior. You have to know how the building is going to react with the fire and how the fire is going to react with the building. Anyone can go out there and chop, but you still need to know building construction and fire behavior.” How very true. The first time I saw Mac was at a fire. Here was this big guy, leather helmet all bent up in the front, pulling drywall with a pike pole in one hand and using his chin to open and close the nozzle with the other hand. I said, “Man, I want to be like this guy.”

Then there was Chief Eddy Enright who taught me about caring for and respecting your guys. He’d always say, “Look for their positives, Rick. Anyone can pick out the negatives. You do that and the negatives tend to go away. Catch them doing something right. It’s easy to catch them doing something wrong.”

One of my best friends, Chief Tom Freeman, one of the smartest firefighters I’ve ever met, also shared his knowledge with me. He said things such as, “A good officer or incident commander is the one who can predict his next alarm. Any mope in a white helmet can stand outside and handle what he’s got right now and burn it to the ground, but it’s the guy who can predict his next alarm, knows when he needs more resources before he runs out, where the fire’s going, and can think out of that box who does well.”

MY POINT

Perhaps the most important thing my mentors taught me was that to be a good firefighter you must have core values such as pride, honor, and integrity. And every last bit of it starts with integrity.

Rick Lasky

QUESTIONS

1. _____ is often called the Father of the American Fire Service.
2. What are some of the areas that firefighters need to be trained in to be proficient at their jobs?
3. Throughout your career as a firefighter, you should remember three things to be successful. Name them.
4. When should we wear Class A uniforms?
5. Is everyone cut out to be a firefighter? What questions can we ask ourselves to be sure we are ready to be firefighters?