Harry: Come, Mose, let's be off.

I'm goin' to have a speech from the landlord—den for a
knock-down and a drag-out—den I retires like a gentleman.

—A Glance at New York

Benjamin Baker’s 1848 melodrama, A Glance at New York, launched the career of the character Mose Humphreys, also known as “Mose the Bowery B’hoy,” “Fighting Mose,” and “Mose, Hero of a Hundred Muses.”¹ Mose was a seegar-smoking, rowdy volunteer fire laddie who emerged from an otherwise ordinary production to magnetize the country in over one thousand performances in the 1850s.²

Mose was a fireman who liked to fight. In his first appearance on the stage he professes, “I’ve made up my mind not to run wid der machine any more,” because the chief engineer had hit him “over the goard wid a trump­pet” for insubordination. Of course, he cannot resist the lure of fire fighting for long. “I did think yesterday I’d leave de machine, but I can’t do it; I love that ingine better than my dinner.”³

In A Glance at New York Mose fights, or threatens to fight, in every scene in which he appears. He does not fight indiscriminately, however. He fights thieves and politicians, loafers and landlords, but is gentle with
the naive country boy, George. "I wouldn't hurt him for the world," Mose promises. His fighting also never interferes with his duty as a fireman. He is an honorable, fearless, and notably masculine figure. When his educated and refined friends decide to infiltrate a women's bowling league in drag and persuade him to come along, Mose betrays them and his own masculinity by kissing a matron, who quickly forgives him his transgression.

Despite Mose's own claim, it is not his fire engine but the fighting that really binds him to his volunteer company. Within his fire company, Mose reigns supreme, respected for his ability in a "knock-down and a drag-out," as well as for his ability with a fire hose. The volunteer fire company provides Mose with the perfect forum for his pugilistic prowess, and it is the respect of his fellow firemen that allows him to retire "like a gentleman" after a fight. Within this fictional and very popular world of volunteer firefighters, honor and violence, justice and masculinity are joined together and personified by Mose.

Mose's impact on the nonfictional world of the real urban volunteer firefighter was intense and lasting. As urban citizens first began to consider paying firemen to fight fires, rather than relying on volunteers, the image of the rowdy, violent volunteer was put to use to justify the expense of municipal forces. As the Mose character grew in popularity, so too did the belief that volunteer firemen were inveterate fighters. Many audiences wondered if Mose, "one of the fire b'hoys, full of fun, frolic and fighting," was an appropriate stage presence in cities troubled by actual firemen's battles. Indeed, a national increase in violence among urban firemen was noted, discussed, and condemned by more law-abiding citizens in the 1840s and 1850s. While Mose was celebrated for his fighting, real volunteer firefighters in Baltimore, St. Louis, and San Francisco, the three cities examined here, saw their institutions dismantled as a result of their own perceived violence. In the late 1850s, as Mose's fame reached its peak, reformers agreed that urban volunteer firefighters posed a serious threat to public order and that firemen stood outside the law, answerable to no power greater than their own. While Mose could have a "knock-down and a drag-out" and then retire "like a gentleman," the firemen of St. Louis, San Francisco, and Baltimore found it impossible to fight and then retire with dignity and reputation intact, in part because of the fictional fireman.

This essay will explore the context and extent of violence among volunteer firemen in nineteenth-century urban America by closely examining
when and why firemen in Baltimore, St. Louis, and San Francisco chose to fight. Although firemen in all three cities were reputed to be “violent,” these firemen did not share a uniform honor code, nor did they engage in identical modes of behavior. The paradigmatic form of fireman violence was the fire “riot,” in David Grimsted’s definition, an incident “where a number of people group together to enforce their will immediately, by threatening or perpetrating injury to people or property outside legal procedures but without intending to challenge the general structure of society.” Such a riot occurred at a fire or alarm of fire only once in San Francisco, twice in a short period in St. Louis, and countless times throughout the tainted history of Baltimore’s volunteer fire department. This article will consider why firemen fought one another in the mid-nineteenth century and why the public reacted to fighting firemen as it did. Did firemen in different cities really exhibit similar behavioral patterns? Did urban volunteer firemen share a masculine culture in which regular acts of violence were sanctioned and necessary? If not, why did urban citizens in the late antebellum period believe this to be true?

The Firemen of Mob-Town

Historians have identified the middle decades of the nineteenth century as a time of disorientation for urban men. Industrialization and the decline of the apprentice system increasingly forced working-class men to acknowledge the limits of their economic opportunity, whereas middle-class men were forced to balance home and work environments that were sharply at variance. Masculinity itself had reached a point of transition for both groups, and specific class-related social activities emerged. Middle-class men joined literary clubs and temperance and other reform organizations. Or, as Mark Carnes has shown, they joined fraternal orders with rituals that promoted “emotional transition from an identification from feminine domesticity to the relentlessly aggressive and competitive demands of the masculine work place.”

Working-class male culture, in contrast, was increasingly organized around drinking, gambling, theaters, whoring, and, above all, physical violence. Urban workers repaired from their anonymous workplaces to saloons, where they found the camaraderie and respect that was missing from their jobs. They also found fistfights, dogfights, and rat-baiting contests organized by saloon keepers as entertainment. One way working-class
men earned the respect of their peers was through their physical strength and ability to dominate others. Indeed, physical violence was central to urban working-class masculinity, which celebrated bare-knuckle boxing as well as less orchestrated exhibitions of virility. Personal acts of physical violence were common within saloon culture and also among working-class street gangs. By midcentury, both working- and middle-class men had developed masculine cultures that offered approval and respect distinct from any performance in the workplace. These two visions of masculinity were increasingly opposed to one another.8

The volunteer fire department offered men a third option, a vigorous masculine culture that combined aspects of working and middle-class culture with cultural forms singular to the fire department. In a period when leisure activities were increasingly segregated by class, the three volunteer fire departments considered here all contained memberships that were heterogeneous with regard to class and ethnicity. In Baltimore and St. Louis, volunteer fire departments were primarily composed of men who practiced low white-collar occupations: clerks, shopkeepers, small businessmen, and those laborers who practiced skilled trades. In San Francisco, the volunteer fire department was substantially more elite in occupational profile, but welcomed many skilled and some unskilled laborers. In all three cities, a higher proportion of volunteer firemen practiced white-collar professions than did the population at large up until the decade before municipalization. The volunteer firefighter was just as likely to be a clerk or merchant as he was to be a butcher, like Mose.9

Volunteer fire companies offered a heterogeneous membership some of the trappings of the middle class—fine houses, libraries, even an occasional piano—along with the physicality and excitement of working-class culture. The volunteer fire departments of urban America developed a vision of masculinity that was accessible and appealing to men of different social strata. Firefighter masculinity lacked the constraints and hierarchies of middle-class cultural forms and celebrated physicality within narrower parameters than working-class culture. Firemen held banquets, tea parties, and balls like middle-class men, but they had no elaborate rituals like those of middle-class fraternal organizations during this period. The ideal of decorum prevailed even when its practice failed. What the fire department offered men was an opportunity to race, parade, wear a uniform, and match strength with other like-minded men, regardless of occupation.

In Baltimore, this masculine subculture produced and supported ex-
tensive violence, but not because it became a working-class institution. Historians of the fire departments of Philadelphia and New York have attributed the violence among firemen in those cities to transformations in the class and ethnic compositions of fire-fighting forces. In both cities, “perfectly respectable” departments were altered by the coming of industrialism and population growth. The departments came under the control of working-class rowdies, who engaged in increasingly violent expressions of their competitiveness until an exasperated public saw no choice but to replace them. In Philadelphia, in the 1830s, “intercompany rivalries were still relatively benign.” A decade later they had developed into “brutal clashes between warring white traditionalists.” By the 1850s arsonists were burning down rival firehouses, and firemen preferred to shoot at each other rather than fight with more primitive and traditional weapons, such as brickbats or fists.10

Although this decline narrative may accurately represent the history of the volunteer fire departments of Philadelphia and New York, none of the fire departments considered here experienced this trajectory. Not only did the heterogeneous composition of these departments differ from that of Philadelphia, where, we are told, the white-collar workers fled in terror from their companies, but the actions of the volunteers differed as well. Baltimore’s volunteer fire department certainly did not conform to the precedent of New York and Philadelphia. Baltimore’s department maintained a heterogeneous membership with regard to ethnicity as well as class. As late as 1858, the year the volunteer department was disbanded, 42 percent of active Baltimore firemen locatable in the city directory were listed as either owning shops or practicing white-collar occupations. Eight percent of the firemen were identified as high white collar, such as merchants, doctors, lawyers, and manufacturers. These figures do not include honorary members of the companies, those members who supported the department financially but were not required to fight fires themselves. Nor do these figures include veteran members, who had served seven years of active duty and now held emeritus status. Honorary and veteran members of Baltimore’s department in many cases identified themselves with volunteer fire fighting as vigorously as any young volunteer fireman, and they were even more likely to practice white-collar occupations than were the active members.11

Baltimore’s department differed from the Philadelphia department in another way: it supported a culture of violence almost from its origins.
Unlike Philadelphia, Baltimore had no Benjamin Franklin to set the tone for their eighteenth-century department, and troubles in Baltimore started early. Between 1763, when the Mechanical Fire Company was formed, and 1782, when a group of firemen split off and formed the Union Company, there was peace in Baltimore. The motto of the second company, “In union there is strength,” was quickly belied, however. According to an early source, “rivalry sprung up between the two companies,” and the disaffected met in 1785 to form a third company, which “with a view of reconciling all the then difficulty” took the name Friendship.

The first surviving fire company records in Baltimore document disputes. A meeting of the Mechanical Company in 1813 condemned the lack of orderliness at fires and “great neglect of duty” by the company. One of the earliest entries in the Union Company’s ledger is a resignation letter from a member who complained of being “badly insulted” by another member. By the 1830s Baltimore had gained the sobriquet “Mob-town” because of its frequent riots, some of which originated within the fire department. Both newspapers and company ledgers document serious volunteer troubles, including a battle between two companies at the scene of a fire, shootings, and arson.

Despite attempts in the early 1830s by both the firemen and the city to bring the firemen’s behavior under control, violence worsened. Although fights seemed always to center around the firehouse, or fire itself, firemen pointed to outsiders as the cause of the violence. In the 1830s three firehouses were torched by unidentified arsonists. Riots were nearly weekly occurrences. Yet the press failed to identify firemen as the perpetrators. “When shall we be able to pass a Sabbath day without being called upon to record some act of disgraceful violation of the peace, some daring outrage amounting almost to bloodshed?” asked the Baltimore Sun on January 16, 1838, after one of these riots. “Not, we fear, until the originators of these riots, the master spirits who excite the evil passions of gangs of thoughtless, unruly boys, and lead them on step by step from simple brawls to riot, arson, and murder, receive their just dues.” The Sun did not suggest that the master spirits might be firemen.

Firemen maintained that they were blameless in these doings, but fire companies began internal reforms. Company members signed pledges that they would discontinue the use of “ardent spirits at fires” and that they would “refrain from giving any cause of offense to the members of
any other company." Rather, they would take care to remember "the honour of the company" of which they were members and the "character of the Firemen of Baltimore."16

Much of the problem, however, lay in this question of honor. It was unclear whether a volunteer fireman's code of honor would be better served by fighting or not fighting. The ledger of the Mechanical Company in 1839 commends the Independent Fire Company for attacking the Patapsco Company (the Mechanical Company's particular enemies) because of the latter company's "continued disorderly conduct, and the low character of the man of fellows of which it is composed—a disgrace to the Fire Department of Baltimore."17 In the eyes of the Mechanical Company it was perfectly all right for an honorable company to attack a company made dishonorable by its own fighting.

The Volunteer Fire Department Standing Committee also considered honor a legitimate reason to start a fight. "It will not be maintained," the committee declared, "that any company should remain quiet and permit itself to be taunted, insulted, or mistreated."18 In fact, members of the committee were not above such concerns themselves. According to fire company notes, in 1840 a fracas was instigated by one of the members of the committee whose "taunts and vociferous noises" were sufficient to start a riot on a "most beautiful and moonlit night!"19

This tacit recognition of an honor code that condoned violence under certain circumstances helps explain the great number of disputes brought before the standing committee. In the highly charged and competitive world of antebellum fire fighting, insults lurked everywhere. The first years of the committee, between 1834 and 1840, saw an astounding array of cases, from relatively minor infractions involving racing, or one company throwing water upon another, to serious threats, bludgeonings, theft, and "general outrages by firemen." The United Fire Company ran their hose carriage into the Washington Company's engine. Was it deliberate? Unclear. Was it reason for a fight? Yes. Was the threat "to split your head open" made by a member of the Columbian Company simply high spirits, or was it an insult to the member of the Deptford Company against whom it was made?20

Committee members clearly felt ambivalent about firefighter violence. They recognized that sometimes fighting was justified, and they were firemen themselves. They rarely reached any conclusions. Subcommittees
were often appointed to look into disputes, but they do not seem to have reported back. Even when evidence was forthcoming, the committee was loath to lay blame within the department or to pronounce any serious punishment, perhaps out of concern for the department's public image. After all, a volunteer fire company survived on the goodwill and financial contributions of its neighbors. It was not in the interest of the standing committee to make violent conflicts more visible than they already were. The same parties reappear with similar complaints. The New Market Company, generally considered to be a "bad lot," was accused of "using implements and carrying clubs and weapons not required by their duties, and frequently applied to purposes subversive of the public peace." In one particular 1838 battle against the Union Fire Company, New Market members or their "runners" killed two men. Yet no one was punished, and the firemen continued fighting. It is unclear whether the committee was astounded or resigned that two deaths did nothing to tame the disorder in the fire department. Indeed, the committee noted, "Riots, turbulence, disgraceful conduct and personal violence have since repeatedly occurred. The name of the fireman has almost become a badge of obloquy, and an emblem of disorder." Fire company records show that the deaths made little impact on the firemen and that even firemen who condemned "disgraceful" companies could still take a lurid pleasure in the violence of others. "The Patapsco and Friendship came in collision and ended in a glorious fight," the secretary of the Mechanical Fire Company wrote in his ledger on August 22, 1840.

The standing committee must have done an excellent job of keeping volunteer difficulties private. Although the name of the fireman might be on the way to becoming a "badge of obloquy" far into the 1840s, the press refused to locate the source of rioting among the firemen. Perhaps this was due to the firemen's capable performance at a series of large fires or the role the firemen played in controlling an 1835 bank riot. In any case, although firemen engaged in frequent and extensive episodes of violence, they were not publicly identified as violent during the 1830s. In 1838 the Baltimore Sun clearly attempted to exonerate the firemen of any charges of misbehavior. Although the paper acknowledged that some people once suspected that the firemen themselves were starting riots, "this opinion . . . is nearly exploded." The Sun offered an alternative explanation, elaborating and expanding on the favorite excuse of the firemen: "We say the cause is this: Baltimore City, like all other large places, contains some five
or six dozen flash fellows — fancy rattlers — men who are a sort of half and half—who dress with more ease than grace, and now and then with more grace than ease: a species of nondescript, being neither professional men, mechanics, or laborers—a something, nothing, a kind of wandering beings.” After elaborating upon the details of these “confidence men,” who wander from eating house to tavern bar, flashing showy jewelry and drinking late into the evening, the paper revealed their fiendish designs. Intent upon fighting, “according to their own conception, a sort of civil drubbing, which some particular man, or set of men, has in some way earned,” their intention is conveyed “to the various engine houses (at most of these in the evening are collected large gangs of half-grown boys); they hear of the coming battle with the greatest joy, and off they scamper to the battle ground.” The paper concluded that it was the responsibility of parents and masters to keep children and apprentices at home late at night and that no one under the age of twenty should be allowed to collect in gangs or at engine houses.

Outside agitators did help incite firemen’s riots. According to fire company minutes, rabble-rousers might shout inflammatory remarks at the firemen or throw bricks and stones at them during or after fires. Often these fights originated in political disputes between Whig and Democratic political clubs, which associated at the privately owned firehouses or at taverns near the firehouses. On August 18, 1844, the secretary of the Mechanical Fire Company reported that the engine of the Vigilant Company was “seized by a party of rowdies, who threw their hose in the Falls. The Columbia Carriage was likewise seized and partially destroyed. Beautiful Conduct!! Brick bats flew like hail, pistols were fired in every direction.” This company believed that rowdies, and not firemen, were the source of their troubles. The secretary of this company was clearly concerned that “there is now no safety for those that are well disposed,” and he predicted that “something must be done or the department will be in the hands of these rowdies completely!”

But firemen were not the innocent victims of rowdiness and political difference. The firemen also contributed to these scenes, and “disgraceful fights” in which “axes, torches, knives and pistols were freely used” were attributed by firemen to their brethren as well as to “rowdies” who might or might not be connected to the department. Yet in reports of riots at fires and false alarms in the 1830s and 1840s, firemen were rarely identified. On the rare occasions that combatants were arrested, they
were reported to be “youths not believed to be firemen” and unidentified belligerents. Clearly, many of these individuals, arrested or not, were firemen. A particularly disgraceful fight occurred on Easter 1844 after a false alarm. The ledger of the Mechanical Fire Company commented that on this occasion, “Easter morning trial of apparatus turns into a fight in which members of all companies participated.” The *Baltimore American* stated conservatively on April 9 that they “observed a general melee going on, but as to who was at fault, or who were the belligerents, we could not ascertain.” In 1838 legislation was passed making the intentional injury of a fireman a crime punishable by a month’s imprisonment.

A combination of internal reforms and a new municipal “minor law” banning minors from companies in 1844 worked to dispel both the boys and riots. The secretary of the Mechanical Fire Company commented with some amazement in April 1845 that the recent legislation “is found fully to effect the object for which it is designed—scarcely a boy is seen with any of the Reel Suctions. . . . A most admirable regulation and calculated to do away with the broils and riots which have disgraced the Fire Department for so long past.” But the minor law was soon ignored, and by the summer of 1847, rioting had again become “so bad that it is dangerous for peaceable persons to go to fires, for fear of being shot, or knocked down by a brick.”

After the two-year hiatus on disorder, the press became far less sympathetic to the firemen. In an article on September 11, 1847, entitled “Firemen’s Riots—What Can the Matter Be?” the *Baltimore Sun* scorned the excuses they had once believed. “We find bonfires built in some remote section of the city, merely to cause an alarm and draw the firemen together for the purpose of a fight, and have seen the apparatus of certain companies taken out when there was no alarm and run into a section of the city where a collision was most likely to take place.” Although adult men, in the uniform of firemen, always appeared to be in charge, “when a collision occurs,” the reporter sneered, “we have every assurance given that those who participated in them are half-grown boys, and not members of the companies” Or, as another *Sun* article stated skeptically on October 28, “It certainly seems strange that these rioters, if not members of the companies they run with, should be allowed to take out their apparatus.”

Apparently the public was losing interest as well. For the first time, the Mechanical Company Collecting Committee decided in December not to request funds from the neighborhood, due to “the impression which
Fights/Fires

may have been made on the public, by the rioting of several Companies in the city.” Instead, they decided that they “had better defer it until peace and harmony was restored.” That time never came. By late 1848, another person had died, and at least five observers had been injured by the flying bricks, missiles, and bullets that marked the firemen’s battles. 27

During the period of calm in the mid-1840s, “arrests of minors were made, all rioting among firemen ceased, and there were not near so many fires as now,” as one fireman later put it. It appears that large numbers of Baltimoreans took advantage of the peace following the passage of the minor law and reexamined their assumptions about rioting in Baltimore. 28

In the 1830s and early 1840s, riots frequently did not involve firemen. Many were perpetrated by unhappy segments of the population to protest social ills. Riots in Baltimore were both expressive and recreational, to borrow Michael Feldberg’s terms. The Bank Riot of 1835 was one of three riots in Baltimore in a two-year period clearly expressive of protesters’ sense of economic or political injustice. An 1840 attack by “a large party of rowdies with the New Market and United companies . . . on a crowd of Whigs assembled at the Patriot office” offers another example of expressive rioting. “Several pistols were discharged by the Whigs but no one was killed . . . great political excitement between the Whigs and Democrats, threatening riot and bloodshed.” 29

Other riots, involving rowdies and firemen, appear to have been purely recreational in nature. These riots may have reinforced the solidarity of the group or upheld a group’s honor code, but such riots did not express any larger dissatisfaction with the status quo. 30 Those riots in which the firemen took part (according to their own records) were therefore easy for the public to blame on other troublemakers, and the confidence man served this purpose well. Firemen could not be expected to be in control in an environment where no one else was, either. If boys ran with their machines and bashed one another with bricks, well, they might have done as much elsewhere just as easily. The firemen blamed the police for not keeping order, and in fact they had to act as police to protect public order during the Bank Riot. It was also difficult for the public to decide whom to blame when the police consistently failed to arrest rioters.

But by 1846, there is evidence of a dramatic decline in expressive rioting and a decline in the number of riots not related to fire fighting. Virtually no reports of riots without firemen can be found in the newspapers of the late 1840s. 31 The link between firemen and riots probably became
clear in the 1845–46 period of calm in the fire department. As a result, all later riots could be blamed on the firemen, who clearly were rioting for recreational purposes. Thus a solution to all riots was sought in relation to the fire department.

In fact, rioting among firemen had only marginally worsened. Individual riots of the late 1840s in Baltimore were particularly violent, and for a period in 1847 firemen battled each other weekly, but there were also particularly violent battles in 1835 and 1840 and an extended series of battles throughout the period. Rioting appeared worse in the late 1840s, not simply because it was, but because there was no longer a background of lawlessness to soften its edges. "Mob-town" may have been an appropriate description of Baltimore in the 1830s, but by the late 1840s, Baltimoreans were looking for a more dignified title.

Firemen were perceived to be rioting more often because they were more likely to be identified as such in Baltimore Sun reports in the late 1840s, a fact possibly related to the rise of "Fighting Mose" in 1848. Fights involving firemen were also more likely to be labeled "riots" than in earlier years. "A Riot and Brutal Murder," in February 1849, is actually the story of a barroom brawl involving perhaps four people, all of whom unfortunately belonged to fire companies and one of whom was stabbed to death. A postfire disturbance a week later was saved from becoming "a riot of considerable extent" by the "efficient and extraordinary efforts" of the police. An engine collision on Baltimore Street led to insults, followed by two injuries. A brick thrown by a member of the Watchman Company hit a member of the United Company on the head, and a United member retaliated by smacking a Watchman fireman with a pipe. The police, the Sun reader is told, saved the day. "The very moment that manifestations of disorder appeared, [the police] were on the spot amidst the uproarious crowds that filled the street, and regardless of danger or injury promptly arrested the offending parties." This event would hardly have merited a paragraph in the 1830s, but in the 1830s the police would not have taken preemptive action. The melee would have taken its own course, either dissipating, as such events often did according to fire company records, or developing into a full-fledged riot.

What is clear from this passage is the new interest and demand for order in Baltimore, focused on preventing disorder, not simply controlling it. As in other cities, order was enforced in Baltimore by growing numbers
of professional police. Police expenditures in Baltimore more than tripled between 1845 and 1855, and by 1856 an expanded and centralized Baltimore police was uniformed, reflecting and legitimating their growing semimilitary status in the city. In 1849 the mayor of Baltimore divided the city into fire wards to which the companies were then assigned and allowed to leave only upon permission of the mayor.

These two preemptive strikes against the firemen in 1849, one by the police at a disturbance and one by the mayor, could only help convince the public that a nonviolent fire department was nonviolent because it was externally controlled, not because of any internal restraints. In fact, the police were utterly unable to control a truly riotous crowd, as was made clear in Baltimore's election riots of 1856–59, the most violent election riots in U.S. history. The perception that the police alone could provide control helped them to widen their own sphere of influence. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, it also helped the police to justify ever-increasing force sizes and expenditures when they failed to provide that illusive control.

There is no evidence of any firemen's riots, or other major public disturbances by the firemen from 1850 to 1855, although there were a great number of false alarms and fires, averaging almost one of each per day in 1851. Two or three minor attacks by one company upon another are documented in the company ledgers, but these events do not seem to have resulted in major injuries or to have been publicized.

The decline in violence does not seem to have improved the public standing of the fire department. Perhaps this was because their behavior was now viewed within the paradigm of police control, their orderliness viewed as the result of effective policing. The press portrayed it as such, commenting, when a serious riot broke out in August 1855, that for some time, "there has been every indication of a serious struggle between them [the New Market and Mount Vernon Companies], though they have been kept in check by the police, who were always on the watch, in consequence of the anticipated rupture. Notwithstanding their vigilance, however, they have, at last, succeeded in their disgraceful designs." The results were indeed disgraceful. One fireman was killed by a member of his own company (who was aiming at a policeman). Also killed were a young bystander and a former fireman, killed by a shot to the breast. Three other men were injured, and the crowd at large was "armed, and for
the most part, incessantly firing." After two more election-day riots, in 1856 and 1858, the volunteer department was dismantled, although the firemen's role in each riot was exaggerated.36

Given the strange trajectory of the Baltimore volunteer fire department—a membership which clearly did not reflect the ruffian reputation it acquired in the 1850s, a long and involved history of recreational rioting which had no impact on the reputation of the department until the late 1840s, and increasing public condemnation of behavior which did not substantially worsen—it becomes difficult to accept traditional explanations for firefighter violence. Baltimore's volunteer fire department did not decline from a bastion of middle-class respectability to a mob of working-class and immigrant rowdies. Volunteer firemen in Baltimore rather found their traditional concepts of honor, and means of expressing that honor, increasingly under fire amidst changing demands for order and respectability in the larger society. Baltimore's behavioral norms had changed more than had the behavior of the firemen.

St. Louis Rowdying

The violence of the St. Louis volunteers seems playful in comparison, more rowdy than riotous. Firemen did not begin to fight in St. Louis until 1849, and they employed primitive weapons in primarily minor skirmishes. Only one fatality can be directly attributed to the Volunteer Fire Company's record of rowdying, and up until they were disbanded, firemen in St. Louis showed a willingness to reconcile with their sparring partners, which highlights the casual nature of most of this fighting. Firemen in St. Louis shared a code of honor, but the behavior it sanctioned was far more limited than that of the Baltimore volunteers. Here, as in Baltimore, the department contained a larger percentage of white-collar members than did the city at large, as well as a membership of diverse ethnicity. As in Baltimore, the record of firefighter violence does not fit a simple decline narrative.

The first five permanent fire companies in the frontier city of St. Louis were established between 1832 and 1835, with the first recorded fighting occurring in 1849. Their first fight was really a riot, although it was not referred to as such at the time. This may have been because the firemen did not attack each other but the Irish inhabitants of the appropriately named "Battle Roe." The fight resulted in worse press than injuries, although not
as bad, of course, as if the firemen's victims had been "Americans." The Irish deckhands of this area were renowned brawlers. Native-born residents of St. Louis were not sympathetic to these violent immigrants. One contemporary account of this thumping only stated: "A fight occurred between the firemen and a gang of Irish. The firemen came off the victors. Loss $130,000." In the report of a fireman, the Irish had "got what they deserves," after the firemen finished "run[ing] the Irish all over the upper part of town." 37

Fire companies in St. Louis maintained their honor in the 1840s by racing to fires, raising false alarms, and stealing the engines out of other companies' firehouses. Engine racing was treated as a major problem by many of the companies, who passed legislation to expel any member who engaged in such an activity, and warned of the "many evil consequences ensuing from persisting in such practices such as unnecessarily injuring the apparatus and endangering the lives and limbs of members." The lives and limbs of nonmembers were also endangered by this practice. The Missouri Fire Company admitted to running over four people with their engine in two years, none of whom, amazingly, were seriously hurt. 38

The 1843-49 records of the Phoenix Fire Company, the "most turbulent" company in the department, and the one containing "more of the Eastern rowdies than the rest combined," according to one historian of the department, reveal that the company in this decade had more interest in entertaining other companies, parading, and attractively dressing both its engine and members than in fighting (men or fires). The most disturbing event of the 1840s at the Phoenix firehouse was a threat made by a member to shoot the watchman if he rang the bell. This transgression occupies an entire month of debate in the record book. Fines were also instituted for members caught racing or ringing the bell in a false alarm of fire. 39

The Franklin Company also expelled a member for "misbehavior and stating a gross falsehood to the company." St. Louis fire companies favored the threat of expulsion, and expulsion itself, as a way to control behavior, and to accept a previously expelled fireman into your company was a mark of great dishonor. 40 Four offenses merited expulsion from the Laclede Company in 1850: "giving false alarm of a fire," "disobedience of the order of a Superior," "loud, vulgar, or obscene language either at the engine house or when on duty," and quarreling. These transgressions appear quaint in comparison with the arson, battery, fighting at a fire, and shooting another fireman that resulted in expulsions in Baltimore. 41
March 1852, the Missouri Company threatened to expel any member who appeared drunk at a fire twice or made any noise "deemed injurious to the character and reputation of the company."  

Even flagrant provocations of another company appear to have diffused themselves fairly well in the 1840s. The Missouri Fire Company stole the Union Company's engine out of their house "without authority" in 1846, in a clear violation of that company's honor, and felt no repercussions for four years. "Union Fire Co. awfull keen for a muss, they had better keep cool," the Missouri secretary remarked in March 1848. Only with the onset of the tumultuous 1850s could the fight they had "been expecting for some time" begin. The description of this fight reveals a joy in pure physical violence lacking in any of the surviving materials from Baltimore. The fight began as the Missouri Company returned home with their engine from a fire. As they passed the Liberty hose truck, the captain of the Liberty Company, known to the writer as "Big Six," ominously approached Mr. Dickey, assistant foreman of the Missouri Company.

Big Six struck at Mr. Dickey but missed him. In turn, Dickey knocked him down, and so the fight began. Both companies fought like h — 1. At last the Liberty Hose Co. run, and I thought the fight was ended, but not so, for just as we started home again, the Union and Liberty Companies came at us with stones, clubs, spanners, and wrenches. Our boys tried to stand their ground, but it was no use, they were too much for us. . . . There was as many as 20 of the Liberty and Union members at Mr. Dickey at once, and if ever a man fought hard, Dickey did, and I believe he would have undid them all, but one of the Liberty's members jumped on the fence and struck Dickey in the back of the head, which knocked him down.

The fight ended with Mr. Dickey's fall. Three Missouri members were injured, but only Dickey had to be carried home. The writer proudly announced that more Liberty members were injured than their own members, but he closed with a sobering evaluation of the afternoon's activities. "All I wish is that there will never be such another fight again. . . . This scrape will be the means of breaking down the Missouri. P.S., we will have a slap at them again some day." Intradepartmental fighting began in St. Louis in 1850, but firemen
continued to exhibit restraint. As the Missouri secretary indicated, firemen in St. Louis felt ambivalence about physical combat. They may have enjoyed the excitement of the battle and felt the desire to avenge previous wrongs with more fighting, but they could also hope that "there will never be such another fight again." This regret is entirely absent from the surviving records of the Baltimore fire companies.

The Union Company and Missouri Company seemed to drop their differences after this fight, although the Union Company went on to fight with the Liberty and Phoenix Companies in 1852. The Missouri had the chance at another "slap" at the Liberty in 1854 when the latter company "accidentally" ran their engine into the path of the Missouri engine. The Missouri men practiced restraint, although the Missouri secretary did not mince words about the "dirty low blow hards" that made up the Liberty company. "The D — n Rowdies are a perfect nuisance, and the company from its commencement was a quarrelous, low, rowdy company, and instead of getting better, they got worse. A bigger set of Cowards never pulled on a drag rope of an Engine." The secretary's comments upon this occasion reveal a firefighter code being broken by the Liberty Company, and a real fear of the ramifications fighting would bring on the department. "It is this company of our once Respectable Department [that] from their first organization . . . would take in members expelled from other companies. . . . They now talk of breaking up, and the sooner the better for the city and department." 45

It was probably this fear for the reputation of the department, in the light of developments in eastern departments, which kept fights from escalating into riots in St. Louis. A "muss" broke out in 1851 after the Washington Fire Company threw water on the St. Louis Fire Company, with "plenty of Brick Bats thrown by the St. Louis," but the Washington Company did not retaliate. 46

Fire companies in St. Louis fought throughout the 1850s, but also repeatedly attempted to work out their differences with apologies or meetings with other companies, indicating that the firemen hoped to limit the extent and ramifications of their rowdyism. In 1856, the Missouri and Franklin Companies, who had fought on and off for several years, held a "friendly visit" as they both pledged to "stand by each other as friends, and to do all in our power to cement the bonds of friendship more closely than ever." 47 Problems between the Franklin and Liberty Companies proved difficult to solve. Differences between the two originated when the
Franklin was “attacked by members of the Liberty . . . on their way to take up some Hose” in 1851. After three years of occasional fights after fires and false alarms, the Franklin Company held a meeting with members of the Liberty Company to attempt to finally resolve their difficulties.48 Fighting continued, and in May 1855 the Liberty Company was suspended for six months for damaging the Franklin Company’s engine, the same month that the Washington Company was suspended for breaking the windows of the Liberty Fire Company.49 The injury to engine led to the only verified violence-related fatality in St. Louis. Before these two companies were finally reconciled, a Liberty Company member was shot and killed, the only documented case of a fireman in St. Louis using a pistol against another fireman.50

Within its own context, the fact that only one St. Louis fireman was shot is somewhat remarkable. Firefighters in St. Louis deserve credit for not resorting to firearms again. By the mid-1850s, nearly all firemen carried them for protection against mobs at fires, according to one volunteer who claimed he “would not have gone to that fire without his revolver under any consideration.” Yet if guns were carried, they do not appear to have been drawn, or if drawn, they certainly were not fired at other firemen.51

On the eve of the Civil War, St. Louis was a town seething with sectional violence, where “Bibles and Sharp’s rifles were associated as correlating agencies of civilization.”52 Advertisements for rifles appeared on the front pages of St. Louis newspapers. Yet firemen in this city did not use firearms regularly. Fights in St. Louis emerged out of races to fires, competitions over fire hydrants, and turf disputes, as they did in Baltimore and other cities. Some St. Louis firemen clearly enjoyed fighting. But the firemen of this city exhibited clear restraint considering the weapons on hand and the precedent set by departments on the East Coast. The volunteer firefighter culture in St. Louis sanctioned only limited forms of violence.

Although there may have been an internal control and possibly even order to the St. Louis fighting, by the mid-1850s the firemen had alienated their public as thoroughly as had the Baltimore volunteers. In another ethnically based disturbance in July 1854, the firemen attempted to impose their values outside their organization. They demanded beer from a German beer-house keeper, and when that beer failed to materialize, they
"began to break the bottles in the house, and in other ways damaging the furniture in the room." The angry brewer shot one of the firemen in the face, and shot at several people in the crowd outside as well.\(^53\)

As in the earlier Irish-bating episode, the sympathy of the public was fully with the firemen. Perhaps if the St. Louis volunteers had limited their attentions and demands to immigrants and one another they could have continued in this manner for some time, harassing ethnic groups and throwing bricks at rival engines. But by the 1850s, the values of the firemen and the larger society were clearly diverging. The *Missouri Democrat* complemented the firemen on their "effective work in subduing the flames" at the fire near the beer house, but complaints about the firemen's behavior elsewhere began to increase.

The firehouse became a central site of contention in St. Louis in the battle over behavioral norms. Men drank in the firehouse and sometimes fought. Occasionally the fights were of a formal nature. Robert Dunn was expelled from the Laclede Fire Company when he did "to the great scandal of the company and disturbance of the neighborhood bring hither into our engine room two men as Principals to fight a prize fight — they, the said Robert Dunn and Wm Boyd, aiding and abetting them in the capacity of seconds." Generally the fights were of a more banal sort. The Laclede records also report that "Peter Holden did while in an intoxicated state come into our engine room and then and there violently assaulted a member of the company," for which he was not expelled.\(^54\)

Firehouse neighbors complained of the constant noise and disorder emanating from almost all of the houses throughout the 1850s, a situation firemen were either unable or unwilling to rectify.\(^55\) The mayor of St. Louis focused on the disorderly firehouse in his report to the city council in 1855. In his opinion, the volunteer system was "demoralizing" because of its impact on the young and on families. Firemen, "particularly the more youthful, will and do congregate, as they feel free to do, in and about their engine house, day and night, and on the Sabbath, in great numbers, and indulge in conversation and conduct, not only unbecoming, but highly indecorous and obscene." The mayor continued, warming to his subject. "No one who has a decent regard for what is polite, refined or virtuous, has lived in the vicinity of, or passed near one of the houses in the evening or on Sunday, and not been disgusted with the exhibitions there witnessed."\(^56\) The polite, refined, and virtuous were more actively
assaulted when missiles thrown in one 1856 battle between the Liberty and Franklin Companies damaged several houses, not firehouses, in the neighborhood.57

Members of the middle class of St. Louis were actively working toward the gentility of Boston and New York in the 1840s and 1850s, and they were insecure about how well they were progressing toward this goal. Boosters and middle-class transplants from those cities valiantly strove to bring refinement to St. Louis at the exact time that the behavior of the firemen was degenerating. The morality of the firemen became the object of public outrage, and their behavior in the streets was almost as loudly bemoaned as their behavior in the firehouse. This was because the street, like the home, was an especially contested battleground in the struggle for refinement in America, as Richard Bushman and others have illustrated. In the streets of St. Louis, the refined were forced to interact with everyone else. And the firemen were not only actively visible in the streets but actively crude in their behavior.58

It was appropriate that the final confrontation between the norms of the firemen and those of the polite, refined, and virtuous would transpire in the streets. Only two months after Mayor King's report on the indecorous firemen, he and a number of "ladies and gentlemen" were interrupted on a promenade down a "crowded thoroughfare" by the Phoenix Hose Carriage. The carriage, drawn by "a set of Wildmen and half-grown boys on the sidewalk," threatened the "lives" of the decent citizens as well as their control of the streets. When the mayor heard "the yell as of so many savages," he stepped in and attempted to use his authority to stop the "disgraceful act" of firemen running their engine on the sidewalk. Perhaps the greatest crime that afternoon was not the misuse of the sidewalk but the fact that Mayor King, in his own words, "was not only disregarded, but insulted by a louder yell when they learned who I was."59

The savages had squared off against the protector of ladies and gentlemen and won a Pyrrhic victory. In April 1857 the city of St. Louis passed an ordinance to provide for a paid steam fire department.60 Legislated out of existence, the final year of the volunteer department was marked by arson and active resistance to the new paid organization. Nonetheless, as the department apologist pointed out correctly, "The record of dangerous injuries due to the spirit of 'sport' during its whole existence, is not comparable with that often resulting during a single season from the rivalry in sport among 'teams' of leading universities, between 1898 and 1905."61
St. Louis’s fire department was never an unruly mob. Although they may not have shown sufficient respect for elected politicians, violence within the department was almost always internally controlled. But history has not been kind to the St. Louis volunteers; their record of violence continued to expand long after their institution was dismantled. The most famous nineteenth-century historian of St. Louis, John Thomas Scharf, spared no venom in his portrayal of the firemen as nearly Baltimorean in character (which, considering he had written *The Chronicled of Baltimore* nine years earlier, is perhaps not surprising). The volunteer system, he wrote, “had become a standing outrage” and was responsible for all manner of urban crimes. “The spirit of rowdyism which had grown up under it, not satisfied with an occasional demonstration at fires, turned to the highways and assailed the inoffensive citizen as he walked to his home.”

Strangely enough, firemen also contributed to the mythologizing of fireman violence. Thomas Lynch, a veteran firefighter, apparently manufactures a dramatic riot in his 1880 history of the St. Louis Volunteer Fire Department. The supposed riot is undocumented in any previous work, including the leading newspapers of the period. The “Dog-Fight Riot” of 1853, according to Lynch, occurred when a fireman interfered in a fight between a large bulldog and its small victim in his “desire to see fair play.” The owners of the bulldog resented the interference, and soon a riot between the firemen at large and the bulldog’s supporters interrupted the peace of a St. Louis Sunday.

Could Mose be responsible for these developments? Both Scharf and Lynch attribute the rise of rowdyism in the St. Louis Fire Department to the “acquisition of members . . . of a lot of refugees from justice and chronic roughs from the departments of the Eastern Cities.” Although the names of these rough characters are not given, both authors provide clues to their exact identities. According to Lynch it was the “typical ‘B’hoy’ or ‘Syksey’” (another character in the fictional Mose drama). According to Scharf, “This class were those who styled the apparatus ‘de masheen!’ who said ‘nah!’ and ‘yaas!’” Both authors indicate that Mose, in his most threatening and dangerous form, came to St. Louis at just the time when his character would have graced the stages of St. Louis.

Not only did Mose, in the form of East Coast rowdies, enter St. Louis, but Lynch reports that St. Louis began to produce its own Moses as well. “The character of ‘Mose’ brought out about this time at the theaters
contributed largely to give 'éclat' to the sayings and doings of these parties, and especially in molding the future character of the younger members."  

The influence of Mose was far greater than either of these commentators realized, however. Mose was not only able to change the character of the department after his arrival, as they suggest, but to re-create its entire history in his image. Who but Mose would stand up for the rights of the literal "underdog" with his fists, as the firemen of the imaginary "Dog-Fight Riot" did? The victims of the real St. Louis firemen, the Irish in 1849, and the German tavernkeeper in 1854, would have been beneath the notice of Mose, or at least would not have figured in his adventures. The persecutors of small dogs are precisely the sort that Mose would revel in fighting. It appears that Mose not only enabled those outside the fire department to understand rowdyism within it but also enabled members of this masculine subculture to construct their own behavior and history.

The "Model Fire Department of the World"

Almost from their organization in 1849, the firemen of San Francisco considered themselves the "Model Fire Department of the World." In part this was due to the "strict observance of its laws, and . . . brotherly feeling which has always distinguished them." In part it was because the San Francisco volunteer fire department was among the most elite departments in the country. In 1860, after the Baltimore and St. Louis volunteers had been forcibly disbanded, San Francisco's volunteer fire department contained far more white-collar members than members who were laborers. Nearly 60 percent of volunteer firemen in this city practiced white-collar occupations, and fully 18 percent practiced high white-collar occupations. The department was ethnically diverse but less so than the gold-rush city to which it belonged. In a city where only half of all residents were native born, one-third of all firemen were foreign born in 1860. San Francisco's department was a model of wealth, decorum, and middle-class trappings.

Because they organized so much later than did East Coast or Midwest departments, the San Francisco firemen understood the wages of violence. They correctly observed that "one blow struck in anger in the public street, while in the Fireman's garb, will be like a cancer, eating gradually into the vitals of the Department." As a result, violence in San
Francisco had a different character than it did in Baltimore or St. Louis. Each violent episode in San Francisco can be traced to a concrete source of "ill feeling" among the participants, and in each case, the resulting violence was read by the participants as a legitimate reaction to perceived wrongs. The San Francisco firemen were not riotous, as the Baltimore firemen were, or rowdy, as were their St. Louis brethren. They shared a code of honor, but it sanctioned very few expressions of violence. Like the other departments, however, the San Francisco volunteers alienated their public with scenes of public disorder at odds with an increasingly orderly urban context.

 Volunteer fire fighting in San Francisco was not free from the rivalry and competition that marked other departments. Starting in 1849, when the department was organized, firemen raced each other to fires, allowed boys to run with their engines, and even "saved" hydrants at fires. Yet those activities, which provided the impetus for so many of the fights in other departments, had little effect on the good feeling among firemen in San Francisco. As volunteer Robert S. Lammot wrote, "After it [a fire] is over, instead of stopping a while to have a fight, as they file past one another on their way home, you hear such cries as Hurrah for the 'Howard!' She's always the first in service — Three cheers for the 'California' — she is some at a fire — There comes the 'Monumental!' good for the Baltimoreans." 69

Antagonism and rivalry could and did appear. After a trial of apparatus in front of five thousand spectators, and a $500 wager, the Monumental and Vigilant Companies nearly came to blows. They published insulting letters to one another in San Francisco's newspapers, but were reconciled during the visit of a Stockton fire company to the city, before a self-described "war of water" could become a "war of blood." 70

Similar tensions arose for the same reasons between the Howard and Knickerbocker Companies (who wagered $6,000 on a contest of machinery) and were heard to growl "instead of giving three cheers for each other as they ought to have done" when returning from a fire. 71 In the letters exchanged between these companies, also published, each company attempted to negotiate terms of the contest most favorable to them, while accusing the other company of demanding unfair advantage. These correspondences finally degenerated into accusations of dishonesty on both sides, and the refusal of the Howard Company to compete at all was based
on the assertion that “judging from several previous transactions with [the Knickerbockers], there is no honor or probity among them as a company.” Although honor was at stake, no blows were exchanged between these companies.

San Francisco also suffered from many of the same external stresses that troubled other departments. Fights between boys running with engines occasionally began, but were generally controlled by “the promptitude and decision of MEN in the department.” Unruly crowds interfered with firemen in their discharge of duty. Firemen in San Francisco, like those in Baltimore and St. Louis, complained that there were often no police at the scenes of fires to aid firemen in crowd control.

As in East Coast departments, youth gangs found firemen a tempting target. In 1855 rowdies attacked the firemen on at least three occasions, yet the firemen refrained from battling with rowdies. Truly, they were tested. Although “bullied and attacked on the streets, and followed by their assailants to the very portals of their engine houses” and “the hot blood of a rightful indignation at the insults heaped upon them has mounted to their cheeks,” the firemen never forgot who they were. As the press reported, “the thought of their own unsullied reputation” prevented them from retaliating, as they wished to do. Overall, the San Francisco firemen “displayed a forbearance which their best friends did not give them credit for,” and they did so out of a sense of honor. Until 1856, in fact, the editor of the Fireman's Journal could with some truth report that “blows in anger” had never been exchanged among the firemen (although the editor himself had a year earlier been attacked by the chief engineer). Neither competition, wagers, boys, nor rowdies could compel the “model fire department of the world” to fight, but politics could.

A highly contested 1857 election for chief engineer would provide the impetus for the “one blow struck in anger” that would, as warned, eat away at the department. A five-vote victory of one candidate over another in 1857 left the San Francisco department badly divided. Until January 1860, when the California Supreme Court finally decided the contested election, the department lacked any consensus as to who was in charge as well as a strong leader to discipline disgruntled firemen. False alarms and other difficulties resulted. In December 1857 the San Francisco Bulletin began to report on the “Rowdyism in the Fire Department.” After nearly every fire, firemen became “a little ugly.” Generally this involved members of different companies squaring off, exchanging dirty looks and threaten-
ing remarks. In one example, an engine blocked the path of another company on its way home, “whether by design or not, we can not say,” the Fireman’s Journal reported. After an “unreasonable” delay, “sharp words passed.” At that point, matters heated up quickly, at least by the standards of this department. “The foreman of Manhattan company, was observed to have his coat off, and to talk more than the occasion required. . . . Some one halloed out ‘Three cheers for Jim Nuttman!’ [one of the candidates] and there was a response, which was not calculated to calm the feelings of the companies towards each other. . . . There was considerable noise made, but all ended in smoke.” On at least one occasion, blows were exchanged as well as insulting remarks, although examples of “smoke” were far more common.75

Sarcastic cheering, passive-aggressive engine placement, a foreman removing his coat: this was not rowdism as practiced elsewhere in the country. The public recognized this fact, but panicked none the less. “Heretofore, the Department of this city, with a few exceptions, has been a model for similar institutions in the Union. . . . They [the firemen] are of our quiet, orderly, law-abiding citizens, who have discountenanced all attempts at rowdism or open violations of the peace.”

The firemen’s restraint can be attributed to the deeply held belief in law and order among San Franciscans in the wake of the 1856 Vigilance Committee. The open antagonism in the fire department appeared to some to be the first step in the fall of the department and a return to the disorder which San Franciscans believed had plagued the city in the early 1850s. “If such a spirit is allowed to gain a foothold, all decent men will leave the Department in disgust, and it will fall into the hands and control of rowdies,” wrote the Bulletin.76

Six months later, with no improvement apparent, the Bulletin was nearly hysterical with the possibility of disorder. “When it became evident that if the insurrection was not nipped in the bud, our streets might run in gore, our city be disgraced with such riots as have from time to time occurred in eastern cities . . . it was necessary to take decisive action.” The city supervisors “have the benefit of the record of similar difficulties in eastern cities,” they pointed out, “and should prevent the difficulties from occurring.” The paper also suggested that “it is time for all good citizens, who wish bloody riots prevented, to interfere.” Others agreed. One letter writer to the Bulletin advised, “In times of insurrection and rebellion, the first step is everything.” He suggested that the entire department be
abolished, while admitting that “riots, quarrels and disgraceful scenes are unknown” among the firemen. In light of the developments in cities like Baltimore, where many of the members of the San Francisco Fire Department had served, it was perhaps not unreasonable to assume that unchecked riot was just around the corner. But as of yet, that riot had failed to appear.  

The first “disgraceful fight” took place in August 1860. “Fists, and even harder weapons were freely used, and numbers of bruised faces and bloody noses attested to the prowess of the rival combatants.” Apparently that harder weapon was a fireman’s trumpet, and the firemen’s paper warned against using “the most dangerous of weapons . . . as sharp as an ax and three times as heavy.” Three months later, the foreman of the Volunteer Engine Company was knocked down and beaten with a hose pipe and iron wrench during a fire, by unidentified “members of other companies.”

The same tensions motivating these acts of violence appear to be at the heart of the dramatic 1865 firemen’s riot in San Francisco, although there are no recorded episodes of fighting in between. Short-term hostilities had been building over several days, as firemen collided at various false alarms and fires. The department picked an extremely bad time to finally riot: Sunday afternoon, December 18, on a street filled with citizens returning from church. The peace of the Sabbath was “suddenly broken by shouts, curses, pistol shots, blows from spanners, billets of wood and paving stones, to the great terror of men, women and children, who fled from the disgraceful scene in the utmost consternation and confusion.”

Between five and fifteen shots were fired as the Knickerbocker Fire Company, with assorted members of other companies, battled the combined forces of the Howard and Monumental Companies. The participants were careful not to damage the fire engines, but they did much damage to one another. An assistant foreman was shot through the arm and clubbed on the head. Another fireman was shot in the foot. Several firemen were hit with stones, clubs, and spanners. Chief Engineer Scannel immediately suspended the three companies involved in the brawl. This riot not only justified the warnings of the department’s earlier naysayers but furnished “the enemies of the Volunteer system with an unanswerable argument in favor of its early and entire abolition.”

After nine years of condemnation for minor acts of violence, one riot was enough to finish off the fragile department. In 1866 the department
The San Francisco Volunteer Fire Department, a group which neither sanctioned violence nor regularly engaged in it, was disbanded in the same manner and amidst the same accusations as was the Baltimore Volunteer Fire Department seven years earlier.

Some Conclusions about Fire Department Violence

The decline of the volunteer fire department in the opinion of the public was paralleled by the decline of Mose, who was reduced from a "robust drama-cycle" to "vestigial skit." Mose's principal actor identified the "era of steam fire-engines" as marking the demise of Mose the Bowery B'hoy, but in doing so he mistook cause and effect. For a time in the 1850s, volunteer fire departments could, and sometimes did, support rowdy behavior. A visitor in 1855 observed that Baltimore's fire companies, perhaps the most violent in the nation, were "jealous as Kilkenny cats of one another, and when they come together, they scarcely ever lose an opportunity of getting up a bloody fight. They are even accused of doing occasionally a little bit of arson, so as to get the chance of a row."

Yet this same observer could also write that "when extinguishing fires, they exhibit a courage and reckless daring that cannot be surpassed and they are never so happy as when the excitement of danger is at its highest." This was the era of Mose, the symbol of the fireman who was both a great fighter and a great firefighter. This was also an era when the masculine code of honor that bound firemen in Baltimore had not yet come in conflict with the norms of the larger society.

The separation of fighting and fire fighting, which reduced Mose to an anachronism, was fully accomplished by the "era of the steam-engine," or paid fire department. The strengthening of the police and the decline of other rioting in Baltimore in the 1840s produced the impression that firemen had suddenly become violent in that city. In St. Louis, efforts at refining the city cast that department's behavior in an increasingly negative light. In San Francisco, violence was rooted out and condemned, even where it did not exist.

While it is undeniable that firemen in each of these cities fought in the 1850s, there is no uniform explanation for violence among American volunteer firefighters. Firemen within cities seemed to share a code of behavior that sanctioned some forms of violence, while keeping that violence within certain bounds. Firemen did not share a uniform behavioral code
nationwide, although in all three of these cities the public believed that their firemen had devolved into an uncontrollable mob by the 1860s.

What this perception reflected was not the reality of violence among firemen, or uniform changes in class and ethnic composition across departments, but a widespread desire for order in the city. It also reflected a decreasing tolerance, on the national level, for the masculine culture represented by the character Mose. In Baltimore, firemen were certainly uncontrollable, but this was no new development of the late 1840s. San Francisco’s fire department was far from an unruly mob: the department remained primarily low white collar through 1860, with a stable ethnic composition of one-third foreign born. In St. Louis, the most extensive riots expressed nativist hostility on the part of the firemen, yet these incidents had less of an impact on the reputation of the firemen than did lesser events that threatened the comfort of the polite and refined segments of the population.

In none of these cities was the behavior of the firemen what it appeared to the public, and in all three departments, Mose was the figure who came to represent the volunteer firemen. The American volunteer fireman was celebrated for his violent masculine subculture on the stage, but he was ultimately destroyed by that same celebrated image. This was true even when, as in San Francisco, actual volunteer firemen were not notably violent. Municipal firefighters were not permitted to fight one another, to get drunk at fires, or to otherwise indulge in the excesses for which the volunteers had gained their infamy. The public order of the late nineteenth century had no room for masculine pugilists like Mose or for any version of the masculine honor code that supported the brotherhood of volunteer firefighters.

Notes

2. Dorson 1943, 288–89.
3. Ibid., 9, 24.
8. On the development of urban working-class culture see Gorn 1986 and 1987;
187

Flghts/Fires


9. Statistics on the class and ethnic composition of the volunteer firemen are drawn from research into the census returns and city directories in San Francisco, Baltimore, and St. Louis. See Amy Greenberg 1995, introduction and chap. 3, for more on the failings of a class-based analysis of the volunteer fire department.


11. Statistics based on four fire company rosters. Of the 491 active firemen taken from these lists, 222 individuals were locatable and identifiable in Boyd 1858. The 1858 Mechanical Company roster in McCrory 1901. The 1859 Pioneer Hook and Ladder Company roster, 1857 New Market Company roster, and 1858 Deptford Company roster, all from the special collections at the Peale Museum, Baltimore. Occupational scale drawn from Thernstrom 1975, 289–302. Even given the white-collar bias of city directories in this period, the occupational profile of these Baltimore firemen, the year before municipalization, presents a dramatically different vision of who belonged to a volunteer fire company than that previously presented by historians like Bruce Laurie and Sean Wilentz.


13. Mechanical Fire Company volume of quarterly meetings, 7 December 1813, in the Maryland Historical Society manuscripts division (hereafter MdHS); Union Fire Company records, 5 August 1824, vol. 3, MdHS.

14. Dukehart 1877; Union Fire Company records, 10 February 1832.

15. Forrest 1898, 67.


17. Mechanical Fire Company records, 15 September 1839.


19. Mechanical Company records, 15 August 1840.

20. Ibid., 1834–1840.

21. Ibid., 1837.


25. Baltimore Sun, 21 July 1843, 19 March, 1 April 1844.

26. Mechanical Fire Company ledgers, 13 April, 20 September 1847.

27. Mechanical Fire Company ledgers, 2 December 1847, 22 October 1848; Independent Fire Company ledger, 27 September, 10 December 1847; Forrest 1898, 77.


29. Mechanical Fire Company ledgers, 3 November 1840.


31. Scharf (1874, 528) mentions one, between rowdies and the Baltimore Clipper in 1846, after the result of the election for sheriff had been ascertained.

32. Baltimore Sun, 6 and 12 February 1849.
33. Forrest 1898, 67. In 1845 the police cost the city $70,238, in 1850, $110,102, and in 1855 they cost $232,629 (Browne 1980, 156, 203, 210). On uniforms see "The Re-Organization of the Police and Night Watch," Baltimore Sun, 29 November 1856; The nineteenth-century expansion of police and their duties has been well documented by historians. See Lane 1975; Monkkonen 1982.

34. J. Baker (1977, 133) points out that the Know-Nothing police stood by passively at election riots.


36. Baltimore Sun, 20 August 1855, 9 September 1856; Cassedy 1891, 43–45; Scharf 1874, 570–71; J. Baker 1977, 129; Forrest 1898, 78–79. That, as Forrest claims, "the elections year after year became less and less free from intimidation and terror" cannot be attributed to the firemen.

37. Dana 1858, 179; Adler 1991, 101–2; Missouri Fire Company records, 29 July 1849, vol. 10, Volunteer Firemen Collection, Missouri Historical Society (hereafter MoHS). A large number of volunteer firemen in St. Louis had Irish surnames, although it is impossible to say whether these members participated in the riot.

38. Union Fire Company records, 30 May 1845, vol. 14, MoHS; Missouri Fire Company records, 5 March 1848.

39. Phoenix Fire Company records, 10 February, 10 March 1845, 9 March 1846, 1 March 1848, vol. 11, MoHS; Lynch 1880, 40.

40. Phoenix Fire Company records, 13 January 1845; Franklin Fire Company minutes, 6 September 1850, vol. 2, MoHS.

41. Laclede Fire Company records, 11 March 1850, MoHS.

42. Missouri Fire Company records, 4 March 1852.

43. Ibid., 16 November 1846, 5 March 1848.

44. Ibid., 18 November 1850.

45. Ibid., 23 July 1854.

46. Union Fire Company minutes, 26 June 1850.

47. Missouri Fire Company records, 11 October 1856; Franklin Company records, 11 October 1856.

48. Franklin Fire Company records, 17 July 1851, 26 September 1854.

49. St. Louis Firemen’s Association minutes, 8, 21, and 23 May 1855.

50. E. Edwards 1906, 73.

51. Lynch 1880, 78.

52. E. Edwards 1906, 73.


54. Laclede Fire Company records, 3 September 1857. On the appeal of fighting among the working class see Gorn 1986.

55. Laclede Fire Company, 12 May 1851; Missouri Fire Company, 25 June 1855, 3 and 18 January 1856.

56. Mayor’s Message, 14 May 1855.

57. Dykstra 1974, 58.


59. Firemen’s Association minutes, 3 July 1855, MoHS.
60. St. Louis Firemen's Fund, History of the St. Louis Fire Department (St. Louis, 1914), 168.

61. Missouri Democrat, 21 February 1858; E. Edwards 1906, 73, 277–79.

62. Scharf 1883, 796.

63. Lynch 1880, 91. I was unable to find any account of a riot in 1853 in either the Missouri Democrat or the Missouri Republican. Edward Edwards (1906, 70–71) believes this riot to be a conflation of the riot of 1849 and some other minor dog-related event, resulting from the general disturbances of the period.

64. Scharf 1883, 797; Lynch 1880, 11–13; see also Dorson 1943, 289n. 6.

65. Lynch 1880, 12.

66. Fireman's Journal, 4 August 1855.

67. Statistics on the San Francisco volunteer fire department drawn from a voting roster for the 1860 department election. Of the 859 members of the department entitled to vote, 427 were locatable in either the 1860 census or 1860 city directory.

68. Fireman's Journal, 4 August 1855.

69. California Spirit of the Times and Fireman's Journal, 21 July 1860; Robert S. Lammot, 2 March 1861, in Lammot Family Correspondence, Bancroft Library.

70. Fireman's Journal, 9 January, 16 February, 12 July 1856.

71. Ibid., 30 August, 27 September 1856.

72. San Francisco Bulletin, 22 and 23 September, 2 October 1856; Fireman's Journal, 18 October 1856.

73. Fireman's Journal, 4 August 1855 (emphasis in the original); 11 August 1855; 19 April 1856.

74. Ibid., 9 June 1856.


76. Evening Bulletin, 8, 10, and 12 December 1857.


78. Alta California, 29 August 1860; California Spirit of the Times and Fireman's Journal, 1 September 1860; Alta California, 23 November 1860.

79. Alta California, 18 December 1865.

80. Dorson 1943, 297; Murray 1855, 354–55.