In The Line of Duty:
A History of the Kansas City, Missouri Fire Department
from 1868–1968

This exhibition tells the story of KCFD’s first 100 years—from humble beginnings to international fame, from technological triumphs to tragic losses...

Historical items in this exhibit are from the Kansas City Fire Historical Society Collection, courtesy of the Kansas City Museum and Union Station Kansas City, except where noted. The Kansas City Museum is owned by the City of Kansas City, Missouri, and operated and managed by the City of Kansas City, Missouri Parks and Recreation Department.
The first recorded firefighting team in Kansas City, Missouri was an all-volunteer “bucket brigade,” formed in 1860. Six years later, with the Civil War behind us, the city still did not have an organized fire department—and The Kansas City Daily Journal of Commerce bemoaned this fact, “...we have no equipment and we are without power to save.” In 1867, the Missouri legislature granted Kansas City permission to organize a fire department, enforce a building code, and use necessary tax money for its operation. Francis Foster was appointed Kansas City’s first fire chief months later. Under Foster’s leadership, the first fire equipment was purchased—a steam fire engine named “The John Campbell No. 1” and two hose wagons. The city planned to pay for the steam engine by selling off properties found to have delinquent taxes but was stopped by an injunction by county court justices. Councilman John Campbell saved the day by personally paying the bill of $3,500, thus earning his name on the steam engine. The steam arrived on March 12, 1868 via the Kate Kinny steamboat on the Missouri River. Two days later, a trial run was brought to a successful close, and this date of March 14, 1868 is officially considered the birthday of the Kansas City, Missouri Fire Department (KCFD).

In KCFD’s first decades, cisterns were dug around the city to ease the department’s dependence on ponds. Fire stations were built, and the first paid firefighters were hired (in 1871 there were 35 firefighters recorded). Chief Foster, who had left in 1869, was reinstated by Mayor Turner Gill in 1875 to relieve Chief Michael Burnett (a Kansas City Times headline questioned if Burnett’s deposit was a whitewashing affair or was he made a scapegoat). Foster reorganized the department and oversaw the installation of new technology including a telephone alarm system and alarm push buttons in all stations. He also promoted George C. Hale to assistant chief in 1880, setting in motion KCFD’s arrival on the international firefighting stage.
George Consider Hale was arguably the world’s most famous firefighter at the turn of the 20th century. From mechanical engineer and inventor, to assistant chief and the youngest chief appointed in the department’s history at age 31, Hale was the consummate leader. In his lifetime, Hale held over 60 patents, most of them for firefighting. His inventions saved time and lives, as well as reduced the monetary loss by fire. It’s no wonder that when the United States was invited to participate in the 1899 International Fire Congress in London, officials in Washington looked to Chief Hale and his department to represent our country.

And represent they did: 20 countries competed and gave demonstrations—called exhibitions—of various firefighting techniques and equipment. Most exhibitions relating to technique were competitions against the clock with the fastest time declared the winner. Equipment exhibitions involved a group of judges who meticulously inspected and watched demonstrations of different firefighting apparatus before the winner was selected. The U.S. team won a gold medal for the Hale Water Tower, and walked away with the world championship of the Fire Congress—a tremendous feat. The champions were invited back in 1900 to defend their title and did it again, this time in Paris.

Chief Hale did more than bring fame to the department; he reorganized it and strengthened it. He built more fire houses, including a new fire headquarters, updated equipment, and put his inventions to use to improve conditions of fighting fires in the city. Overall, Hale created a world-class fire department.

Ironically, at the height of his fame and with his impeccable record as the longest tenured chief in the city’s history, his career was cut off. Hale always tried to keep politics out of his department, but it was politics that did him in when Mayor James A. Reed requested that he endorse the purchase of a new police and fire alarm system in 1901. Hale refused and Reed accused him of trying to push his own patented system, which Hale denied. When Reed was re-elected to a second term, his first order of business was to fire Chief Hale, and in 1902, Hale was voted out of his job. This did nothing to his reputation as a world-champion firefighter, and he continued to invent and sell his work until his death in 1923.

Short List of Hale’s Inventions

Chief Hale became well known in fire departments around the world for his inventions such as the Swinging Horse Harness, Adjustable Horse Collar, and Portable Water Tower. Some of his patents include:

- Automatic Fire Alarm System #639,945/Dec. 1899
- Water Tower #331,972/Aug. 1888
- Harness Suspension Device #412,684/Oct. 1889
- Automatic Horse Cover #377,831/Jan. 1888
- Hitching Strap #316,006/Aug. 1886
- Fire Extinguisher #661,066/Nov. 1901

KCFD Chiefs 1868–1968

George C. Hale 1882–1902

KCFD Horse Teams

It wasn’t just men who trained to be firefighters in the early years; horses were trained as well. So when Kansas City sent their firefighting team to London in 1893 for the International Fire Congress, horses Dan and Joe went along as important members. Both were snow white Arabians and known throughout the city as top-notch fire horses. Joe was killed in the line of duty in 1894 in a fire engine cable car collision. His partner Dan retired to Swope Park in 1907 and died six years later of old age. Dan was so beloved that he was mounted and became a display at the Kansas City Public Library’s museum for many years. What ever happened to him?

The horse team of Buck and Mack went to Paris in 1900 and came home to much fanfare. Photographs of them, and newspaper articles about them were everywhere. Both lived to retirement in Swope Park. KCFD disbanded the use of horses in 1927 for complete motorization.
Politics and Technology Prevail

KCFD was slow to recover from the removal of Chief Hale. Clinging to the old ways, they were one of the last fire departments in the region to embrace motorized vehicles and were still purchasing horses as late as 1913. This was partly due to concern that motorized vehicles required repair about 12 times more than horse-drawn steamers. When KCFD finally placed their first order for motorized apparatus in 1916, it was not surprising that they made it with the Kansas City Fire Department Supply Co., owned by Hale. Ten years later, in 1926, it is recorded that ten 500 GPM (gallons per minute) pumps, six hose wagons, four aerial trucks, and one ladder service truck were purchased from the Ahrens-Fox Engine Co. for approximately $225,000. The last hose wagon drawn by horses was retired in 1927.

Chief Hale’s legacy was felt in various ways. Both of his immediate successors came from his staff: Edward Trickett left after four years to head up the new Fire Prevention Division, and John Eger retired in 1918 out of fear that the Republican Party would take his job. In fact, politics often intruded in the workings of the department. In this instance, the Republican-dominated city council named Captain Edward Coffey as chief, passing over more qualified assistant chiefs. A month later, the largest and most devastating fire up to that time happened in the West Bottoms. Over 40 buildings were lost or heavily damaged with an estimated $2-3 million in damages. Six firemen were sent to the hospital and dozens more were injured. Coffey’s handling of this blaze quickly got him demoted.

The American Federation of Labor held a convention in Washington D.C. to establish a union for firefighters in the United States and Canada. This union became known as the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF). Kansas City was represented by two delegates; they carried the names of 373 Kansas City firefighters who became the founding members of IAFF Local 42 on February 28, 1918.

The union was helpless against the advancing political machine now known as the Pendragon Era of the 1930s. Thomas J. Pendragon rose to prominence as the Chairman of the Jackson County Democratic Party, using his vast network of friends and family to help elect politicians and award government contracts and patronage jobs. KCFD was particularly hard hit. Back then firefighters worked 84 hours a week in 12-hour shifts and were responsible for buying their own uniforms and gear. Now add to that having to make political campaign donations just to keep their jobs. Pay disputes, non-merit promotions, and hiring and firing without cause plagued the department. Two stations were closed with all 16 firemen from these stations fired in 1936 alone. This, according to City Manager Henry McElroy (a part of the Pendragon machine), saved the city $180,000.

Fire Alarm Boxes

The city’s growing population in the 1920s brought up the need for a backup fire-alarm system, as per new requirements of the National Board of Fire Underwriters. The city chose the fire alarm box system, and it took four years to get it fully installed and working in 1926. A separate exchange building (414 E. 22nd St.) was the centralized location for the system. The first alarm boxes—essentially a box on a post with a telephone inside—were mostly placed downtown and in the West Bottoms, considered the “high-value district.” Eventually, 185 fire alarm boxes were posted throughout the city; however, truth be told, they were used more by pranksters than to phones in actual fires. KCFD stopped using the system in 1985.

KCFD Director

With the passage of Kansas City’s new charter in 1925 came a provision to institute a new position of KCFD Director. The new director would handle all administrative duties such as hiring and firing, purchasing of fire equipment, and general correspondence. This position would hold much power; it was the director who appointed each new chief. The chief supervised all departments including repair shops, alarms, fire prevention office, and suppression division. Dr. Lee Johnson was appointed the first KCFD Director in 1926. The position was eliminated in 2006.
John T. Lynch—one of the last veterans of the Hale years—rose through the ranks and was appointed Chief in 1940 to lead the department out of the dark days of “machine” politics that was the 1930s. When Lynch took charge, KCFD ranked second to last in U.S. cities of equal size with 10.6 firemen for every 10,000 people. The pension was so small (340/ month) that firemen eligible to retire stayed on as long as they could, which created an old fire department. And fire apparatus was old as well—nothing younger than eight years old, and most equipment was 13–22 years old. Chief Lynch, along with new Director Francis Wornall, led an effort to purchase new state-of-the-art fire apparatus, minus the trendy new enclosed-roof trucks. Traditionalist that he was, Chief Lynch didn’t want his department to go soft.

During World War II, many firemen enlisted to fight in the conflict overseas. Like so many other occupations in the nation, KCFD was depleted of manpower. The vacancies were filled with very young men, some no older than 15. The ranks were now either very young or very old, and augmented by Civil Defense volunteers. This was one occupation that women did not replace the men; ‘Rosie the Riveter’ did not become a firefighter. Early records show only one woman was employed by KCFD in 1879. Sophie Henderson, wife of then Captain Alex Henderson, was “Watch Woman,” and her main duty was overseeing the station while the firemen were out on a call. She was paid $15 a month. Women would not enter the ranks as firefighters until the late 1970s.

Chief Lynch, perhaps carrying on the drill methods of Hale, trained his men to be aggressive firefighters, a legacy that still holds true today. District Chief John J. Nee, who rose in the ranks under the leadership and training of Lynch, summed it up well in 1946 when he was quoted as saying, “Get inside, where the fire is. Get underneath the fire and put it out. Don’t stand outside and throw water in.” This statement defines what KCFD is all about. They are known both locally and around the country as one of the most aggressive interior-attack departments.

In 1941, all KCFD members began mandatory first aid training. This would be the beginning of an ever-expanding role the department would play in the future. Chief Lynch retired in 1950 and was succeeded by Harvey L. Baldwin who served only three years, dying on the job of a heart attack at the scene of a fire. He was the second chief to die in office (Chief Donovan died in office in the 1900s).

Cityside, there were 28 fire stations (24 with pumpers, four with hose companies), 11 hook and ladder companies, and a crash truck at the (downtown) airport.

Firemen worked 24-hour shifts and were subject to immediate call back at every second alarm. Fire substitutes were paid $4 per day, second-grade firemen received $1,500 annually, and the chief’s salary was $3,600 annually.

Firemen were responsible for boxing their own uniforms and gear* including:

- Uniforms/$35.00
- High shoes/$3.50
- Dress cap/$2.50
- Rubber boots/$8.50
- Shirt (2)/$7.60 ($3.80 ea.)
- Bunker pants/$7.75
- Fire helmet/$10.50
- Fatigue clothes/$3.00

* In 1913, at the request of the union, KCFD consented to purchasing uniforms and gear for their firefighters.

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) sponsored the first National Fire Prevention Day in 1911 on the 40th anniversary of the great Chicago Fire of 1871. It was meant as a way to remind the public of the national tragedy and how important fire prevention was. In 1925, President Calvin Coolidge proclaimed a whole week be set aside for fire prevention, always to be around the week of October 9. Kansas City has observed this week over the years in a series of ways. Below are snapshots kept by Chief Lynch of the Fire Prevention Parade in 1947:
The decade of the fifties began and ended in devastation—the 1951 Kansas City flood covered miles and miles of the metropolitan area, and the 1939 Southwest Boulevard fire challenged KCFD, exposing both their strengths and weaknesses. Fighting multiple fires in the 1951 flood was made worse by having to fight in waist-high water. Fires moved from building to building carried by oil-d slick water, making it almost impossible to contain. Between low water pressure and fires that couldn't be reached, much less stopped; KCFD kept its cool and managed after several days to put out all the conflagrations without any firefighter fatalities. This unfortunately was not the case in 1959; on August 18, a fire broke out around 8:20 a.m. as two men fueled a gasoline tank truck on Southwest Boulevard. The fire spread to four other tanks (capable of holding 21,000 gallons each) filled to various levels with kerosene and gasoline. Two hours into the fight, one of the tanks exploded into a massive fireball and fire firefighters and one civilian lost their lives. More than 30 companies and 500 men from both sides of the state line battled the fire. Kansas City's tragedy became a valuable learning tool for fire professionals around the country and helped ensure better techniques in fighting future petroleum fires.

Political turmoil continued to wreak havock within KCFD during the latter half of the decade. IAFF Local 42 repeatedly requested a pay increase for firefighters through the support of an earnings-tax, which Chief Edgar Grass and other city officials opposed. Union members formed a protest line outside City Hall. The issue caused a rift within KCFD, with some calling for Chief Grass to be fired while others called for Union President Stanton Gladden to be let go. Tensions were eased somewhat when Mayor H. R. Barte approved a raise for firefighters. The Teamsters attempted to take advantage of this rift and form a separate union. In the midst of all the internal strife, Gladden was severely injured by a car bomb in front of his home in 1961; he survived, remaining president of the union until 1970. This attempted murder case was never solved.

In the era of Civil Rights, it is not surprising that the fire department had its own separate but equal policies toward its African-American firefighters. Full integration of the department had happened just a few years before—Raymond Daniel (inset right) became KCFD's first African-American battalion chief; a year later his brother Cecil became the second.

The first African American hired by KCFD was Edward S. Baker in 1887 as a "supplyman." Chief Hale established the city's first African-American fire company in 1896, and appointed Baker as captain. In 1917, the company received a new fire engine for its station (No. 11) located at 1812 Vine Street.

The mid-sixties brought about a new Fire Academy for training, a new repair shop, and two new fire stations. As the department looked toward its 100th anniversary, it could also look back with pride at its accomplishments and how far it had come. They stood ready for the next 100 years.

TRAINING SCHOOLS
Throughout KCFD's history there has been four training schools:
- Fire Station No. 2, 3rd floor of 807-09 Walnut St., 1937-1966
- Fire Station No. 2, 3rd floor of 1020 Central St., 1966-1992
- Fire Station No. 4, 1420 Penn St., 1928-1965
- Fire Academy, 5130 DeZarnus St., 1965-Present

What was taught under Chief Hale in the late 1980s is far removed from today's modern firefighter training. Yet the basic remains: getting to know your equipment, agility, and on-the-job training. In 19th-century firefighter training, emphasis was on the quick hitching of horses and the use of pumper ladders. The change to motorized fire trucks required new training for drivers and operators in their respective apparatus (hose trucks, pumper, and aerial trucks).

The use and care of fire apparatus changed little throughout the mid-20th century. By 1938, the department still used wooden ladders, rubber-lined cotton hose, and drove open cab fire trucks, a legacy of Chief Lynch. Firefighters-in-training had ten days of first-aid training, five days of pumper training, five days of aerial truck training, and a four-to-eight hour Saturday shift at a fire station nearest their home.

Scenes from the 1959 Southwest Boulevard fire (above) and the 1951 Kansas City flood.
KCFD is currently led by a 30-year veteran of the department, Chief Paul Berardi. Berardi began his career in 1986, rose through the ranks, and was permanently appointed to the position of Chief on January 10, 2013.

While KCFD’s services have expanded beyond even what the visionary Chief Hale of the late 1800s could have imagined—including Emergency Medical Services (EMS) and hazardous materials handling and disposal—KCFD’s mission remains the same:

To protect and serve Kansas City’s community with commitment and dedication to excellence.

From 33 stations, organized into seven battalions, the current department is a full-service emergency response department that operates 20 station-based ambulances, 15–20 dynamic ambulances, 32 pumper apparatus, 12 ladder trucks, three heavy-duty rescue trucks, a hazardous materials unit, and aircraft firefighting units at two airports. KCFD responds to more than 115,000 calls annually. The department is organized into six bureaus each commanded by a Deputy Chief.

For the past 15 years, KCFD has functioned within a labor and management partnership with the U.S. Fire Administration (lead federal agency for fire data collection, public fire education, fire research, and fire service training) and the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) Locals 42 and 3808. The partnership can take credit for many improvements in operations, equipment, and station upgrades. The latest major successes include a complete fleet replacement and the continuation of station remodels.

Chief Hale can be assured that the men and women of the current department are faithfully preserving his legacy. The citizens of Kansas City continue to enjoy a first-rate fire department protecting their city.

Acknowledgements

The Kansas City Museum would like to acknowledge the commitment, enthusiasm, and support of the City of Kansas City, Missouri including Mayor Sly James, the City Council, and the residents of Kansas City who generously provide public funding for the Museum.

The Museum is grateful to the City of Kansas City, Missouri Board of Parks and Recreation Commissioners and the Director and staff of Parks and Recreation.

In the Line of Duty: A History of the Kansas City, Missouri Fire Department from 1868–1998 was curated by Ray Elder, historian for the Kansas City Fire Historical Society (KCFHS), and developed collaboratively with Paul Ferguson, President of KCFHS, and the Kansas City Museum staff.

The historical artifacts and materials on display are from the collection of the Kansas City Museum/Union Station Kansas City and on loan from KCFHS, Chief Paul Berardi, Ray Elder, and Lorenda and Bryan Lance.

Graphic design by Carrie Maidment, Print Media Design and production by Custom Color.

The Kansas City Museum is owned by the City of Kansas City, Missouri and operated and managed by the City of Kansas City, Missouri Parks and Recreation Department.