

A Brief History of FDNY Badges and Helmet Frontpieces

by Gary Urbanowicz, Honorary Deputy Chief

Even before the formation of the Metropolitan Fire Department in 1865, the FDNY has had two prominent types of identification: badges for uniforms and helmet frontpieces for turnout (now bunker) gear. The history of the Department can be traced through these symbols, reflecting the evolution of apparatus, expanding responsibilities within the City, changes in ranks and titles and the growing complexity in fighting fires and emergencies in the world's most vibrant metropolis.

Shown below are a representative sampling of historic and current badges and helmet frontpieces of the FDNY.



(Above) The first official badges of the FDNY were issued in 1855 during the volunteer era. These were for “active” (left) and “exempt” Firefighters (right). They differed in composition. The active badge was brass-like “Prince’s metal” with nickel numbers and the exempt badge was the reverse. To be exempt from jury and militia duty, a member had to serve for a mandatory period of time, which varied over the history of the Department from seven to three years.

(Above) The first use of the Maltese cross was in 1865 when the paid Department was created by an Act of the New York State legislature, forming the Metropolitan Fire Department. It was a cap device. The Maltese cross, as we know it today, was introduced when the City regained control of the Department in 1870 and reinstated it with its original 1798 name of the Fire Department, City of New York.

(Above) Badges for Officers and civilians were standardized in 1884 with these pentagon-shaped shields (left), representative of the operating nut on hydrants. In 1937, these were replaced with the sunray Maltese cross badge (right) that is still in use today. Another change came in 2013, with the incorporation of the City seal, consistent with the specifications of the New York City Charter by including the words, *Sigillum Civitatis Novi Eboraci* (meaning, the Seal of the City of New York).

During the tenure of Commissioner John T. O’Hagan, several changes were made in uniforms and other identifying items, including the addition of stars (left) on the badges of Chief Officers from Deputy Assistant up.



Under Commissioner Howard Safir, a “police style” badge was introduced. It is available for a limited number of positions and ranks, including four-star Chiefs and Commissioner staff. It also is referred to as a “Command” badge (right).



Company Officers cap and lapel devices originally were embroidered with the speaking trumpet and a background representing the type of company: black



for engine (left), red for ladder (right), green for chemical and tan (with anchor) for marine. When changed to metal devices in 1890, colors no longer were viable, so the ax was introduced for ladder company Officers. Cap devices for company Officers traditionally include the company number.



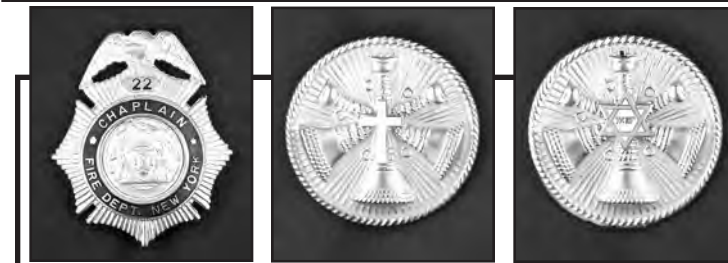
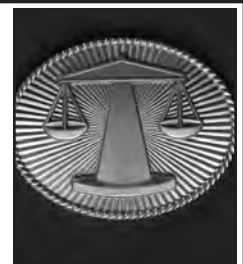
(Left) As the FDNY gained new technology, procedures and apparatus across its 150-year history, company Officers’ cap and lapel devices have been developed that reflect these advances. Shown, left to right, are the symbols for the engine, ladder, rescue, marine and squad. These symbols also are affixed to company Officers’ helmet fronts.



(Left and above) Special badges have been issued for positions in the Marine Bureau since 1891, with changes in 1937, as well as some more recently. These include breast and cap devices for, from left to right, Pilots, Engineers and Wipers. Wiper cap device and breast badge are identical.



Although members of the Bureau of Fire Investigation (BFI) have been part of the uniformed force since 1962, they were not issued Class A uniform insignia. In 2002, a unique device, based on the "scales of justice," was introduced so that BFI personnel could attend official functions in rank-specific uniform. Styles of the device vary somewhat, based on rank. Top, Fire Marshal and Supervising Fire Marshal in silver color. Bottom, Assistant Chief Fire Marshal and Chief Fire Marshal in gold color.



(Left) The first two Chaplains were appointed to the Department on March 28, 1899. They were issued cap and lapel devices with the standard Battalion Chief crossed trumpets superimposed with a crucifix. In 1956, these were changed to Deputy Chief insignia. When Rabbi Edward Lissman was appointed on January 1, 1930, the Star of David was introduced, representing the Jewish faith.



Prior to the elimination of the volunteers in 1865, companies officially were designated by number as today, but they also took on names. Additionally, the member's initials were emblazoned on the shield, preceding the badge number of the post-1865 era. Cataract Engine Company 25 (left) and Cornelius V. Anderson Ladder Company 10 (right).

With the passage of "An Act to Create a Metropolitan Fire District and Establish a Fire Department Therein" to create the paid Department, the letters "MFD" were placed on helmet fronts. When the Department came back under City control in 1870, "MFD" was removed and the easy-to-recognize style of helmet fronts in black for engine and hose companies and red for ladder companies, with the member's badge number, were issued.

Remembering that like a badge, a helmet front is an identification of an individual member, many relics can be found belonging to famous--and, perhaps, infamous--Firefighters, including William "Boss" Tweed (left) of the volunteer era, responsible for bringing the Department back to City control in 1870 and Elisha Kingsland (right), first Chief of the paid Department, from 1865 to 1870.



In the 1930s, the eight-inch "high eagle" was replaced on helmets with six-inch frontpieces to give them a safer, lower profile, as seen above. In 1959, changes in the Department were reflected in helmet identification. Notably, fireboats dropped engine company numbers and became marine companies with the helmet fronts changing from black to green. Squads relinquished their green fronts in favor of yellow. To become more efficient, two-piece helmet fronts were introduced, along with new color coding. Members were required to purchase the new fronts for \$2.32. A summary of these changes was published in the October 1959 issue of WNYF.



In response to the overwhelming increase in multiple-alarm fires during the “War Years” of the 1970s, the operational strength of the Department was increased by the establishment of “Combination” companies (left), second sections of existing companies (center) and tactical control units (right). Combination companies had existed in a number of configurations earlier, but their 1974 iteration put engine and ladder apparatus under the command of one Captain to cut cost and better utilize overworked Officers.

(Right) With innovation comes a need for change, including identifying members of new companies, such as Haz-Mat, established in 1984.



The design on Chief Officer helmet fronts has remained relatively unchanged since 1865. The FDNY lettering was added in the 1970s.

Many companies are long gone, but, hopefully, not forgotten and are forever a part of FDNY’s proud history.



The Super Pumper System was established in 1965 and disbanded in 1982.



Prior to consolidation of NYCEMS in 1996, FDNY ambulances were for transport of members only.



FDNY Salvage units began as a federally funded program in May 1972. After Federal money ran out, the City continued to fund Salvage 2 until disbandment on February 9, 1991.



FDNY was the first department to get water towers and they continued to be used until 1959.

