

Public Health + Safety



Philadelphia Firefighters, 1850s
Image: Library of Congress

In the 1800s, police officers only had to be tough and willing to work for low pay. Fire brigades were staffed by volunteers or hired by insurance companies to protect policyholders. Neither arrangement worked very well.

Picture this ...

A house in the middle of a densely-settled city block catches fire. The fire brigade, hired and paid by a fire insurance company, pulls up to the burning house and checks for a medallion that indicates whether or not the owners have insurance coverage. Unfortunately, the house isn't covered, so the private fire brigade lets it burn. Worse still, the fire jumps to houses on the same block—some of which are covered by insurance—but the firefighters don't have the resources to battle the multiple blazes.

That happened all too often in the days before municipal fire departments.

Today, government provides police and fire services by using tax dollars to pay trained professionals and purchase the necessary equipment. These services are expensive, but when the worst happens, they prove their worth.

And while we are on the subject of essential services, let's not overlook the value of municipal trash management. Anyone who has ever been to a country where it is a low priority can attest to the impact efficient trash management has on public health and the overall quality of life.



Advertisement for Republic Fire Insurance, Co., mid-1800s
Image: Library of Congress



Trash-strewn yard, early 1900s
Image: Library of Congress