

FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 117: 1940 (THE FIRE MARSHAL)

By Richard Schulte

Every once in a while, you come across a presentation which is rather interesting, even though the presentation doesn't necessarily provide any information which you can use. Such was a presentation was made by the Chairman of the Fire Marshals' Section meeting preceding the forty-fourth Annual Meeting of the National Fire Protection Association. The following is the text of the presentation made by W. J. Scott:

"Address of Chairman.

*W. J. SCOTT, K.C.,
Fire Marshal of Ontario.*

*No more opportune time than an annual meeting could be found to review briefly the origin of the title "Fire Marshal" and the institution of our offices which are peculiar to this continent, and to tell something of the beginnings of our organization. **Probably you realize the ancient origin of our title, or know the fact that one of our offices now has a continuous existence of over seventy years.***

*The title of "Fire Marshal," which is changed to the lengthier, modern one of "Fire Commissioner" in some jurisdictions, is one of the offshoots of the word "Marshal" which has long been the title of officers important in both military and civil life. **This name has evolved from the "Marescalci" or "Masters of the Horse" of the early Frankish kings.** It is interesting, in view of the activities of most fire marshals in the investigation of arson, to note that the word "Constable" is derived from the name given to the same "Masters of the Horse" by the Byzantine emperors. The importance of the cavalry and horses in olden times meant that the Marshal was an important figure, and led to the military title of "Field Marshal." This officer was originally responsible for the orderly conduct of the military camp, a duty now exercised by the Provost Marshal in the British Army, but as early as 1214 the Marshal was one of the chiefs of the army. The title Field Marshal was first introduced in England in 1736 by George II, and now is the highest ranking officer in the army. In the modern development of aerial warfare, the importance of the title Marshal is recognized, for in the Royal Air Force, the four highest ranking officers are Marshal of the Air, Air Chief Marshal, Air Marshal and Air Vice Marshal.*

One of the oldest hereditary titles in England is the Earl Marshal, and until quite recent times the Court Marshal was an important official in the English courts. This title is still preserved in the United States in the Marshal who is an executive officer in the federal courts. There are also marshals appointed by the President in Alaska, Hawaii, etc., with other administrative duties. Also in some parts of the United States the title has sunk to that of the village policeman, to distinguish him from the county officers known as sheriffs.

The earliest establishment similar to that now known as the Fire Marshal's Office was in New York City in 1689 under the name of "Brent Masters," but now there is little trace of their exact function. But the modern office does date definitely from the year 1868 when the Province of Quebec established Fire Marshals for the cities of Quebec and Montreal. James Prendergast was appointed Fire Marshal of Quebec in 1868, and those of this audience who go over from here to the meeting of the Association of Canadian Fire Marshals at Quebec City next week can meet Mr. Romeo Gingras, K.C., the sixth to occupy this office in its 72 years of continuous existence. In the same year of 1868 Henry William Austin and Mathias Desnoyers were appointed Fire Marshals of Montreal, and that office, too, has been continuous ever since, although they are all now called Fire Commissioners.

*The first law naming and establishing fire marshals which I have been able to trace is this Quebec statute of 1868. Most interesting is the fact that it begins, "Whereas the destruction of property by fire . . . , frequently occurs under circumstances giving rise to strong suspicion that such fires were not accidental" **Although no fire prevention duties are established, this law does give the fire marshals as complete arson investigation powers as any of us enjoy today, even extending to the power of arrest.***

The first state or provincial fire marshal's office was established in the Province of Manitoba, Canada, in the year 1876 and has been in continuous existence ever since, Fire Commissioner E. Magrath of Winnipeg being the present holder of that office. Early records are now lost.

In the United States, I believe that the first State Fire Marshals were appointed about 1894 in Massachusetts and Maryland and that one held office briefly in New York State shortly after. However, I am informed that these officers ceased after a period and that today the Ohio State Fire Marshal's Office is the oldest in continuous existence in the United States. State Fire Marshal Ray Gill of our Executive Committee is the direct successor of Fire Marshal S. D. Hollenbeck, who took office on May 30, 1900.

From then on the growth of the institution of Fire Marshal was rapid in both the United States and Canada, until today there are 278 state and provincial fire marshals and deputy fire marshals and city fire marshals who are members of the Fire Marshals Section of the N.F.P.A.

Our Association dates back to 1905 when the Fire Marshals Association of North America was first established. It included only United States state fire marshals and Canadian provincial fire marshals, and there is now little information available about their annual meetings. At their meeting in Memphis in 1926 a momentous step was taken when a resolution was passed to change this independent association into the Fire Marshals Section of the National Fire Protection Association. With this change, the city fire marshals and chiefs of fire prevention bureaus were admitted to membership, and the annual N.F.P.A. Proceedings starting from 1927 give a continuous history of the development in membership, influence and public service of our international organization of the fire marshals of the United States and Canada. (Applause.)

And so if you were wondering about the term “Fire Marshal” and where it came from, there you have it.

* * * * *

Source: “*Proceedings of the Forty-fourth Annual [NFPA] Meeting*”, Atlantic City, New Jersey, 1940.