

Starting
(OR WANT TO UPGRADE)

A FIRE MUSEUM?

Decisions you will make...
which you may not have thought of yet.



Observations of a first-time volunteer Curator who
appreciates all the help received along the way.
Jim Van Drunen

Produced as a service of the
Fire Museum Network

MUSEUM OF FIREFIGHTING





Foreword

Jim Van Drunen approached me at the Fire Museum Seminar in Phoenix in 2025 with the idea of creating a helpful guide for beginners as well as those who were already experienced in Fire Museum operations, and while I had no idea of all the work involved in producing it, Jim clearly already did and was willing and eager to “get ‘er done!” Jim had visited a number of Fire and Non-Fire Museums and had noticed things that really stood out, as well as those things that may not have worked quite so well. He wanted a way to convey that beneficial information to our members.

Fire Museums are more than entertainment; they are, and should be, educational, informative, and culturally historical. They celebrate and display the proud heritage of the fire service, and Jim, former Fire Chief from Blue Island, Illinois, exemplifies that professional pride in this document.

Thank you, Jim, for doing what a lot of us felt needed doing, but are way too disorganized to successfully put our own jumbled thoughts on paper!

Bob Heckman, President
The Fire Museum Network, Inc.

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Introduction

When we finished restoring a beautiful firehouse in Fort Lauderdale to its 1927 ambiance in preparation to become our new Fire Museum, I inherited the Curator job. My planning centered on helmets, badges, nozzles, etc. I then discovered the “Fire Museum Network” and attended one of their informative conferences. It was held at the outstanding Aurora (IL) Regional Fire Museum. Having no experience creating a Museum, I soon learned that all my plans for the Museum (actually I was planning a “Collection”) were wrong! I was delighted to have learned about *Museum* exhibits before exhibit work began so we could change our plans and create a popular, interesting and educational Museum. Even if our exhibits had been in place, however, I would have used what I learned at that Conference (and what you may learn here) to make our Museum better.

From a spare room in a firehouse to a major cultural and historic attraction enjoyed by thousands of visitors per year, Fire Museums (hereafter referred to as FMs) come in all shapes and sizes. Their growth into something substantial that takes advantage of opportunities for historical preservation and education, safety education and other goals depend on many factors, including the vision, creativity and effort of the leaders. The goal here is to help FM founders be aware of their options and decisions, and to help them create their own plan tailored to their situation to build something outstanding. **This guide will cover many subjects, but each very lightly (books and college courses cover each item better than we can here).** Our goal is to alert you to the basic decisions you will face and can plan for (and perhaps seek further advice or study on). If you have the budget and ability to work with a professional museum consultant, great. This guide is geared toward inexperienced FM Curators that may have a tight budget but still want to create an enjoyable and educational FM. *There are many creative ways to tell the story of Fire Service history. We hope these suggestions and ideas are helpful.*

JAV

Why A Fire Museum?

FM's start from a variety of motivations and opportunities, including...

- A. Real estate: An historic firehouse is retired and several people want to preserve the history, architecture or memories.
- B. A collection: A significant artifact or collection deserves a place to be preserved and displayed.
- C. An historic story: Firefighters/fire buffs want to share the history of service of their department/area. A subset is often the desire to teach fire safety.

A FM may begin with one or more of these opportunities and motivations.

Creating a FM is a large task that will take a lot of time and work (and will encounter occasional setbacks and obstacles), so it's important to have a clear and conscious understanding of the goals... to remain motivated to pursue those goals when the challenges get frustrating.

Where?

- A. If the impetus begins with the availability of an historic firehouse, the where is easy.
- B. If the motivation to create a FM comes from the desire to display a collection or to share a fire department's history, etc., the location decision is wide open. Fire Museums often begin (or continue) in a spare room, spare bay or basement of a firehouse. They have also started in an unused area of a school. A friendly historical society may provide space for a FM to begin. If finances allow, storefronts, modern warehouses and custom-built facilities have been used as sites. Regardless of the site used, it's important to find a site (or adapt it) to create an atmosphere that is conducive to telling a historical story. The overall ambiance created, if done well, can help make an "oh, wow" experience that can grow visitor attendance and enjoyment. On the other hand, a bare or unappealing space, even if it has nice "stuff", will be far less inspiring for visitors and volunteers alike.

- C. Many FM's have begun in spare school or firehouse space, with a plan to seek a more suitable permanent space as soon as that becomes feasible. In that case, the perseverance and creativity of the founders to keep pursuing a good permanent home is critical.

A Collection or a Museum? The Big Question that is often overlooked.

Note: If you have an existing FM and in reading this you find that you have a collection instead of a museum, congratulations! You have preserved irreplaceable history, created an operating facility and are well-positioned to build it into a quality FM if you choose.

Wikipedia shares this comparison: *“As nouns the difference between museum and collection is that museum is a building or institution dedicated to the acquisition, conservation, study, exhibition, and educational interpretation of objects having scientific, historical, cultural or artistic value while collection is a set of items or amount of material procured or gathered together.”*

Many people with limited museum experience are unaware of the existence of, and the big difference between, a collection and a museum. Both can be very interesting and well done, but they have very different goals. Some museums never answer this question, and a blended facility may evolve that misses the mark either way.



A collection of patches and nozzles.

A *collection* gathers and displays special items relating to the topic of the collection, i.e. antique cars or tractors, Tiffany lamps, antique clocks, artwork,

sports trophies and memorabilia, etc. Descriptions may or may not be posted, but if they are, the information is often limited to a few specifics. Little or no information is shared on the human aspects; the people who used the items, what their lives were like, the item's impact on society, etc.



A collection of fire helmets



A collection of communications equipment



A collection of firefighting equipment

A collection can be wonderful, but it will start and end with “things”, as beautiful or unique or historic as they may be. Enthusiasts of the topic will love visiting and may stay for hours. Average people may enjoy a visit but will have a lower level of interest.

Collections often try to close this information gap by providing volunteer docents to give all visitors personal tours to explain the objects they see. This has pros and cons.

Pros:

- the personal attention visitors receive.
- the docent's enjoyment in talking about a subject they love

Cons:

- the information shared (and its accuracy) often varies widely from what the FM wants to share, and from docent to docent. Docents may spend time telling personal stories unrelated to the information that is the goal of the institution to share. If a Collection is serious about the quality of the information shared with the public, training and constant docent monitoring (and corrective re-training if needed) is necessary.
 - the number of visitors can exceed the number of docents available
 - the visitors may want to spend time on specific subjects while docents may cover a general overview or be less familiar with the specific topic than a museum exhibit information panel could provide
 - visitors may want a faster or slower pace than docents use
 - Museum days/hours open may be limited by docent team availability

Docents are extremely valuable to FMs in many other roles however, including operating working displays, and occasionally making themselves available to answer questions. Since this organization is the Fire MUSEUM



Network, this publication will cover the creation of a *museum*.

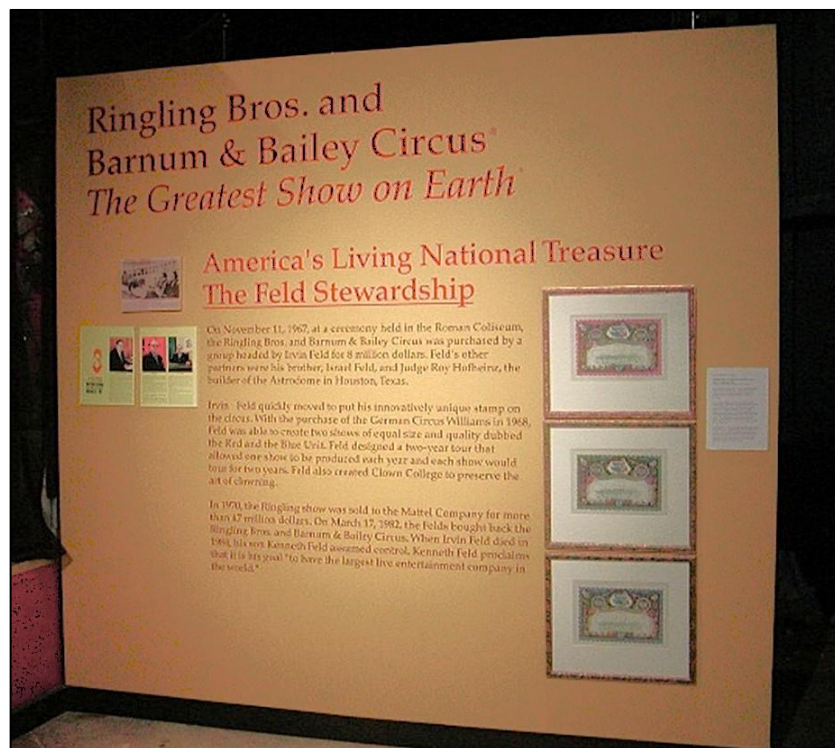
An excellent alternative to docent tours for collections, and an enhancement to FMs, is the AI-enabled AUDIO DOCENT system offered by ArtTech Alliance (available at a discount to Fire Museum Network Members).

A *museum's* goal is to educate. Its founders will consciously NOT start

planning with things... artifacts, vehicles, photos, etc. A well-conceived museum's founders will start with a blank sheet of paper and write down (a) a list of stories (about the museum's subject) that they would like to tell, and (b) things they want people to remember when they leave that they did not know before.

Walking into a museum will not look like entering an antique store, with lots of THINGS on display. It will look more like a classroom, with informative exhibits covering topics, and those topics (stories, information) being illuminated with related artifacts, photos, documents, etc.

This is the introductory exhibit at a circus museum. It uses photos and documents to help share the overall story that visitors will experience.



Other exhibits will go on to tell interesting portions of the story in detail, again using objects, photos and documents to bring to life the stories and information shared. This one explains the role and importance that elephants played at the circus.



In a FM arranged chronologically, each downline panel could share stories from one, or several, decades (large incidents, equipment improvements, racial/gender integration, etc., again with related photos and artifacts.

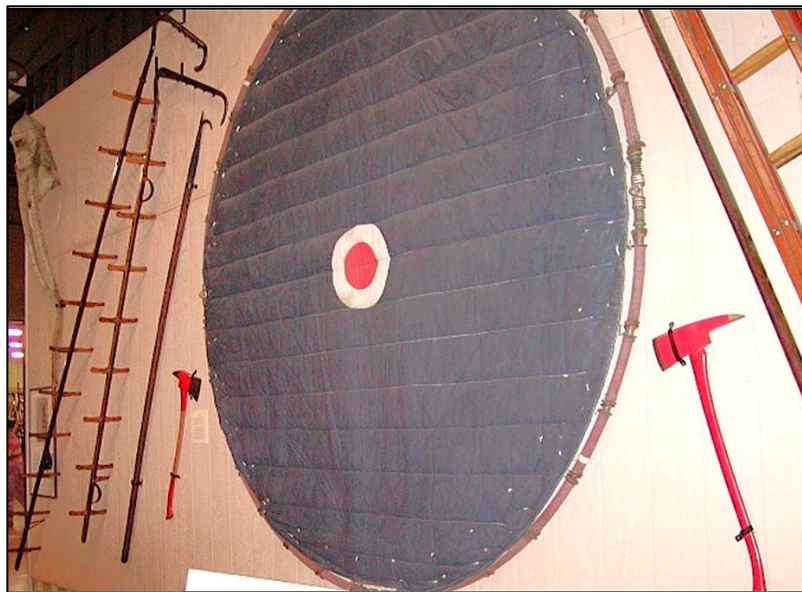


Below is an excellent, inexpensive example of the museum concept. Sign panels on walls or free-standing kiosks share information on important subjects, illustrated with photos. Information and related photos can also be printed and mounted directly on the wall. Artifacts can go on the

wall or in a display case near the related copy. Always have photos, newspaper clippings and documents scanned and printed on permanent media. Never post originals.



Here is a life net in a *collection* of fire equipment. Little or no information is shared for non-enthusiast visitors, so of limited interest to them.



Here is a life net *museum* exhibit, accompanied by an information panel. The panel has:

- a description of what a life net is.
- a 1950's life net advertisement.
- a 1950's photo of the mayor jumping into a life net to start Fire Prevention Week.



This exhibit started when the curator found the photo of the mayor. A life net was purchased from a collector, and the old advertisement was found on eBay. He then wrote the copy explaining it all. A creative, inexpensive way to add a great deal of human interest to a big, odd, round thing.

LIFE NET



FIRE PREVENTION SAVES LIVES!

The first standard in the Department of Fire Prevention, Inc. is the fire escape. The fire escape is the only way out of a burning building. It is the only way out of a burning building. It is the only way out of a burning building.

She will be Saved—But—

Nearly 10,000 persons lost their lives in fire in U.S. last year. Some of this loss of life—made of it in fact—could have been prevented by the use of modern rescue equipment. ATLAS LIFE NETS are the latest in safety, modern rescue equipment. They are built by one of the best of the equipment makers. They are an ATLAS NET on your new apparatus. Lifesaving equipment is not for sale at ATLAS—they are available only.



Specify ATLAS on new apparatus

ATLAS SAFETY EQUIPMENT CO., Inc.

25 WARREN STREET ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ NEW YORK 7, N. Y.

The above is a list of the equipment that is available for fire fighting. It is a list of the equipment that is available for fire fighting. It is a list of the equipment that is available for fire fighting.

LIFE NETS SAVE LIVES

Today, and all other times, of rescue equipment is the most important piece of equipment for fire fighting. It is the most important piece of equipment for fire fighting. It is the most important piece of equipment for fire fighting.

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Let's look at a *collection* vs. a *museum*, both hypothetical, displaying beautiful antique sewing machines. Both occupy attractive spaces in a historic storefront in a historic part of town. Both have flat black ceilings with track lights illuminating antique sewing machines displaying beautiful ironwork and gold leaf. Both display the machines in chronological order.

The ABC Sewing Machine Collection: *Walking* in the door, the visitors see lots of sewing machines. Each machine has a small exhibit panel that shares the manufacturer, model, years made and type of sewing work it did. It may also include the strengths and shortcomings of the machine, and what replaced it and why. Artifact centered.

The XYZ Sewing Machine Museum: *Walking* in the door, the visitors see very large photos behind sewing machines. The photos show people using the machines. Some photos are inside homes. Some are inside factories. The exhibits include examples of the stitching and garments that could be created on that machine. Information panels with the photos explain what people used the machines for. The exhibits of the oldest machines share the story of the machines being used by child workers in factories. The exhibits of the newer machines share how the machines became affordable for most people, and how people learned how to operate them. People centered.

As you can see, the first critically important decision that FM founders make is whether they will display *artifacts* (a collection), or if they will create *exhibits* that tell stories, and share information, with photos, documents and artifacts helping tell those stories (a museum). Either one can be great; pick one. From this point forward, we will discuss *museum* creation.

Manpower:



(presentations to civic groups, potential donors, etc.), techies (Facebook and website creation and ongoing content), construction (building and grounds



restoration/maintenance), and other areas. Active or retired teachers who enjoy history would be great to invite to help with writing (exhibit copy, newsletters, etc.). Retired fire officers and city officials often like to help as a FM-City liaison. An active or retired business-person (i.e. insurance, finance, etc.) can be effective in approaching finance donors.

Civic clubs (Rotary, Kiwanis and others) are invaluable for special projects like “landscaping” or “painting day”. They are often open to longer-term help also, especially if it is related to youth (i.e. fire safety education).



Poll your co-workers; Board members and workers may have excellent contacts for the materials and professional labor you will need. Ask who may have a contact that might donate or discount help with plumbing, electrical, painting, tile, HVAC, glass, landscaping, fencing, pressure washing etc. Many firefighters do trades and businesses (even sell insurance) on the side. Make a list of them and ask for some help with *their* Museum! The same is true to find donors and discounters for supplies for the above trade

work. The owner of a paint store was so pleased with one FM's historic preservation that he donated the paint (over 100 gallons!). One sprinkler company donated a complete system. Fire equipment firms often donate extinguishers and recharging.

Companies that do business with the city are easy to ask for help, from building repairs to truck body and mechanical work. Ask if they'll help!

It's important to remember when approaching people for help, most people respond well to the words "can you please *help* us", but most are afraid to agree to what might be an endless commitment. Often, it's best to ask for help with a specific project (i.e. prep and paint a room or help prepare a fire engine for display). Hopefully they will enjoy the work and continue to help.

The choice of a Curator or Curator Committee is perhaps the most important personnel decision. They will carefully shape the FM. Some FM's don't appoint specific exhibit leadership and responsibility, and the result can be a diffused FM that is a partial collection and partial museum. The Curator must start with the museum vs. collection decision. They need to see the big picture of what can be created and also be good with details. More about Curator's work in the Exhibits chapter.

The Board:

When starting a FM it is inevitable that those people working on the project will become part of the Board of Directors, and they deserve it. As hard-working and involved as they are however, others may bring additional critical talents to the Board, and recruiting a Board of the most qualified people should start at once. A few examples of the skills and experiences Directors can bring are:

- An educator can be useful in creating fire safety learning and STEM programs, inviting college teaching students to serve as docents and interns. They could also be good at setting up and supervising

profitable birthday party and summer camp programs with a fire safety component.

- A finance person is ideal as a treasurer, negotiating larger purchases, developing fund raising, creating budgets and attracting donors.
- An experienced building tradesman is ideal to head the Building and Grounds Committee.
- A graphics professional would be valuable to oversee signage, exhibits, brochures, etc.
- A firefighter or officer is helpful as a spokesman/publicist to maintain a frequent flow of quality communications to FD personnel and the public.
- Some FM's make the fire chief (or his designate) an ex officio Director. This often becomes the Fire Marshal, who can be very helpful with fire safety program creation and coordination with the FD.
- An active or retired attorney can be helpful from incorporation to by-laws to leases to attracting donors to donor estate-planning programs.
- A staff member from a local museum would be wonderful to have (even for one year) to help with creating exhibits and establishing operations (and it's a resume enhancer).



- A person who has fund-raising or financial development experience would be very helpful, especially in the beginning or during growth.
- Some FM's go a step farther and require Directors to have some

skin in the game by maintaining an annual membership level of a specific dollar level.

When asking people to serve as a Director, they may be apprehensive of a long-term commitment, so asking them to serve for one year to help start (or improve) the FM can be much more attractive... and hopefully they will enjoy the teamwork and stay. Keeping meetings productive, fun and brief will be important to retain good Directors.

Incorporation, tax considerations, permits, licenses, leases etc.

- a. A new FM must form a corporation, create a set of by-laws and have an Organizational Meeting. If they don't have an attorney on the Board, it's often possible for one of the Directors to ask their lawyer to donate this help.
- b. The next important step is to apply to the IRS for 501c3 tax exempt status. This is not difficult (someone familiar with government forms can do it), and many other actions will begin once this is in place (such as people donating because the donations are tax deductible). Once approved, the IRS requires that a simple annual tax return be filed or the tax exempt status will be automatically suspended, then revoked.
- c. Once 501c3 status is received, use the IRS document to apply to your State for a Non-Profit Sales Tax Exemption Certificate to avoid paying sales tax on FM purchases. Again, it's an easy process. Give each vendor a copy of the Certificate to keep on file.
- d. Open a checkbook and credit card merchant's account. Shop for a bank that is convenient and hopefully offers no fee accounts to non-profits. Have several signatures on the account. Also opening a credit card merchant account is valuable and not hard, so you can receive credit card donations and payments.
- e. If a firehouse is involved, a lease will be needed. A nominal rent (i.e. \$10 per year) is often used to establish the landlord/tenant relationship. Though nominal, pay it each year by check. The FM team can also ask the city for some help (like landscape maintenance by the parks crew) to help get the project started. Leases often require the FM to do the building

- maintenance as well as operate a museum open to the public. Patiently and persuasively negotiate for the best terms and help possible.
- f. Building permits are required where applicable in most cases. Many cities will waive fees for permits for a non-profit improving a city building.
 - g. ADA compliance deserves a word. If the old firehouse is to see major changes, it may be possible to comply with modern standards. In many cases, the point of the historic preservation is to keep the property as original as possible, and in many cases, attempting to fully comply would require some or a lot of demolition and rebuilding. Some new FM's have successfully negotiated waivers, with the agreement that they will use every possible improvised means to meet ADA goals without structural changes, i.e. portable or permanent ramps, wheelchairs, safety rails, etc. to accommodate people who need them.
 - h. A good Mission Statement will help keep the work focused as time passes.

Funding. Sources. Capital campaigns. Budget. Reports.

One of the largest challenges when starting a FM is income. Why give if there is no museum? How is a museum created without money? A few ideas to start your creative thinking include:

- Seed money sources, such as the IAFF Local, a Firefighter's Benevolent Association, local Civic clubs and historical groups, city community development funds, insurance and bar associations, and local donors. When asking for help, be specific. Don't ask for money, ask for help to get the roof fixed or the exterior or interior prepped and painted or the wiring improved for safety.
- Once the project is moving, many FM's ask the city to add them to the Employee Payroll Deduction program. Then it's a matter of Board members and involved firefighters selling the program and getting donation forms signed. This is a very valuable way to create the *steady* income that is so important.

- Create a Membership Program and sell Memberships. Retired firefighters are a good place to begin.
- Many people prefer giving to a specific need, and non-profits often find great success using Capital Campaigns for specific needs. The goal may be a new roof or HVAC or electrical system, or even that special fire engine that belonged to the FD at one time.
- Once the facility can be occupied, birthday parties are very popular and profitable. Summer camp, scout badge and other programs can do a good job of teaching fire safety (and often charge \$5 +- per young person).
- FM's receive lots of donations of fire artifacts (and "knick-knacks!"), many unneeded by the FM, so much so that a "Ramp Sale" can be held occasionally and can raise a few thousand dollars.
- A Finance Committee (including the Treasurer) must be appointed to draft the annual budget and present it to the Board for approval, the month before the fiscal year begins. Even if the first year's is rough estimates, get started! It should start with income projections by category, go on to project spending expectations, and give committees annual spending limits, beyond which they need Board approval. Having previous year's numbers makes creating a new budget easier... and remember to include budgets for desired improvements. A spending limit for Committee heads is also created for any one item without Board approval. Adjustments can be voted anytime as needed.
- Monthly Treasurer's reports should itemize cash on hand, revenue by source (donation box, donations general, Membership sales, events by category, etc.). Expenses should also be listed by categories, including bills payable. Committee heads should be advised of how much of their annual budget remains available to date.

Preserving artifacts, photos, documents, books:

Books have been written on this subject, but we'll take just a line or two to offer some suggestions.

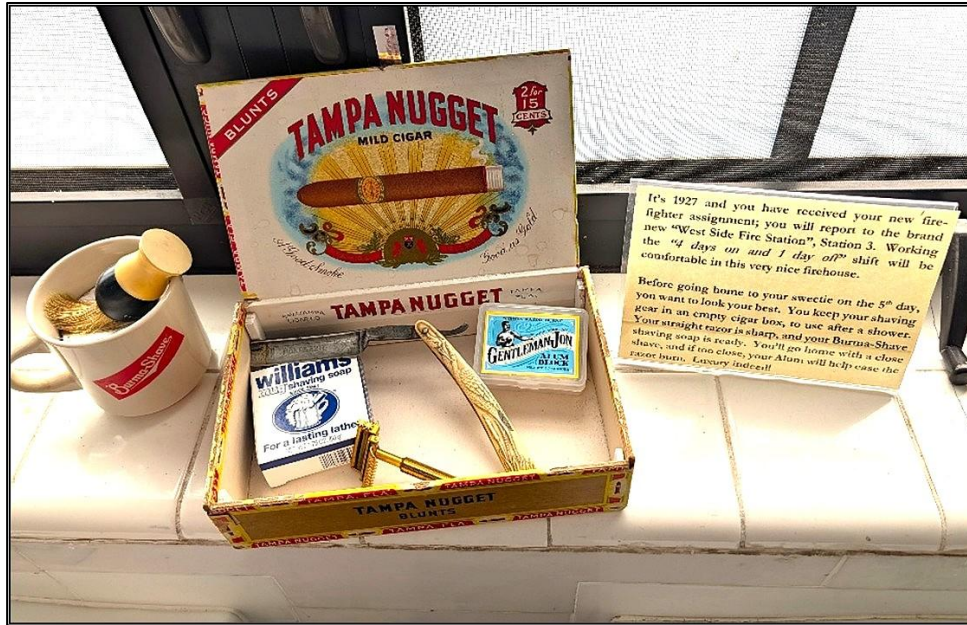
Every museum needs an “attic”, a secure storage area. To museum people, visiting each other’s storage area is often the most interesting part of a visit. The largest danger to paper goods is moisture. It’s important to find an air conditioned, or at least de-humidified space to preserve them.



- Moisture can also cause corrosion to many artifacts, so try to use the same protection.
- Paper documents need physical protection from crushing, bending, folding. It’s also important to be able to find them. Many new FM’s use large plastic storage tubs and file folders. The tubs protect from damage, and the file folders can be marked by year, decade, subject or other filing system, with an index maintained, so that a certain photo can be found, or at least identify the tub number it’s in. Number the tubs and maintain the index!
- Artifacts are often stored on simple shelving, arranged by subject (brass goods, scrap books, etc.). The brass goods department needs very sturdy shelving!

Creating museum exhibits:

Here is where your creative Curator or Curator Team can shine. Good exhibits can be expensive or inexpensive. Imagination and creativity are more important than money. Here is an example, using a windowsill in the washroom to tell a short story, enhanced with artifacts. The panel describes the long shifts worked in the 1920’s and about the shaving equipment used then. Inexpensive, fun and all created with a little research plus items from eBay. Who says 20 seconds of hand washing needs to be boring?



Let's back up and go over some basics. There are as many ways to create a museum as there are museums. Here are a few popular ideas:

- a. If your fire department has a "yearbook" or other written histories, much of your work is already done. One way or another, create a rough list of topics (to become exhibits), so you can start writing an outline of each exhibit's copy and search for applicable photos, artifacts, documents, etc. for each exhibit. Planning the sequence of exhibits to each other will be next; many use chronology in general, but often the detail exhibits show evolution, i.e. telling the story of breathing apparatus over time.
- b. If in an historic building, you will have to decide if you are doing an exact restoration to original or if modifications will be allowed to adapt it to its new use (i.e. paint colors, move a wall). Your call, but we suggest that adaptive reuse changes be allowed but kept to a minimum. Antique kitchen components may be installed in a non-working kitchen, but if it will be used, new (retro-style?) appliances may be necessary. If changing a toilet is necessary, a modern toilet (retro-style) may be more practical.

- c. To draw attention to the exhibits, many museums use flat black ceilings in large rooms to highlight exhibits and avoid drawing attention to anything above. White ceilings in bedroom-size rooms can be used. Track lights can match ceiling color (test narrow vs. wide vs. flood bright, low energy bulbs). Schoolhouse ceiling lights were very common in historic firehouses. Nice reproductions are available, and they stand out on flat black or white. Find period-correct repo wall switches, etc.
- d. It's natural for items on display in a FM to be big and red. It is important to pick a wall color that creates a nice background to red and does not clash or compete. A soft yellow is often chosen and works well. Using the same color throughout makes the space seem larger and is easy. Remember washable.
- e. Exhibit panels: Here is where the graphics or sign company volunteer we mentioned earlier could be very valuable.
 - 1. The first decision is what background color you will standardize on for all information panels. The panels will have photos, some in color with fire, reproduced newspaper clippings, dispatch print-outs etc. To make this variety of subjects look nice, a light tan or sand color can be used. Be sure this color harmonizes with your new wall color, above.
 - 2. The next decisions will be standardized font styles; one for exhibit headlines and another for the bodies. The most important consideration is that your fonts are easy to read and are large enough. Either a modern Arial or a font with a bit of an historic look can be used. Shop around for a (cooperative) sign company to use to print the exhibit panels (we have had great success with FedEx Office). If you need help in this area, ask each vendor if they would be willing to help you make choices on fonts, etc. before you pick your vendor. The font colors decisions can come next; headlines and body can be different for impact. Using bold adds

impact, but standardize to stay harmonious. Italics is great but use sparingly.

3. Adding borders to panels can add class. A few flames can add variety and impact. Outline all photos with a thin black line.
4. The decision on panel material and size comes next. Plastic foam core is economical and easy. Learn the sizes that your material comes in. Remember that your visitors will range from wheelchair-height and youth to adult, so you will want the panel size (and how high you mount them) to take that into consideration.
5. Amount and size of copy: You can use a bold (and italics?) headline font, size and color. The copy body will be an easy-to-read paragraph that tells the main story on each panel. Details of the story can be added below in smaller font size, but... try to be succinct and brief and avoid too much copy, which means font size gets too small and hard to read (so no one reads it).



Font too small, too much text!

Let's look at some reasonably inexpensive examples. In this one, newspaper clippings, photos and interviews with firefighters are used to tell an important story. Two standardized fonts are used, the headline a bold italic. The body copy has an urgent look, both easy to read. A yellowed background was added to the clippings to imply age. Missing in these images is the light sand background color (which this museum standardized on) which complemented the clipping's yellowed background and soft yellow wall color.

FORT LAUDERDALE'S DEADLIEST FIRE

Sun-Sentinel

Thursday, March 18, 1993 25 cents

Fireball of death

On March 17, 1993, Engine 35's crew was collecting bicycles for needy children. The crew saw smoke from a huge fire, and assumed that a plane had crashed. They reported a major fire to Dispatch, and responded.

Due to heavy traffic, a Hess gasoline tank truck entered, but was unable to clear the CSX Railroad crossing at Cypress Creek Road near Andrews Avenue. The fast-moving Amtrak Silver Star passenger train was unable to stop, and crashed into the gasoline tanker. Explosions and a huge fireball ensued.



Firefighters the Amtrak train (left) crashed into the Hess tanker, leaving a huge fireball in the background. Six of the 121 people aboard the train were fatally injured.

Six motorists die in blasts as train splits tanker in two

Engine 35 arrived from the east, attacking the fire in the Amtrak passenger car, while Engine 88 arrived from the west, attacking the gasoline tanker fire. The explosion and fire killed six people; the truck driver, and five other motorists waiting for the train in their cars. Miraculously, no one on the

train was seriously injured, even though one passenger car was melted from the heat. Firefighters finally gained control of the huge gasoline inferno and the blazing railroad passenger car.



Some words about words: How the copy is written is *critically* important. Some people find writing enjoyable; others find it painful. Find someone who likes to write and tell stories, who will avoid dull copy, and use lots of action words. Pick someone who will be brief and avoid unnecessary words and phrases, like an English teacher or newspaper copy writer or other good writer.

This example has very carefully written copy. It is an exciting, dramatic story to share, but discipline followed this highly controversial rescue. This copy is truthful and accurate but written to share the event in the best possible light. Fire Service work is messy; look for positive outcomes to present, and go easy on negatives. Be very careful with words! Have others critically review copy drafts, both for *content* and *grammar*.

THRILLING "SKY HIGH" RESCUE

On August 7, 1980 a fire on the 10th floor of the Ocean Manor Resort hotel stranded a 10-year-old girl on the 10th floor, just above the reach of aerial ladders. Rescue efforts inside were hampered by faulty fire doors and smoke-filled stairwells and hallways.

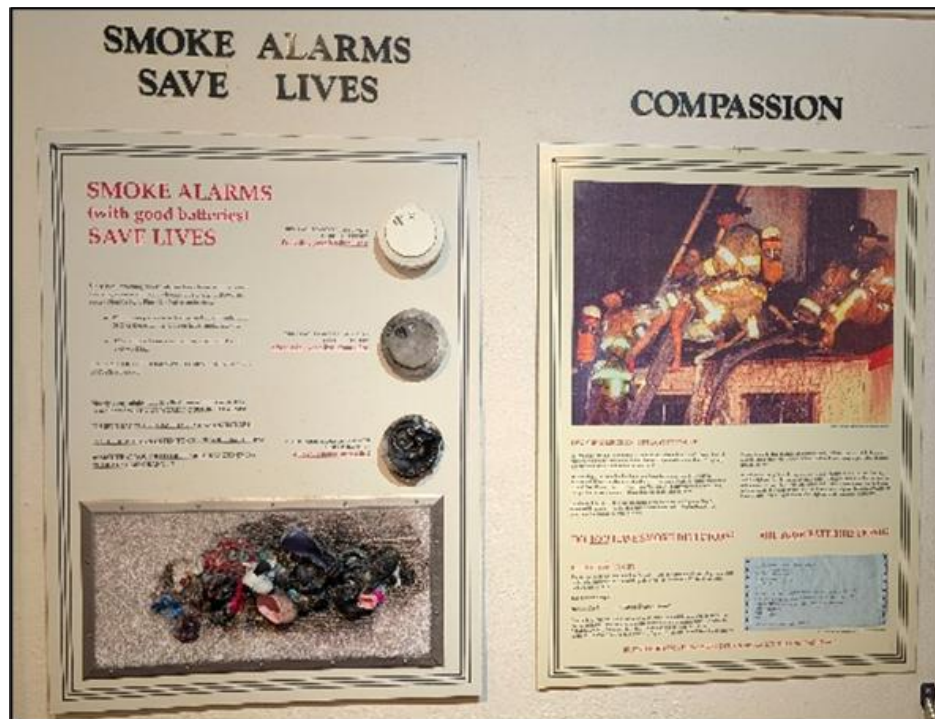
Captain Gerald Markey climbed the 100' aerial ladder with a 14' roof ladder. He hung the ladder's hooks from the balcony railing, and tied the bottom to the aerial ladder. He then climbed up the roof ladder, helped the girl climb out, down the roof ladder, and 100 feet down to safety.



While very courageous and totally successful, this rescue was controversial and obviously very dangerous. Happily, it provided two positive outcomes. The first was that the girl and Captain Markey were both safe. The second was that the discussions that followed this rescue lead the Fire Department to create highly trained and equipped teams for many kinds of dangerous situations, now called our *Technical Rescue Teams*.



Smoke alarm information can be boring. This exhibit includes a photo of the rescue of 2 girls who ultimately perished because smoke detectors had no batteries. Burned and melted toys complete the impact. Visitors remember!



6. Finding exhibit content: The curator will next, perhaps with help, start the list of stories to be told and “remember-able” information to be presented. To find story ideas, gather printed histories of the fire department, and search through old FD and Union photo collections. Ask the FD logistics people to set aside obsolete equipment for exhibit use. Alert all active and retired firefighters to please help with the search now underway to find lots of photos, artifacts and important stories for the new museum; it is about *them*. Visit the Historical Society and the local newspaper and ask for help. An appeal to retired firefighters is often very fruitful (for exhibit items and for general help!). The harvest may start slow, but as people catch the vision... the flow of artifacts and information can grow fast.



Here is an example of a FM's 1910-1930 exhibit room. Inexpensive foam core panels have been printed with interesting copy and photos that tell stories, highlighted by applicable 3-D artifacts. This FM is very fortunate to have a retired Battalion Chief/woodworker who created a special curved display case for a high-value exhibit.

7. Panel printing: If economy is important, foam-core plastic board is practical and economical. As you are picking out your printer or sign company, show them a pencil drawing of one potential exhibit. Show them sample photos and clippings and the typed copy to be used. Talk over who has the best scanner for photos and clippings. Ask if they will help with decisions like borders, font type, size and colors. Some curators have the vendor do all the scanning but give them everything else camera-ready. When you have a plan, make all your "standardized" decisions (fonts, borders, colors, etc.). Get a quote for the first panel; the vendor will probably need to recoup his costs of drafts and getting you started with the first panel, so it could be expensive. Then get a quote on the future panels which will be much easier to create. It should be a much more economical volume price.

8. At this point the curator can check on typical prices for a few of the artifacts needed (eBay, Facebook and collectors). To economize, creative searching and gentle persuasion can get many items donated or at low cost, stretching the budget. Many departments help their FM's by giving them a lot of obsolete equipment which can be used in exhibits or traded for items needed, again stretching the budget. When asked to help, people love to give if they feel their generosity is needed and appreciated.

With all this information, the Curator or team can meet with the Board to discuss:

- The broad concepts of what the museum will be, share and look like,
- An example of the specific stories that one or two panels will tell,
- The estimated cost of creating the first panel, and the other panels,
- What sources have been found for photos, clippings, documents, artifacts, etc.,
- Some examples of what artifacts may be needed that are not on hand already, and a rough guess of what they may cost, and
- A very rough estimate of what budget range may be needed for all the above (or for the first room). If the concepts are approved, next create a spending limit for the Curator for any one item, above which Board approval is needed. A monthly spending limit may also be established to maintain cash flow.

Donation receipts, labeling, inventory, deaccessioning surplus artifacts:

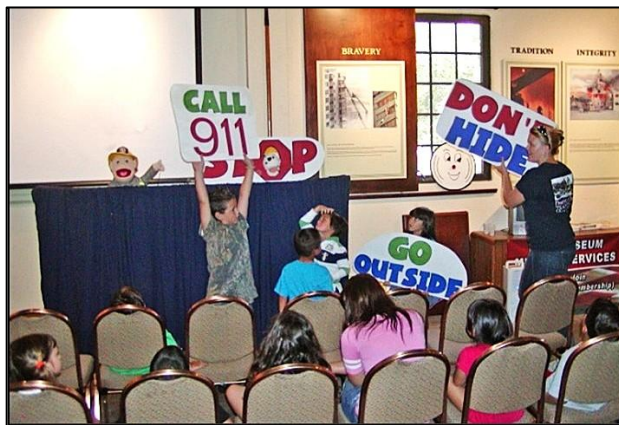
It is important to give artifact donors a written receipt for their item. IRS does not allow non-profits to put a value on donated items; that's the donor's responsibility. It is wise to inform donors (verbally *and* on the receipt) that the FM uses artifact donations in three (3) ways; for a current exhibit, for a possible future exhibit, or sold and the income used to support the FM's operations and programs. If a donor declines this, the artifact can be received and documented as "on loan" or the donation respectfully declined.

Maintain a log of the date, item received, donation or loan, item description and location. Tag each item with a number that corresponds to the line number entry in the log.

Deaccessioning is the museum term for getting rid of things. Unneeded items can be traded or sold for needed items. You may be amazed at how much stuff will be donated, including unneeded knick-knacks. Accept it all, with the 3 possible uses explained. Some FMs holds a “Ramp Sale” every few years that earns a few thousand dollars.

Fire safety education:

Most FMs want to include Fire Safety Education. Some do it very well, some don't.



Create a place where kids can sit on chairs or mats on the floor. Many fire safety videos are available on YouTube and other sources. Puppet shows with hand-held cue cards create response. Stress Operation EDITH and 2-ways out of every room. Keep it short and powerful... attention spans are short.

Summer day camps look for kid's activities, scouts earn merit badges and babysitting, first-aid, CPR and AED classes all can provide teaching opportunities and create income for FMs. Children's birthday parties are very profitable, and safety ed can be briefly included. Send kids home with a safety check to do with their parents. A paid part-time staffer can market and host these events, with help as needed.



It is amazing how many Survive Alive fire safety training trailers are around. It's disappointing that many of them are seldom used. They take some manpower but are excellent for life-safety education. Team up with an FD that owns one and put it to good use, even if at only a few special events per year.



A Gift Shop?

They can do 2 things; earn income and make a visit to a FM more interesting. A dedicated coordinator is needed to learn what will sell, buy it inexpensively, price products (usually +100%), monitor inventory and reorder. Some FD's allow their duty tee shirts (as well as patches, caps) to be sold, some don't. If not, a FM tee that looks like the FD duty tee is usually a good seller.



A risk is inventory control when that person is not there (i.e. the temptation to give a gift to a "special" visitor). A separate checkbook should be used, just for the gift shop. The FM opens and funds the checkbook, and receipts go into it. New merch is purchased from that checkbook, and extra revenue is spilled over from the gift shop checkbook to the FM when possible. This way funds are separate, and the gift shop can purchase and maintain inventory even if the FM budget is low.

Marketing; Facebook, email addresses, bulk email, website, newsletters:

Sales communications will have a large impact on your success. Once again, college courses and books cover these vital subjects, so we will cover them very lightly. Your publicity person and graphics person(s) can create a logo, mastheads

and formats. A good image depends on standardized “*branding*” or appearance on everything you issue. The news is the meat, but making it look nice grabs eyeballs. Your advertising/marketing/publicity person(s) is very important.

Facebook: Starting with a Facebook page is great. It’s free, easy to start and to update. Your readership will grow if you regularly post pieces of news... what you need (materials, labor, artifacts, photos), items donated/found, volunteer profiles and volunteers needed, accomplishments, etc. The key is *regular*! At least once a week (twice is better!) post some “exciting” news (if it’s not earth-shaking, make it sound like it is).

Email addresses: Ask someone to be your email address bulldog. They will be a VIP! Keep the list on an Excel-type spreadsheet (last name, first name, email). Ask them to get all active and retired firefighter’s addresses. Add all elected city officials and staff heads. Include people at the newspapers and historical society. Collect email addresses from everyone who visits the new FM site. Hopefully you will soon have hundreds of addresses.

Bulk email: Using all these email addresses via bulk email will be your fastest and least expensive mass media. You can go to Google and set up a system, but it is difficult for anyone who has not done it before. Another plan would be to ask (local if possible) advertising/PR firms if they would help you send bulk emails, if YOU do all the work of collecting addresses and giving them (nearly) camera-ready copy to send. Remember to ask for *help*, and that their help is tax-deductible. Send out a newsy UPDATE! at least once per month. Bulk emails should end with a note on how to unsubscribe.

Website: A volunteer can create a website, but it is complicated and can be frustrating. If you have someone, great. If not, ask the advertising/PR firm for suggestions as to how to get a simple site up quickly and inexpensively. Try for a .org address; it implies a volunteer organization. Listing the website address on everything you put out indicates to potential donors that you are an active, viable organization, so it’s a valuable asset. You may get some ideas from firemuseumofgreaterchicago.org

Newsletters: Save the articles/information you put up on all other media. It will be the start of each issue of your Newsletter, but re-write with more detail. One per quarter is good timing. Try to give it a catchy name. With photos, two pages are okay, four is probably ideal. A THANKS column with photos about donations is important to show broad support. A Q&A column about local FD history adds interest. Add photos...! An old engine and newest engine, worker's action at the new FM, etc. Your main distribution will be by bulk email, but have some printed, and 3 copies (labeled for each shift) delivered to each firehouse, and a number to FD headquarters, newspapers, IAFF Local, etc. If you are selling Memberships, add an application form and info on how to pay.

Operations options:

Once open for business, FMs use a variety of organizational structures. A few examples are:

Full-time paid staff: An experienced Museum Director could be an early hire, even before opening, and could help create the FM. Paid staff can follow, and a major institution can be created. This will not apply to most readers of this guide.

All volunteer: This will be the first structure of most new FMs reading this. A volunteer Board, with officers, will lead and probably do much of the work. Volunteers will be appointed to fill roles including Curator, building and grounds, social media and promotion, fire safety education, apparatus team (if applicable), membership sales, special events, fund raising, etc. Their vision, motivation, skill and available time will determine the success of the FM. If committees are used, make sure the leader is held responsible that goals are pursued and achieved in reasonable time.

Blended paid and volunteer: In many cases, there are some roles that only a paid (part time or full time) staff person will have the time and ability to accomplish. Let's set up a hypothetical, and your imagination can reshape it to what might work for you. Let's assume that a FM has the cash flow to pay the normal expenses; utilities, maintenance, insurance, rent, and has a reasonable bank balance.

Now the FM Board wants to get active, increasing hours of operation and offering a variety of fire safety and other programs. The workload will be too much for the volunteers, but a full-time salary is beyond their budget. They recognize that children's birthday parties, hall rentals, etc. can provide income if they could be sold and staffed.

The Board decides to augment (*not replace*) volunteers with a part-time sales and operations person. This will be an outgoing (sales) person who is good with kids, is organized and self-motivated (a teacher?). The staffer's cost might be \$30 per hour (\$600 per week, \$2,400 per month), including taxes, for 20 hours per week. The Board earmarks three months' salary (\$7,200) to start the pilot program. The Board creates a good job description and interviews applicants. Congratulations!

The Staffer's first job will be to create enough new income to cover their salary, excluding FM out-of-pocket program costs. They will create and sell children's birthday party programs, children's safety programs, a hall rental program, etc. It will be necessary for volunteers to help provide backup labor as needed.

What would it take per week to make this work? An example:

2 birthday parties at a profit of \$180 each = \$360

2 children's safety programs, 25 kids at \$5 = \$250

Red Cross first aid, CPR, AED, babysitting, hall rental and other programs can add to the income. Starting this program in the early spring would give the person the opportunity to sell fire safety programs to summer camp operators.



A blended program like this will not reduce the need for volunteer help. The FM must be always kept ready for visitors, and volunteers will be important for event backup. The part-time staffer can also handle phone calls, issue advertising media, recruit volunteers and help staff additional hours that the Museum is open to the public. Growing income could mean increasing the hours/days the FM is open.

An additional staffing opportunity can be interns from local colleges offering teaching programs. They can be volunteers or preferably paid a stipend for hours scheduled and worked (also a resume enhancer).

A public service... or private club? While we are on Operations, a note of caution. Some FMs lose sight of (or never really had) the vision of being a public service organization. Instead, they become a club or clique for a few people's personal enjoyment. Visitors, exhibit improvements, safety education efforts etc. all take a back seat to private bull sessions. How do docents greet visitors? How do they explain to visitors what they will see? Do they point out the Donation Box and explain its importance when visitors are leaving? In quiet moments are they active in improving things? Is a leader active in making sure docents are productive, and create a warm and welcoming atmosphere? Is there interest in growth (days open per week, more education programs offered, improving visibility for visitor growth, exhibit improvement, etc.), or is everyone content with the "club's" status quo? Does walking in feel like an Apple store or a post office? Please be careful... to be the very best you can be.

Longer range planning:

During the FM creation and operation, you will find some goals that will take longer to accomplish, so gather them and put them in written timeframe "buckets". This can best be done in 1, 3 and 5 year plans. Remember, a goal without a plan is only a dream, so each goal should have a short list of plans, steps to take and people to ask to accomplish it. Remember to stay within your Mission Statement as you move ahead.

Bring the multi-year goals to the group for discussion... and for help and ideas to make them happen. Each Board is required to have an Annual Meeting, and this is a great time to adopt the new the 1-year plan and revise the 3 and 5 year plans.

Summary:

You are either considering, or are already on your way, to creating something that can tell the amazing stories of the Fire Service and display its unique and often spectacular artifacts. If your goal is to create a *collection*, great. We encourage you to create one that thrills visitors with the red and chrome and gold leaf beauty of apparatus, and the utility of its unique tools and equipment, all creatively displayed. That is wonderful.

If your goal is a *museum* that tells stories and leaves people thinking, you have a larger task, but if done thoughtfully it will create an attraction that will educate and entertain fire people and civilians alike. Begin by picking the stories to tell, and the information you want visitors to retain, like this real-life example:

Addendum 1: Case study:

The Savoy Automobile Museum in Georgia displays cars as a museum rather than a collection. It has a budget that most FMs could only dream of, but if you want to create a museum, your goals will be identical. Here is a published review of the museum and what a visit is like. Your goal will be to create exhibits that cause people to say things like this about your new FM.

The classic car museum in Georgia that makes road-trippers glad they stopped by!

Road-trippers, this is your sign to exit I-75 and treat yourself to Savoy Automobile Museum in Cartersville, Georgia. The galleries rotate frequently, so there is always something fresh to discover, from rare classics to unexpected gems. You will find a welcoming staff and spotless facilities. If you love cars, great design, or just beautiful spaces, you will be glad you stopped.



Why Savoy is a perfect road trip stop

Rolling through north Georgia, you spot a sleek, modern building and feel that twinge of curiosity. Savoy Automobile Museum rewards the detour with curated galleries, wide walkways, and cars displayed like sculpture. It is easy to explore in an hour or linger all afternoon.

You will appreciate the rotating exhibits that keep things fresh, even if you have visited before. Parking is ample, signage is clear, and the welcome feels genuine. It is the kind of stop that turns a long drive into a memory. Bring a camera and comfortable shoes.

Art and automotive design

Beyond the metal, Savoy celebrates the art of the automobile. Paintings that look photographic, design sketches revealing a car's birth, and sculpture that captures motion. You start noticing color, curve, and proportion in new ways.



It is perfect for mixed groups where not everyone is a gearhead. The artwork creates talking points and frames the cars as cultural artifacts. You will leave appreciating designers like artists and engineers like storytellers. It rounds out the experience beautifully.

Standout vehicles you will talk about later

Expect headliners that grab your imagination. Maybe tailfins on a late 50s Cadillac, a Shelby Mustang teasing a dedicated exhibit, or a coach-built European surprise. You will see icons and oddballs curated with equal respect.

The mix tells stories across eras, showing how design, engineering, and culture shaped the automobile. Even casual fans find a favorite, while enthusiasts lose track of time. The diversity invites comparisons you will be discussing in the parking lot. That balance is Savoy's secret sauce.



Pairing your visit with Cartersville attractions

Savoy anchors an easy day in Cartersville. Visit in the morning, grab lunch, then stroll downtown or explore nearby museums and parks. The location is convenient whether you

are heading to Atlanta or Chattanooga. Because the visit is flexible in length, it fits a long drive or a weekend getaway. You will leave energized rather than drained, which is rare for museums. It is the ideal waypoint that becomes the highlight. Simple, satisfying, and memorable.

Addendum 2: Sample of a good FM Donation Receipt:



FIRE MUSEUM *of* GREATER CHICAGO

Preserving History & Tradition

Donation Receipt

Thank you for your donation!

The Fire Museum of Greater Chicago acknowledges that a (product) (service) (artifact(s)) (circle one) donation was received from:

Name _____ Address _____

City, State, Zip _____

Phone _____ Date _____

The Fire Museum of Greater Chicago is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Your donations are tax deductible to the full extent of the law. No goods or services were provided in exchange for this donation. For your records, use the space below to itemize and value your donation (IRS regulations prohibit charitable organizations from establishing or affirming the value of contributions.):

Donation of: (use reverse if necessary) _____

_____ Which you value at \$ _____

Your cash, goods, services or artifact donations will help us carry out our mission. **All donated artifacts are used in one of three ways: existing exhibit, future exhibit or sold and the proceeds used for ongoing Museum operations and programs.** If this is unacceptable the artifact(s) may be received “on loan” or respectfully declined.

Fire Museum of Greater Chicago
5218 S. Western Avenue, Chicago IL 60609

For information on how to include Fire Museum of Greater Chicago in your estate planning,
or to schedule a tour of our facilities, please call 773-771-9976.

Donation Received by Museum Member:

Thank you very much!

Print name _____ Date _____

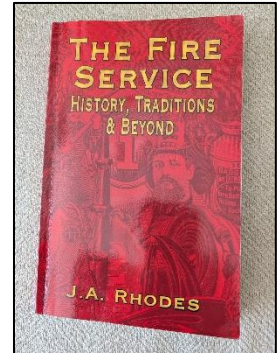
Signature _____

Donor: PLEASE COMPLETE AND RETAIN FOR YOUR TAX RECORDS

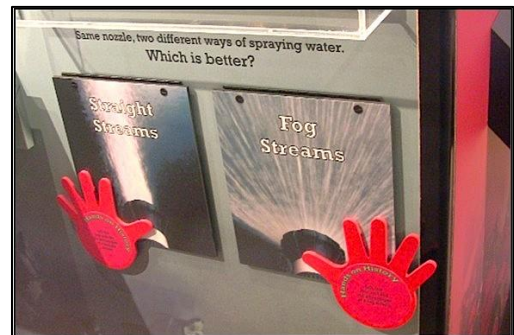
Addendum 3: The sincerest form of flattery... is imitation:

It's not necessary for every new FM to re-invent the wheel. Visit many other FMs, *both in person and their websites*. Any FM can use and improve ideas from other FMs. Here are some great ideas thanks to several FMs.

- a. Get a copy of this book. It's a FM Curator's friend.
Dozens of interesting, little-known facts that are great to include in exhibit copy. *The Fire Service - History Traditions & Beyond* by J.A. Rhodes.



- b. Red Hands: Create some exhibits that kids can touch. Add red hands that say TOUCH ME to invite little ones to get involved.



- c. A ladder can be used as a nice backdrop to hold flip panels with interesting questions and answers (some from the book above). Question can involve the shape of FD helmets, why most fire trucks are red, why firemen used to wear long beards, what bugles are and what they mean on badges, why do police go on calls and firefighters go on runs, etc.
- d. A firefighter mannequin in full gear rescuing a large doll can be hung from the ceiling, saving space.

This exhibit panel is used to teach kids:



***I'M A FIREFIGHTER.
WHEN YOU SEE ME, DON'T BE AFRAID.
DON'T HIDE FROM ME.
COME TO ME, I WILL HELP YOU!***

- e. This exhibit works hard. It shares ancient efforts to protect firefighters from smoke, the evolution of air paks through the years, the dangers of smoking, and information on helmets (ID's, the wreath embossed on brims, etc.) Here you can see colors; soft yellow wall and sand colored exhibit panel backgrounds.



- f. Kids love fire poles, and here is one for them. A retired Battalion Chief/woodworker built the stairs and added a brass pole arrangement. The kids love to slide down and run around to do it again!



- g. Need to create exhibits in small rooms or areas? Is wall space limited by a door, a window, a closet? Add free standing display panels to add exhibit space. Instead of a triangle shape, form a “Y” shape for 6 exhibit panels.



- h. Poster display racks can display a lot of photos and documents very accessibly and in a small space, but help your visitor. Put an INDEX on a small pedestal in front to inform visitors of what's there, and where to find it.



- i. Many FMs put content they want to share on looped TV exhibits. Interesting content can be firefighting, fire safety, apparatus through the years, a specific major incident, etc. TVs can add audio and visual interest to various exhibits, at reasonable cost.



Get creative, and also check out as many other FMs as possible for ideas and inspiration. Best wishes for great success!



This guide is produced as a service by the Fire Museum Network

Visit our website for additional resources

firemuseumnetwork.org

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