

FabFemFireFighters: “It didn’t matter if you were an Olympic athlete or if you were 6’ 7” tall and the strongest woman on earth—it didn’t matter,” said Brenda Berkman in 1982. Women were not hired for jobs as NYC firefighters, not even allowed to “apply.”

That year Berkman filed a lawsuit against New York City alleging that some of the physical exam requirements unnecessary for the job itself, discriminated against women. The court ruled in her favor and the physical exam was revised to be more job relevant. That year, 47 women passed the exam and Berkman became the first female firefighter hired in NYC. But her fight for women’s equal opportunity was not over. Realistically, it just had begun.

On the job, Berkman faced years of harassment and gender abuse. “The idea that men hated me so much that they might leave me in a burning building by myself, that they drained my air tank, that they phoned death threats to my house, that they followed me around on the street and threatened me—that was scary,” Berkman said.

It is recorded that the very first female firefighter in the United States was Molly Williams in 1815. Williams was a slave owned by New York merchant Benjamin Aymar, a member of the Oceanus Engine Company No. 11 in New York City. Little is known of her life, but female firefighters know her heroic story.

Dressed in a calico dress and checked apron she fought alongside men and had their respect. It is written that during the blizzard of 1818, when few male firefighters volunteered, Williams helped save multiple towns by repeatedly pulling the pumper engine through deep snow to fight fires. Albeit she was only a “volunteer” firefighter, Williams’ dedication and endurance paved the way for other women to become paid firefighters.

Lillie Hitchcock Coit is mentioned as an early female firefighter in 1859 San Francisco, but, again she was not a paid firefighter. As a little girl, Lillie was captivated by the fire department. As a teenager she witnessed a poorly staffed crew of firefighters responding to a fire call and threw down her schoolbooks to help drag the engine to the fire up on Telegraph Hill. After that, Lillie became the Engine Co. mascot and could barely be constrained by her parents from jumping into action at the sound of every fire bell.

She would frequently ride with the Knickerbocker Engine Co. #5. Throughout her youth and adulthood Lillie was recognized as an honorary firefighter with Knickerbocker Engine Company #5. Later, for her enthusiasm and unwavering support, she became patroness of all San Francisco firemen (firefighters).

In the 1920s at the age of 50, Emma Vernell became a member of Westside Hose Company #1 after her firefighter husband died in the line of duty. She was the first woman officially recognized as a firefighter by the State of New Jersey. Again, it appears Vernell may not have been paid for her firefighter work.

Judith Livers Brewer is considered to be the first paid female firefighter, hired in 1974 by the Arlington County, Virginia, Fire Department. While helping her firefighter husband study for his fire science classes, Livers was motivated to become a firefighter herself. She retired in 1999 at the rank of battalion chief.

Toni McIntosh hired by the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Fire Department in June of 1976, is considered to be the first African-American woman to become a career firefighter. She served for more than 11 years.

The first female hired by the Indianapolis Fire Department was a black woman named Byronna Slaughter sworn in on March 3, 1978. Slaughter chose to leave the department after a short career mid reports of harassment and lack of acceptance due to her gender.

Male firefighters were often crude and rude to the women. To intimidate the women, they played demeaning practical jokes and ostentatiously displayed sexual behavior, all of which conformed to traditional and unacceptable male mores such as the accepted “boys will be boys” behaviors. Some men wouldn't even talk to the women because they felt women shouldn't be there and couldn't do the job as well as men.

In 1980 Lauren Howard became the first Chicago female firefighter in a macho profession that had been traditionally preserved for primarily white Irish men passed down in families from generation to generation. Howard was the only woman in the department for six years when 20 female firefighters were hired in Chicago in 1986.

In the 1990s, Nancy Ducey experienced gender harassment as a woman firefighter in Urbana, Illinois. When a phone call was for her, the man who answered it would turn on the microphone as a signal for her to come to the phone, and then he would not speak to her. She felt the men believed that she shouldn't be there because it was a man's job. Ducey went on to become an instructor at the Illinois Fire Service Institute.

As of this year, women still remain a miniscule part of this profession. Nationwide, only 10,800 women are career (paid) firefighters, making up 3.6% of the career firefighter population. Women comprise approximately 4% of the volunteer fire service, an estimated 32,000 members, and 61,000 women are career emergency medical technicians and paramedics, representing 34% of the EMS work force.

“Taking the Heat,” a 2003 PBS graphic documentary film poignantly details the facts surrounding Berkman and the NYC female firefighters. In celebration of Women’s History Month in March 2011, the U.S. Fire Administration recognized the contributions of all women, past and present, to the American Fire Service: Each one a FabFemFireFighter.

Sources: BlackAmericaWeb News, 2/5/10;

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<http://www.usd116.org/ums/apple/service/department/history/women.html>;

<http://www.usfa.dhs.gov/womenshistory/>; <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/ct-met-first-female-firefighter-class20110625,0,477222.story>.