

# THE MEN WHO MADE THE NFPA

**A**t the beginning of our story are two essentials of the modern universe: water and electricity. Although it's generally considered wise to separate the two, they're brought together here by another essential of our universe: fire.

The men who brought them together were a visionary breed. Some, such as Thomas Alva Edison, are well-known to history. Others, such as John Ripley Freeman and William Merrill, are not. But all of them were instrumental in the founding of the National Fire Protection Association.

Fortunately, much of Freeman's work is well-documented, so let's start our story with him.

**The beginnings of the  
100-year-old legacy  
of advancing  
fire protection**

**John Ripley  
Freeman of  
Factory Mutual  
and, later, the  
Manufacturers  
Mutual Fire  
Insurance  
Company.**



**So many  
sprinklers,  
so little  
standard-  
ization**

John Freeman was born on July 27, 1855, in West Bridgton, Maine, and graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1876. He joined the Factory Mutual Inspection Department in 1886 and spent the next 10 years reshaping the company's approach to fire protection.

By this time, sprinklers had already proven effective for controlling fires in large mercantile properties, and there were a number on the market, including the Mackey from 1887, the early Grinnells, the Kane and the Neracher from 1888, the New York from 1889, the Harkness from 1890, the Buell from 1892, and the National.

John Freeman would have had various tools at his disposal to assess the effectiveness of these sprinklers, including an 1884 report generated by C. J. H. Woodbury, chief engineer of the Factory Mutual Fire Insurance Companies. Woodbury's report evaluated the response times of 15 different types of sprinklers after they underwent a gradual temperature buildup, followed by sudden immersion in steam.

Woodbury was also involved in another area that would soon present a major fire problem: electricity.

By establishing the Underwriters Electrical Bureau, Merrill had taken the first important step toward a unified approach to electrical technology. However, he believed that there was still work to do. Most important was the need for standards.

By the end of 1895, five distinct electrical codes existed in the United States, including the universal rules developed in 1890 by the National Electric Light Association. Other respected organizations developing codes included the National Board of Fire Underwriters and the Underwriters National Electric Association. The New York Board of Fire Underwriters

issued one of the earliest sets of installation rules in 1881, and the National Board adopted these in 1882. Clearly, consistency was needed in the blossoming electrical industry.

**Building consensus**

Consistency was also needed in the sprinkler industry. Early in 1895, at the Boston office of the Underwriters Board of New England, a handful of men, including John Freeman, gathered in Everett U. Crosby's office to talk about establishing consistent rules for sprinkler systems. Besides Crosby and Freeman, four other men attended. They were Everett's father, Uberto C. Crosby, chairman of the Factory Improvement Committee of the New England Fire Insurance Exchange; W. H. Stratton of the Factory Insurance Association, later renamed Industrial Risk Insurers; Frederick Grinnell of the Providence Steam and Gas Pipe Company, known today as Grinnell Fire Protection; and F. Eliot Cabot of the Boston Board of Fire Underwriters.

The group agreed that the immediate

**An early  
sprinkler  
design from  
the 19th  
century.**

