

# The origin and development of professional fire brigades in Finland

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**Finland's first professional fire brigade was the Helsinki Whole-time Fire Brigade or the Helsinki Fire Department, which was founded in 1861. In Finland the term 'professional fire brigade' has always been used to refer to public fire departments.**

**In 2003 the municipal fire department system was replaced by a regional system. Today Finland has 22 regional rescue service departments, which combine professional and contract fire brigades.**

In 1838 new fire regulations were issued for Helsinki, the capital city, stipulating that two fire towers should be built. These were completed in 1840. There were 60 fire watchmen.

An edict issued in 1856 required towns to draw up new fire regulations. In Helsinki the edict resulted in the founding of a whole-time fire brigade in 1861.

Finland's first professional fire brigade relied on the existing system of fire watchmen. Their number was raised to 90, they were appointed as fire constables and housed in the two fire towers or their immediate vicinity. The brigade was led by an executive fire officer, who was assisted by a junior fire officer and four head firemen. The equipment was stored in the towers and in an old pump room in the city centre.

The start of the fire brigade was not easy. As the amount of equipment remained small and the fire constables were former fire watchmen, the standard of the staff was not improved. The pay was low and the social conditions were poor.

The number of professional fire brigades increased very slowly. The fire brigade of Turku was founded in the same decade as that of Helsinki, but the third professional fire brigade (in Tampere) was not founded until 1898. Even after this, new professional fire brigades came into being in towns only at long intervals. The next towns to have a fire brigade were Kotka 1899, Vaasa 1909, Hämeenlinna and Mikkeli 1911 and Lahti 1912.

The number of professional fire brigades was never large. In a sparsely populated country like Finland a whole-time fire brigade has always been possible only in urban municipalities. In 2001 there were over 400 municipalities in Finland, only 60 of which had a whole-time fire brigade. In other municipalities fire fighting and rescue services was the responsibility of volunteer or semiprofessional fire brigades.

After a difficult start the Helsinki Fire Department developed into a modern and efficient professional fire brigade, a rescue department, which celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2011.

## **Fire brigades today**

In Finland, organized firefighting has always been the responsibility of municipalities. It was therefore a major surprise when the firefighting community learnt in June 1993 that the Government had decided to investigate the option of nationalized rescue services.

Eventually a regional system emerged as a solution. Rescue services remained a local concern but rescue tasks that had been the responsibility of individual municipalities were now transferred to regional rescue departments. In all, 22 regional rescue departments were created. The Helsinki rescue service department continues as the only rescue service region which encompasses only one municipality.

In 2012 the number of full-time professional rescue service personnel was about 4000. Today there are 103 round-the-clock professional fire stations.

In most of the country, the system still relies on contract fire brigades. These contract fire brigades of the regional rescue departments are in charge of an area which covers about 95% of the surface of Finland. They participate in about 70 percent of the annual rescue tasks.

In most cases the contract fire brigade is still a VFB. A contract fire brigade is also created when a group of private individuals enter into a personal contract with the regional rescue department. Often they have founded a firemen's association for the purpose. This kind of associations and VFB associations produce rescue services for regional rescue departments on the basis of a contract.

This system, which relies on both professional fire brigades and contract fire brigades, has proved to be a good solution. It helps to realize the subsidiarity principle, which is a precondition for life-saving activities.