

## **“Mr. Cranford’s” Uniform**

*By Robert Fridlington*

Carefully preserved in the Historical Society’s costume collection are a sturdy fireman’s helmet and a bright red shirt bearing the Union Hose Company logo, both of which belonged to one of this community’s first fire fighters, Nathaniel R. Foster.



Nathaniel R. Foster, in “engineer’s cap” looks out the window of a Jersey Central locomotive on Cranford Day, 1950.

The items were given to the Society by Nat Foster, and today they stand not only as relics of the earliest firefighter’s organization in Cranford but as a continuing memorial to Foster, who was affectionately known as “Mr. Cranford.”

Foster was born in Cranford (then “Craneville”) in 1867 in a house that stood on Lincoln Avenue West, near North Avenue. After graduating from local schools, he attended New York University for two years before setting out on a career.

In 1892, at the age of twenty-four, he was one of the young Cranford men who formed the town’s first volunteer fire company, and in 1895 he was one of the several members who signed the articles of incorporation for the Union Hose Company, No. 1, of Cranford.

How long Foster remained an active volunteer is not clear, but throughout his life he took great pride in his fire company service and was an active member of the Exempt Fireman’s Association.



Foster's Union Hose Company, No. 1, Shirt.  
Photo by Ed Wolf.

A brief summary of Foster's life will show how he became known as "Mr. Cranford." For most of his career he worked in New York, but he was also active in the business affairs of Cranford. He dabbled in real estate, was a director and Vice President of Cranford National Bank, an incorporator and President of Cranford Trust, and an original Stockholder of the *Cranford Citizen*.

He served on the Township Committee, on the Board of Education, as Township Treasurer, and as Township Clerk. He was Chairman of the Police Commission, of the Board of Adjustment, and of the Zoning Board.

Foster served more than fifty years as an elder of the first Presbyterian Church, where he was also a trustee and deacon, and where he belonged to the Men's League. He was Sunday School Superintendent for twenty-one years at the same church, and he became locally famous for sponsoring annual Sunday school picnics and train outings to the Jersey Shore.

A footnote of sorts must be added to the story of Mr. Cranford's uniform, because the Historical Society is home to one other item of Foster's apparel.



Foster's Union Hose Company, No. 1,  
Helmet. Photo by Ed Wolf.

At the Cranford Day celebration on July 9, 1950, the Central Railroad of New Jersey paid tribute to five residents of Cranford who had commuted to New York for 50 years or more. Mayor George Osterheldt opened the ceremony at the train station at 7:30 a.m. (after all, it was to honor commuters), and coffee and doughnuts were served to all in attendance. Mr. Foster had commuted the longest—67 years—and in recognition of the distinction he was presented with an “engineer’s cap.” The cap (see picture above) is preserved by the Society.

Of the many organizations in which Foster was active, the Cranford Historical Society was one nearest his heart. He became a trustee of the Society in 1938 and became president seven years later, a position he held until his death. He organized activities, presented programs, spoke to community groups, and sought out historic artifacts.

Foster presided over a meeting of the Society Trustees on the evening of January 25, 1952. It was his last meeting. He died peacefully later that night. He was eighty-four years old.