

The Beginning

An Overview of the History of the Cranston Police Department



Cranston Police Officers, 1898

To understand how the Cranston police department has become the organization of dedicated professionals that it is today, it is necessary to go back to the year 1754 when Cranston was first incorporated as a town. In June of that year, the first town elections were held and John Carpenter was elected to the position of Town Sergeant. In early America, the Town Sergeant's job was to perform police duties and serve civil process for the town.

In its early days, Cranston was primarily an agricultural community with a population of just under 1500 people. With such a small populace, one might think there wouldn't be any need for a lawman, but not so. This was a time when highwaymen still roamed the back roads and countryside preying on innocent travelers and settlers. Theft of livestock was common. And property disputes between abutting landowners often led to civil complaints.

In 1755, Isreal Gorton was elected Town Sergeant. Town records for that year also show that the first set of stocks used to punish criminals were built by Johnathan King behind Caleb Arnold's house.

In 1756, Stukly Westcot became the next Town Sergeant. He in turn, appointed six constables to assist him. They were; Stephen Brown, William Robarts, Eliflet Yubbrock, Elisha Green Jr., John Knight Jr., and Thomas Williams Jr.. This was the first semblance of any type of police department for Rhode Island's newest town.

Town elections were held every June. When checking early town meeting records, one can see that the names of the town sergeants and their constables changed frequently. The reasons for this are unclear at this point in time. Being a Town Sergeant was not a full-time paid position. The duties were carried out in addition to ones "regular" occupation such as farming or running a small business.

There are no records to indicate that the men who held the office of Town Sergeant or the constables who served under them received any compensation, but it is assumed that they were paid by fees collected for serving process and executing arrest warrants.

Even though it would seem that the frequent turnover of town sergeant's offered little stability, the system apparently worked, as it was used for more than 100 years.



Early Cranston Police Badge

In 1863, during the American Civil War, town records show the constables being divided into two categories; **Constables**, and **Special Constables**, with the Town Sergeant in charge of all of them. There are no records indicating what the difference between the two titles was, but based on titles that came later, it is speculated that Constables handled criminal matters and Special Constables took care of civil matters.

In 1871, the constables were divided into three categories; **Constables**, **Special Constables**, and **"Special Constables With Power To Make Complaints Without Giving Sureties For Costs."** Some constable's names were listed under more than one title.

By 1879 the list for constable titles had grown to six categories including one that read, **"Special Constables To Enforce The Laws Of The State Prohibiting And Restraining The Sale Of Intoxicating Liquors."** This title was in response to a temperance movement that was exerting pressure to ban alcohol.

In 1880, the title of **“Special Constable To Arrest And Prosecute Tramps”** was added. Town records for that year list the budget for “Police and Patrol Costs” as being \$554.40, the first time costs associated with police work in Cranston was recorded.

As a result of the temperance movement begun in the 1870’s, the office of Chief of Police was created in 1886. The actual title was **“Chief of Police Under An Act Of The General Assembly For The Suppression Of Intemperance.”** A re-organization of the constables created another category of constables entitled, **“Special Police Constables To Enforce The Laws For The Suppression of Intemperance”**. Other constables were listed under the title of **“Constables To Enforce The Laws Prohibiting The Sale of Intoxicating Liquor”**, which would seem to indicate that Cranston took the anti-alcohol movement seriously.

Thus, the office of Chief of Police was created to oversee the constables who were empowered to enforce the state’s liquor laws. The Town Sergeant was still in control of all other police constables.

One might think that this organizational set-up would have caused a division among the constables but it didn’t. As Fate would have it, a man named John Bigbee had been elected as Town Sergeant in 1880 and had been re-elected to that position ever since. In 1886, he was elected as Cranston’s first Chief of Police as well as Town Sergeant. Since he held both positions, he was the only one in charge of the constabulary. He continued to hold both positions until his death in 1908.



Chief John Bigbee

It was during the 1880's that the constables began wearing uniforms. The first uniforms were typical of the era, with bell style "Bobby" hats, and navy blue or black coats with matching trousers.

Town records for 1886 show the police department had 22 constables. Two years later the number had doubled to 44, yet the department remained a part-time constabulary and not a full-time police department.

It wasn't until 1895, 141 years after Cranston had elected its first Town Sergeant, that a regular patrol area was set up in the Edgewood section of town where a constable was paid to patrol the area at night. Records show that the first "beat cop" in Cranston was Benjamin R. Allen, who was first appointed as a constable in 1891.

In 1897, night patrolmen were assigned to patrol the Arlington and Auburn neighborhoods.

74 constables are listed in town records for the year 1897, and three are listed under the title of "**Railroad Police Under Chapter 107 Of The General Laws.**" It is unknown why a municipality would have its own railroad police since railroads have traditionally hired their own police officers, but Cranston records list railroad police constables up to 1910.

Sometime shortly after 1900, the first permanent day patrol beats were introduced. By now the constabulary was better organized. Between 1900 and 1909, the department was administered by a chief of police leading a contingent of about 90 constables, some of whom worked on a regular basis, but Cranston still lacked a permanent police force.

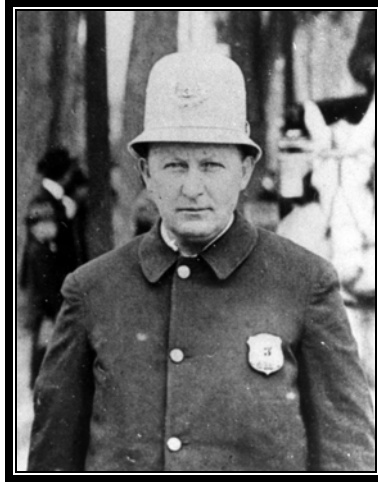
As Cranston progressed into the 20th Century, it became apparent that a city form of government would be better suited to help the area grow and prosper. Not everyone liked the idea of Cranston becoming a city for it meant a shift in political power. Some would gain and others would lose. The debate raged for quite some time but in the end the opposition could not prevent it from happening. In 1910 Cranston incorporated as a city.

The new city government lost no time in establishing a permanent police department consisting of a chief and ten patrolmen. At that time, the offices of Town Sergeant and Chief of Police were merged into one to centralize the department.



Chief's badge 1909

In December of 1908, Chief Bigbee died in the line of duty when he succumbed to an injury he received while fighting a fire. After Chief Bigbee's death, William O. Towne, a constable since 1886, was appointed to serve as the interim chief until elections could be held the following June. At the 1909 election, Patrick Trainor was elected Chief of Police, and when Cranston incorporated as a city in early 1910, he became the first chief of the new "permanent" police department. Chief Trainor had been a constable since 1889 serving under Chief Bigbee



Patrick Trainor

Cranston Police Department Roster 1910

Chief of Police Patrick Trainor

Patrolmen

Claus Abramson
Henry C. Debow
Edward Legacy
John J. McGee
James G. Miller
Fred Silva
Charles H. Smith
George E. Smith
William H. Stone
John A. Yeaw

Chief Trainor served until June 4, 1910, when he was abruptly suspended and later fired for what the mayor termed, “creating of office”. The suspension came one day before the June elections were to be held.

The mayor’s position was that the office of chief of police had never been legally established by the newly formed city council, despite the fact that the city had been paying a chief since 1886.

A newspaper article that appeared in The Providence Journal on June 5, 1910, indicated that the change came as no surprise because it had been widely rumored that the mayor, who had disliked the chief for years, had planned to dismiss him. The mayor was quoted as saying, “We’ll attend to the Chief of Police as soon as we get around to it.”

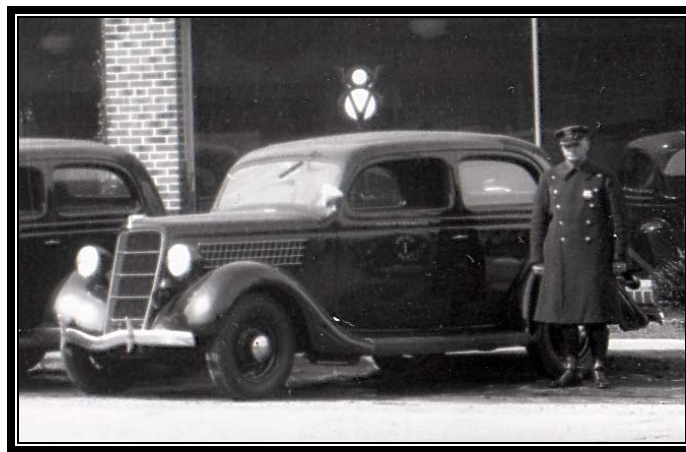
Therefore, on January, 4, 1911, two city ordinances were passed. One formally established the police department and the second established the office of Chief of Police.

The police department ordinance read in part, ***“The permanent paid police force of the City of Cranston shall consist of the Chief of Police and not exceeding ten constables fit for active duty to be appointed by the mayor, with the advice and consent of the City Council,…”***

The Chief of Police ordinance clearly stated that the chief will be appointed by the mayor, and that the chief would have, ***“entire control of the department, its officers and members when engaged in the service of the city, subject to the orders of the mayor.”*** This ordinance also established the chief’s pay as \$1000 per year, which worked out to \$19.35 per week.

With the passage of the new ordinance, James E. Cuff was appointed the new chief. He served until 1912, when he was replaced by Daniel A. Kiernan. Chief Kiernan served until 1915, when Chief Cuff was re-appointed. Chief Cuff served for 14 more years and resigned in 1929 citing ill health. Chief Cuff is the only chief to hold the position twice.

In 1911, the department became the first in Rhode Island to use an automobile to patrol the city. The car, which The Providence Journal described as ***“a high-powered, distance-destroying, upholstered, buzz-buggy,”*** was a Ford Model-T that was donated by the family of one of the patrolmen. The idea of an officer actually using an automobile to patrol his beat was seen as progressive by some, and ludicrous by others.



Cranston Patrol Car 1935

In 1912, the position of Police Inspector was created to act as the department's second in command, and officer James G. Miller is promoted. The salary was \$1000 per year. The chief's salary was raised to \$1300. Inspector Miller was later promoted to Chief in 1929. He is credited for establishing the first city police training school in 1936. Classes included training in criminal law, police procedures, and city ordinances.

In 1915, the Cranston Police relief Association was established to provide widows benefits in the event an officer is disabled or killed in the line of duty.

By 1921, the department had grown to include the chief of police, a police inspector, 1 lieutenant, and 14 patrolmen.

Since 1910, the permanent department had continued to appoint special or part-time officers. Records show, that by 1920, the list of Special Officers included over 200 names!



Cranston Police Department, 1929

By 1930, the department had grown to 27 patrolmen, 4 sergeants, a captain and a chief. The department at this time operated under a two platoon system, which meant half the officers worked from 7 am to 7 pm, and the others worked from 7 pm to 7 am. The chief was in charge of the day platoon and the captain oversaw the night platoon.

Foot post officers saw the installation of signal boxes on their beats. The boxes were mounted to telephone poles and had a colored light affixed to them that could be set to flashing by the desk sergeant at the police station. When the foot patrolman saw the light flashing, he knew to open the box and call the station to see where he was to respond to.

In August of 1930, Patrolman Henry Johnson was shot and killed by a burglary suspect at the corner of Arnold Avenue and Narragansett Boulevard. The man was later captured, convicted, and sentenced to life imprisonment.

By 1933, officers were using one-way AM band radios in the police cars. These early radios could only receive a call from headquarters; officers could not transmit back. In addition, each car radio had its own frequency, making it impossible for one patrol car to even talk to another. This was a huge technological step for the era.

In 1937 the Cranston Police Retirement Act and Ordinance was enacted by the city council. This act set up for the first time a pension plan for Cranston Officers. The city and the Police Relief Association each contributed \$10,000. Officers also had to contribute 1% of their pay each year as well as any money gained from special details or court appearances.

In 1940 the department upgraded the radios in patrol cars to a two-way, AM band type. In 1948 the first two-way FM radios were installed. These were a vast improvement over the old AM radios, yet due to the topography of the city, certain areas remained “dead spots” well into the 1970’s.



Chief Radio Operator Stanley W. Atkinson
Servicing police radios, circa 1953

In 1950 Louis B. Fouchecourt became chief of police. He is credited for establishing the B.C.I. and K-9 divisions, as well as procuring the site where the present day training academy and firing range are located at 495 Phoenix Avenue.

By 1954, the department has grown to 83 sworn officers. Patrolmen work 16 hours every other day and earn \$58.00 a week. The department’s phone number was Union 1-5700.



In 1964 the International Brotherhood of Police Officers was founded in Cranston as a union/bargaining unit for all sworn officers. This was a very controversial time within the department. Some wanted competitive promotional exams and seniority rights and others did not. Some officers were fired for attempting to unionize. In the end, a vote to unionize was carried, and today the IBPO has grown into an international organization used by police agencies worldwide.

In 1966 a new police station was built on Atwood Avenue to replace the old one at the corner of Park and Phoenix Avenues that dated to 1886. The total cost for the new building was \$425,077.00.

The first uniform shoulder patch was designed and worn in 1967.

In 1969 the time of service required to retire with a full pension is lowered from 25 years to 20 years.

In 1972 the department added four new officers bringing the number of sworn officers to 111. Susanne D'Arezzo, age 22, was hired as Cranston's first female police officer.

The department also implemented a computerized records keeping and reporting system which was considered "state-of-the-art" for its day. This system was envied by other departments for many years as it allowed officers to dictate their reports from the road thus eliminating the need to hand write them. The system could also retrieve information up to five years old which eliminated researching needed information and reports by hand.

1976 saw the implementation of a new three-channel radio dispatch system. This was another major technological step at a time when many Rhode Island police departments were still sharing radio frequencies. The following year eight civilian dispatchers are hired to free some patrolmen from working in dispatch.



Dispatcher uniform patch

In 1979, Sergeant Walter Busby died in the line of duty while struggling with a man trying to kill himself.

In 1987 all officers were issued brand new Smith & Wesson .357 magnum, stainless steel, revolvers to replace the .38 caliber revolvers they had been carrying since the 1920's. The .357 magnums were later replaced in 1991 by .40 caliber Glock semi-automatic pistols.



August 1991

The 1990's saw more changes and improvements for the department. A new uniform was designed to give the department a more consistent and modern look. The police station was renovated and re-dedicated as the "Cranston Judicial Memorial Complex". A "Secure Net" radio system was installed in cruisers. The B.C.I. Division got a mobile crime lab and the S.W.A.T. Team received new equipment along with a new mobile command vehicle. In addition, the history of the police department was written down for the first time.

Today the department roster stands at 151 sworn officers who continue the tradition of providing the citizens of Cranston with quality police service.

For more information see the following;

Patrolling a Beat Throughout the Years

Cranston Police Uniforms, Badges, and Patches

In Memoriam

Chief's Gallery

Police Stations

Bureau of Criminal Identification

The Detective Division

DARE Unit

Honor Guard

The K-9 Unit

The Traffic Division

Training Division

Special Reaction Team

Water Rescue and Recovery Unit

The Auxiliary Police/ Emergency Police/Crime Watch Officers