

Department History

The creation of the department followed a ten year period of lawlessness which included everything from gambling and production and sale of illegal whiskey to political tampering and a series of murders. "Hamilton had been for a long time terrorized by the criminal classes," a city historian noted in commenting on the events which led to the formation of the Hamilton Police Department in 1875.

The change, in 1875, came with the election of Michael N. Maginnis, a native of Maryland, to the Office of Mayor of Hamilton. Maginnis, who came to Hamilton in 1861 and had been branded a Copperhead during the Civil War, had been mayor from 1871 to 1873, but was defeated by John B. Ladder, an insurance agent, in 1873. Ladder tried to initiate some reforms, but had little success. His first official act as mayor in 1873 was to order all saloons in the city closed on Sunday. The order was defied.

Maginnis was a surprise winner in the nine-man race for Mayor in 1875 - the field included Ladder. "He thoroughly suppressed crime and lawlessness during his administration," said a local historian writing in 1901. "This body (the Police) which he appointed, disciplined and supervised, thoroughly suppressed the criminal and disorderly classes of the city," noted another local historian in 1882.

Maginnis, who moved to San Francisco after being defeated in the 1877 election, started the movement to create a professional police force immediately after his election in April, 1875. The Mayor, at that time, was not a member of City Council - he could participate in the council debates, but he could not vote. Despite this handicap, Mayor Maginnis secured passage of ordinances in City Council which created the police force in the summer of 1875. Under this system, members of the Department were appointed by the Mayor, but had to be confirmed by a vote of Council. The Mayor also was Justice of the Peace and Maginnis, a lawyer, sat in judgment of those persons arrested by the newly created Hamilton Police Department.

The first chief was David T. Riley, who had been elected City Marshal in the April, 1875, election. Fred Louthan was the first Police Captain. They headed an eleven man force which replaced the Marshal and three deputies as Hamilton's law enforcers. The eleven officers in 1875 were Mike Bowerman, Jacob Boli, George Zeller, Dan Dunwoodie, George Hafertepen, Joseph Fallert, August Tabler, Sam Johnson, Levi Breitenstein, Henry Burrige and George Crolain. According to 1875 newspaper accounts, it cost the city approximately \$8,000.00 a year to create the Police Department.

Later in 1875 Maginnis was also successful in obtaining council approval for ordinances against gambling, rioting and disorderly assembly, and other unlawful acts, protecting city property. In most ordinances it specified that the mayor could levy fines up to \$50.00 (a large amount in those days) and imprisonment in jail "at hard labor."

One of the most controversial actions was an ordinance passed on December 20, 1875, to establish a city prison. City prisoners were being held in the Butler County Jail at that time. This ordinance led to acquisition of a building to be used as City Hall at the southeast corner of Monument Avenue and Market Street (to the rear of the existing Municipal Building). The structure had been built circa 1835 as the Hamilton and Rossville Female Academy. Later it was a private academy for both male and female students, operated by Nathaniel Furman until about 1863. It was acquired in 1863 by the Long & Allstatter Co., owned by John M. Long and Robert Allstatter. The company used it as a machine shop until 1873 when it moved to a new shop at Fourth and High Streets.

The controversy in mid-1875 did not involve the merits of establishing a City Hall and jail. It centered on charges that the transaction involved possible conflicts of interest. Three of the eight councilmen had a connection to the company which owned the building. They included Robert Allstatter, Third Ward councilman, who was a partner in the firm; Isaac Graham, Fourth Ward councilman, an employee of the company; and William Pfau, also a Third Ward councilman, a brother-in-law of a minor partner in the business. Despite these objections, the building was leased from Long & Allstatter in 1875. It was sold to the city for \$9,400.00 in 1883 and remained Hamilton's City Hall until the Municipal Building was completed in 1935.

From these hectic beginnings, Hamilton's police force was expanded and improved. In 1885 the first appointed Chief was named. William Bruck, who was the first appointed chief, had joined the police force in 1876 and was elected City Marshal in 1881 and 1883. Bruck, who later was Sheriff of Butler County, served as appointed Chief for two years. The position changed hands with frequency until the adoption of a charter form of government in 1928. The Chief's appointment and longevity was dependent on the irregular swing of the city's political pendulum until the charter was in force. Hamilton police were on foot or horseback from 1875 until November 1, 1889, when a horse-drawn wagon was delivered to the department. There is no record of the first motorized patrol car, but the first motorized ambulance went into service in March, 1916.

The first police pistol range opened in October, 1928, at an abandoned firehouse on Third Street. It wasn't anything like the "Pop" Mayer Memorial Range on Headgates Road, which was dedicated in July, 1974, but it was a start. In the 1950's, early 1960's and 1970's Hamilton police began to demonstrate the value of such facilities by winning more than their share of trophies at pistol competitions. In 1974, work was also started on the indoor range and continued through 1975. The range was completed in 1976 and is now being used for regularly scheduled firearms training for members of the Hamilton Police Department.

Communications with officers and patrol cars were almost non-existent until 1935 when seven police cars with two-way radio systems were placed in service. Hamilton police had a radio system in service for several years before 1935, but it was a one-way system in which cars could listen to messages from headquarters, but could not reply. Hamilton now has a state-of-the-art Communications Center, staffed by civilian dispatchers, and equipped with such features as computer-aided dispatch, automatic vehicle locators and emergency 911 capabilities.

The first polygraph (lie detector) test was administered by Hamilton Police in July, 1963, and in the past twenty-seven years various devices have been added, including video-tape units.

Manpower was eleven patrolmen and two administrators in 1875. A twenty-two man force was authorized in 1890 and there were fifty-three persons on the staff in 1907, when the three-shift system was started. Department strength increased to ninety in July, 1954; to ninety-seven in December, 1959; and exceeded 110 in December, 1974. Current authorized strength of the department includes Neil R. Ferdelman, Chief of Police, two captains, six lieutenants, 12 sergeants, twenty-one detectives, and eighty-four officers, totaling 126 sworn men and women.

Due to the acquisition of the Kroger property on South Front Street at Sycamore Street, the Hamilton Police Department was able to move from their cramped quarters in the Municipal Building into a newly remodeled Criminal Justice Building. The remodeling of this property was completed in the spring of 1977 and the Police Department, along with the Municipal Court, moved into the new facilities in April, 1977. This location has enhanced the efficiency of the Hamilton Police Department in that all sections are now located in the same building.

Recently, the Hamilton Police Department Headquarters was remodeled to take advantage of new space provided by the Municipal Court's move to One Renaissance Center, and to take advantage of more efficient, modern police department designs.

The first woman appointed to the force was Mrs. Frank Fowles, who joined the Department on February 1, 1922. Hamilton has had at least one female member of the Department since that time.

Hamilton Police were relieved of some responsibilities in October, 1959, when parking meter attendants were appointed to assume that duty. A related improvement came on January 1, 1914, when the Police Court (conducted by the Mayor) was replaced with the Municipal Court system. The adoption of the charter in 1928 and the increased reliance on civil service standards also have removed law enforcement appointments from the political arena.

The Hamilton Police Department has experienced many triumphs and temporary setbacks in its first century. There are legends about the 1930's, for example, that range from the politically-ordered policy of ignoring much of the graft and corruption in "Little Chicago" (Hamilton's dubious nickname) to the time the Department almost nabbed the notorious John Dillinger in his South Second Street hideout.

In this era of sophisticated police science, it is difficult to imagine Hamiltonians 128 years ago living in the fear-ridden period when the ill-equipped city marshals could not keep order. It is also difficult to realize the courage it required to effect a change, yet Mayor Michael N. Maginnis did it in 1875, and what he began has now blossomed into the state-of-the-art veteran force that the Hamilton Police Department is today.

At least seven members of the Hamilton Police Department have died in the line of duty in the Department's first 128 years, none of which have died since 1938. They and their families will remain in our hearts:

[Inspector Arthur M. Walke](#) was assaulted in the Hamilton Police Station on July 1, 1916. He struck his head on the cement floor and died on July 3, 1916.

[Merchant Patrolman Harry Baker](#) was shot dead on December 15, 1919, at the corner of South Fourth and Court Streets during a confrontation with five men whom he had contact with earlier in the evening.

[Desk Sergeant Charles Stegemann](#) was shot June 25, 1920, when he responded to a call for help at a residence on North "B" Street where a domestic fight was in progress.

[Sub-Patrolman Earl Grubb](#) a police cruiser near the corner of South Second Street on New Years Day 1935 when his prisoner, also in the car, shot and killed him.

[Patrolman Arthur E. Sponsel](#) was shot and killed on April 12, 1937, as he surprised burglars in a restaurant on North Third Street.

[Patrolman Aaron Laubach](#) was shot dead on January 27, 1938, as he tried to stop a holdup attempt at Central Avenue and East Avenue.

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