

# Low pay a fact of life for early keepers of town law and order

By June W. Kennedy  
Eagle correspondent

**T**he position of constable, or police, in Westford is as old as the town itself. When the first Town Meeting was called after the incorporation of Westford in 1729, the warrant was headed as follows:

*Middlesex: George the Second by the Grace of God of Great Britton, France and Irland, Kind Defender of the faith, and so forth...To the Constable of the Town of Westford.*

*The warrant was signed on the back: By vertu of the wish in retten warrant I have warned the free holders and the other inhabatence to apear at time and plase"*

*Joseph Fletcher, Const.*

At the first Town Meeting on the first Monday of March, 1730, two constables were elected: Aaron Parker and Aquilla Underwood, thus starting a precedence that has carried on for 260 years. At this same meeting, five selectmen and other town officers were also elected. Among them were two hogg reeves (overseers or supervisors of swine) — William Butterfield and Ebenezer Hildreth. Guardians of the swine, or hogs, were needed, as they had voted to allow swine to go at large in town).

## Served without pay

For more than the first 100 years, the town constables, as well as other town officers, were servants of the town, giving freely of their time with no reward except satisfaction of living in an orderly and friendly community. It was not until 1870 that Constable Isaac Day was paid \$14 for his services of posting the town warrants for the years 1867, 1868 and 1869.

In 1870 Constable Edward Prescott journeyed to East Cambridge to appear before the County Commissioners in the case of the Abbot Worsted Company; he received \$5 for his expenses.

The number of Constables increased to four by 1871: Isaac E. Day, Edward Prescott, Samuel Wiley and Farnsworth Shattuck. Edward Prescott was the only one to receive pay: \$7.50 in regard to dog license and \$1.50 for posting the town warrant.

The number was increased to 12 in 1872. Only two received pay; the

others probably served for protection in their neighborhoods. By 1875 and 1876 the constables had been reduced to six, only one of whom received a total of \$67.75 for attending 23 funerals with town hearse and for the posting of town warrants.

## Elected police officers

It was in 1879, for the first time, that the term police officers was used. Constables were always elected along with other town officials at the regular annual Town Meeting. In 1893 the police officers were chosen by hand ballot, and that year, five were elected along with two constables.

For example, in 1894 constables Isaac Day and Walter C. Wright were elected along with police officers Eugene De Rochin, Joseph H. Wilson and Samuel H. Balch. But the pay of any was very small, as in 1897 with two constables and five police officers, the total expense for the year was \$25.40.

In the early 1900s expenses began to climb: \$112 one year, another year, \$72.50. Expenses in 1908 were high due to an epidemic of stealing horses, with payments of \$41.57 or \$42.84 for some officers. Handcuffs for the Poor Farm (an overnight jail was housed here), the cost of police badges, and expenses to the First District Court in Ayer brought additional cost for law enforcement.

As late as 1915, Frank L. Healy and Charles T. Brook were elected at Town Meeting along with 12 police officers. Stephen Gardel, William Wall and Charles S. Ripley, Keeper of the Town Farm, served as constables during this period.

In 1920 the name "Police Department" appears for the first time and in 1921 the force really gets started. For that year Harry E. Whiting signed the report as "Chief of Police." Part of his report is worth repeating:

"To the Board of Selectmen: I herewith submit my first report of the Police Department. On March 1, 1921, I received my duties which were to act as a police officer and to have charge of the police work of the town.

"I have been handicapped in several ways, a few of which I will enumerate: First, the means of transportation furnished, namely a

defective motorcycle which took a large part of my appropriation to keep in repair, and to hire transportation for myself when it was out of repair or the weather was such that the use of a motorcycle was out of the question.

"Secondly, the large amount of territory to be covered. Thirdly, the smallness of the appropriation when one considers the many different expenses to come out of the same, and the fact that the money collected from fines does not revert back for use in the Police Department, but goes into the town treasury.

"My report would be incomplete without a word of appreciation for

---

**For more than the first 100 years, the town constables, as well as other town officers, were servants of the town, giving freely of their time with no reward except satisfaction of living in an orderly and friendly community. It was not until 1870 that Constable Isaac Day was paid \$14 for his services of posting the town warrants for the years 1867, 1868 and 1869.**

---

Special Officer Sutherland, who has proven himself an efficient officer and dependable at all times and to Constable William Watt and Special Officers Ripley and Robinson for any and all work which they have done to make the Police Department a success."

In 1921 the total budget for the Police Department was \$2000; expenses were: Salaries, \$1250; Special Officers, \$218.82; Constables, \$86; Court Expenses (1920), \$47.28; Other Expenses (1921), \$112.45; Gas and Oil, \$58.58; Other Motorcycle Expenses, \$270.70; Telephone \$83.14; Printing, \$4; Total, \$2080.67.

June Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections," a series of historical vignettes and photos.