

The Evening Star, March 8, 1890

Seven of the Finest

They Have Seen Nearly Thirty Years' Service

Origin of the Police Force

Present at the First Roll call -- Before the Days of Uniforms, Helmets and Batons --

Men Who Have Earned Easy Berths -- Something About the Veterans

There are now only seven persons on the police force who went on duty when the metropolitan police force was first organized. They are Lieut. James W. Gessford, Lieut. John F. Kelly, Lieut. Charles R. Vernon, Sergt. Cornelius Noonan, Private Augustus Brown, Private Godwin Pierce, Private Caleb Sebastian.

These seven men were authorized to carry batons on the evening of September 11, 1861. They have seen hard service and most of them are, still strong and vigorous men, and are likely to remain as the protectors of property and guardians of the peace for some years to come.

Their Present Duties

The three lieutenants are still in charge of precincts, while the only sergeant left handles the thousands of dollars that are paid in fines at the Police Court. Policeman Brown is detailed at the free bridge and does not have to do night duty. Officer Pierce is detailed at the District government building, while Officer Sebastian is food inspector in the seventh or Georgetown precinct. Thus the force is caring for its oldest officers in the best possible manner, looking out for their good treatment and good health. "I'll never forget the first day we went on duty," said one of the originals to a STAR reporter the other day. It was raining and the first roll call was at 6 o'clock in the evening. The city was divided into ten precincts. When the force was organized Mr. William B. Webb was chief and there were one hundred and fifty members. There were no station houses and the roll was called out in the street. I was in the old seventh ward, which was in South Washington, and answered the roll call on the cellar door of the old Island hall.

"We were a pretty crowd that evening when we started out. We had no batons, badges, uniforms or clubs, but were provided with a small oil cloth band to put around our hats bearing the inscription: "Metropolitan police."

"The first thing the men did was to go to a pile of wood and get clubs, the regulation size being 22 inches long. Some of the primitive batons were of good size and looked as if they were to be used as mallets rather than on the heads of offenders against the laws."

No Helmets in Those Days

"How about the hats?" inquired the reporter. "Some went on duty wearing slouch hats, others had derbiemans and silk hats and some hardly had any hats," was his reply, "but it was only four months before the government furnished uniforms, caps and clubs, but they don't furnish them now. The oil cloth, which was the only thing to designate the policemen from other citizens, gave them the appearance of hotel porters and they were often called such by the soldiers.

"Police duty was different then from what it is now. The officers had no time to loaf, but it was always 'get up and get,' as there was always something going on. Such a thing as a patrol wagon was never thought of during those days. The persons arrested were marched to the central guard house on

Louisiana avenue. In some cases it took the officer a half a day to take his prisoner in and return to his beat.

Old-Fashioned Whistles

“The police at that time had the old-fashioned whistles with a ball in them. They took the place of the rattles that were used by the old corporation police. Even after the change in the forces rattles were kept in many houses and were used when police assistance was necessary. “The prisoners were tried at the old central guard house, the soldiers arrested being turned over to the military court, which occupied a portion of the building. The punishment meted out to the offenders was about the same as now, in petty cases the fine usually being \$5 and costs. The costs were either 48, 54 or 94 cents, according to the circumstances attending the case. The jail building was at the corner of 4th and G streets, where the pension office now is, and persons sentenced to that prison were escorted there by an officer and compelled to work. The work house was situated where the alms house now is and \$1 was allowed by the magistrate for transporting prisoners there. The officers then used to hire a hack or other public vehicle and go to the prison in style. Sometimes there would be a dozen or more prisoners to be taken at once and then an omnibus was procured.

“When the officers first went on duty every man thought he would not reach the top of the ladder until he had arrested a murderer and when the first crime of that serious nature was committed every man was anxious to catch the murderer.

The First Murder

“It was not long before there was a murder, and then all the officers who heard of it started out to do their best. The killing occurred in a frame shanty on the island or seventh ward. A man while intoxicated stabbed his wife with an oyster knife and then stood over her corpse as quietly as though nothing unusual had taken place. The officers surrounded his house and finally the door was opened and several of the bluecoats entered.

“‘What do you want here?’ the man asked.

“‘Why, you, of course,’ one of the officers replied. Then he was placed under arrest and locked up. His trial, conviction and death sentence followed. The jail had just been transferred from the charge of the marshal to that of the warden, and the law making the change had failed to mention who was to execute death sentences. The consequence was that the prisoner, like several others, escaped the gallows and got off with a light sentence.

James W. Gessford

Is the only person now in charge of a precinct who can boast that he was made lieutenant by an act of Congress. He is as good natured as he is corpulent, but he is also a man who believes in policemen doing their duty, and no one knows that fact better than the men under him. Lieutenant Gessford is a native of Baltimore and celebrates his birthday on a legal holiday, having been born on the same day of the same month that George Washington was, February 22, 1835. He left Baltimore when seventeen years of age and came to the national capital to seek a fortune, and if he has not succeeded in amassing wealth he certainly has earned a fortune so far as the good wishes of the citizens are concerned. Having learned to construct houses under the instruction of the venerable C.B. Church, he gave up his trade and was willing to become a defender of the city of Washington and was one of the first policemen appointed. He was not on the force long before W.G. Brock who was afterward made chief, was promoted to a position in headquarters and he was promoted to fill the vacancy thus caused. When Congress changed

the grades of officers he was then Sergeant Gessford and the act made him lieutenant. He has since commanded a number of precincts and is held in high esteem by those who have done duty under him. In addition to doing duty as lieutenant he held the office of night inspector for some time.

Lieut. John F. Kelly

Who has filled every office on the force, is a native of this city, having been born on the 22d day of November 1831. He was born at the corner of 27th and K streets, where his father kept the first ale bottling house that was established in this city. After attending the Trinity Catholic school in Georgetown until he was fifteen years old, his parents having died, he was bound out as an apprentice to Thomas Lewis, the master brick layer. He served his apprenticeship and then went to work and was foreman of the force employed on the Corcoran art gallery building at the beginning of the war. When President Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers John F. Kelly bundled up his tools, left the art gallery building and enlisted as one of his country's defenders in the three months' service. As a member, of the Metropolitan Rifles, under Capt. Nally, he crossed the long bridge the night before the killing of Ellsworth in Alexandria. He was appointed a private on the force and went on duty the day of the organization. About a year later he was promoted to be roundsman and four years afterward was made sergeant. After serving about one year in the latter position good luck again befell him and he was made lieutenant in charge of a precinct and was transferred from time to time until he became thoroughly acquainted with both officers and criminals in all sections of the city. During 1867 and 1868 Lieut. Kelly had charge of the detective corps and was afterward appointed night inspector, being the first officer to fill that office, to which duty he was subsequently assigned a second time. Again he was put back in charge of a precinct and fought many hard battles in Swampoodle, where had had worked while an apprentice boy. In addition to the offices mentioned Lieut. Kelly has acted as captain and during Maj. Moore's illness some months ago he was the acting chief.

Lieutenant Charles R. Vernon

Has done duty in the South Washington precinct more than in any other and consequently he is more familiar with people and affairs in that section of the city than most of the other lieutenants. During the first days of the existence of the force there was plenty of hard duty to perform thereabouts, as there were several places on Maryland avenue where the soldiers congregated and committed violations of the law. The lieutenant, who was then a private or patrolman, figured in many severe battles. Like his true friend, Lieut Gessford, , he answered roll call on a cellar door the first evening and went out without uniform, club or shield

Lieut. Vernon was born in Alexandria county, Va., September 20, 1832. At the age of thirteen he left school and went with his father to learn his trade as carpenter. Like many other young men at that period he left home when quite young and went to the home of his uncle in the country to become a farmer. He remained farming on what is now the Gentlemen's driving park until he was twenty years old, when he came to this city. He brought with him several good horses and engaged in hauling freight until the organization of the police force. Several times he could have been promoted but being fond of his country dogs and gunning he did not care to deprive himself of those amusements and gave way to another member of the force. In 1866 he was made sergeant and nine years later he was designated as lieutenant to take charge of a precinct. In 1879 he was made captain, which position he filled until S.H. Walker was made chief, when he gave way to Lieut. Austin, who was promoted. Since that time he has commanded the South Washington precinct, except during short intervals when he acted as captain during Capt. Austin's absence.

Sergeant Cornelius Noonan

is one of the oldest men on the force and has probably had more experience in police duty than most men on any force in this country. Being born in County Cork, Ireland, in 1817, he lived with his parents until he became of age, and he then became a member of the constabulary in Cork, where he rose to the rank of sergeant. He resigned his position there and came to America with his wife and one child with excellent recommendations from his superior officers in the old country. Arriving in America about 1847 he spent a number of years in Baltimore and then came to this city. Appointed as the others in 1861 he has gone through all grades to lieutenant, and as a reorganizer of several disordered precincts he proved a success. On one occasion while in command of what is now the second precinct he went to the rescue of the bartender in Loeffler's garden, who was being mobbed by soldiers. He succeeded in rescuing the man, but in so doing he received a severe stab in the chest and his skull was fractured. For several years he had charge of the detective and sanitary corps.

On account of his age he was afterward made sergeant and placed at the Police court to handle the money paid in fines in District cases. When he first took charge there, about twelve years ago, the collections amounted to less than \$10,000 a year. They have steadily increased until now they exceed \$30,000. During the twelve years it is estimated that he has handled nearly a quarter of a million of government money, and his accounts have always been correct to a cent.

Policeman Augustus Brown

bears the distinction of being the only man who wore a badge the first day he went on duty and the only original member of the force who is now doing street duty. He was a member of the corporation police prior to the organization of the metropolitan force, and that is where he obtained his badge. Officer Brown was born in Georgetown, March 4, 1825. He learned his trade as carpenter and worked for Mr. Entwisle, who is now building inspector. Sometime after learning the trade he went to work for the Chesapeake and Ohio canal and was in charge of the carpenters employed by that corporation. When it was decided to establish the metropolitan police force he put in his application and was one of the lucky ones. He answered the first roll call in a little shanty in rear of the present police station. There were two rooms in the building, but no place where the officers could sleep. In his twenty-nine years' experience in police duty Officer Brown has figured in some severe struggles. He had lost less than one month in sickness in all that time and less than six months from all causes. He is now doing duty at the free bridge, where he has succeeded in putting down the rougher elements who used to make that thoroughfare almost impassable.

Godwin Pierce

has served the force as private, roundsman and sergeant. He is a native of Philadelphia and is sixty-two years old. Before leaving his native place he mastered the brick maker's trade and worked at it here from 1850 until shortly before he was made a member of the police force. For two years he served as sanitary officer and as such looked after the welfare of the unfortunate class of society who were without funds enough to take them to another city. As a member of the force Officer Pierce was connected with between fifteen and twenty homicide cases.

In 1883 he was detailed for duty at the office of the District Commissioners and has faithfully protected those officials from the troublesome office seekers after 2 o'clock in the afternoon ever since.

Caleb Sebastian

is at present performing the duty of food inspector for Georgetown, and as such he makes his daily report to the health officer instead of to the chief of police. He was born in Fairfax county, Va., in 1818,

but has been a resident of Georgetown for fifty-three years. Long before the war he occupied a stand in the old Georgetown market, where he sold butter and eggs. When President Lincoln called for volunteers he was one of the first to respond, and, like many other Georgetown citizens, he went in the three months' service and received an honorable discharge. At the expiration of that term of service he took charge of the first ambulance train to Bull run, but did not reach the battlefield, being compelled to return to Arlington. When the police force was organized he went on duty, and has been serving his city ever since. When Dr. Townshend was appointed health officer he secured the detail of Officer Sebastian as food inspector in Georgetown, and for twelve years he has performed his duty faithfully.