

Early History of the Sheriff's Office

The first sheriff of Washington County was appointed by Governor Ramsey in 1849 when Minnesota became a territory. Before this time, Wisconsin had become a state and its border had been drawn at the St. Croix River. Since the appointed sheriff lived on the wrong side of the river, in Wisconsin, an election had to be held. Jesse Taylor was elected in the fall of 1849 and started serving his term in January of 1850. The first sheriffs who were elected only served two-year terms. Their office was located at Chestnut and 4th streets in Stillwater. The Sheriff's Office remained at this location for the next 20 years.

William C. Penny was elected as the next sheriff and only served one term from 1853 through 1854. Asa Green was elected as the next sheriff and started serving his term in 1855. The legislative assembly of the Territory of Minnesota passed an act requiring the sheriffs of Minnesota to be census takers. The Act granted the sheriff the authority to hire as many deputies as necessary to help in the task. "The sheriffs of the several counties shall receive from their proper county as compensation for their duties herein required, two cents for each and every person enumerated in all the counties where the population exceeds 3,000. In counties with a population of 2,000 and under 3,000, three cents for each person enumerated. In counties containing a population of 1,000 but less than 2,000, four cents for each person enumerated, and in all counties with a population not exceeding ,000 five cents for each and every person enumerated in such county."

1855 Census

An article appeared in the Saint Croix Union paper shortly after Sheriff Green completed the census in 1855. "Mr. Green, Sheriff of this County, has recently finished taking census of this city, and he informs us that it now numbers 1,482. Of this number, 700 are unmarried men and bachelors. Did you ever! We advise some of the overstocked and goodly towns of the east to send out a goodly number of goodly women to this goodly place. They would be snapped up, instanter, we would suppose, by the unmarried and goodly male denizens herein congregated; and that, we take it, would be praiseworthy and goodly deed."

Tax Collection

One of the largest tasks that the early sheriffs did was to collect taxes and conduct property sales. There were pages and pages of tax forfeited land that was printed twice a year shortly after taxes were due.

Politics in Sheriff Elections

William C. Johnson was elected and served a term as sheriff in 1856 and 1857. G.M. Stickney defeated William Johnson in the election of 1857 and Stickney took office in 1858. In the early years of the Sheriff's Office, politics played a large part in the elections. There were inflammatory articles around election time between the Republicans and the Democrats. In a newspaper article printed in the Stillwater Messenger newspaper Tuesday, October 18, 1861, the headline read: "Washington County Election -- A Glorious Republican Victory.... rejoicing and we congratulate you upon your invincible patriotism. We come out of the contest with a triumphant majority for the entire state ticket! Three representatives! One Register of Deeds! One Sheriff!"

Low Turnout due to Civil War

George Davis, who was Stickney's deputy, ran unopposed for sheriff in the election of 1861. Because of the Civil War, there was an extremely low turnout according to the Stillwater Messenger Tuesday, October 15, 1861, newspaper. "Within the past six years there has not been so quiet an election held in this city and county as that of last Tuesday. Neither has there been so small a vote polled. The vote of the entire county did not exceed what should have been the vote of this city. In many of the towns there seems to have been barely enough to form the election boards. The war, business and pleasure have called hundreds of citizens away from home; while the great mass of the people at time did not feel sufficient interest to attend the election. This indifference was the result of an assurance felt by everyone that the Republican ticket would be elected." George Davis received 572 votes plus 4 votes for the opposition, even though he ran unopposed.

Drafting

On August 11, 1862, the Stillwater Messenger printed an article signed by George Davis, Sheriff of Washington County - "STATE OF MINNESOTA. Whereas, Orders have been received by the undersigned to cause the Orders of the President of the United States, issued by the War Department on the 6th and 8th ins. provided; therefore by the virtue of such orders, all persons between the ages of 18 and 45 years are hereby notified and warned are not to leave the limits of the afore mentioned county under pain and penalty of arrest, as in Order of the 6th inst. provided; and all good and loyal citizens are required to give information of the whereabouts of any such persons who has left said county since the 5th instant, as also of the intention of any such person to leave said county until the Orders of the President of the United States relative to drafting shall be carried into effect."

Resisting the Law

Sheriff Davis was a wily man. Tuesday, July 18, 1865, the Stillwater Messenger newspaper had an article - "Resisting the Law. - On Saturday Sheriff Davis with a posse went over to the lake to attach some logs lying in a raft attached to the opposite shore. The pilot having charge of the raft Mr. Hagerty - made some show of resistance, and talked blustering about having 24 muscular shoulder hitters who stood ready to rush in at his bidding. The matter was finally compromised by inducing, Mr. Pilot to come over to Stillwater, when he was immediately placed under arrest, for resisting a process of law."

Jail

The Washington County Sheriff's Office did not have a jail at the 4th and Chestnut Street location. The move was on to build a new Court House and Sheriff's Office complete with a jail. To help convince residents that a new building was needed, the Stillwater Messenger printed an article on Wednesday July 25, 1866. "Having been requested to furnish for publication a statement showing the expenses by Washington County by reason of not having a County Jail and offices I have prepared and herewith submit the following exhibit, showing the amount of such expenses during the year commencing June 1, 1865, and ending June 1, 1866 to wit:

- Amount paid for office rent \$275.00
- For guarding prisoners during the two terms of District Court \$425.00
- For boarding guards of prisoners \$183.00
- For conveying prisoners to and from St. Paul \$87.00
- The amount paid for boarding prisoners at the hotels in this city during the two terms of the court at \$2.00 per day was \$450.00
- Assuming that the expenses of boarding prisoners in jail there would be the same as in Ramsey County, per week \$4.00
- There would be an extra expense in the item of board of \$321.84

In the fall election the citizens of the county voted 546 to 398 to build a new court house and Sheriff's Office.



Moving the County Seat

In 1867 the March 6th edition of the Stillwater Messenger reported that the state legislature Representative Ayres presented a bill to move the county seat from Stillwater to Lakeland. It raised a flurry of criticism. March 13th paper said that the bill was killed and "The measure is killed - beyond the prospect of resurrection." in the election of 1869 the Republican county convention nominated J.R. Carli for Sheriff beating former Sheriff G. M. Seymour and R. Langley. Carli was the first sheriff to serve in the new court house. The original sheriffs also served as janitors, making almost as much money cleaning the place as they did for serving as sheriff. In 1871 Carli made: \$183.80 for boarding prisoners, \$691.55 for Sheriff's fees, and \$472.46 as the janitor of the courthouse. Before a newly elected sheriff could take office he had to post a \$5,000.00 bond. The sheriff was responsible for this out of his own pocket. Sheriff Carli appeared to be more involved in law enforcement; at least he received more newspaper coverage than the previous sheriffs. The Stillwater Messenger, March 7, 1873, newspaper, "Sheriff Carli and Chief of Police Lyons returned last Friday evening from their search for the escaped prisoners, Grant and McCary. They traveled upward of 100 miles through deep snow and over unbroken roads in less than 36 hours, but were unable to find the objects of their search..." Friday May 2, 1873, edition of the Messenger had an article; "Sheriff Carli took to the Reform School on Monday last, the two boys, Charlie Sawyer and George Runny, who were convicted of stealing some shooting irons from Ma Van Vorbes." J.A. Johnson defeated C.H. Pratt and incumbent J.R. Carli in the November 14, 1873 election. Sheriff J.A. Johnson had articles printed about him but they did not deal with law enforcement.

Bad Press for Sheriff Johnson

Stillwater Messenger May 22, 1874, " Sheriff's Johnson's children are disposed to be erratic, and cause their father more trouble in watching than do the eight inmates of the county jail placed under his charge. About half past five o'clock last Monday afternoon, while Sheriff Johnson was in the southern part of the county on official business, Alice, age 8, and her two younger brothers, receiving permission from their mother "to play in the yard" immediately struck out for the lake, coming down the grade to Main Street they boarded a raft lying in the vicinity of Butler & Gray's warehouse, and were having a glorious time when Alice slipped into the water. Not knowing how to swim she sank twice, when fortunately a little son of Daniel McKisick seized her hair as she rose the last time and succeeded in holding her head out of the water until someone who saw the accident came and drew her out, when she was taken to Mr. McKisick's residence and carefully nursed. Meanwhile, Mrs. Johnson had prepared the evening meal, and when ready to sit down called the children who were nowhere to be found. Presently, a lad came up with the startling intelligence that little Alice was drowned. But on accompanying him to the scene of the accident, her fears were set at rest by finding the little one alive, though considerably chilled by her involuntary bath."

Not only did Sheriff Johnson receive bad press about his family, but he also had an article written about him letting a prisoner escape. In the Messenger's July 16, 1875: "Last Thursday Sheriff Johnson of this city received information that Sullivan had been arrested in Duluth, Whither he (Johnson) started Friday morning. The next morning, left for home, having Sullivan by his side, handcuffed. He kept a careful watch of his prisoner, but as the train was going at the rate of 25 miles per hour between Pine City and Rock Creek he relaxed his diligence for a moment at which moment Sullivan improved by sneaking to the rear door of the rear car and rearing off. Sheriff Johnson glancing around about this time could not discover his man, and looking from the window discovered him as he touched ground, and turned numerous forcible if not graceful somersaults. The train was stopped, as quickly as possible and diligent search made, but Sullivan had made good his escape. If Sullivan desires to preserve his liberty he will do well to leave the country, for if our sheriff ever gets hold of him again, he'll not get away alive."

Jail Records

1877 was the first year that jail records could be found. Information on the jail registers included: name, age, height, color of eyes, color of hair, nativity, occupation, reads, write, married or single, by whom sent, what for, term of sentence. They were not filled out like they are today. For color of hair there were entries like: dark, light, sandy, and darkly. Under nativity they didn't record, Caucasian, black, native American, but they had written Swede, Scotland, Ohio, Norway, Indiana, Iowa and Mass.

Sheriffs arrested and jailed people for committing everything from murder to being drunk. Drunks were given anywhere from 6 to 10 days in jail. "Sheriff Johnson succeeded in capturing William Boelter on Tuesday a few miles from Red Wing. His examination took place on Wednesday, and in default of \$1000.00 he languishes in jail." July 26, 1878 Messenger. In the election in the fall of 1879 J.A. Johnson's deputy Chas Holcomb defeated McCarthy. In the early years of the sheriff's office it was very partisan politics. When Holcomb won the election the paper printed; "And the Republican ticket triumphs..." The paper five months after the election was still printing editorials about the election. On Saturday March 20, 1880, the Stillwater Messenger printed: "Defeated candidates for sheriff couldn't explain too minutely how 'the other fellow' happened to bag the persimmons."

Politics continued to make the newspaper, and on October 30, 1880, the Stillwater Messenger printed: "Dick Taylor has preferred charges against Deputy Sheriff Lund because he (Lund) could not or did not compel his brother-in-law at Marine to support every nominee on the Republican ticket. Dick proposes to have Lund removed from office."

Holcombe was the first sheriff that we found records showing what he received for each job: Arrest of John Cligg \$1.00, mileage \$1.80, subpoenas \$2.80, attending court \$3.00, committing Cligg to jail \$1.00, boarding John Cligg 15 days \$8.45, washing for Cligg \$1.00 and discharging Cligg \$1.00.

Sheriff's Job Definition

A Sheriff's job, as defined by law: The Sheriff is required to keep and preserve the peace of his county. He apprehends felons, execution of writs, processes, precepts, and orders issued by a lawful authority and delivered to him; attends terms of district court, has charge of the county jail, collects delinquent personal property taxes and conducts tax sales. The sheriff, although elected by the county, is virtual a state officer in as much as he attempts to maintain the laws of the state. In the performance of his duties he may appoint as many deputy sheriffs as he considers necessary, such deputies to be responsible to him and removable at his pleasure. Deputies are required to file with the register of deeds their oaths and appointments before entering on their official duties. The Sheriff also is responsible for civil process. If required, every sheriff must give to any person delivering a process or papers to him for service or execution a certificate specifying the names of the parties, the nature of the process, and the day of delivery. The sheriff is required to attend all sessions of the district court and to take charge of juries when they leave the jury room. The sheriff may appoint a female legal voter of the county as special deputy sheriff or bailiff to serve until the discharge of such jury from further service upon the case. It is the duty of the sheriff to have charge of the county jail and to receive and safely keep all persons lawfully committed, until their release through due course of law.

In the early years the sheriff conducted hundreds of tax forfeiture land sales. This was in the early years Stillwater and the growth of the County. Holcombe also housed the Younger brothers after the Northfield Bank Robbery. Cole and James Younger were serving time at the prison in Stillwater. There was a fire at the prison and Sheriff Holcombe housed the brothers until they could return to the prison.