

HISTORY OF THE GREENVILLE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

1786 - 1986

200 YEARS OF SERVICE

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The office of Sheriff has a long and interesting history. Originally Shire-Reeve, manager of the Shire, or Office of Sheriff existed in England before the Norman Conquest in 1066. The Sheriff was the leader of the land and had a general responsibility to the King for preserving order and the maintenance of the King's peace. He was authorized to hold the "posse committatus" (power of the county) by which he could mobilize the whole available civil force of the Shire (county) in cases of emergency.

The County of Greenville was created by law on March 22, 1786. As the new County's population began to grow, it was faced with positive challenges. Law Enforcement in Greenville County has grown along with the land, and Sheriffs and their Deputies have played an integral part in that growth. As the office of Sheriff progressed many changes and exciting events took place. Following are a few of the major events faced by Sheriffs in Greenville County during the last 200 years.

One of the best known early Sheriffs was Robert Maxwell. Because he was more well known, many have referred to him as Greenville's "first sheriff." He was a Revolutionary Hero, who after his appointment to Sheriff on December 12, 1795, turned his experience as soldier to that of crime fighter. Sheriff Maxwell was ambushed on November 10, 1797 while crossing the Saluda River Shoals where the Piedmont Mill Dam was later built. Four or five assassins shot the brave Sheriff and two days later he died of his wounds. Sheriff Maxwell now rests near the Ware Place in Southern Greenville County. The inscription on his grave reads "Robert Maxwell, A Christian, A Soldier, and a Whig."

The life of a Sheriff has never been an easy one because they

often had to face angry mobs determined to render instant justice. In the late 1880's a black man killed a white woman in the Simpsonville area. After a three day hunt the suspect fell into the hands of the Sheriff P. D. Gilreath's men and was placed in the Greenville County jail. Fearing a lynching movement was underway, Sheriff Gilreath occupied the citizens at a near by bar and had his deputies to move the prisoner from the jail to a secret place in the courthouse.

Late that night two hundred hooded men approached the jail and demanded the murder suspect. After finding he had been moved, they demanded to speak to the Sheriff. He went to meet them alone and unarmed, telling them that he was going to see the prisoner hung, but only after due process. And further, if anyone in the crowd wanted to witness the hanging, they had only to give their name to be invited to it. Their spokesman said, "We all know that Perry Gilreath never made a promise he did not keep so let's go home." After trial and conviction, Sheriff Gilreath sprung the trap that sent the murderer to eternity.

Sheriffs played important roles in changing times, and one Greenville Sheriff played a critical part in the lowering of the curtain of lynch law in Up State South Carolina. In February 1947, a yellow cab driver took his last trip from Greenville into Pickens County carrying two black men. The next day he was found in a ditch suffering from multiple stab wounds from which he later died. The Pickens Sheriff arrested a man named Willie Earle on suspicion of having participated in the crime.

That same night, nearly thirty taxi cab drivers armed themselves and went to the Pickens County Jail. They forceably removed Willie Earle at approximately 5 A.M., and at approximately 6:45 A.M. the body of Willie Earle was found in Greenville County. He had been stabbed and shot three times in the head with a shotgun. Then Governor Strom Thurmond publicly expressed his outrage, and stated he did not favor lynching and would use every resource to apprehend all persons who may have been involved. Four state constables were sent to investigate, including Captain G. F. Richardson, a later Sheriff of Greenville County.

The lynching occurred Monday, February 17, and by Friday, February 21, Sheriff Homer Bearden of Greenville had twenty nine men in jail for lynching, and twenty six confessions in hand. In all, thirty one persons were indicted. After a nine day trial which was strongly prosecuted, the Greenville jury found the defendants not guilty. Nonetheless, observers of the time, such as the *Greenville Piedmont* of May 22 said that "This is a community in which cases of this kind are less likely to occur again. For the state and county have given notice that the time is past when murder in any form, lynchings or otherwise, will be ignored or white washed." This was the last lynching in the Up Country, and possibly in the entire state. Sheriffs began to receive the support needed to uphold due process.

Samuel D. Willis was appointed to fill the un-expired term of Sheriff Hendrix Rector from July 1919 until 1920. The next election was won by Carlos A. Rector, brother to Hendrix Rector. He served from 1920 until 1924. At that time Sam Willis ran and was elected Sheriff and served until June 11, 1927 when he was ambushed in the garage at the back of his home at 219 East Stone Avenue. The Sheriff apparently was caught by surprise, as he did not have a chance to return fire. He was shot once in the abdomen, once in the left eye, and twice in the heart by a .32 weapon.

In a bomb shell movement, state investigators announced the arrest of Mrs. Ethel Willis, wife of the Sheriff, and Deputy Henry S. Townsend for the murder of Sheriff Willis. The state charged the Sheriff was murdered because of a lover's triangle. Because the State had little evidence and refused to discuss the case, community sentiment supported the claims of innocence by Mrs. Willis and Deputy Townsend. After a sensational fifteen day trial, the longest ever at that time, the jury took only an hour to return a verdict of not guilty for both defendants. Carlos Rector was appointed to serve out the remaining term of Sheriff Willis.

In 1929 another change took place in the Sheriff's Office. Carlos Rector had not solved the murder of Sheriff Sam Willis. Cliff Bramlett, who had been a deputy under Willis, ran for Sheriff on a campaign promise of arresting the person really

responsible for the murder of Sam Willis. Bramlett was elected and began work on his campaign promise. The Sheriff's Office had now grown to a staff of ten including the Sheriff. Sheriff Bramlett had the utmost confidence in one of his deputies, George King and he immediately assigned him the Willis case. Deputy King answered only to Sheriff Bramlett and after approximately one year of intense search and investigation, an important clue surfaced.

Deputy King learned that a black man had been approached about killing Sheriff Willis for money. That man was Ed Cuffie, but he had to refuse to do it. Deputy King learned that shortly after the murder, another black man, Blair Rooks had suddenly come into a great deal of money. King reported this information to Sheriff Bramlett and the two lawmen decided to approach Rooks. Bramlett and King found Rooks at a construction site near Greenville and when they questioned him, the guilt was obvious in his eyes. Rooks admitted to the murder of Sheriff Willis and explained to the lawmen how he laid in wait of Sheriff Willis the night he killed him. Rooks also led Bramlett and King to the location where he had thrown the murder weapon. The gun was found and although in rusty condition, a laboratory examination in Chicago, Illinois proved that it matched the bullets taken from the body of Sheriff Willis.

Blair Rooks admitted to the murder of Willis but added that he had been paid \$500.00 by two white men to carry out the act. When asked "who"? by Bramlett, Rooks replied - "by Sheriff Carlos Rector and Deputy J. Harmon Moore." This information spread like wildfire throughout the county and residents were astonished. Rector and Moore were arrested the next day, after lengthy trial delays, both were found guilty of accessory to murder in December 1930 and sentenced to ten years in prison. Rooks was sentenced to life in prison, and another chapter closed in the book of Sheriffs.

Since 1977 many changes have been initiated and followed through in regard to professionalization of the Sheriff's Office. This resulted in the office receiving the statewide Southern Bell Award for Excellence in Law Enforcement in 1979. Department personnel are now second to none in the state. Currently, the

department consists of 197 sworn officers, 30 reserves, 100 crossing guards, 16 dispatchers, and 12 administrative persons. The budget is over six million dollars and provides a wide range of progressive law enforcement service. Public confidence in the Sheriff's Office is at an all time high and we pledge our continued professional service.