

“The Mongrel Regime!.” The Untold Story of Tennessee's  
African American Policemen  
During the  
New South and Jim Crow Eras,  
1867-1930

by  
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For God.

For my family, for all my friends, for all of MTSU.

For the memories of all of the earliest African American police officers that served  
Tennessee's cities after my people were finally free.

Thank you

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I must say that this thesis project was my own lovely cross to bear, so I offer all the joys and pains of carrying it to God. May He use my joys and suffering to aid all the holy souls in purgatory so that they may gain eternal life. All glory and honor is to Him alone.

I have to express my complete thanks to Dr. Mary S. Hoffschewlle who was a everlasting source of support, guidance, hope, strength, and push that I needed throughout this whole endeavor. Every ounce of gratitude in my heart is to her as my thesis advisor. Even during the low-points of trying to complete this project, she was there with a smile and a calming spirit that let me know that it was going all get done one day. I truly could not have done it without her support and care. You are a friend for life, Dr. H.

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Lastly, I would like to extend my personal thanks and gratitude to the Honors College at MTSU for allowing students to undertake a project such as this. This gives students like myself an opportunity to go the extra mile with our course work and maximize the most of an undergraduate education. The thesis project further gives students a chance to apply both the knowledge and the skills they have learned in college to something that will

prepare them for the fields they wish to go into. The honors thesis project is a hidden treasure at MTSU. Thank you.

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## PREFACE

This work deals with a most interesting topic in Southern history that has largely been overlooked: the presence of African American police officers on the South's urban forces during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During my research, I have only been able to find around a handful of journal articles that have as their primary subject postbellum southern black police officers. Full length books on the history of blacks in southern American policing have been even scarcer. W. Marvin Dulaney appears to have written one of the only books on the complete history of African Americans in American policing in general, *Black Police in America*, which I call “the mother of all sources” on the subject. Dulaney gives an extensive history of black police. In his second chapter he takes his first deep look at postbellum black appointments that were made in the South, which started only a few years after the Civil War. More came during Reconstruction; however, both the frequency of appointments and number of black officers dwindled as the nineteenth century faded away and Jim Crow began to creep its head into the picture and later force its way onto the historical scene in the South. He calls these first black police officers “black pioneers,” and, for a number of reasons that I will discuss in this work, I concur with the title.<sup>1</sup> Even still, Dulaney's focus on the southern black officers between 1865 and the early 1900s is limited to only two chapters. To my knowledge, there is no book that exclusively deals with the presence of African American police officers in the South during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So,

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W. Marvin Dulaney, *Black Police in America*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 8



technically speaking, this thesis in your very hands, which is bound in hardback with all the proper trimmings of a book, is the *first* one that deals with this specific topic exclusively. *Technically speaking*. I know this is not a “book” in the same way Dulaney's work is a book, only an undergraduate thesis project. But I will take the technicality and bask in all the proper glories. All other sources that I have read only briefly mention black officers in passing within a larger historical framework about something else.

Inspiration for this topic came in the summer break of my sophomore year at Middle Tennessee State University in 2013. During this time, though I did not have one favorite historical period, I was tremendously interested in the nineteenth century thanks to a survey course on the tail-end of world history taught by historian and professor, Dr. Mark Doyle. I also had a hunger to study more about Reconstruction that had lingered over from middle and high school social studies and history classes where we, for the most part, only glanced over this time period. Furthermore, the history of the South had always greatly intrigued me, and still does. Finding out more about race relations in the South after the Civil War had always been in the back of my mind. Thus, the genesis of my inspiration came after lightly reading the first part of a book I had gotten the summer before. The book was Howard N. Rabinowitz's *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890*, an “oldie but goodie” in the words of my thesis advisor, Dr. Mary S. Hoffschwelle. I was flipping through the pages and came across the fateful forty-first page. Towards the bottom it read: “Negro policemen were an even less familiar sight in Southern cities.”<sup>2</sup> I vividly remember stopping at the end of that sentence and saying out loud, “Wait. Hold

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<sup>2</sup> Harold N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1978), 41.

up. There were *black police officers* in the *South* during this time?” At that moment, I realized that all the history courses I had taken in my years of schooling it had never once been taught, or even hinted, that there was a presence of African American police officers in the South during its post-Civil War period. I kept in mind that this period was one of tremendous racism, discrimination, and racial segregation that only got worse and reached its zenith at the beginning of the Jim Crow era in the 1890s, an era that lasted until the landmark laws enacted during the Civil Rights Movement. So, therefore, the fact that there were black men on southern police forces was a momentous revelation to me. I returned to Rabinowitz's book, moved on, and on the following page came the inspiration for the title for my project: “In July 1868, under the headline “The Mongrel Regime!! Negro Police!!,” the Conservative *Daily Sentinel* announced the appointment of four Negroes [in Raleigh, North Carolina] and concluded “this is the beginning of the end.”<sup>3</sup> As clear as anything in this world, I remember saying to myself this topic would be “a pretty good idea for a thesis.” It was not long after that moment that I concluded that this was the topic for me and that “Mongrel Regime” would be the name for the project. I *had* to find out more about the presence of black officers in the South during this time period. I *had* to get to know who these individuals were and discover (and argue like the historian I wanted to become) what impact they had on postbellum southern society just by doing their job. Along with the previous work already done by scholars, I sought out many types of primary sources for my data. I found census records, city directories, newspapers, pictures, among many others, and dove in. This work will focus primary on black police officers in the Tennessee cities of Memphis, Knoxville, Chattanooga, and

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<sup>3</sup> Rabinowitz, *Race Relations*, 42.

Nashville. The data was in my backyard.

### **What I hope to accomplish**

One of the goals I hope to accomplish with this work is to contribute historical scholarship to an area that has received very little. This is an area that deserves far more gazes than my eyes could ever wander, more ink than my pen could ever spill across a page, and definitely more time than I could ever have writing an undergraduate thesis project. These black men, who because of my intimate research into their careers and lives have become “my guys,” have a story worthy of being told on paper by a southern historian and on screen by Ken Burns. I desire to become a humble vessel by which these men from the far-off plains of the past cross over the flowing historical deep and land ashore in the hearts and minds of the reader. I want to spread the word about them.

Over the course of my historical journey into this topic I guided my research by asking numerous important questions, but most crucially I kept three major research questions in mind that, in turn, captured all other questions. First, who were these black police officers? Second, how do these men fall into their place within the historical context of Reconstruction, New South, and Jim Crow eras in the South? Third, how (and who) could they police? By answering these three questions in this work, I hope to shed new light on the presence of southern African American policemen during a time of tremendous racial hostility and help to provide a much needed shade of black nuance to American police history. I hope to expand our understanding about race relations in the post-slavery South, by answering the looming question of how could blacks achieve this position of authority over whites in the community. I hope this work will help others

draw parallels and contrasts between the brief period of black integration into several important jobs across the South provided during and because of Reconstruction and the integration that came during the Civil Rights Movement. Additionally, I believe an attempt can be made to connect this topic to the problems of the present day. Scholarship in this area provides an important shade in the historical backdrop of the modern contentious relationship between police departments and black communities, especially in a discussion of the recent controversies in Ferguson, Missouri, New York, Baltimore, and other places across the nation. I hope the insights brought by this work and the future research of historians in this area can be added to the ongoing discussion that seems not to be going away anytime soon.

Finally, as for personal aspirations, I hope this thesis project has prepared me for not only work as a future graduate student, but also prepared me in becoming the historian I hope to be by allowing me to do the actual work historians do, even if on a smaller scale. This project introduced me to the grind of a historical researcher in ways that most papers in a semester's history class cannot do completely. It is my further goal to carry on this work on after this project with more extensive research in the future and craft it into published works in journals, then eventually a book (or two) like Dulaney's *Black Police*. Ultimately, in the far future I want to compile all research in this specific area into an encyclopedia of Reconstruction and Jim Crow era southern African American policemen. I want to make my own contributions to the discipline of history for historians, researchers, and future thesis students alike.

- Justin Farr (2/4/16)



## CHAPTER ONE

### *White World, Black Justice, and Unsung Heroes*

\* \* \*

The year was 1865. Flowers that had been imprisoned in the ground by frost were just beginning to blossom in the springtime air as the ink from General Robert E. Lee's pen was just starting to dry on terms of surrender papers. After years of brutal conflict, the Civil War had finally reached an end. Days and months later, formerly enslaved Negroes, now free black Americans, were looking down dirt roads and away from plantation houses and cotton fields across the South. They had heard the echoes of a proclamation that rang out months ago that had freed them. With their hearts enraptured by this call like a song from a black Siren, they started walking.

The heritage of these men, women, and children was one of shackles. Overseers had always loomed over them while they worked tirelessly amongst the crops that sustained an entire Southern economy; the endless rows of leaves and seeds appeared as prison bars. Enslaved blacks were kept from certain activities and privileges both because (in the view of most whites at the time) illiterate and subhuman Negroes who were docile and happy with the shackles of their oppression would not be able to handle them and because if they were given access to items of power, like guns, and felt the sense of authority given by them, only God knew what these “unreasoning creatures” would do with them.

Though American slavery had died an official death at Appomattox with the Confederacy, its ghost lingered long after. The white men and women who bore the legacy of the South's peculiar institution were still living, and they carried the same

sentiment of white condescension and fear into the dawning years of a “New” South. Consequently, the world that newly freed blacks were walking into had already been shaped by what they had just left behind. So, it might be expected that most, if not all, of the same activities and privileges denied to slaves would be kept off limits to blacks by a domineering white society as they continued to strip blacks of both authority and social autonomy.

Enter J.H. Roberts. It's now July 1868 in Charleston, South Carolina. The summer Carolina sun beams down from the sky and melts the air in a sweltering blaze of heat and humidity. Roberts recalls the days of his youth spent on days like this in the fields hunched over with his head toward the ground with his hands grasping at crops below. Now, this former slave is standing erect and proud in a freshly ironed uniform. Holstered at his waistband is a handgun. Pinned above his heart is a badge. Upon his lips are the words of the oath to protect and serve the *all* citizens of Charleston. Mr. Roberts has just entered into a line of work that “conferred status and authority” as one of the “conservators of the peace.”<sup>4</sup> He was not only a policeman but a *black*<sup>5</sup> policeman. In a time when just three years before he and millions more like him were the slaves of white men, Roberts now was not only a free black man but a free black man who held authority and social autonomy over practically every white person who did not have the same

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<sup>4</sup> John Oldfield. “On the Beat: Black Policemen in Charleston, 1869-1921 *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 102, no. 2 (April 2001): 155, accessed December 18, 2014, JSTOR.

<sup>5</sup> This thesis project's definition of “African American” police officers includes both “black” and “mulatto” under its umbrella. Chiefly, this is because, even though African Americans who fell under the historical classification of “mulatto” during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were of mixed African and European ancestry, they were still considered “black” by whites due to concepts such as the “one drop rule.” This work will predominately use “Negro,” “African American” and “black” when broadly referring to its subjects (post-Civil War southern African American police officers), and these terms will also include officers who on census records identified as mulatto.

official power he now possessed.

Whites raved. “Another step towards Negrodom,” they warned in a local newspaper.<sup>6</sup> “If a nigger policeman should attempt to arrest any of their party they would kill him,” they threatened.<sup>7</sup> However, as John Oldfield stated in his journal article “On The Beat: Black Policemen in Charleston, 1869-1921,” Roberts was assigned to the position of door and gate keeper and would be confined to the guardhouse. This perhaps assuaged some of the white fear in the city. Nevertheless, Roberts *was* a black policeman in a racially hostile South that, though it could no longer enslave blacks, tried its hardest to at the very least pin them down in the invisible chains of societal, political, economic, and class-based subjugation. Amazingly, Roberts, was not the first black appointee to a police force in the South during the postbellum years. As this work along with the work of the few historians who have done research in this area show, Roberts was also not the last African American police officer during this time. Roberts and other black and mulatto men were appointed officers of the law in a number of southern city police forces. The black officers who came after Roberts in Charleston and in other cities such as in New Orleans, Memphis, and Knoxville policed far more than just the guardhouse. Some, as in Charleston<sup>8</sup> and New Orleans,<sup>9</sup> policed both black and white areas and were allowed to arrest anyone who broke the law.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps shockingly, some black officers even won praise from whites who described them as “gallant and efficient,”<sup>11</sup> as in the case of Charleston officer James Fordham, who received “universal admiration” for “exud[ing] a

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 164

<sup>8</sup> Oldfield, “On the Beat,” 163.

<sup>9</sup> Vanessa Flores-Robert. “Black Policemen in Jim Crow New Orleans.” *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations* (December 17, 2011): 15, accessed June 14, 2015. JSTOR.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>11</sup> Oldfield, “On the Beat,” 158.



natural authority and a calmness under pressure.”<sup>12</sup> This type of position, this type of authority, this type of respect had been rare to any black man in the days of slavery. Now, fortune would attain for some of them a good measure of all three while being full officers of the law in the South. Blacks would have a presence on a significant number of southern city police departments during and after Reconstruction and into the New South and even the Jim Crow era. In some places, the presence of black officers on southern police forces even lasted into the early twentieth century. The broad focus of this work deals with the presence of African American police officers in the South during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

### **Black Police Officers in the South During the late 1800s and early 1900s**

As alluded to previously, there is not much scholarship that *directly* focuses on the presence of post-Civil War African American police officers appointed to Southern urban police forces during and after Reconstruction. This work stresses “directly” because, although some Southern historians have mentioned the presence of these black officers before, they have usually done so only in passing, even when a brief commentary on their presence is given. Only a small number of historians have devoted works that focus on these Southern black officers exclusively. Journal articles by scholars such as Oldfield, Vanessa Flores-Roberts, and Dennis C. Rousey have shed light on the postbellum African American police officers in the southern cities of Charleston, New Orleans, and Memphis. Additionally, W. Marvin Dulaney, with his extensive work, *Black Police in America*, has produced one of the few full-length books on the history of blacks in American law enforcement. He devotes two chapters to the appointment of southern

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 167

black police officers during the Reconstruction, New South, and Jim Crow eras. Nevertheless, research in this area on these men has generally been unexplored by historians. The limited scholarship that has been focused directly on these officers forms a small body of secondary sources that pull from each other as they draw from newspapers, police reports, census records and other primary resources. This work seeks to shed more much-needed light on this remarkable instance of integration of law enforcement agencies in the South *well before* the advent of the Civil Rights Movement and bring more attention to these tremendous and brave black men.

In *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890*, Howard N. Rabinowitz argues that the emergence of black police officers during Reconstruction was a “natural” coincidence to the rise of Republican rule in the same period. Whites saw the newly granted freedom of blacks as an encroachment upon white society, and thus the white policeman in southern cities was, as Rabinowitz points out, the “last defense against the freedmen.”<sup>13</sup> Crucial to his job, according to whites, was catching the Negro, who possessed an innate unruliness. White tempers were already on edge with Radical Republicans' apparent quest to enfranchise blacks and integrate them into a white man's society by gaining them more rights and privileges. The status quo of white male dominance was being challenged and was losing ground moment by moment in the South. To make matters worse, blacks had started to petition their state governments to appoint black men to police forces in southern cities, such as Atlanta<sup>14</sup> and New Orleans.<sup>15</sup> The absolute *last* thing that whites wanted was for blacks to have any measure of power over white citizens. Some cities rejected black encroachment upon their police forces when calls for integration first rang

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<sup>13</sup> Rabinowitz, *Race Relations*, 41.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> W. Marvin Dulaney, *Black Police in America*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 11.

out from black communities. Whites rejected a petition to appoint black officers in Atlanta in September of 1867. White opposition to these appointments “remained strong and subsequent efforts to place blacks in the [Atlanta] department also failed.”<sup>16</sup> The case in Atlanta, where there was a lack of Radical Republican presence, typifies the connection Rabinowitz draws between Republican political usurpation of southern cities and the hiring of black police officers, for cities that did come to hire blacks were usually controlled by Republicans, although there were some exceptions.

However, well before September of that year, the stronghold of white opposition in the South towards the appointment of black officers had already been breached. According to W. Marvin Dulaney in *Black Police in America*, earlier in 1867 on May 28, the black New Orleans newspaper, the *New Orleans Tribune*, triumphantly reported that “newly enfranchised citizen” Charles Courcelle had been appointed to the Board of Police Commissioners. Three days later the newspaper reported that Dusseau Picot and Emile Farrar, two other blacks, had been hired to the New Orleans police force. These men were among the first southern police officers in the South after the Civil War, as the tail-end of the 1860s saw the beginning of this remarkable form of integration stimulated by Reconstruction. The number the African American men on the South's urban police forces would grow in the next decade. Dulaney reports that “by the 1870s, African Americans were serving as police officers in Montgomery, Mobile, and Selma, Alabama; Vicksburg, Meridian, and Jackson, Mississippi; Jacksonville, Florida; Charleston, South Carolina; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Austin and Houston, Texas; and Washington, D.C.”<sup>17</sup> Blacks served on these and a number of other Southern police forces throughout the

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<sup>16</sup> Rabinowitz, *Race Relations*, 41.

<sup>17</sup> Dulaney, *Black Police*, 13.

1870s.

To explain the presence of black officers on urban police forces of the South, Dulaney agrees with Rabinowitz that “[i]n almost every case, black police officers were appointed by Republican administrations,” but then he adds “to protect African Americans from the endemic white violence and terrorism that characterized the Reconstruction era.”<sup>18</sup> Black men would continue to have a presence in the South's police departments in the 1880s as well; however this decade was marked by the decline of the prevalence of southern black officers that began with the end of Reconstruction in 1877. During the late 1870s and 1880s the number of black appointments started to dwindle as black men were either fired, retired, or simply not kept on when a police department was reorganized due to the drafting of a new city charter or the creation of a new police commission, especially as Democratic rule returned to southern cities during the South's so-called, “redemption.” Finally, the rise of Jim Crow in the 1890s choked out most of the remaining black men from law enforcement in the southern states, most evidently in the Deep South. However, as this work will demonstrate, there were a few exceptions to this rule, including cities that continued to employ black officers into the 1910s, and even a few that had them as late as the 1920s, and 1930s.

Two significant examples of African Americans being appointed to postbellum southern police forces were the aforementioned examples of New Orleans and Charleston. As stated before, Charles Courcelle, Dusseau Picot and Emile Farrar joined the New Orleans police force in May of 1867, making these three among the first southern police officers in the South after the Civil War. The next month brought more than a dozen more black men to the New Orleans' department, which included the highly

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

noteworthy case of Octave Rey, whom both Dulaney<sup>19</sup> and Vanessa Flores-Robert in her journal article, “Black Policemen in Jim Crow New Orleans,”<sup>20</sup> cite as becoming the first African American police captain in the nation's history in 1868. Admittedly, New Orleans had been a bit more culturally diverse and cosmopolitan than other southern cities over its history up to this point, as both aforementioned scholars point out. Flores-Robert was right to state that the city's black community nevertheless had to apply continual pressure upon the mayor to appoint black officers just like blacks had to do in any other southern city, Republican government or not.<sup>21</sup> The struggle of black communities to gain representation on the force framed the emergent presence of African American police officers that would take place over the last three decades of the 1800s and into the earliest reaches of the 1900s.

The same year brought more blows against white social dominance in the South by further appointments of southern black policemen. Montgomery, Alabama's police force had been integrated as blacks “won almost half the positions in the police department under a Radical [Republican] administration.”<sup>22</sup> Also, Raleigh, North Carolina, had appointed four black police officers, which in the minds of the city's whites spelled the “beginning of the end.” Turning back to Charleston, as mentioned at the earlier, ex-slave J.H. Roberts integrated the city's police department in July of 1868. Perhaps it began to feel like the end of white society was coming for South Carolina whites too, as the following year began a period of increasing black presence in the police department of Charleston. According to Oldfield, from 1869 to 1921, “approximately 150 blacks served

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<sup>19</sup> Dulaney, *Black Police*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Flores-Robert, “Black Policemen,” 10.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

<sup>22</sup> Rabinowitz, *Race Relations*, 42.

on Charleston's police force."<sup>23</sup> Most of the appointments of black officers to the Charleston force were made during the 1870s. This lines up with what went on in the rest of the South in regards to the hiring of black officers during the late nineteenth century.

Regarding the performance of black officers, Rabinowitz, Dulaney, Oldfield, and Flores-Robert all seem to corroborate each other in their evaluation of these men. All four historians describe these men as having done just as well on the job as whites did, or as Dulaney phrases it, "there was no significant difference between the performance of blacks and white officers."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, examples of specific officers who led exemplary careers on the force are given by all four scholars. Fine black officers like the aforementioned James Fordham of the Charleston police force, who won universal acclaim, and Octave Rey, who rose to the rank of captain, served the uniform with high esteem. Flores-Robert gives extensive information about three New Orleans black officers, Stephen Boyard, Louis J. Therence, and Joseph Thomer, who performed not only with excellence but also with intelligence, as they were required to be literate in a time of low literacy rates for blacks and maintain a deep "knowledge of civil law, city ordinances, and departmental regulations."<sup>25</sup> The men mentioned by Flores-Robert also were trusted to be responsible as their equipment included both a badge and firearm.<sup>26</sup> Henry Carroll, another black member of the Charleston police force, was described by a local newspaper as "efficient" and having a "good" record when he retired in 1915.<sup>27</sup> However, as Dulaney, Oldfield, and Flores-Robert remark, there were both good examples and bad examples of black officers just as one would find with their white

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<sup>23</sup> Oldfield, "On the Beat, 153.

<sup>24</sup> Dulaney, *Black Police*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Flores-Robert, "Black Policemen" 14.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Oldfield, "On the Beat," 166.

counterparts. Oldfield mentions two cases. In January 1874, George Shrewsbury of Charleston, who was Chief of Detectives, had a complaint of cruelty against a detainee brought against him by the detainee himself; he was dismissed and later restored to the force. In another case, a black man accused Sergeant James Robinson (also a Charleston policeman) and another officer with assault and battery; Robinson was found guilty and faced the punishment of either paying a \$5 fine or serving ten days of jail time.<sup>28</sup>

Dulaney, Oldfield, and Flores-Robert all help to paint a picture of the commonality among black and white officers. Both black and white policemen faced the same harsh conditions and dangers of police work. Both faced the same jeers, mistrust, and resistance of the community at times. Both had to meet the same requirements of knowledge of laws and ordinances and maintain professional and sober conduct even under tremendous pressure. Remarkably, Oldfield, who focuses on Charleston, Flores-Robert, who focuses on New Orleans, and Dulaney, who covers the whole South but mentions New Orleans, Charleston, and Mobile specifically, all agree that black officers on these forces and other cities achieved some level of what Dulaney exclaims was an “equality and mobility that they would not achieve anywhere in the nation until the 1960s!”<sup>29</sup> Flores-Robert puts it plainly about the New Orleans police department: “color was no barrier.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Dulaney, Oldfield, and Flores-Robert all mention that black officers in several cities patrolled both black *and* white areas and arrested *anyone* who broke the law regardless of color.

Oldfield, Dulaney, Flores-Robert, and Rabinowitz all reveal that the Reconstruction era saw the most hiring of black officers on southern police forces. As stated before, after

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>29</sup> Dulaney, *Black Police*, 17.

<sup>30</sup> Flores-Robert, “Black Policemen,” 10.

Republican rule in southern states had ended with Reconstruction, black policemen faced a hostile resurgence of Democrats pining to “redeem” the South from the ravages wrought by the Radical Republicans and the “Negro rule” they had brought. The return of Democratic political dominance began the process of shedding blacks from police departments throughout the South, and the 1880s saw a significant decline in the number of blacks in southern law enforcement. For Charleston, Oldfield cites political, racial, and ethnic prejudices, as even Irish American officers were targeted for dismissal.<sup>31</sup>

Fortunately, black police officers did not vanish all at once during this time, even with the increasing pressures of the Democrats and Jim Crow. As stated before, in some places blacks lasted on police forces through and even past the 1890s. Dulaney states that New Orleans police officers Therence and Tholmer, mentioned above, died in service in 1909 and their deaths “closed an era for black police in the South.” Dulaney goes on to say that by 1910 African American police officers “had literally disappeared from southern police forces.”<sup>32</sup>

However, Dulaney was a little short-sighted about the last policemen of both New Orleans and the South. At the very beginning of her work Flores-Robert corrects Dulaney by simply quoting a headline from the May 15, 1913 edition of the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* that read “Police Board: Corporal Boyard [Stephen Boyard, as mentioned above] Retired.”<sup>33</sup> Additionally, Boyard is truly worth noting down because, since he was a corporal to whom other officers had to report, Flores-Robert infers that “it is feasible that Boyard had white officers as part of his squad, therefore going against the very

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<sup>31</sup> Oldfield, “On the Beat,” 161.

<sup>32</sup> Dulaney, *Black Police*, 17.

<sup>33</sup> Flores-Robert, “Black Policemen,” 1.



principle of Jim Crow.”<sup>34</sup> Boyard served the longest in New Orleans before his retirement, so his death actually closed the early era of black police officers in the South, *but* only in New Orleans. Oldfield also goes a step further than Dulaney by giving the case of Officer Henry Carroll, who left the Charleston police force in 1915.<sup>35</sup> The title of Oldfield's essay gives the impression that one could find other cases of black police officers in Charleston going all the way up to 1921. On, another note, none of the scholars who have been discussed so far talk extensively about one particular state that had a significant history of postbellum black police officers in its cities. This is a state which not only had the typical southern pattern for black police officers play out in its urban centers, but it also had an incredibly rare instance of *continual* black hires of policemen during the early twentieth century in one of its city that saw some of the longest careers of black officers seen in the South during this time.

### **Tennessee's Reconstruction and Jim Crow Era Black Policemen**

Enter William Cook. November 18, 1867. It is Fall. The trees have begun to surrender their leaves in this, the Appomattox of seasons. The wind moves cooled air freely throughout the Memphis sky. Men are huddled in the police station where Cook, a Negro, stands before the white chief of police. Several months ago he read in the newspaper about the strangest thing. In May he saw something about how in New Orleans a black man became a police officer. Then, some days later, he read about how in the same city two more blacks were hired to the same force. May eventually passed away and summer spent its days bringing the Tennessee heat, but Cook kept this wonderfully strange

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>35</sup> Oldfield, “On the Beat,” 166.

occurrence in his mind the whole time. Then in September he picked up the paper again and saw how in Atlanta blacks had been trying to make the same thing happen in their city that had happened in the bayou. It was getting closer. Now, Cook had gotten in his head the strangest idea. Maybe *he* could become one these *Negro* officers in Memphis. He was not the only one who had this strange idea. Now, Cook stands alongside another black man named John F. Harris and is ready to be sworn in to serve and protect.

Enter Earnest E. Scruggs. It's 1959. He sits at home in his living room recalling the years long gone by. He has had a long career as an officer on the Knoxville Police Department that started nearly years ago in 1920.

*Forty years* as a black police officer in the *South*, Scruggs stresses in his mind.

He has read the newspapers, he knows about the marches and the protests, and he has heard the speeches of a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, who has been rising in prominence as each day goes by. He knows about the fight for the rights of his people that seems to be spreading like wildfire. Yet, he still cannot get it straight in his mind how one black man, much less several, could have survived on a southern force for this long. Even more, he wonders how a southern black man in his line of work could have survived, period, in the South. The images of his lynched brethren still haunt his mind.

He turns his head up and stares at the ceiling, up at God. Surely it was Providence, he guesses as he wonders if ol' Thomas Nowlin who had retired about six years earlier, another black cop, had the answer. Maybe Wilburn Lyons or Frank Robinson or any of the other black officers he had known over the years that had come and gone knew the answer. All those black men, *on the police force*. Knoxville was different.

Enter Larken Fralix. It's mid-March, 1883. His mind is troubled. Around the

Chattanooga police station there is a buzz about the new city charter that is about to be passed. He has heard rumors about what it might mean for those on the force - the black men on the force, at least. He is worried. He might be out of a job soon. He has already put in about a year of service for the growing city. It has not been easy, but he is proud. Now, with a few dashes of a wet ink it could all be over for him and the other blacks on the force. He is scared.

Enter John Coleman. It's October 1875. Nashville. He is confused, but not complaining. Scratching his head, but not sitting on this good opportunity. What brought Mayor Thomas A. Kercheval to make this decision? Coleman has been hired as one of the mayor's "special detectives" for the city, whatever that means. He and another black man make up this new band of colored detectives. The other, Washington Withers, apparently has been already been in this kind of work. He drew a pistol on two blacks who resisted arrest the year before. The formal police force failed to see that Withers was in the right for using a deadly weapon to apprehend some suspects and fined him a sizable \$20 dollars for the incident. Well, they must have liked some of his other work because he's about to be brought in by the mayor himself for this special duty. A bit of smirk perks up Coleman's lips. Why a white man would give a gun to a black man in peacetime was beyond his thinking. But, again, he was not complaining.

Now open the floodgates. Enter Townsend D. Jackson, enter James Mason, enter William A. Richardson, and Charles Wilson. Enter John Singleton, enter Rufus Smith, and do not forget Moses Plummer. A litany could be further chanted of more of these men, these pioneers, these black policemen. And these are not names of black officers taken from across cities in the postbellum South. These are all names of black Tennessee

lawmen from the cities of Memphis, Knoxville, Chattanooga, and Nashville who had careers protecting and serving the citizens under their watch in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

### **The Purpose of This Work**

This work has four objectives. (1) The broad focus surveys the presence of African American police officers in the South during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in order to (2) shed light on this remarkable instance of integration of law enforcement agencies in the South before the advent of the Civil Rights Movement, bringing more attention to black men about whom scholars, for the most part, have failed to write about to any great extent. (3) Even though the typical pattern for these black officers seems to be that most were hired during Reconstruction and by the 1890s their numbers had been substantially depleted, this work seeks to demonstrate that there were exceptions to this rule, including some cities that continued to have black officers in their police departments during the early decades of the twentieth century. Finally, (4) this work seeks to tell about one state in particular that had a significant history of postbellum black police officers that cannot be ignored because although it had the typical southern pattern for black police officers take place, it also had the rare instance of one city which had continual hiring of black policemen (with some of the longest careers of postbellum Southern police officers) into the early twentieth century. Now, these four objectives come together. The central purpose of this undergraduate thesis project for the Honors College at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) is to perform the above four objectives concerning the state of Tennessee after the Civil War with a focus on the four

cities of Memphis, Knoxville, Chattanooga, and Nashville, with Knoxville being the exceptional case of continuous black policemen.

Immediately, numerous questions rightfully should come to mind. When did these cities first hire black policemen? How long did they stay on the force? Why did these forces hire them and what drove them to the decision to hire African American officers during a time of rampant racial prejudice and inequality? Are these instances similar to New Orleans where black officers encountered a more racial harmonious environment in the heart of a hostile South? Do these cities contain more instances of black officers who were not only armed and policed colored offenders but also policed white offenders? What can the presence of black police officers tell us about race relations in the South during this time? What could the presence of these men tell us about American police history? What can be learned about police and community relations in selected cities with black officers (and the South) during this time?

In addition to answering the broad questions above, this thesis project will also focus on the individual stories of these officers and see how they dealt with being black on a police force charged with protecting and serving a community that was hostile to themselves. This work will consider what personal triumphs and failures they might have had and show the reader how these men rose to the challenge and performed on the force. How many of them were ex-slaves? To what extent did blacks on the force try to form a bond with each other? Did any of these black officers lead exceptional or trying careers on the force? What drove these men?

This work seeks to stitch together a historical narrative involving Tennessee's postbellum and Jim Crow era black police of the four selected cities. This work seeks to

piece together a story of these men and their experiences during their time, and add to the story of black officers, about whom historians have seldom sought to tell. *Black* officers potentially policing *white* offenders during a time of white societal dominance and terrible racial conditions is a story truly worth telling. Black men getting on white forces during Reconstruction is obviously an instance of integration in the American South that was almost completely unheard of for the time. Integration would come again to southern society later in the 1940s, and 1950s. However, the first instances of integration that is seen in Reconstruction, not only with police forces but also with other sectors of civil life along with Southern *society* itself coming out of slavery, is a bit more ground-shaking because there was no Civil Rights Movement for blacks at this time. Advocacy existed for the newly enfranchised African American community, but the inner debate within the black community itself concerning societal and cultural integration versus exclusion, the overall weakness of the black community caused by proceeding generations of slavery and its effects, the fact that black social institutions were not strong enough yet, and the often scattered nature of the advocacy itself all meant that no sustained and powerful social movement for the attaining of complete civil rights for blacks could not rise yet from the ashes. Nevertheless, some parallels between both times of integration can be made, and this work will discuss them later.

So far in this introduction, the presence of African American police officers in the South and in Tennessee, for the most part, has only been brought up, but what *about* these men? What is this purpose of this work discussing them? What is the argument? How does this project account for total explanation for how these African American police

officers come to be in the South and in Tennessee during their time and place? Why do they matter?

When looking at the presence of African American police officers on urban police departments in the South during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly in the four Tennessee cities Memphis, Knoxville, Chattanooga and Nashville, a number of historical aspects come into play as far as the explanation of why these black officers come in at all in the postbellum South. Reconstruction and its politics of in combination with both white and black political maneuvering play a huge role. . Tennessee's historical geographical, cultural, and social dynamics also have a part as well. Furthermore the reasons black police officer emerge in Tennessee are:

1. The historical geographical, cultural, and social dynamics of Tennessee helped to produce the historical political dynamics seen throughout the nineteenth century: Democratic west and middle Tennessee versus Republican South)
3. The flexible nature created by the historical political dynamics that existed in the nineteenth which to bled into and help characterize into the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction Tennessean political landscape)

Finally, the reasons they emerged in the individual cities of Memphis, Knoxville, Chattanooga, and Nashville are as follows in list form:

### Memphis

Timeline of African American policemen in Memphis: 1867-1895; 1919

1. Racial unrest in the late 1860s
2. Yellow Fever epidemic of 1870s, which disproportionately effected whites to blacks and killed off many white policemen creating a great need for officers to fill the ranks
3. Political maneuvering of both whites and blacks in response to racial and biological conflict to the city, which created desperation among officials in their need for civil tensions to go down and the streets to be policed.
4. Political maneuvering of powerful black leader Robert Church, Jr. and the desire for white leaders to get black votes.

### Knoxville

Timeline of African American policemen in Knoxville: 1870 – onward continual hiring

1. Reconstruction politics in Knoxville
2. Historical and political dynamics in Tennessee
  - The above helped to produce the historical political dynamics seen throughout the nineteenth century: Democratic west and middle Tennessee versus Republican east
  - The flexible nature created by the historical political dynamics that existed in the early and mid-nineteenth to bled into late half of the century and help characterize into the made it more receptive to Reconstruction politics which allowed for the emergence of southern black policemen.
3. Reconstruction era was a lawless and rebuilding period for Knoxville, which was a growing small town. City needed help policing the streets and drew from black pool of men.

### Chattanooga



Timeline of African American policemen in Chattanooga: at least 1880-1883

1. Reconstruction politics in Chattanooga
2. Reconstruction era was a lawless and rebuilding period for Chattanooga, which was a growing small town. City needed help policing the streets and drew from black pool of men

### Nashville

Timeline of African American detectives in Nashville

1. Reconstruction politics in Nashville
2. Republican mayor of Nashville Thomas A. Kercheval

The structure for the rest of this work is as follows. The subject of the next four chapters will be the four cities of Memphis, Knoxville, Chattanooga, and Nashville, respectively, and the presence and early story of African American police offices within each. In each chapter, this thesis project will seek to accomplish primarily two objectives. First, each city's histories of postbellum black policemen from 1867, the earliest any of these cities have them, to around 1930. This thesis chose to stop around 1930 because even though the exceptional case of Knoxville has some black officers on the force well after 1930, all the other cities end before that year. As stated before, this work desires only to cover till the early twentieth century. The second primary objective is that after guiding the reader through the history of the general presence of these black officers, then the reader will be brought into the world and perspective of these black officers. A story of the more intimate dynamics of the careers, demographics, and lives will be told. In all the limited scholarship that covers primarily with black officers in the South during this

time, Flores-Robert seems to be the only historian who comes close to at an attempt at depicting the more inner nature of their careers and lives. Instead of only telling the history of these men as incidental *figures* within a larger historical backdrop, this work desires to also tell the story of these officers as men, human lives; black lives; relatable lives that *mattered*. These are lives who have been worth every ounce of ink spent over them just because they were ordinary men who did their jobs.

All across the South, black men who bore the fortune of bearing the badge upon their breast during this time were no doubt slurred against doubly more and thrice more despised by whites than rest of their colored brethren. One of the slurs they were branded with in Raleigh, North Carolina by a newspaper when four African American were appointed to their city's police force in July of 1868 was "The Mongrel Regime!! Negro Police!!"<sup>36</sup> This work is a history of heroes unsung, pioneers not celebrated, and stories seldom told. These were Tennessee's own "Mongrel Regime," men beyond their time.

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<sup>36</sup> Harold N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890*. (New York, Oxford University Press, 1978) 41.



## CHAPTER TWO

*“I worked in fine cooperation with the white officers who were my friends.”*

*The Early History of Memphis's African American Police Officers*

\* \* \*

1919 Memphis. Matthew Thornton and Will “Sweetie” Williams, two African American detectives, are standing on North Front Street. A few cars stream by as a stream of nameless faces trickle across the sidewalk. They stand in front of a known black gambling spot ran by a white boss of Memphis's underworld, Jim Kinnane. *Our perp has gotta be in here.* They had been tipped off that a criminal wanted by the law was hiding out in this neighborhood sin-den. Thornton and Williams welcome themselves into the gambling hall and bring their un-welcomed police attention along with them. The heat is on as both detectives search the place for their wanted man, as cigarette smoke billows and the tang of alcohol hangs in the air of the crowded sanctuary that loose cash built. They kill the buzz. Patrons are walking their money out the door. The white underworld boss gets enraged. He threatens to kill both the detectives if they ever came snooping around his place again.

The following night these same two black detectives were standing at the corner of Main and Market when a gang of white men attacked and beat them with clubs and brickbats. Williams fired a shot and wounded one of the men. Both detectives Thornton and Williams made it out with their lives. However, both men were fired the next morning from policing Memphis's streets.

The above was a true story containing an actual set of incidents that transpired in

Memphis in 1919.<sup>37</sup> Detectives Matthew Thornton and Will “Sweetie” Williams, along with another detective, F. M. Mercer were the only black men on the force during this time.<sup>38</sup> There would not be another African American helping to police Memphis for nearly thirty years till 1948. However, these men were not the first. Their appointments in 1919 made by Mayor Frank Monteverde, though surely also due to some black political maneuvering, was the first time since 1895 that blacks served alongside whites to police Memphis against crime. The 1919 black detectives’ tenures were brief, only serving months on the job, but their presence marked the third separate instance of integration in Memphis law enforcement that had happened after the Civil War in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Memphis. There may have been only three black lawmen in the city in 1919 that lasted for a short time; however, the tale of Thornton, Williams, and Mercer is anything but the typical story of the early history black policemen in Memphis. At one point in the late 1870s and early 1880s, the number of black officers on the force rose to the double digits, and the length of individual careers ranged from two to seventeen years of service. Overall, a sizable total number of African American policemen served the city after the Civil War until till 1919.

A brief overview of timeline of black appointments is as followed. The very first black officers the department hired on November 18, 1867. Their names were William Cook and John F. Harris, and they served for two years as “turnkeys at the two district

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<sup>37</sup> *Tennessee Lawman: History of the Men and Women Behind the Badge* (2006) by Eddie M. Ashmore, *Beale Street: Where the Blues Began* (1934) by George W. Beale, and *Crusades for Freedom: Memphis and the Political Transformation of the American South* by G. Wayne Dowdy all tell the full story of this incident. One version adds detail other do not have, and one contradicts another in some minor details, but they all have this in common: the role of political maneuvering (between Robert Church, Jr. and Mayor Frank Monteverde) that got these black detectives hired.

<sup>38</sup> In Ashmore’s account, F.M. Mercer gets dismissed, but in Beale’s account Mercer dies sometime before the other two are dismissed. In Dowdy’s account the third officer is named George Isles, instead of F. M. Mercer.

offices.”<sup>39</sup> A year later Memphis's first black detective was hired. In February 1878 the department hired Rufus H. McCain and remarked that [t]he experience with Policeman McCain was so satisfactory that when white officers were lost to the disease [the 1878 yellow fever epidemic], the number of black policemen were increased to a level proportionate with the black population of the city.”<sup>40</sup> Later in August of the same year fourteen other black police officers were hired by the department. A good number of these officers left the force within a year. From these there were five men, whom this work dubs “The Memphis 5,” who all lasted for over at least 10 years or more at the department.<sup>41</sup> The names of the five patrolmen were Townsend D. Jackson, Burrell Randolph, Moses Plummer, Howard Chastaine, and Dallas Lee. Between 1879 and 1889, eight more black officers were hired. After Officer Lee retired from the force in 1895, there is no record of any more black officers being appointed until 1919, when Detectives Thornton, Williams, and Mercer were hired by Mayor Monteverde. With their discharge from the department mere months into the job, their brief careers in law enforcement shut the door again to African Americans on the Memphis Police Department, and that it would remained closed until 1948.

There is the question of how do African American policemen emerge as policemen in Memphis during the late nineteenth century and briefly again in the early twentieth century. The emergence of black officers of the law in Memphis is due to three main causes:

1. Reconstruction politics in Memphis;

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<sup>39</sup> “Memphis PD History Timeline,” Memphis City Police Department, accessed September 4, 2015. <http://www.memphispolice.org/history.asp>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

2. Yellow fever epidemics of 1870s; and
3. Political maneuvering of both whites and blacks

This work divides the coming of black policemen in Memphis into three separate instances. The first instance is the very first appointments that were made in 1867 and the hiring of the city's first black detectives in 1868. The second instance is the hires that were made during the 1870s and 1880s. Last, the third instance is the 1919 detective hires.

From 1867 to 1895, which includes the first and second instances of black integration, the hiring of black officers by the Memphis police force during this time can be summed up as ones made because of the effects of two major conflicts and the need for black men to be appointed to the force. The police department dealt with the large racial conflict between blacks and whites that led to a deadly riot just one year after the Civil War. Then the police department also had to deal with an even more disruptive and deadly conflict during the next decade. The biological conflict between humans and the yellow fever disease during the 1870s in Memphis worked to deplete a large portion of the city's population. However, as to be discussed later in this chapter, the three separate yellow fever epidemics that hit Memphis during the 1870s disproportionately affected whites over blacks, which led to two types of mass exoduses of whites from the city: either a physical fleeing to another town or a spiritual escape to another world beyond the grave of the sick bed. The police force was marred by death from the disease creating a dearth of lawmen to serve and protect the city ravaged by an unseen enemy. Therefore, these two conflicts created the necessity within the police department for new officers that opened the door for blacks to be appointment. This necessity was one of two kinds that

led to integration: (1) the necessity to calm racial tensions in the late 1860s by adding black policemen and (2) the necessity to draw from the black male population to replace some of the positions on the police force left vacant because whites succumbing heavily to yellow fever and the looming legacy that the disease had on the force going into the 1880s. However, there was one thing needed to in order to provide the needed one last push for black appointment to become a reality. Both elements of conflict and necessity created the situation in which political maneuverings between blacks and whites that included the exchange for integration of the police department for black votes.

The third instance of black appointments to the police force, the 1919 detective additions was a bit less complicated than the other two instances and was occurred with far less conflict from either man or germ. The 1919 appointments to the police force were due to primarily political maneuverings on the behalf of blacks and whites as well. Dealings between the mayor of Memphis, Frank Monteverde, and very influential black leader Robert Church, Jr. included the appointment of black officers in exchange for prized African American political support.

### **Late 1860s – First Instance of Police Integration in Memphis**

The story of Memphis's African American police officers officially begins in 1867. After the deadly race riot that rocked the city one year after the Civil War, and the need for the return of law and order was paramount. Governor William Brownlow passed the Metropolitan Police Bill of 1866 and its effects fell upon three cities in the state: Nashville, Chattanooga, and Memphis. According to the May 12, 1866 edition of *The Bolivar Bulletin*, the bill removed “the entire police control of the above cities out of the



hands of the municipal authorities and vest it in commissioners to be appointed by the Governor.” “Room for the radicals – room for the thieves,” the newspaper scoffed.<sup>42</sup> The bill helped to create the “Metropolitan Police District of the County of Shelby,” which policed Memphis. Since this policing force was established in major part because of Governor Brownlow, this agency, which grew to 140 men, was dubbed “Brownlow's Band” by the public.<sup>43</sup> They were also called the “Metropolitans” because of the official name of the district under their jurisdiction. This Metropolitan era of Memphis police would last until 1870, and it would be under thus era that in 1867 the first black police officers would make their appearance. On November 17 William Cook and John F. Harris were hired to the force.<sup>44</sup>

These hires took place a mere *two years* after the Civil War. Memphis was not the only southern city to hire black police officers within the dawning years after of a postbellum re-United States of America. New Orleans (as mentioned in chapter one), Selma, and Mobile all appointed blacks to their forces in the same year as Memphis.<sup>45</sup> A year later in 1868, Montgomery, Raleigh, and Charleston would hire blacks to serve as policemen too. Now, of course in a good number, if not most, of the cities that had African American policemen restricted the extent to which they could actually police. However, this development in the South is astonishing when take one takes into account the fact that these men were considered property of other men only a mere handful of years before. Even if most of these men were regulated to only policing the predominantly black areas

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<sup>42</sup> *The Bolivar Bulletin*, May 12, 1866, <http://tngenweb.org/histnews/metropolitan-police-bill-passed-1866/>

<sup>43</sup> Eddie M. Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman: History of the Men and Women Behind the Badge* (Nashville: Turner Publishing Company, 2006) 281.

<sup>44</sup> Memphis City Police Department, “Memphis PD History Timeline.”

<sup>45</sup> Dulaney, *Black Police*, 116

of the town, the fact that they were able to police at all is quite notable. Even though the need for policing signifies that there that there is some amount of disorder within a community, the mere fact that there is policing also signifies that there is an order, a collection of human persons who are citizens of a community, that could become disordered in the first place. Thus, policing is marker for humanity even though most whites still considered blacks to be lower than themselves. This is *big*. In barely a fraction of a lifetime, blacks went from being considered sub-human property with little-to-no autonomy, to being able to become human persons that could police themselves in their own communities within a small portion of a larger civilized order of citizens. This is not say that all southern whites began to recognize the full personhood and citizenship of their African American neighbors (and policeman). Although, there would still need be a tremendous amount of additional rights to be recognized and “granted” over the course of many decades to fully turn African Americans from being un-enfranchised citizens to being franchised citizens, blacks being police officers after the Civil War and into the latter half of the nineteenth century is a highly significant development that deserves further study and historical analysis. Not to mention that blacks in some cities such as New Orleans and Charleston *were* allowed to patrol both black and white areas and arrest both black and white offenders, as discussed earlier in this work. This is *even bigger*.

Officers William Cook and John F. Harris served for two years as “turnkeys at the two district offices.”<sup>46</sup> “Turnkeys” were officers was in charge of the prison keys, in other words, there were jailers. Thus, since they were jailers at the two district stations, Cook and Harris were most likely restricted to the station offices and did not spend much time walking a beat over the course of their two years on the job. As of yet, there is not much

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<sup>46</sup> Memphis City Police Department, “Memphis PD History Timeline.”

more information that can be found on these two men apart from what was told about their brief term as turnkeys by the police history given by the Memphis Police Department itself, and so this work leaves the further investigation of these two black officers open. The only other support from primary sources that this thesis project for their police careers is the 1869 and 1870 Memphis city directories that lists Cook as a “(col'd) turnkey.”<sup>47</sup> The 1869 directory lists him as serving as turnkey at the second district station before he was moved to the first district station, according to the 1870 directory. He lived at “Causey, bet[ween] Beale and Linden” over the course of his two year career.<sup>48</sup> In both directories Cook is listed a few names above a fellow policeman, Fritz Cooker, safely assumed to be white because of the lack of an indication for “colored,” which the city directories from which this work draws from prove to be very consistent when it comes to the black citizens.

As for Harris, neither he nor any other black person named “John F. Harris” show up in the 1869 directory along with Cook, but there is a “John F. Harris” who is “(col'd)” that does appear and is the only one listed in the 1870 directory.<sup>49</sup> However, this person is listed as a lawyer living at “DeSoto” street. City directories typically listed information that was gathered the previous year from the year it was published. Therefore, a city directory dated for 1870 likely listed 1869 data. What this means is that the “John F. Harris” listed for 1870 *could* in fact be the same Harris that had been a turnkey police officer, but he switched careers some time in 1869. Another clue is the introductory page in the 1870 city directory is dated January 1, 1870 as it commences the directory for the published

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<sup>47</sup> 1868[1869]-1870 Memphis City Directories, *Ancestry .com*  
The “1868” Memphis City Directory on Ancestry.com is actually the 1869 directory.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> 1868 [1869-1870] Memphis City Directories, *Ancestry .com*

year. However, there does not appear to be any other substantial evidence for this career change for this particular person. It is hard to find further definite information on these two men. They do not appear to show up in the couple of Memphis directories immediately afterwards, which would have been a few years after their police career. This should not be surprising since there are particular editions of city directories in which some of the other black officers that will be discussed later in this work fail to show up before appearing again the following year. Sometimes it is also the case where the person is listed but the occupation is not. Furthermore, it is also difficult to find these two men in the 1870 U.S. census records because their names are common and they might have changed careers before being counted.

Around the same time in the late 1860s, though it is not known exactly when, there were two other black appointments made to law enforcement in Memphis. Eddie M. Ashmore in his tremendously extensive *Tennessee Lawman: History of the Men and Women Behind the Badge* briefly mentions that Samuel J. Ireland and George S. Hayden were “Memphis's first black detectives.”<sup>50</sup> Ashmore does not give the year in which these two men were hired or left the force, he does, however, mention these men while is he still discussing the Metropolitan era of the Memphis Police Department. So, Detectives Ireland and Hayden had to have been hired between 1866 and 1869. More clarification on the years of these men's careers is given by the city directories. Between the 1866 and 1876 Memphis city directories (omitting 1868, 1873 and 1875 because this work access to these editions appear not to be available)<sup>51</sup> Ireland is only found in two of them, 1869

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<sup>50</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 284-285.

<sup>51</sup> They are not available as of yet on Ancestry.com

and 1870.<sup>52</sup> Only in the 1869 directory is he listed as a member of law enforcement. In that edition he is listed as “detective police” without his address or indication that he was colored.<sup>53</sup> In the 1870 directory he is again listed but this time his address, “102 Linden” is given.<sup>54</sup> His race is still not listed. Ireland then disappears from directories. As stated before, city directories typically lists the previous year’s data instead of the published year. Therefore, an educated guess can be made that he might have been hired sometime in 1868 or even 1867 with Officers Cook and Harris. Since he is not listed as a detective for the 1870 directory and the succeeding directories do not list him anymore after this point he might have been off the force by 1870. This work could not find him in the 1870 census, either.

George S. Hayden is a different story, however. Hayden can be found in the 1869-1872 Memphis city directories, and he also appears in the 1870 census. There is a small conflict between some of these primary sources and Ashmore in regards to Hayden's position. Ashmore states that Hayden was a detective; however, the 1870 directory is the only one that lists him as a detective with the metropolitan force. The 1869 and 1871 directories along with the 1870 census say that he is a constable. Since constable and detective are two different positions in law enforcement, of course Hayden could have started off as a constable, became a detective, and ended his police career as a constable again. In the 1872 directory he is listed as a laborer, and does not appear in the succeeding directories.<sup>55</sup> According to the 1870 census, during his time as an officer Hayden was married, and raising two young girls, ages five and four. He considered

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<sup>52</sup> 1866[1869]-1876 Memphis City Directories, *Ancestry .com*

<sup>53</sup> 1868 [1869] Memphis City Directory, *Ancestry .com*

<sup>54</sup> 1870 Memphis City Directory, *Ancestry .com*

<sup>55</sup> 1872 Memphis City Directory, *Ancestry .com*

himself mulatto.<sup>56</sup>

These three men hired in the late 1860s during the Metropolitan era of the Memphis Police Department make up what this work considers the city's first instance of police integration. These black officers worked a dangerous job during a dangerous era for policemen. Ashmore depicts this era as replete with instances where officers regularly found themselves in shootouts with criminals who were often armed. It was not uncommon for officers to be shot, wounded, or killed. Ashmore reports that, these types of incidents “were consistent with the state of lawlessness throughout the South following the war.” He goes on to say that “lack of respect for authority was pervasive. . .” as officers often faced sketchy and desperate characters on the job, and “the more desperate the character, the more deadly the situation was for the police.”<sup>57</sup> However, it would be a mistake to cast Memphis lawmen as spotless knights of justice during this era. Ashmore quotes reports that the Metropolitan force was “a law unto themselves, and a terror to the helpless citizen in dark reconstruction days,” who “frequently hauled innocent citizens before ignorant magistrates on ridiculous.”<sup>58</sup> The Metropolitan force often faced resistance from the city and county authorities, and their duty was impeded on a number of occasions by suits and other legal actions. These obstacles made the job of a police officer tremendously difficult, indeed, but, there is no doubt that Memphis's early black lawmen had to deal with that very same amount of difficulty times two because of the color of their skin. Fortunately, the Metropolitan Police Act was repealed in 1869 and police leadership and policy returned to the city government's hands in January of 1870.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> 1870 U.S. Census, *Ancestry.com*

<sup>57</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 283.

<sup>58</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 281.

<sup>59</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 285.

### **1870s-1880s – Second Instance of Police Integration in Memphis**

The year after the first major outbreak of yellow fever in 1873, Memphis law enforcement saw integration once more and ushered in its second instance of black officers. Though, his name is misspelled in the 1874 Memphis city directory as Rufus “McCann” when he is listed with the other officers in the “Police Department” subsection of the “City and County Record” part of the directory, Rufus H. McCain began his police career as a turnkey for the district two station at Causey street.<sup>60</sup> Then McCain switched to being a constable sometime over the next couple of years, which he remained as such for at least two years.<sup>61</sup> Sometime in 1876 or 1877, McCain becomes what the 1878 and 1879 city directories lists as a “master South Market.”<sup>62</sup> Neither of the only two secondary sources that give evidence for McCain's career, as law officer, the Memphis Police Department’s website and Ashmore’s *Tennessee Lawman*, tell about his time as a turnkey and constable during the mid-1870s. They overlooked his early police career as evidenced by the city directories and begin when perhaps he began to be on the regular patrolmen force in 1878. Furthermore, the year 1878 was tremendously significant in the history of Memphis black policemen, and because it was the year of the second outbreak of yellow fever, the worst of the three.

The Memphis Police Department's website and Ashmore's *Tennessee Lawman* are the only sources this work knows of that mention Officer Rufus H. McCain's apparent February 1878 appointment to the force. Both sources remark virtually word-for-word

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<sup>60</sup> 1874 Memphis City Directory, *Ancestry .com*

<sup>61</sup> 1876-1877 Memphis City Directories, *Ancestry .com*

<sup>62</sup> 1878-1879 Memphis City Directory, *Ancestry .com*

that “the experience with Policeman McCain was so satisfactory that when white officers were lost to the disease [the 1878 yellow fever epidemic], the number of black policemen were increased to a level proportionate with the black population of the city.”<sup>63</sup> Later in August of 1878 the department hired fourteen other black police officers. Both the positive reception of Officer McCain by an overwhelming white police force and the move by the city government and the police department to increase the number of police officers on the force, were extremely unprecedented during this time for just about anywhere in the South.

First, give thought to McCain's reception by whites as an officer of the law. Just over fourteen years earlier, most southern whites would have been seen as a slave, someone's property and a mere tool used to till the land and gather up cash crops. Even if he were a free black person during the days of slavery, he would have still been seen as an unequal, degraded, and lesser form of a human, perhaps even a potential slave if he ever found himself on the wrong side of the “Reverse Underground Railroad.”<sup>64</sup> He and millions of blacks were stripped of their humanity and fell under the chains of white racial dominance. However, in 1878 the bottom rail was now on top. McCain was now counted as a citizen by virtue of his humanity's nativity upon American soil; even though most southern whites did everything in their power restrict the rights of that citizenship through continued white social dominance. Additionally, McCain was not only a black citizen, but a black policeman, and as a black policeman McCain wielded authority that most men, black or white, did not have. However, most of all, he was black man who

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<sup>63</sup> Memphis City Police Department, “Memphis PD History Timeline.”  
Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 287.

<sup>64</sup> “The ‘Reverse Underground Railroad’ is the term used for the pre-American Civil War practice of kidnapping free blacks from free states and transporting them into the slave states for sale as slaves.”(Wikipedia) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reverse\\_Underground\\_Railroad](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reverse_Underground_Railroad)



received white praise for his job as a black policeman, a member of the so-called “mongrel regime.”

Second, fourteen black officers were hired to the force in August of 1878. During Reconstruction the politics of the Radical Republicans and their dominance in the postbellum South allotted for black integration in a limited number of political, economic, and social avenues. Some of positions blacks attained during this time were unheard of in the times of slavery. Two examples include black participation in South to elected political office and policemen, two solid and oftentimes harsh manifestations of white racial and social power. Senator Hiram Revels from Mississippi, the first African American to serve in Congress, had his day and so did the black men who served as city policemen in the South during Reconstruction. However, these types of appointments were few-and-far-between for the most part in the South. This is why a southern police force hiring fourteen black officers was so unprecedented for its time. Furthermore, this took place in 1878, a year after Reconstruction came to an end and Democratic rule returned to the South. For Memphis in the 1870s ravaged by yellow fever this mass hiring of blacks signaled two things. First, it signified desperation on the police department’s part for men to police the city because many of their white officers had died because of yellow fever and they could not replace those officer with other white men because of the yellow fever’s disproportionate effect on whites over blacks. Second, it also signaled political maneuvering, for blacks were calling for representation on the police force and for the policing of their neighborhoods, which whites seldom did. White politicians saw that they could amass black support by yielding to their own desperate need at the time for new policemen on the force.

Three sources, The Memphis Police Department's webpage on its history, Eddie Ashmore's Eddie M. Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman: History of the Men and Women Behind the Badge*, and Dennis C. Rousey's "Yellow Fever and Black Policemen in Memphis, A Post-Reconstruction Anomaly" mention some of the fourteen blacks hired in August 1878 to the force by name. None of those sources names them all, nor will this work try too because of the lack of original sources that list all of them. However, the research of this thesis project has uncovered more of their names than any other known secondary source that discusses these hires. Both the Memphis Police Department's webpage and Ashmore reveal that most of these fourteen left the force less than one year later. Patrolmen Alexander Mitchell and Jesse Woods were two of these men who served for that brief amount of time. Hired in 1878, the 1879 city directory, which actual shows the previous year's data, reflects this, but in the 1880 directory, neither of the two men are listed along with the other patrolmen when the roster of police department is given, and they never appear with them again.<sup>65</sup> Both become laborer afterwards.<sup>66</sup>

Two others from the 1878 group of fourteen, Patrolmen David Mitchell and Charles Wilson, last a little longer than Alexander Mitchell and Jesse Woods. Two years prior D. Mitchell was a barber then a driver before he became a policemen. He lasts three years on the force, till 1880, and afterwards becomes laborer. It is unclear if he and A. Mitchell are related in anyway. Charles Wilson transitioned from being a porter to having a five-year career as a police officer from 1878 till 1882 when he was fired. Rousey reports that Wilson contended he was the victim of the racial prejudice of his bosses in his dismissal

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<sup>65</sup> 1879-1880 Memphis City Directories, *Ancestry .com*

<sup>66</sup> 1880-1881 Memphis City Directories, *Ancestry .com*

from the force.<sup>67</sup> Officer Wilson supported a wife who kept the house, according the 1880 census during his time on the force. He also grew to be “one of the best known citizens of Memphis,” according to 1908 *The Bright Side of Memphis: A Compendium of Information Concerning the Colored People of Memphis, Tennessee* by G. P. Hamilton. Wilson appears to have lived a very active life and served the city exceptionally in a various capacities in addition to his time as one of Memphis early black policemen. *The Bright Side* states his connection to the police department while also revealing that he has “always been prominent in the councils of the Republican party.”<sup>68</sup> Wilson also worked for the post office. He was a key leader in Memphis's black community and worked in the “Reform School” movement that occurred in Memphis and provided assistance to black youth. After his police career, Wilson had at son Charles Wilson Jr., whom *The Bright Side* briefly referred as a “fine young man and a chip off the old block.”<sup>69</sup>

The most extraordinary case surrounding these fourteen black men was that five of them experienced a long career on the force. These five men, who this work gives then the name of the “Memphis 5,” lasted 9 to 12 years at the department. Their names were Officers Townsend D. Jackson, Burrell Randolph, Moses Plummer, Howard Chastaine, and Dallas Lee. The length of these five men's careers were longer than those of most other known Tennessee black police officers except those of Knoxville. African American policemen during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. All five shared the privilege

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<sup>67</sup> Dennis C. Rousey, “Yellow Fever and Black Policemen in Memphis, A Post-Reconstruction Anomaly,” *The Journal of Southern History*, 51, no. 3 (August 1985): 372, (accessed April 9, 2015.) JSTOR.

<sup>68</sup> G. P. Hamilton, *The Bright Side of Memphis: A Compendium of Information Concerning the Colored People of Memphis, Tennessee Showing Their Achievements in Business, Industrial and Professional Life and Including Articles of General Interest on the Race* (Memphis: (1908), Hathi Trust Digital Library, 197.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

of being listed along with the rest of the officers throughout the 1880s in the city directories from 1878 to 1887<sup>70</sup> Their names were not segregated together, but they appear co-mingled with the names of white officers under the banner of “patrolmen.” Officer Jackson had a career of nine years, which lasted until 1887. Officers Randolph, Plummer, and Chastaine, were for around twelve years till their careers ended sometime between 1889 and 1891. Officer Lee rounded them off, lasting the longest of any African American police officer in the entire early era of black integration of the force. His career of seventeen years until 1895 is tremendously noteworthy. According to the 1880 census all officers were married, and Jackson, Randolph, and Plummer all supported several children. All of them were about the same age, and all were born during the time of slavery. During the 1880s they were all in their 30s. The youngest were Jackson, Randolph, and Lee; all were listed 30 in the 1880 census, while Chastaine was 35 and Plummer was 38. Some of them were born outside of Tennessee and had moved (or possibly brought) to the state sometime in the past. Jackson, Randolph, and Lee all were listed as black, while Plummer and Chastaine were listed as (or considered themselves) mulatto. There is evidence that a bond developed among these men. Both Rousey and Ashmore mention that these men formed a mutual benefit and relief association in 1883 for themselves to attain some form of security.<sup>71</sup> According to the city directory's addresses for them and the Sanborn maps for Memphis in 1888, a year all five were still on the as force, all five officers lived in the same neighborhood.<sup>72</sup> So along with the mutual relief association there bond could have been extended to living emotionally

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<sup>70</sup> 1878-1887 Memphis City Directories, *Ancestry .com*

<sup>71</sup> Rousey, “Yellow Fever,” 372.  
Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 288.

<sup>72</sup> Memphis [Shelby] Co.]. 1885. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1867-1970.  
<http://sanborn.umi.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/tn/8348/dateid-000001.htm?CCSI=2812n>

connected lives that may have included their wives socializing with one another, their children playing together, attending the same colored church that was in the area, going to the same stores, and more. All these are mere likely possibilities, however. Finally, as shown above, these men last on the force for a significantly long time. These five men helped to form a lasting African American presence in the administration of law and order for their city throughout the 1880s and even into the early 1890s. In addition to these men, after the yellow fever outbreak there were even eight more black officers that were hired to the force between 1879 and 1889, according to Ashmore.<sup>73</sup> This work has not discussed these men and leaves them open for further research in the future, but one thing for sure is they, along with most of the other black officers, gradually disappear from the force by the end of the 1880s and early 1890s. Dallas Lee was the only one left in 1895, and when he resigned in August of that year due to failing health the force went back to being all-white; it had been integrated for seventeen consecutive years.<sup>74</sup>

### **1919 – Third Instance of Police Integration in Memphis**

As told by the story given at the introduction of this chapter, Memphis experienced a brief but important moment of reintegration in 1919, and this happened with three black detectives, Matthew Thornton, Will “Sweetie” Williams, and F. M. Mercer. It had been twenty-four years since the last black officer had been on the force, and the Memphis Police Department had been transformed greatly through the years since the 1880s and early 1890s. Throughout the time of the Memphis 5, shortages of men to police the streets of the city kept the number of officers to low levels as Memphis grew and the

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<sup>73</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 287.

<sup>74</sup> Rousey, “Yellow Fever,” 373.

population recovered from the ravages of the yellow fever epidemics. Ashmore reports: “the number of policemen per thousand of population in 1870 was 16.2. This was reduced to 9.2 per thousand in 1880, a reduction of 43.2%.”<sup>75</sup> In 1882 the force only numbered 43 men and by 1888 had only increased to 53.<sup>76</sup> By 1895 there were 56 men on the force, and by the next year there were 59.<sup>77</sup> Ashmore cites the tough financial conditions of Memphis during the late 1880s and early 1890s for a reason why the number of officers were kept so low.<sup>78</sup> However, from the end of the 1890s and into the first decade of the 1900s the department saw high growth. By 1899 the department grew to 83 men, and in by 1907 the force had expanded to 146 officers, with 102 men serving as patrolmen.<sup>79</sup> In 1910 there was 185 officers.<sup>80</sup> Ashmore mentions that the city had annexed a large area of land by the end of 1899 and this contributed to the growth in officers.<sup>81</sup>

The department has also began to modernize since the time of the Memphis 5 in order to improve police work. The force acquired its first police wagon in 1890. Sometime in the early 1890s Officer Dallas Lee had become a police driver, so he could have driven this very wagon while lawbreakers were hauled off to jail and his fellow lawman were being driven around the city. Wooden cells were replaced by iron ones, and an alarm system was installed extended the reach of the police to all parts of the city.<sup>82</sup> The department also greatly improved its internal communication system by installing the Gamewell Police Telephone System in the city with 18 signal boxes complete with

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<sup>75</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 288.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> 1895-1896 Memphis City Directory, *Ancestry .com*

<sup>78</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 288.

<sup>79</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 291, 296.

<sup>80</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 296.

<sup>81</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 291.

<sup>82</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 288.

telephones in 1899.<sup>83</sup> In 1905 a bigger patrol wagon with larger hauling capacities was acquired and replaced the old 1890 wagon, and five years later the department got its hands on a gasoline powered patrol wagon.<sup>84</sup> A new station was built in 1911.<sup>85</sup> Along the whole journey leading up to 1919 the men received new weapons, new uniforms, and an increased fleet of horses, horse-drawn buggies, motorcycles, and other improvements. The department was even reorganized in 1912.<sup>86</sup>

The job remained highly dangerous. Ashmore's *Tennessee Lawman* is replete with stories of officers facing deadly situations on the beat. In 1894, an officer, Patrolman Rufus L. Parkinson, was shot in the left side while trying to apprehend a suspect who robbed had a woman. The wound was so serious that he had given up chase after nearly falling from a commandeered horse. A wagon took him home, and doctors tried profusely to stop his profuse internal bleeding but they simply could not help the officer. The wound was a mortal one, and Parkinson died early the next morning.<sup>87</sup> In July of 1900 Chief Detective Joseph A. Perkins and Detective Walter Lawless went to the house in search of a murderer and ended up in a shootout with the killer. The officers capped the perp in the head but not before he had shot the chief detective and mortally wounded him. He died 36 hours later.<sup>88</sup> Sometimes criminals even came looking for cops to kill. In 1901 a criminal was arrested and had paid his bail, but mere freedom was not enough. He wanted revenge. So, the morning after his arrest, he waited with a gun outside the police station for the officer who had arrested him. The criminal spotted his target coming out of

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<sup>83</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 291.

<sup>84</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 295.

<sup>85</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 296.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 290.

<sup>88</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 292.

the station, walked up, pulled the trigger, but, miraculously, the gun did not fire. The officer drew his sidearm and ended the failed cop killer with one shot.<sup>89</sup> In April 1919 two patrolmen went to investigate the theft of a bicycle. They came to a shanty house at the back of a grocery store. They entered the building. One of the officers did not see the suspect in a dimly lit room reach for a gun and was shot above the eye and killed instantly. He died over a stolen *bicycle*. These were the type of job conditions that the three black detectives, Thornton, Williams, and Mercer, were hired into 1919. Recall the story told of the 1919 detectives at the beginning of this chapter. They emerge on the force during this time because of the political maneuvering of influential black leader Robert Church during this time. Ashmore provides Matthew Thornton later comments on his brief career.

“I worked in fine cooperation with the white officers, who were my friends. I arrested a lot of Negroes for various offenses, and I never lost a case in court. I only had to use my gun once. That was when a Negro prisoner broke and ran when I was phoning for the patrol wagon. I fired into the air, but he got away. Only one time did I arrest a white man, and that was when I came upon a white man and a Negro who were fighting on South Fourth Street. Of course, I had to arrest both of them. The white man’s case was not carried into court.”<sup>90</sup>

In summary, the story of Memphis's early African American police officers of the late

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<sup>89</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 293.

<sup>90</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 304.



nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is one of brave, pioneering, and driven black men who had a thirst for justice and the stability brought by the rule of law. A large portion of the significance of these men is wrapped up in the fundamental realization that they did not have to become police officers. There was certainly no draft of black men to be policemen where they were chosen to serve the city involuntarily. If the majority of southern whites during this time had their way, there would not have been black police officers in the first place. To give a black man a badge and a gun after three hundred years of defenseless enslavement and tell him to police even his *own* community would have been radical madness, to say the very least. No. Rather, these men must have actively sought the position in order to provide, at least for their own families and people, the two basic things that they thirsted for that the black community had been denied to have for the longest of times, even after slavery: namely justice and the stability brought by the rule of law.

These were outstanding men. Even some whites during the time recognized it. Chief of Police W. C. Davis commented in 1882 that the black policemen that served for him during the time “met all the requirements of their officers, and [had been] proven worthy of confidence of all citizens.”<sup>91</sup> Again, this work repeats that these men had been “proven worthy of confidence” of citizens who belonged to a society that still stubbornly, unabashedly, and forcefully denied blacks basic rights of citizenship. This was the confidence of a citizenry that had not been confident in their complete humanity not too long ago. Now, they echo a white chief of police words by proclaiming in the *Memphis Daily Appeal* that these *black* men had been “a well-behaved and intelligent body of men, attentive to their duties” who had “the fullest confidence and regard of their superior

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<sup>91</sup> Rousey, “Yellow Fever,” 370.

officers.”<sup>92</sup>

In regards to the men that were hired during the late 1870s and 1880s, they were mostly dark-skinned, 71.4% according to Rousey, which was different from city like New Orleans which had a more mulatto force.<sup>93</sup> They were typically younger than their white counterparts, and they were and were native born southerners, versus the whites on the force, many of whom were immigrants.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, it is ironic that many of the white policemen were immigrants considering the fact of highly-prevalent anti-immigration prejudice in the nation during this time. Even though immigrants were a targeted group for prejudice just like African Americans, it would have been more likely for the blacks on the force to receive most of the bigotry due both to their skin color and occupation. They were all were married versus 76% whites, and most had children.<sup>95</sup> They came from the lower half of economic spectrum, and it is likely that their time on the force did not do much to improve their economic standing.<sup>96</sup> Their jobs before becoming cops included driver, cooper, waiter, laborer, hostler, and bricks mason, and afterwards they went back into the same types of jobs. For example, Officer Townsend D. Jackson was a driver before being appointed the police department and became a painter after he was dismissed.<sup>97</sup> Officer Burrell Randolph was a cooper, and afterwards he went into farming for a living.<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, their salaries as policemen afforded a number of them living stability and security in their home life. Most of the “Memphis 5” were able to stay in the same address for a number of years during the 1880s before moving to a

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<sup>92</sup> Rousey, “Yellow Fever,” 370-371.

<sup>93</sup> Rousey, “Yellow Fever,” 371.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Rousey, “Yellow Fever,” 372.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> 1888-1889 Memphis City Directories, *Ancestry .com*

<sup>98</sup> 1888, 1892, and 1893 Memphis City Directories, *Ancestry .com*

new location. From what can be known from the census records, even though the condition of some makes it hard to determine, most of the black men who served Memphis as policemen during 1867-1919 were literate during a time of low literacy among blacks, especially in the South. As for the duties these men performed officers for department, most of these officers served as patrolman in addition to detective, constable, and police driver.

One of the most important question to ask about these men is how and who were they able to police. Rousey answers it in “Yellow Fever and Black Policemen” stating that though they “may have been assigned to patrol predominantly black territory,” these men “had the authority to arrests whites - and used it.” Rousey further comments that “of 362 arrests made by black policemen in the periods August-December 1881, and August-November 1882, 139 (or 38.4 percent) were of white offenders.”<sup>99</sup> However, as the 1880s moved on they began to arrest fewer whites. In 1888 “only 20.7 percent of arrests made by black officers were of white offenders.” All this was true even though black officers disproportionally arrest fewer white offenders. Rousey posits that this suggests that the police work of these officers began to be channeled by the department towards black areas and away from whites. He also suggests that this was in response to the hardening of race relations.<sup>100</sup> This is a fair assessment by Rousey to explain the channeling of black police work. The rise of Jim Crow in the late 1880s and 1890s along with most whites lingering mission to “reclaim” the South from so-called “Negro-rule” would have definitely aided in the restriction of this broad black policing ability. One explanation for why blacks they were able to police whites at all in places like Memphis, New Orleans,

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<sup>99</sup> Rousey, “Yellow Fever,” 372.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

and Charleston could have been big city simply inefficient to keep blacks officers restricted to black areas. What could have also aided was the fact that cities such as Memphis and New Orleans had a heavy black population leading up to the time of the emergence of black officers. Combine the issue of policing a large city that was increasing growing, a sizable black population with the depletion of the white policemen to police white areas due to rampant disease and the conditions could be favorable not only to blacks attaining police job but also blacks helping to police whites in some cases. As the Memphis force regained its white numbers in the mid and late 1880s that were lost to three separate outbreaks of yellow fever during the 1870s and as race relations were hardening throughout the South due to the emergence of Jim Crow, the department began to direct their black officers towards the crimes of their own community, restricting who they could arrest.

Additionally, as shown earlier, the late 1880s and early 1890s is when these black officers began to leave the force and the number of them gradually drops. Rousey states that some of them lost their jobs for alleged cause, for economic reason, and some may have even suffered an arbitrary dismissal such as Officer Charles Wilson, as mentioned earlier.<sup>101</sup> Officer Jackson was suspended and later removed for his alleged sexual advances towards a white woman, a lynch-able crime for any black man in the South. Furthermore, as Rousey's work stated, the allegations against Jackson were rumors, but, either way, he had to go. These events hint at what might have been an agenda for the department to get rid of its black officers, which would make Officer Dallas Lee's career all the more remarkable, for he continued to stay on the force when the rest of the Memphis 5 were gone. By 1892 he was the only one left, and he survived another three

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<sup>101</sup> Rousey, "Yellow Fever," 372.

years until his retirement from the force in 1895. Lee signaled the end for the black police officer in Memphis in the nineteenth century, but with a new century came the very brief flare of integration of the 1919 detectives. After Detectives Thornton, Williams, and Mercer gone after two controversy incidents with whites the early age of black policemen in the city would be stamped out for good. There would not be another African American on the force till 1948.



## CHAPTER THREE

### *Breaking the Mold:*

#### *The Beginning of Over 140 years of Black Policemen in Knoxville, 1870-1930*

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This work will restrict its discuss of the history of African Americans on the Knoxville Police Department to the year 1930 and earlier. Any discussion that goes beyond this year will only be in relation to the black officers who were hired before on during 1930 and enjoyed careers that extended beyond this year, of which there were several. This is because the historical time period that this work seeks to cover is from the late nineteenth (1865-1899) to the early twentieth century (1900-1930), and also because the presence of black police officers in the selected Tennessee cities was mostly kept to this time period. As stated before, Knoxville is a most interesting exception to the rule not only for Tennessee but for the South as a whole during the same period. It was one of the few southern cities that not only had black police officers still employed during the 1890s-1910s but also continue to appoint blacks to the force during first decades of the twentieth century. A brief overview of the timeline of blacks on the Knoxville Police Department leading up to 1930 is as followed.

Integration in Knoxville law enforcement began in 1870 when A. B. Parker was hired by the city council. It did not take long before for more black appointments were made, even if they were only temporary hires. Between the years 1871 and 1882 four black temporary officers were added. Two of these men, would later be hired by the city again to help police Knoxville. One of these men was Moses Smith who went on to become the city's first permanent black officer in early 1880s. The other, James Mason, would be

hired on the force in 1884, and he would continue to be employed by the department for 18 years until 1902. In 1885, Hugh B. Draper was hired to the force, and would last to middle next decade when he left the department in 1894. With at least Officer Mason still on the payroll after Draper's departure, from that moment on there would always be a presence of African Americans on the Knoxville's police department.

Now, before the overview of the timeline is continued a disclaimer has to be made. The list of officers that this chapter will particularly discuss is not intended to be exhaustive given the fact the Knoxville would continuously employ and hire black officers over the course of its history. Therefore, when this chapter's discussion of the history of Knoxville's black officers shifts to the point after the 1881 hire of the city's first permanent African American police officer, Moses Smith, this work understands that in between the appointments of the officers that will be mentioned other unmentioned appointments probably were made. It is the intention on this work to only mention some of the post-1881 appointments because so many were made.

With the disclaimer out of the way, the timeline can continue. Officer Mason would not be the only black officer to have a career cross into the twentieth century. William (Bill) S. Lillison was hired to the force in 1890 would continue to be connected to the force till the 1920s. Furthermore, as the South moved into the next century, the pattern typical of the cities that employed post-Civil War black police officers was the number and these officers began to shore up the closer they got to the turn of the century. The number of cities that had blacks on their police departments in the first decade of the 1900s was significantly less than before; according to W. Marvin Dulaney only four southern cities, including Knoxville continued to employ African-Americans as police



officers by 1910.<sup>102</sup> The rate at which cities hired black officers also likewise decreased as the twentieth century drew closer. However, Knoxville not only saw the number of black officers increase, but the rate-of-hire appears to increase, as well. At least two blacks were hired to the force during the 1900s. Followed by them, five more appointments were made in 1910. In 1918 the total number of black officers in the force was five. The next year at least one appointment, James Smith, was made. Lastly, during the 1920s leading up to 1930, at least four more blacks were brought to the force. Their names were Earnest E. Scruggs, Frank Robinson, Thomas Nowlin, and Wilburn A. Lyons. The careers of the black officers on Knoxville were among the longest of all the African American appointments of the four cities discussed in this work. For example, Officer Robinson had a 6-year career. Smith spent 14 years on the force, and Lyons spent 19. Officers Nowlin and Scruggs blew everyone else out of the jailhouse, as they both enjoyed an unprecedented and unrivaled 30 and 39 years of service to the City of Knoxville, respectively. Even the best of the “Memphis 5” from the previous chapter, Dallas Lee, only had 17 years on the force. Besides the notable exceptions, the average career of Tennessee's black officers outside of Knoxville seems to have been below five years. Not to mention there were probably several appointments made in between all the ones mentioned. In summary, from 1870 and leading to the present day Knoxville has had an over 140-year history of African American police officers.<sup>103</sup>

Obviously, there are two very important general questions. The first is this: what allows for black police officers to emerge in Knoxville? The second one is: what are the

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<sup>102</sup> Dulaney, *Black Police*, 17.

<sup>103</sup> Robert Booker, “Booker: City Has History of Black Officers,” October 26, 2010. <http://www.knoxnews.com/opinion/columnists/booker-city-has-history--of-black-officers-ep-407335580-358394581.html>.

forces and conditions that allow black officers not only continuously to be hired but also have that such long stretches of careers on the force? This work will argue that since Knoxville and east Tennessee, in general, had had the most Republican past leading up towards Reconstruction, the emergence of African American officers in the South due to the politics of Republicans found an easier place in Knoxville. Also, the dangerous and lawless times of postwar era in the South and its lingering effect upon Knoxville combined with the fact that the then-small city was in a phase of rebuilding helped to create a situation that would facilitate the appointments of black officers first on a temporary bases then permanently. What kept blacks employed on the force and a steady flow of black officers coming was probably a combination of several factors. The small-size of the city combined with the slowness of its police force towards modernization and the exceptional job blacks must have performed over time could have provided the conditions for the officers to have long careers. These conditions continued up to the late 1940s and 1950s when a number of cities in the South began once again to desegregate their police departments including Memphis, Chattanooga and Nashville, which all brought blacks back to their forces in 1948. Not to mention, the political pull of a black alderman in 1910 which led to the appointment of five blacks to the department did not hurt, either.

The plan for this chapter is to tell the story of the early history of black cops in Knoxville up to 1930 with glimpses of the ordinary lives of these men as well.

### **1870-1881 Temporary Black Policemen**

Although Knoxville's first African American policemen were temporary hires, they

left a lasting impression over 140 years' worth. It all began with A. B. Parker. The Knoxville city council hired Officer Parker was hired by on January 10, 1870. There is not much known about him apart from what was told from a 2010 article for the *Knoxville News Sentinel* written by Robert J. Booker who researched some of the city's first black policemen. Titled "City Has History of Black Officers," Booker focuses only on the earliest of Knoxville's black officers, A. B. Parker and the four temporary black officers hired between his given time span of 1871 and 1882. Officer Parker emerged during a time where it was "the policy of the council to hire policemen to serve for 'one year or at the pleasure of the council.' " Booker comments that Officer Parker made the news several times. On June 4, 1870 a councilman reported complaints he had been hearing from citizens concerned about the job Parker was doing. He had been exceeding his duty as a mere colored officer and had been arresting whites.<sup>104</sup> Booker writes that Parker the councilman, hoping to put the incident behind everyone, assuaged the people's concerns and said that "the officer had admitted his fault, and would do so no more."<sup>105</sup> However, white fears about being arrested by a black police officer would not go away.

Next, as mentioned earlier the city hired four more temporary black policemen between 1871 and 1882, according to Booker. Only three of four temporary officers are known by this work: Moses Smith, James Mason, and Samuel Osment. According to Booker, on January 29, 1879, Councilman Scales a motion was made by to fire a black officer that had been hired as night watchman in order to "to avoid trouble from the fact that country people have a perfect horror of being arrested by a colored policeman." The motion passed by an overwhelming majority vote, Moses Smith, would be hired to serve

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<sup>104</sup> Booker, "City Has History."

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

as police officer again in the future and have the distinction of becoming Knoxville's first permanent black policemen during the early 1880s.<sup>106</sup> While a temporary officer, however, Smith led an eventful term. He had applied for one of the temporary positions in 1871, Booker states. Another one of the four officers, James Mason, was hired on January 23, 1875, and his hiring had been the result of 15 ballots. Booker remarks how there had been a split in among council members regarding whether or not to appoint two black policemen. He too would be hired to serve as a permanent policeman three years after Smith would be hired again in the early 1880s. The third temporary officer that this work is aware of was Samuel Osment. Osment appears listed as a policemen in at least two 1880 documents, the U.S. census from that year and the 1880-1881 Knoxville city directory. It is not known exactly when Osment began his term as officer in 1880. Booker does not mention Osment as one of the officers hired, but he must have been one of the temporary officers because his listing as a policeman falls in line with Booker's 1871-1882 timespan for them. If the city council's policy of only hiring officers to serve for one year carried over to this time, then Osment must have been hired in 1880, as the census and the directory show, and he must have been let go sometime during the next year. Applying the same rule to the other two discussed here, Mason's probably ended in January of 1876; if not January, then sometime during that year. Osment had become a barber then a porter after his time as a temporary officer.<sup>107</sup> According to the 1880 census, he was married and had an adult son living with him. Booker is the only one who mentions this time period of temporary officers.<sup>108</sup> The controversy that surrounded Officer A. B. Parker and his arresting of white men shows that these temporary officers

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> 1882,1884 Knoxville City Directories, *Ancestry.com*

<sup>108</sup> 1880 U.S. Census, *Ancestry.com*

may have had arresting and other active policing duties, perhaps not against of whites, however, Nonetheless, more research needs to be done on both these men and the extent their duties. These men were certainly pioneers of their time.

### **1881-1899 Knoxville Black Officers**

Ashmore's start for the first Knoxville's first black officer is Moses Smith, and he gives a hire date of January 22, 1881.<sup>109</sup> His date creates a conflict with Booker's work, as he gives the year 1882 for Smith's hire but does not give a date in his article. However, Ashmore's date is correct. Sylvia D. Lynch in her work "To Protect and Serve: History of the Knoxville Police Department, 1849-2001" provides a scanned image of a the minutes from the very city council meeting that took place on January 22, 1881 which hired Smith. Also, Smith is mentioned in the July 28, 1881 edition of the Knoxville *Daily Chronicle* as policemen who assisted in the apprehension of man who had a warrant out against him for real estate fraud.<sup>110</sup> He was hired along with another officer named B. J. Reeder to serve as the "patrolman or assistant police or marshal." A report to the city council made by the chief of police on January 27, 1882 showed that, by that time, Officer Smith had made 21 arrests.<sup>111</sup> Smith faithful served the department until he resigned on June 12, 1885. However, this was not the end of his policing duties. In Smith own words, Booker quotes him as stating to the city council "As you all know, his excellency Grover Cleveland, President of the United States, has in good pleasure appointed me patrolman of the United States Post Office in this city," therefore he felt it

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<sup>109</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 258

<sup>110</sup> Knoxville *Daily Chronicle*, July 28, 1881. [Chroniclingamerica.gov](http://Chroniclingamerica.gov).

<sup>111</sup> Booker, "City Has History."

necessary to “tender your honorable body my resignation as patrolman.”<sup>112</sup> As Booker recounts, the city council had “voted to give him 'general police powers' in his new job at the Custom House.”<sup>113</sup> The 1886 city directory reflects this career change showing Officer Smith as “policeman Custom House” instead of just “policeman.”<sup>114</sup> However, he cannot be found at all in the subsequent editions of the directory. Perhaps he moved out of the city or died.

As mentioned earlier Moses Smith had not been the only permanent black officer hired in the 1880s, which had also served a year as black temporary officer during the previous decade. James Mason emerged again as policemen for the city for the first time since 1875. He had was hired three years after Smith in 1884 and served with him until Smith's resignation a year later. Mason's existence as a black police officer was both the complete antithesis of how his life began and at the same time a perfect symbolism for how he lived it. He was born into slavery in 1840. Though slavery had already cast him to live a powerless life, he shown a determination that was unrelenting. He did not accept this powerlessness that slavery forced upon him. He bought his way to freedom by performing odd jobs, according to Booker. After he had attained his own liberation from the chains of bondage, he then try to do the same for his wife Elizabeth (“Betty”), but Abraham Lincoln beat him to it. The Emancipation Proclamation and the defeat of the South in Civil War had brought a fitting end to slavery. He had been saving his earnings for his wife's freedom, but with her now free he instead spent the money to purchase a home. Out of that home came thirteen children and a marriage that had lasted 40 years by

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> 1886 Knoxville City Directory, Ancestry.com

the time of the 1900 census.<sup>115</sup> With his purchase in 1866 he became the first African American property owner and taxpayer in Knoxville<sup>116</sup> Moreover, Officer Mason also lived an exceptional life of service. He was a charter member of the Shiloh Presbyterian Church. Furthermore, he and his wife founded a school for deaf black children operated from their own home.<sup>117</sup> He would go on to become a prominent leader in Knoxville black community. He continued to serve the public as a police officer until he retired in 1902, spending 18 years working for the department.<sup>118</sup>

Ashmore and Booker both corroborate with Mason's serving until 1902. However, after listing him as a policemen from 1884 to 1889 the city directory stops listing him as such in the 1890 edition. That edition did not list his occupation is not listed at all, and in the 1893 directory lists him as a grocer. Then, from 1892 till the year that he dies, 1906, he was listed by the directory as a school janitor first for "Bell House schl" then "John Sevier schl."<sup>119</sup> If Mason did remain with the police then he could have acted in some limited role with the department over the years while balancing out his another occupation. Even when the census taker came knocking on his 113 Cumberland Ave. home in 1900, he still chose to describe himself as a janitor.<sup>120</sup> Typically, the Tennessee's black officers had no problem telling the census-man of their affiliation with the police department, as his fellow African American Knoxville police officer, William S. Lillison, did when he was balancing working both as a lawman and an undertaker in 1920. If Ashmore and Booker are correct, it is unknown why he is not listed anymore as a

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<sup>115</sup> 1900 U.S. Census, Ancestry.com

<sup>116</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 358.  
Booker, "City Has History."

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> 1892-1906 Knoxville City Directories, Ancestry.com

<sup>120</sup> 1900 U.S. Census, Ancestry.com

policemen after 1889, nor why he only described himself as a janitor in 1900.

After briefly discussing Mason's police career, Ashmore states that “Knoxville continued to employ black policemen during the Jim Crow era of the early twentieth century when most other police departments in the state did not.”<sup>121</sup> His discussion of Knoxville's black officers that were hired during the focused time period of this work all but drops off. However, instead of skipping over the rest of this rich history, this work picks up right where both Ashmore and Booker left off.

Officer Hugh B. Draper was hired sometime in 1885 and served with James Mason as the only two black police officers on the force to lead out the rest of the 1880s. Mason is first listed with the other members of the Knoxville Police Department in the 1886 city directory. Before becoming an officer, he had been a teacher living at the junction of Clinton and Montgomery roads and then at 403 Asylum. Officer Draper served as a patrolman for 8 years until 1894 when exits the force and late become a laborer. During his police career he had gotten married in 1892, and moved to 1003 Clinch Ave.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, starting in the 1890 directory, when James Mason began to not be listed anymore, another black officer seem to take his place alongside Draper. His name was William (“Bill”) S. Lillison. Officer Lillison began in 1890 and enjoyed a truly long career with the police department. As, stated before, Lillison seemed to balance his duties as an officer with other jobs over the course of his police career. From 1890 to 1894 he was listed with the rest of the police department and as a “policeman” for his occupation, but starting in 1895 he begins to not be listed as such. From that year till 1901 Lillison is

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<sup>121</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 358.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*



shown to hold different jobs such as teacher in 1895, porter in 1900.<sup>123</sup> However, in the 1900 census he told the census taker that he was a “city policeman.”<sup>124</sup> Moreover, the 1901 directory has Lillison as “supr police dept.” “Supr” certainly stood for “supernumerary,” and supernumerary policeman is a term for an extra or “special” police officer who assists the department.<sup>125</sup> Also, Ashmore lists him among the supernumerary officers when he gives the 1900 in his chapter on the Knoxville Police Department.<sup>126</sup> Therefore, it is possible that he must have gone from being a regular patrolman in the early 1890s to a supernumerary officer in 1895. From the 1903 directory and onward, it begins to list him again as “police” and “policeman” during the 1900s and 1910s. By this time the directory had ceased listing all of names of the officers under the police department's section. Therefore, it is difficult by the directory along if he ever went back to the regular force. He may have remained as a supernumerary because though he is shown to have entered into the funeral business with a business partner during the 1900s, the directory at times alternates in listing him as policemen and undertaker through these years. However, when the 1920 census came around he again described himself as a policeman. It is not certain when, but sometime in the 1920s he retires from the force and his job as an undertaker because the 1930 census lists him as not having a job at age 70.<sup>127</sup> He died in 1931. Lillison had an over thirty-year career with the police department. His position as a supernumerary may shed light on why James Mason not listed as a police officer for most of his career after 1889.

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<sup>123</sup> 1895-1900 Knoxville City Directories, Ancestry.com

<sup>124</sup> 1900 U.S. Census. Ancestry.com

<sup>125</sup> 1901 Knoxville City Directory, Ancestry.com

<sup>126</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 360.

<sup>127</sup> 1930 U.S. Census.

### **Internal Improvements of the Police Force**

As Officer Lillison took the black presence on Knoxville's police force into the turn of the century, some of the lawlessness and extremely dangerous nature of the job that was present in the nineteenth century did not fade easily, Ashmore states.<sup>128</sup> It carried itself over to the 1900s. Moreover, as Ashmore further pointed out later, Knoxville continued to be more-or-less a small town during the first decade of the twentieth century. This was true especially we compared to a city like Memphis during the same time. In 1912 “fewer than 25 Knoxvillians owned cars.”<sup>129</sup> The small-town nature of the town continued into the 1900s. During the time, the police force was made up of less than 50 officers. The department had acquired its first paddy wagon in the early 1890s, and the wagon (with later mounted patrol) was the primary way of hustling both lawman and captured crook throughout the city until 1917 when the first police cars were acquired.<sup>130</sup> Compare this with Memphis's police department around the same time span, which got their police wagon in 1890, upgraded it in 1905, and replaced it with its first police car in 1910. Even before this, Knoxville's force formed a bicycle patrol was formed to improve police movement through the city. According to Ashmore, officers even chased down traffic violators by bicycle.<sup>131</sup> The horse-drawn wagon would continue to be used until 1923, when it was replaced by the much larger “C” cab motorized police truck.<sup>132</sup> However, the town did begin to grow in the early twentieth century, as more civilians (and criminals) made use of the revolutionary automobile. Just like in Memphis and in other urban

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<sup>128</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 360.

<sup>129</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 361.

<sup>130</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 363.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 364.

centers in the South, the nature of police work had to change; it had to be upgraded to keep up with the ever-passing times. Gradually, Knoxville improved its policing technology over the course of the dawning decades of the new century. An example of this was in the department mode of police communications with its officers scattered in the city. The department first used a very large bell atop the police headquarters that was heard all across town, then in 1926 the police call boxes of the Gamewell system was installed in Knoxville. It was the predecessor to the one-way radios placed in police cars in the 1933, which was improved upon in 1936 and 1942 with two-way radios then FM receivers, respectively.<sup>133</sup> With all the changes being made to the department between 1900 and 1930, one thing remained constant: Knoxville's employment of African Americans on the police force. And not only did it remain constant, it also seemed to grow along with the department's improvements and the city itself.

### **1900-1930 Knoxville Black Officers**

In 1900, there were at least three blacks serving as officers in the Knoxville Police Department. Joseph (“Joe”) Reynolds along with Officer Lillison and Isaiah H. (“Bud”) Kyle, two supernumeraries during this time, according to Ashmore, and the affiliation of all three to the police department is shown in 1900 census.<sup>134</sup> Furthermore, by the 1901 city directory all three men are listed with their respective positions on the force in the resident and address section.<sup>135</sup> All three were family men, with Reynolds, Lillison, and Kyle each being having a wife and children with the exception of Officer Kyle during by

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<sup>133</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 366-367.

<sup>134</sup> 1900 U.S. Census, Ancestry.com  
Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 360.

<sup>135</sup> 1901 Knoxville City Directory, Ancestry.com

the 1900 census. He had been widowed sometime in the past. This continues the trend prevalent among Tennessee black policemen of the overwhelming number of them being married and having children.

Officer Kyle was probably hired sometime in 1900, for the 1900 census describing him as “city policeman” was enumerated in June, and the 1900 city directory, whose information would have been gathered anywhere between the previous year and early 1900, listed him as a shoemaker. He was an officer living on Georgia street for at least 11 years until he became a presser either sometime between 1911 and 1913. He continues to be listed as such, but since he had been a supernumerary before he could remain with the force as one and had limited policing duties as he balanced another job.

Officer Kyle was pictured in a 1910 photograph of the Knoxville Police Department. He was standing in the far-left corner of the back almost off the frame of the shot. He stood along with all the others in uniform, and he was next to two more black officers that were on the force at the time. Officer Lillison, the man who would spend at least another ten years to add to a, by then, twenty-year career on the force, was to the right of him. Followed by him was another black officer who had been hired during the 1900s decade, John Singleton, who had a 14-year career as an officer between 1908 and 1922.<sup>136</sup> Also in 1910, five more black appointments were made to the department facilitated by the political maneuverings of an influential black alderman.<sup>137</sup> At this point there had to be at least 8 black police officers on the force; Joseph Reynolds was off by this time. In this Knoxville separated itself not only from the other Tennessee cities covered by the work but also most other southern cities that hired black police officers during the late

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<sup>136</sup> Dulaney, *Black Police*, 48.

<sup>137</sup> Dulaney, *Black Police*, 136.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Instead of dropping as the department moved into the 1890s, 1900, and 1910s, the number of appointments and the frequency increased. It seemed almost as if when one black officer left the force another was hired to replace him. When Officer James Mason nearing retirement in 1902, Officer Isaiah Kyle was hired in 1900 and the department was prepared for Mason departure. By the time Officer Reynolds may have left the force (if he did not become a supernumerary) during the 1900s and Kyle left the force in the early 1910s, five more black appointments came in 1910 to replace them.

Numbers did not slow down. 1916, another African American, Charles A. Redmon, was added to the force. Even a worsening of racial tensions which erupted into a riot in 1919 did not slow down the hires. The response the police department had to it during that very year and in the next decade was the hiring of at least four more black officers. James Smith was appointed in 1919, followed by Earnest E. Scruggs in 1920, Frank Robinson in 1921, and Thomas Nowlin in 1924. Furthermore, in 1930 William A. Lyons was hired, to boot. As stated earlier in this chapter, the black officers in Knoxville has the longest terms on a white dominated police force than any of the other cities covered by this work. Officer Redmon had an 11-year career. Officer James Smith stayed on for 14 years. While Officer Robinson held on for 6 years and Lyons for 19, both Earnest Scruggs and Thomas Nowlin served for an incredible 39 and 30 years, respectively.

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In summary, as stated very early on in this work, historical literature that is focused exclusively on African American police officers in the South during this time is tremendously lacking. Dulaney with *Black Police* by far provided the best work on the

broad history of blacks in American law enforcement, but his type of work has been rare for this topic. There is even less on Tennessee's post-Civil War black officers. While there is Dennis Rousey's exceptional treatment on Memphis's black officers during this time, there is not much other focused scholarly treatment that has been provided for Tennessee's cities. It is certain that historians have touched on Knoxville's black police but their mentioning of them has been passing and brief. Robert Booker's article gives a great example of focuses work on these officers, but larger forms of this type of focus is needed, and that is what work seeks to be – telling the history of the presence of these men and the lives they led. Thus, though no journal article like Rousey's or book like Dulaney seems to exist for Knoxville that covers a large span of the early history of the city's black policemen. It is disappointing for a city like Knoxville because of the amount ground that could be covered



## CHAPTER FOUR

*Here's Where You Get Off:*

*Chattanooga's Brief History of Police Integration at the Dawn of Jim Crow, 1880-1883*

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The pre-modern history of African American police officers in Chattanooga is, in a few ways, different from that of Memphis and Knoxville in that there is only one period of black officers, and when it stops the first time, it *stops*. The pre-modern presence of black officers on the force ends more abruptly than the other cities. As was discussed in the previous chapter, the presence of African Americans on the Knoxville police department was a continuous phenomenon that continued right up to the present day. Furthermore, in Memphis there were three separate instances of black officers emerging before it was stopped for good in 1919 until 1948. Also, the nature of how it ends in Chattanooga is different than the way it ends in Memphis.

For Memphis, in the first two instances *individual* (for the most part) black officers seem to either retire or get fired because of a perceived infraction, real or contrived by the department. On the other hand, in Chattanooga, one civil act, the drafting of a new city charter in 1883 effectively plays a role in the end of black officers in Chattanooga. It then takes another 65 years until African Americans achieve representation on the city's police department again. The fact that only in Chattanooga does a civic act aid in the re-segregation of a police department in Tennessee is significant for reasons that will be discussed later.

Now that the end of the timeline of Chattanooga's black officers has been established, there remains the question of when does it *begin*? W. Marvin Dulaney in *Black Police in*



*America* gives the year 1872 in a chart listing a selection of southern cities and the year in which they first hired black policemen during the Reconstruction era, but research for this work has not been able to recover the data on the officer(s) that came at this point.<sup>138</sup> It is worthy to note that Eddie Ashmore's work *Tennessee Lawman* does not (or fails to) mention any black officers that were hired in 1872. Ashmore begins his short mention of Chattanooga's early black officers in 1883. However, it also must be stated that Ashmore does not necessarily say that 1883 is the start of integration, he just happens to first mention black officers at that point. Additionally, Rita Lorraine Hubbard in her book *African Americans of Chattanooga: A History of Unsung Heroes* only mentions the presence of black policemen on the force starting in 1880.<sup>139</sup> Not even Chattanooga.gov's section on the history of the city's police department mentions any black appointments of 1872. Because none of these sources, besides Dulaney, definitively say "it starts from here," the case is still open. They only mention black officers in the years they do, as if to say that black officers are on the force at least there at this particular point in time. So, it is possible that Dulaney's date could be correct, but more research needs to be accomplished. Therefore, this work will use the year 1880 as well for its beginning point for the emergence of black police for the sake of the discussion because this seems to be a point in which African Americans were definitely on the force, according to the primary source data. Also, 1880 is chosen for the reason of the lack of data for Chattanooga black officers around 1872 that the research for this work has encountered.

Thus, the time line for the early history of Chattanooga's black policemen is quite shorter than Memphis and Knoxville: 1880-1883. In 1880 there were 4 blacks on a 10-

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<sup>138</sup> Dulaney, *Black Police*, 116.

<sup>139</sup> Rita Lorraine Hubbard, *African Americans of Chattanooga: A History of Unsung Heroes* (Charleston: The History Press, 2007), 24.

men police force.<sup>140</sup> Then, by the next year the number had increased to 7 on a 12-men force and stayed that way into 1882.<sup>141</sup> Finally, before all black officers were dropped from the force, the year 1883 had 5 black patrolmen which split even with 5 white patrolmen.<sup>142</sup> Along the way there were two blacks who served as constables during this time as well that were listed in the 1880 and 1881.

What brought about the emergence of African American police officer in Chattanooga during the late nineteenth century, specifically between 1880 and 1883 was a combination of three phenomena that was taking place in the city during this time. First, after the Civil War, Chattanooga began to experience the post-war era in a similar way to Memphis. There was a metropolitan police force that was created in the city due to the passing of the Metropolitan Police Bill of 1866, the yellow fever epidemic had a costly effect on the city and it especially had a dangerous outbreak in 1878, and Chattanooga had to deal with postwar lawlessness. Memphis had to deal with all three of these problems during the same time-period. Second, Chattanooga was a notably small city during the postwar era, and to be affected by the yellow fever epidemic and generally lawlessness of the South was tremendously difficult for the growing city. These conditions created an environment of necessity for the city to govern itself in, especially for the police department. All these conditions along with the effects of Reconstruction politics on the city created the situation that which black police were hired by the city to serve as policemen.

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

Michelle R. Scott, *Blue Empress in Black Chattanooga: Bessie Smith and the Emerging Urban South*. (Champaign, IL.: Illinois Press. 2008), 43.

<sup>142</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 378.

*1899 Souvenir of Chattanooga Police Department*, 49

Like the previous to chapters, the plan for this chapter is to give the story (at least from 1880) of the early history of the black cops in Chattanooga with a focus on telling the careers as well as providing an insight into the lives of some of these men.

### **1880-1883 Chattanooga's Black Officers**

By the year 1880, there were four African Americans on Chattanooga's small police force head up by a city marshal. Some or all of these men could have been hired in 1879, but that year's directory does not appear to be available in order to see if the names appear alongside the other officers of the police department. However, it is certain that none of their names appear in the 1878 directory, and all the patrolmen listed for that year's force are white. Moreover, it is important to note that not all the four black men's names appear in the 1880 directory. Also, Hubbard claims that there were two black men serving as policemen during the early 1880s, but they are never listed as policemen in any of the years 1880-1883, and their names never appeared alongside the policemen like the other black officers's names did. More research needs to be done. However, city directories were not infallible pieces of documentation and did make mistakes. Those left out could have actually served, but never appear. Because of this, this work first list the black officers that are listed, then a possible arrangement will be given for when the two offices named by Hubbard could have be a part of the force.

As stated before, in 1880 four black officers served on the force. The 1880 directory lists only two William A. Richardson and Marion Keith. Then, according to Rita Lorraine Hubbard, in 1881 seven black officer where serving as policemen, but the directory only has four officers listed with the police department. These four included the

aforementioned Richardson and Keith, and added to them were Andrew (Andy) F. Thompson and William A. Henderson. The number of black men stays at seven going into 1882, according to not only to Hubbard but Michelle R. Scott in her book *Blue Empress in Black Chattanooga: Bessie Smith and the Emerging Urban South*. The number of black officers actually listed in the directory increases for the next year, though Officers Keith, Thompson, and Richardson drop off. Thus, in the 1882 directory, Officer Henderson is listed with Dock F. Mitchell, Rufus Smith, Larken Fralex, and Joseph Taylor. However, these are obviously only five men and not the seven that is claimed to be there by two scholars to have been on the force in 1882. The next year's directory could have provided some clarity, but the 1883 directory already had already reflected the changes to the police department brought by the adoption of the new 1883 city charter which helped to eliminate all the black officers on the force, though the charter did not explicitly target these men for termination. Further confusion is added when Eddie Ashmore and the primary source, 1899 Souvenir of the Chattanooga Police Department both state that in 1883 there were five black officers on the force before the new charter was drafted. A problem, therefore, emerges, for the numbers given by the historians do not coincide with the numbers that are given by the documents from the time. Even if one were wanting to count the two black constables that make an appearance too for 1880 (John W. Robinson) and 1881 (William A. Willis) the numbers still would not add up.

The problem might be resolved with the two men that Hubbard mention but they never appear listed as police officers in the directories. Though Hubbard on page 24 of her aforementioned book gives the numbers of black officers for 1880 and 1881, the only

names she specially mentions are Officers Andrew (She writes him as “Andy”) Thompson, George White, and Charles (She writes “Charley”) H. Bird. Thompson is the only one that appears in the directory as a policeman. Although White and Bird appear in the directory as well, they are never listed with the police department. Between 1880 and 1883, White is listed as laborer and a painter, and during the same time span, Bird appears as a drayman and driver; also, in 1882 his occupation is not listed. How might the problem be resolved by these men?

Even though Officer Andrew Thompson Hubbard does not appear as a policeman till 1881, Hubbard states that “he began his career as a Chattanooga policeman in 1880.”<sup>143</sup> It is clear exactly when in 1880 he joined the force, so it is possible that Thompson could have joined the force after the directory was released. Therefore, he could be counted among Officer William Richardson and Marion Keith in 1880. That leaves a fourth man, which could be the one other black officers that began to appear in the 1881 directory alongside Richardson, Keith, and Thompson. That man is Officer William Henderson, who, like Thompson, could have joined to force late in 1880 after the directory was released. So, in 1880, there is: Officers (1) Richardson, (2) Keith, (3) Thompson, and (4) Henderson.

Then there is the year 1881 where 7 black officers are said to appear. Right after Hubbard stats that “. . .by 1881, seven of the twelve-man Chattanooga police force were African American” says, “Included in these numbers were Charley Bird, George White, and Andy Thompson.”<sup>144</sup> Tack Bird and White to the above list of 4 black officers and there is six. This leaves the seventh man. In the 1882 directory, four new names show up

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<sup>143</sup> Hubbard, *African Americans*, 24.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

as discussed earlier: Officer Mitchell, Smith, Fralex, and Taylor. Either of these men could have joined the force in 1881 before the 1882 directory was published and be that seventh man. This makes it so that in sometime in 1881 *before* the 1882 directory is published there is: Officers (1) Richardson, (2) Keith, (3) Thompson, (4) Henderson, (5) Bird, (6), White, (7) one of the 1882 directory's black officers besides Henderson.

However, neither does the 1882 directory mention 7 black men for the officers to match up with the number of 7 given by Hubbard and Scott. Again, the directory for that year gives Henderson, Mitchell, Smith, Fralex, and Taylor, only five. It is possible that could by this time Richardson, Keith, and Thompson have left the force, and that is why they are not listed anymore. If that is the case, then neither of these men could have been the one the seven for 1882. But, it could also be the case that at least two of them were part of the 7-man black officers group, and then left the force before the official number was counted for the 1882 directory. Finally, since the 1882 only lists five and the 1883 directory does not list any black police officer, it is quite possible that in 1883 Henderson, Mitchell, Smith, Fralex, and Taylor could be the five black men that were part of the 10-man force, as mentioned by Ashmore and the 1899 Souvenir. They may have been the ones ended it all for African Americans on the force on the pre-modern era of the department. Of course, this is all assuming the accuracy of the both the city directories and the research of the cited scholars, and a number of different combinations of men for the years could be proposed. Nevertheless, the scenario offered here would be able to explain the problem of the given numbers and the actual data.

But enough about the numbers, what about the *men*? There does not appear to be any scholarship that focuses exclusively upon these men in great detail like Dennis Rousey's

“Yellow Fever and Black Policemen in Memphis.” All the sources that from historians that have been cited so far have followed the pattern that most scholarship has taken on the subject of black policemen during this work's focused time-period in not only Tennessee but also the South in general. They only briefly mention these officers in one place or another often in passing to the other topics that are being discussed with a larger framework of a dominating subject. Nevertheless, the information given by some is truly insightful to the careers and lives of some of these men. Hubbard mentions that Officer Bird served as a politician before he became a police officer.<sup>145</sup> In addition, this work also reveals that he was married by 1880 to a mulatto woman who kept house.<sup>146</sup> He was in his mid-twenties when he served as one of the early black officers in the early 1880s. He lived with his wife at Grove Street which was near Gillespie Street (modern day 11<sup>th</sup> Street) for a time. According to Hubbard, Officer Thompson led a very active and well documented life. She cites a 1896 *Chattanooga Times* that stated that he was a noted leader of the city's black community in one point, and in addition to the being a policeman, he would hold a number of public offices representing his constituents in the fourth ward. Hubbard further states that Thompson had even been captain of the city's colored fire department and “member of the Board of Mayor and Alderman in 1888-1890.”<sup>147</sup> He was also a supervisor in the city's chain gang as a jail guard. What this work adds is that he was married to Dolly, a marriage that lasted all the way through 1910, and they had at least two children.<sup>148</sup> He was a Tennessee native born around 1855, so there is a high likelihood that he could have been a former slave. According to his

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> 1880 U.S. Census, *Ancestry.com*

<sup>147</sup> Hubbard, *African Americans*, 24.

<sup>148</sup> 1880, 1910 U.S. census,

death certificate he passed away at the age of 60 on May 30, 1915 in Chattanooga of “ptomaine poisoning” (food poisoning). He father's name was William Thompson and he was survived by his wife who filed the report. His wife would die five years after him on January 16, 1920 in Chattanooga of tuberculosis at the age of 69.

Hubbard stated that there was not much information on Officer George White's life. This work discovered that at least by the 1880 census he was married and had 7 children. He was born soon after his time as an officer he became a carpenter. Officer Marion Keith had by married with a daughter and a son by the 1880 census. He was born around 1847 in Georgia. Before becoming an officer he was porter, and afterwards he became a drayman. Because their careers were so short, it is difficult to find out about the police work they may have performed. Nevertheless, more research should be done in the future, and this work leaves the lives of all the black police officers and their careers open for further research by scholars. In addition to these men, Hubbard tells of black deputy sheriff of Hamilton county named Hiram Tyree, who “who never lost an opportunity to aid in the development of the African American race.”<sup>149</sup>

### **1883 City Charter and the End of Chattanooga's Black Officers**

As stated earlier, this early southern police integration in Chattanooga ended abruptly in the year 1883 at a time where there were black police officers balanced out with five white counterparts on the force. What helped to bring the end was the passing of an act in the Tennessee state legislature on March 29, 1883, which amended the charter of the City of Chattanooga. Though, the new charter did not solely deal with the police department, it introduced a significant change to the police. The charter removed the control of the

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<sup>149</sup> Hubbard, African American, 25.



police department from the city council which had appointed black police, much like in Knoxville, and placed it under the control of the a governor-appointed commission. As, Ashmore pointed out in *Tennessee Lawman*, the act had “abolished the office of City Marshal and established new metropolitan system of policing the city to be commanded by a Chief of Police,” thereby creating for Chattanooga a completely new system of law enforcement.<sup>150</sup> On April 13 a new chief of police was chosen. A new selection of ten policemen, all white, were appointed to serve the new force. Even after the new police chief and police officers were picked and began to perform their duties, the old marshal, N. W. Wilbur, did not dismiss his band of men that previously served the city, which included the five black police officer, until the city officially ordered him to do so. On April 15, the mayor and the aldermen dismissed Marshall Wilbur and his integrated force. As said earlier, even though the new city charter drafted in March of 1883 did not specifically target the black officer, at least explicitly, it nevertheless played a role in the re-segregation of the police force by creating a new police system that simply appointed a force of men, though some of the officers hired to the new force, especially in leadership, were members of the previous force. Because of the creation of the new system, the black men who served were simply, perhaps perversely, overlooked and not hired back to the badge. Were it not for the new system, blacks would have continued to be on the force for longer. It is impossible to say for how long they would have lasted or if they would have continued to be on the force indefinitely like Knoxville. One thing is for sure, and that is that at least from 1880-1883 there was a consistent black presence on the force from year-to-year. This work would hazard to guess that they probably would have at least made it till the end of the decade before being stomped out by Jim Crow and the effects of rising

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<sup>150</sup> Ashmore, *Tennessee Lawman*, 397,

racial tensions all over the South in the late 1880s and 1890s on Chattanooga. James R. Mapp in his book *Chance or Circumstance?: A Memoir and Journey Through the Struggle for Civil Rights* he argues that the adoption of the charter was an attempt to “minimize black political strength.” His argument fits in with the wider “reclaiming” of the South from Republican and what was called “negro rule” in during the “redemption” era after Reconstruction had ended. If Mapp's argument is accurate, then it can easily be seen how the charter's mission to limit black political power could also include the elimination of African Americans from the city's police department.

In summary, because of the lack of both scholarship and uncovered primary source data on these men and the short time that they were on the force, there is not much that can be said about these men that has not been already said about the postwar African American policemen in the previous two cities. Parallels and common trends between the black officers in the three cities looked at so far can be drawn and should be discussed briefly, however. On the conditions and reasons for how these men emerge to serve the cities of Memphis, Knoxville, and Chattanooga: Though Reconstruction politics played a key role in the emergence of black in Tennessee just like other places in the South, it must be recognized that the majority of the appointments in the cities looked at are made after Reconstruction has already ended. This is important because Reconstruction and the politics of Radical Republicans become one of, if not the biggest, reasons for why southern cities begin to appoint black police officers during this time. It is when Reconstruction ends, and Democratic rule returns to the South that the curtailing the black presence on southern police forces. Blacks that may have been appointed during

Reconstruction may have stayed along until they were let go, fired, or left the force, but not many southern cities continued to make black appointments into the 1880s. With Memphis, Knoxville, and Chattanooga you see black appointments being made after Reconstruction, though Chattanooga ends up following the more typical path of other cities in the South. Black political power plays some role in all three cities, as well.

On the men themselves, Chattanooga continued to show the sort-of typecast of the Tennessee black policeman that the other two cities show: married, children (usually at least two or more), mix of black and mulatto men (though mostly black), typical in their 30s while serving as a police officer, most likely from the lower economic spectrum based on the type of jobs before and after careers as policemen, and stable living patterns.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### *The Mayor's Men and a Lone Patrol Driver:*

#### *The Curious Case of Nashville's Black Detectives of the 1870s and an 1888 Patrol Driver*

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If one were to ask the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department today and the *Nashville Banner* on April 11, 1948, both would tell you that the first black policemen in the city's history were selected that year.<sup>151</sup> However, the men that were hired that day were not the first appointed black officers of the law to police the city. This chapter will be a little different from the previous ones dealing with the Tennessee cities. This chapter will be more of a historical reflection than a straight history like the previous three. And since this is only a reflection the analysis is not going to be as deep in the other chapters. The reason being is that the research that went into the searching for the presence of African American police officer in Nashville during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries encountered something very unexpected discovery. This discovery came at a very late stage of research (which ran on a very limited time frame for the author of this work under.) This discovery expanded totally what was originally thought to be only a small instance of black police in the city's history, and even this small instance was something worthy to include in this work because it has been tremendously overlooked but hold a very interesting story. But this discovery has added so much to the table of historical discussion, and, consequently, research upon it is so fresh, it seems that only the tip of an iceberg has been touched, an iceberg that has barely been uncovered by scholars. This historical iceberg is the presence of black detectives in Nashville during

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<sup>151</sup> *Nashville Banner*, April 11, 1948.

Metropolitan Nashville Police Department's Facebook Page.

the 1870s.

There seems to be more than what has been thought of or written about. Mention of any blacks serving as lawman in the late nineteenth century has been very limited. W. Marvin Dulaney's *Black Police*, as stated before, is, perhaps, the most extensive focused work on the history of blacks in American law enforcement. In his work, Dulaney gives an exceptional treatment of the presence of black police in the south after the Civil War. However, he only provides a hint that there were some in Nashville during this time, but never provides detail. In the first chapter of his book, "Black Pioneers" he writes on the pages 13-14: "the arrest powers of black officers were also restricted in New Bern, Raleigh, North Carolina, and in Nashville, Tennessee."<sup>152</sup> After this he does not bring up black policemen in Nashville until he discusses the southern black policemen during the modern era of the South's police forces from the 1940s onward. Historians Harold Rabinowitz and Bobby L. Lovett only provide brief snap shots, as well. Rabinowitz in *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* only mentions "special detectives" that were hired by Mayor Thomas A. Kercheval, who served as the city's mayor on three separate occasions in the 1870s and 1880s, but never goes further in discussing them.<sup>153</sup> Lovett in his book *The African American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930* only briefly states that Nashville had "some black policemen in 1867-1869" and that there were replaced.<sup>154</sup> Neither scholar give an indication of the number of black officers there might have been, leaving an area for much need investigation. Eddie Ashmore

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<sup>152</sup> Dulaney, *Black Police*, 13-14.

<sup>153</sup> Rabinowitz, *Race Relations*, 43.

<sup>154</sup> Bobby L. Lovett, *The African American History of Nashville, 1780-1930*. (Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press, 1999) 86.

never mentions that there were any blacks who served on the force in neither the late 1860s nor 1870s. The generally impression from scholars has been that there was not much during this time when talking about any Nashville' black officers. However, there is more to the story to what has been barely told.

### **Nashville's Prevalence of Black Detectives during the 1870s**

The 1870s, there seems to have been a very prevalent time where the mayor made a significant number of black appointments as detective policemen. The mayor that seems to have appointed the most, if not all, of these black detectives, or “special detectives” as a newspaper during the time and Rabinowitz have called them, was three-time leader of Nashville, Thomas A. Kercheval, a Republican. Furthermore, Rabinowitz is the only one who hints at these men. The sources for this detectives is are two Nashville newspapers that ran during the 1870s. They appear in multiple articles in the both the *Nashville Union and American* and the *Nashville Daily American* throughout the 1870s and one from 1880. This work pulls from a total nine combined editions of these historical publications, however this work does not argue that these are all the mentions of these black detective that exist. This work suspects that there are many more left to be uncovered. This work also does not strictly bind the presence of these men to the 1870s. It focused during this decade because most of the newspaper articles being used for this chapter are from the 1870s. The editions drawn from are:

*Nashville Union and American* (NUA)

October 26, 1872

March 21, 1874

July 9, 1874

July 17, 1874

January 10, 1875

August 14, 1875

Nashville Daily American (NDA)

October 30, 1875

November 15, 1878

January 1, 1880

The presence of these black detectives stretch throughout the 1870s, and thus blacks are seen policing the Nashville far longer than Lovett's 1867-1869. Rabinowitz only cites the last three clipping in the endnote he uses when he briefly brings up the existence of Kercheval's "special detectives."

Fortunately, almost all these newspapers editions gives the names of these black officers. The October 26, 1872 issue of *Nashville Union and American* mentions the name "Coleman," "a colored man" who had been appointed as a "detective policeman" by Mayor Kercheval. His announcement was given a very small slot in the paper titled "A Colored Detective Policeman." Apparently, "Coleman," which the paper gives no indication of his full name, had been "rendered famous" by his involvement with a notable criminal "Cad Perkins." He was entered upon his "official duties" to serve the city. The March 21, 1874 edition of the same paper mentioned another "colored detective" named J. B. Walker. Subsequently, the July 09, 1874 edition mentioned "a trio of colored detectives," and the July 17, 1874 mentioned another black detective officer John B. Walker, who mostly like could be the "J. B. Walker," but, of course, it is possible



that “J. B.” stands for another name. The January 10, 1875 edition mentions Wash. [Washington] Withers, who would also make appearances in the *Nashville Daily American*, and another black officer, Constable Harney.

Then the “special detectives” hired by the mayor comes into the fray. They all are mentioned in three above editions of the *Nashville Daily American*: Mentioned in all three was Washington Withers who had been hired along with another black “special detective” John Coleman, who was only mentioned in the October 30, 1875 issue. Detective Samuel Coleman was referred to in the both the November 15, 1878 and January 1, 1880 editions. Also mentioned was a black justice, Justice Sampson W. Keeble, and Edward Gaines, who although not mentioned as detective, was referred to as a “colored” man who had sworn out a warrant of charges, so Gaines could have been a black officer of the law as well (NDA, November 15, 1875). Although, there could likely be some overlap with the names, given by just these nine newspaper editions alone there could be no more than 11 black detectives and other officers of the law running around in Nashville during the 1870s. Furthermore, this work does not argue that these men were the only ones, so there could even be more. In any case the lives and careers of these men have been vastly overlooked and have, consequently, not been given a proper look at by scholars as of yet.

What makes these men even more interesting is the duties that they had as evidenced by the newspapers themselves and the fact that they seem to have been a very problematic group of detectives. They had “official duties” as appointed detectives and could be referred to as “policeman” (NUA, October 26, 1872). They had the authority to arrest, and they used it even on dangerous criminals. Additionally, they were authorized

to carry weapons. Detective Withers was involved in cases where he was resisted by two blacks who had broken the law and pulled out a gun to make their arrest go smoother. (NDA, October 30, 1875) He was involved in another case where he was arresting “John Murphy,” who had been charged with assault and battery. African American Constable Harney also had arrested John Murphy, who had been issued three warrants for his arrest charging him with assault with intent to kill, resisting arrest, and a peace warrant. (NUA, January 10, 1875). Perhaps, the most interesting thing about the Murphy cases was what was left out. Typically, southern newspapers (and probably most newspapers in print in America) during this time almost never missed an opportunity to identify a black person. “Colored,” “negro,” or “black” was never far behind whenever an African American appeared in the papers, or most publications for that matter. This occurred even when a black person had not broken the law, but it was *especially* in those cases where one had. This is important to note because when John Murphy is mentioned for his crimes in the cases involving Withers and Harney, both who had been immediately identified as “colored” right after the ink had set in on their names, the race of Murphy is not given. This could be a clue that they were arresting and serving warrants on a white man, a dangerous white man at that. One would think the authority during this time would not send a black detective to bring an allegedly violent non-colored person, or a non-colored person in general.

What could also give a clue that Murphy may have been a white offender, was that in both cases even though he had been charged with violent crimes, he was soon leniently released after being arrested by black men. The first cases he only paid a two dollar fine and costs by the court and released. In the second, his case was investigated but he was

released soon after. This work questions that if John Murphy was a “colored man,” would he have been handed so leniently given his crimes. This might give us a clue in who could these black officers in Nashville could police, though their duties would have been most likely restricted to policing blacks. Additionally, they were even involved in the extract information from a criminal. (NUA, August 14, 1875).

However, these detectives also had the ability to be arrested themselves. What cannot be overlooked from these newspaper editions is that these men seemed to be in-and-out of trouble and were detained and in two cases dismissed from their jobs. Detective J. B. Walker was arrested by another officer and charged with “insulting treatment” of a lady while serving out a warrant for the arrest of her brother-in-law. (NUA March 21, 1874). Detective John B. Walker was arrested on the charge of “fraudulent appropriation of money.” The July 17, 1874 *Nashville Union and American* reported that after an investigation, he was discharged, ending his police career. It never mentions that he was guilty or innocent; however it seems that the newspaper probably wanted the reader to assume that a “colored” that mostly should have never had the title of “detective” in most minds of the day because of his race was found guilty after an “investigation” into a crime he allegedly committed. There is a sort of unspoken, but expected, guilty verdict is whispered from the ink itself with the mentioning that he was “discharged.” Also, compare this case to the treatment of John Murphy, who although committed far more violent offense “with the intent to kill” was fined a two dollars in one case and released after an “investigation” in another. This could be an indicator of both the injustices that were in justice system for blacks to endure and that Murphy was in fact white. These are viable possibilities from the primary source text.

Possibly the most problematic of these officers were the “special detectives” Washington Withers and Samuel Coleman. The three editions of the *Nashville Daily American* tell a small saga of trouble. In the October 30, 1875 issue, Withers is hired. It is not clear when Samuel Coleman is hired, but by the November 15, 1878 editions he was already on the force. In this November issue, “three colored officers of the law,” Withers and Coleman, along with Justice Sampson W. Keeble, were arrested by a constable on a warrant sworn out by Edward Gaines who was also “colored,” They had been charged with “extortion and official oppression.” They were held for a hefty \$250 bond for a future trial. It even mentioned that Keeble was arrested once before on a similar charge. Fortunately, surprising both Withers and Coleman had been able to keep their jobs, but, unfortunately, this would not be last time they would find themselves in trouble, and this time it would be the final straw. The January 1, 1880 edition of the *Nashville Daily American* it was reported that they apparently assisted in the escape of a black criminal named Israel Johnson. Johnson had been arrested and even had acknowledged himself for the theft of “furs and hides, etc. worth nearly \$100.” During the time, Johnson’s theft was no small robbery. The officer who had arrested him left Johnson in the custody of Withers and Coleman while the arresting officer went into a store for, and this work quotes, “a cigar.” For whatever reason, Withers and Coleman “told Johnson to leave, which he did.” The newspaper reported that the criminal had not been recaptured at the time of this issue. It mentions that Mayor Kercheval, who had hired them, revoked their appointments. Another point from the newspaper about this men was their authority was not respected at times, not even by their color. The *Nashville Union and American* on the July 9, 1874 addition reported that a black man created a scene involving “a trio of

colored detectives” when he repeatedly resisted arrest while crying out to the bystanders that had gathered to “get him an officer, in order that he might be ‘arrested right’” in his own words.

In short summary, what most likely explains the appointment of these men throughout the 1870s are at least these two things: Nashville mayor Thomas A. Kercheval and Reconstruction politics. As mentioned earlier, Mayor Kercheval, who seems to have been in the business of hiring black detectives to serve for him, was Nashville’s mayor for three separate occasions, 1871–1874, 1875–1883, and 1886–1888. He was Republican and made these appointments during Reconstruction, the time were most blacks were being appointed to southern police forces. These appointments were probably patronage to gather up black political support which was growing to be a powerful and thus valuable commodity. There is not much known on these men lives. However, Detective Withers appears in the 1880 census, as married to Maria, a mulatto “washerwoman.” He was 50 years-old, which means he was in his forties while he was detective and a bit older than the typical black Tennessee lawman. He was born in Virginia around 1830. Nevertheless, all these interesting instances of black police activity in Nashville during the 1870s, and possible more, means that there is an area of focus that historians can and should look into. The ground is fresh.

Before this chapter ends, it may be true that all of the black detectives of Nashville were probably all dismissed in the late 1870s and 1880s, but they were not the only case of black law enforcement before 1948. Though, Eddie Ashmore in *Tennessee Lawman* completely overlooks these men, he does however mention briefly the instance of John

Stuart, a patrol driver of the police wagon who was hired on March 1, 1888. Not much is known about him other than that he “performed police related duties in his position.”<sup>155</sup>

And guess who was mayor during that year. Kercheval. These were truly the mayor’s men.

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<sup>155</sup> Ashmore, Tennessee Lawman, 187.



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**APPENDIX: LIST OF AFRICAN AMERICAN POLICE OFFICERS**

**MEMPHIS POLICE DEPARTMENT**

**Metropolitan Era**

1. William Cook – Position: Turnkey (1867-1869)
2. John F. Harris – Pos: Turnkey (1867-1869)
3. George S. Hayden – Pos: Constable/Detective (1867/1868-1871)
4. Samuel J. Ireland – Pos: Detective (1867/1868-1869)

**Present Era**

5. Rufus H. McCain – (Pos: Turnkey/Deputy Constable (1874-sometime in the late 1870s)

*- From the Group of 14 hired in August 1878) -*

6. Alexander Mitchell – Pos: Patrolman (1878-1879)
  7. Jesse Woods – Pos: Patrolman (1878-1879)
  8. David Mitchell – Pos: Patrolman (1878-1881)
  9. Charles Wilson – Pos: Patrolman (1878-1881)
- “The Memphis 5” of the Group of 14*
10. Townsend D. Jackson [T. D. Jackson] [D. Jackson] – Pos: Patrolman (1878-1887)
  11. Burrell Randolph – Pos: Patrolman (1878-1889/1890)
  12. Moses Plummer – Pos: Patrolman (1878-1890)
  13. Howard Chastaine – Pos: Patrolman (1878-1890)
  14. Dallas Lee – Pos: Patrolman/Patrol Driver (1878-1895)

*- Detective Appointments of 1919 -*

- 15. Matthew Thornton (1919)
- 16. S. "Sweetie" Williams (1919)
- 17. F. M. Mercer (1919)

**KNOXVILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT**

**Temporary Black Officer Era**

- 18. A. B. Parker – (1870-1871)

*-From the Group of Four Temporary Officers Hired between 1871-1882-*

- 19. James Mason – (1875- probably 1876)
- 20. Samuel Osment – (1880-1881)
- 21. Moses Smith – (c. 1882)

**Permanent Black Officer Era**

Moses Smith – Pos: Patrolman (1881 -1885)

James Mason – Pos: Patrolman/probably Supernumerary (1884 -1902)

- 22. Hugh B. Draper – Pos: Patrolman (1885-1894)
- 23. William (Bill) S. Lillison – Pos: Patrolman/Supernumerary (1890-sometime in the 1920s)
- 24. Isaiah (Bud) H. Kyle – (1900 – c1913)
- 25. Joesph Reynolds – Pos: Supernumerary (1900-1905)
- 26. John Singleton – (1908-1922)
- 27. Charles A. Redmon – (1916-1927)
- 28. James Smith – (1919-1933)

29. Earnest E. Scruggs – (1920-1960)

30. Frank Robinson – (1921-1927)

31. Thomas Nowlin – (1924-1954)

32. Wilburn A. Lyons – (1930-1949)

### **CHATTANOOGA POLICE DEPARTMENT**

33. William A. Richardson – (c. 1880-c.1881)

34. Marion Keith – (c. 1880-c. 1881)

35. William Henderson – (c. 1881-1882/1883)

36. Andrew (Andy) Thompson – (c. 1881-188/1882)

37. Larken Fralex – (c.1882-1882/1883)

38. Joseph Taylor – (c.1882-1882/1883)

39. Rufus Smith – (c.1882-1882/1883)

40. Dock. F. Mitchell – (c.1882-1882/1883)

41. Charles (Charley) Bird – sometime between 1880-1883

42. George White – sometime between 1880-1883

#### Constables

43. John W. Robinson – (1881)

44. William A. Willis - (1882)

#### **Nashville Detectives/Law Officers and Police Driver**

45. Washington Withers

46. John Coleman

47. Samuel Coleman

48. "Coleman" [Could be John, Samuel, or another person]
49. John B. Walker
50. J. B. Walker [Mostly likely "John B. Walker" but it is possible that this could be someone else.]
51. Constable Harvey
52. Edward Gaines
53. Justice Sampson W. Keeble
54. John Stuart – Pos: Patrol Driver (1888-?)

**APPENDIX: IMAGES OF BLACK OFFICERS**

**MEMPHIS**



The Memphis Police Department sometime during the early 1890s. Eddie M. Ashmore provides this photograph in his book *Tennessee Lawman: History of the Men and Women Behind the Badge*, and he states that this is an image believed to be of Moses Plummer, who was one of the fourteen black officers hired in August of 1878 and who left the force around 1890. However, if the above image is from the early 1890s, then the black officer pictured could also be either Burrell Randolph (1878-1890), Howard Chastaine (1878-1890), or Dallas Lee (1878-1895). (pg 293, *Tennessee Lawman: History of the Men and Women Behind the Badge*.)



Matthew Thornton, Sr., one of the three black detective hired by the mayor of Memphis in 1919, early (left) and late (right) in his life. After his short time as a detective he went on to become a very popular leader within the black community in Memphis. He became active in the political, social, and civic affairs of his community. He was widely respected by both blacks and whites. Additionally, he was elected “Mayor of Beale Street,” an honorary position, in 1938 and would hold the position until his death in 1963 at age 90. (pg. 308, Notable Black Memphians [left picture]; <http://historic-memphis.com/memphis-historic/beale/bealestreet.html> [right picture])



### First Modern Era Black Officers of Memphis



The first group of black appointments to the Memphis force made during the modern era in 1948 after a twenty-nine year hiatus. (pg 328, *Tennessee Lawman: History of the Men and Women Behind the Badge.*)



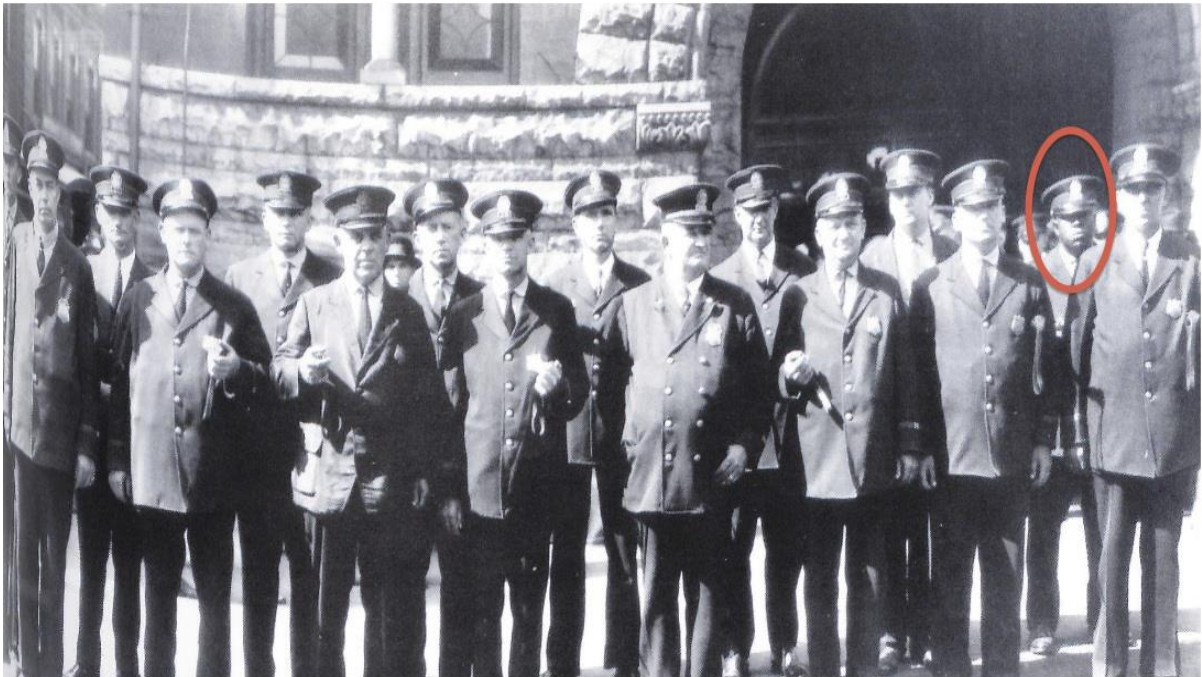
The second group of black appointments to the Memphis force in 1951. (pg 329, *Tennessee Lawman: History of the Men and Women*)

KNOXVILLE

A collection of images of nine of the many black men who served the Knoxville Police Department from James Mason in 1884 to Ernest E. Scruggs in the mid-twentieth century. These collection of images are from W. Marvin Dulaney's book *Black Police in America*. Although Dulaney has Officer Scrugg's police career ending in 1960, he actually left the force by 1959 and died the same year. (pg 48, *Black Police in America*)



The Knoxville Police Department in 1910. Hidden in the upper left corner are the three black police officers on the force at the time, Isaiah (Bud) H. Kyle, William (Bill) S. Lillison, and John Singleton, respectively. (pg 363,



A group of officers from the Knoxville Police Department in 1926. An unnamed black police officer is pictured in the far right. (pg 365, *Tennessee Lawman: History of the Men and Women Behind the Badge.*)

### Modern Era Knoxville Black Officers



A group of Knoxville black police officers during the modern era in 1960. (pg 370, *Tennessee Lawman: History of the Men and Women Behind the Badge.*)

CHATTANOOGA

Andrew (Andy) F. Thompson, Charles (Charley) Bird, and George White, respectively, who served on Chattanooga's police force during the early 1880s. (pg 24, *American Americans of Chattanooga: A History of Unsung Heroes*)



Hiram Tyree. He served as alderman and deputy sheriff of Hamilton County. (pg 25, *American Americans of Chattanooga: A History of Unsung Heroes*)

### Modern Era Chattanooga Black Officers



The first group of black police officers in the modern era hired to the Chattanooga Police Department in 1948. These men ended the sixty-five-year absence of African Americans on the force. (pg 397, *Tennessee Lawman: History of the Men and Women Behind the Badge.*)



