John Jacob Kiefer – Cincinnati, Ohio's First Police Chief

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Cincinnati, Ohio's First Police Chief

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John Jacob Kiefer was born on February 15, 1825, in Bavaria,

Germany, and migrated to the United States in 1828 at the age of 3 with his parents, settling in Cincinnati. He married Dorothea Amelia Busse, also a German immigrant, on June 4, 1847, in Cincinnati, Ohio, and together they raised five children: Catherine, Louisa, Emma, Charles, and Anna.
Kiefer was regarded as one of Cincinnati's veteran firemen, having served seventeen years with the department. He later became a constable in the city's notoriously turbulent "Bloody Tenth" Ward, where he worked alongside Colonel Leonard A. Harris , who would go on to serve as Mayor of Cincinnati. From his role as constable, Kiefer advanced to the position of "Captain of the Watch".5

By the 1840s, Cincinnati's rapid growth had pushed the old City Marshal and Watch system beyond its limits. The city's expanding population, rising crime, and increasingly complex urban environment demanded a more professional and accountable approach to public safety. Reformers began calling for a centralized, non-political police force—one with standardized hiring, consistent discipline, and leadership appointed for competence rather than elected through shifting political tides.



In 1852, the Ohio Legislature, in response to riots in the major cities, granted municipal governments more authority to create centralized police forces with defined chief's offices.8
In 1853, Cincinnati finally activated its newly organized police department. The reformed department was now uniformed and professionally supervised, reflecting national trends toward standardized policing. Under this new system, the office of the Chief of Police was created, however the City Marshal remained in competition for several more

years.8

Kiefer became the first appointed Chief of Police in 1853 when the city implemented its new police structure. He served under Mayor David L. Snellbaker , whose son Thomas later became Chief of Police in 1874.

Kiefer's appointment was controversial from the moment it was announced. As a German immigrant and a Democrat closely connected to Cincinnati's rapidly growing German community, he entered office at a time when the city was sharply divided along ethnic and political lines. The newly created Board of Police Commissioners—charged with overseeing the restructured police force—was itself unstable, deeply factional, and still struggling to define the authority of the new Chief of Police. Its members were split by party loyalties and, in many cases, driven by strong anti-immigrant sentiment.



Kiefer stepped into a political storm he could not possibly navigate, and within only a few weeks, he was removed from office. No evidence ever surfaced suggesting corruption, misconduct, incompetence, or dereliction of duty on his part.
On August 21, 1862, during the American Civil War, Kiefer enlisted in the Union Army and served in the 108th Ohio Volunteer Infantry Regiment, largely recruited from the German-immigrant communities of Cincinnati. He rose from private to sergeant during his military career.5 Kiefer's service dates would have placed him in heavy fighting in the Chattanooga Campaign, the Atlanta Campaign, Sherman's March to the Sea, and the Carolinas Campaign. He mustered out on June 9, 1865.

Kiefer died from heart trouble on November 27, 1904, at his residence at 117 Bradford Street in Dayton, Ohio, at the age of 79. He is interred in Section 104, Lot 1674 of Woodland Cemetery and Arboretum in Montgomery County, Ohio, alongside his wife, who passed away in 1906. 1 5

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