

# Cincinnati Constable Peter Davison | City of Cincinnati

Age: 49  
Served: 9 years  
1841 to June 25, 1850

## OFFICER

Pete was born July 7, 1800, the first of eight children born to Captain John and Elizabeth Davison in New York City. He was christened in New York on August 6, 1800. Captain Davison moved his whole family to Cincinnati sometime after 1815.

Pete married Eliza about 1829 and fathered a son. There is no record of their marriage in Hamilton County, so we believe they were married in New York. Nor do we know if Pete moved to Cincinnati before, with, or after Captain Davison.

We do know that in 1836 Pete and his wife and son were living in the Bottoms on Water Street between Elm and Plum Streets and he was working at Slough and Davison, a coffee house.

On April 5, 1841, Pete ran for and was elected to the position of Constable of the 3rd Ward. During this era, there were seven wards in Cincinnati, and each ward elected a City Councilman, a Constable, and three Watchmen. Constable Davison would have overseen the elected Watchmen and have been responsible for serving warrants and summonses, investigating crimes, et al. Constables also executed sales of foreclosed businesses and other ministerial duties for the courts.

During 1847, he and 2nd Ward Constable (and later Police Chief)

James Ruffin were commended for capturing two of the most skilled counterfeiters of the time, Lewis Slade and John Lovejoy, and seizing \$200 in counterfeit bills (almost \$8,000 in today's currency).

Constable Davison was a highly respected and well-liked constable, as attested to by his nine consecutive popular elections. By mid-1850, he and his family lived on the north side of 5th Street between Main and Sycamore Streets.

On the night of June 18, 1850, the Van Amburg's Circus hired Constable Davison, 8th Ward Constable Phillip Miller, 5th Ward Constable Alexander Delzell, and other officers to keep order at the circus that had set up in the vacant block bounded by 12th, 13th, Vine, and Race Streets.

## **MURDERER**

John C. Walker was born February 11, 1828 in Shelby County, Indiana to Dr. John C. and Bertha Ellen Walker. When he was ten years old, his family moved to LaPorte County, Indiana. At 21, he was already ensconced in Democrat politics, at a time when North and South were in heated debates and violent incidents over slavery and succession. John was vociferously pro-slavery and would later be the chief arbiter in trying to create a traitorous army in the North during the Civil War.

During January 1849, John traveled to Cincinnati to be treated for poor eyesight by Dr. Taliaferro. Dr. Taliaferro was a specialist in diseases of the eye and a slave-owning, and arguably slave-abusing, Democrat.

John's uncle, Timothy Walker, was a Cincinnati of some note. Seven years prior, he was appointed to the Hamilton County

Common Pleas Court bench. In 1843, he won election as the 1st Ward Councilman and appointed Professor of Law in the Cincinnati College. In 1846, he was elected President of the Convention to form a City Charter in Cincinnati. In May 1850, he was offered an appointment to the Ohio Superior Court and became managing editor of the Cincinnati Commercial Gazette.

For some reason, John Walker walked around town with a large Bowie knife in a scabbard concealed on his person.

On June 18, 1850, he attended the Van Amburg's Circus.

## **INCIDENT**

Between 9 p.m. and 10 p.m. a significant crowd, including Walker, had formed along the ring, too close to the performers, and blocking the view of the properly seated patrons. Walker had been told multiple times by multiple officers to not stand there and had at least twice had been escorted to a seat. About 10 o'clock, Constable Delzell remarked to those gathered there again to quit standing there and find a seat. All but Walker obeyed. Constable Delzell tended to another matter and upon return to ringside found Walker still blocking the view of those seated. He again advised Walker to be seated. Walker again ignored him. Thinking Walker might be deaf, Constable Delzell got in front of him, motioned that he needed to sit, and placed his hand on Walker's shoulder to nudge him back toward the seats. Walker resisted and Delzell more forcibly pushed him backwards.

Walker put his hands to his bosom and Constable Delzell excitedly said, "You damned rascal! If you draw a pistol or a knife on me, I'll kill you!" Walker muttered something and withdrew his Bowie knife. Delzell saw it, grabbed his wrist with

one hand, and punched his face with the other. Walker, slightly dazed, staggered back and someone from the crowd pulled Constable Delzell backwards. Walker then sliced Constable Delzell across the abdomen. The panicked crowd rushed between them and Walker fell to the ground.

Constable Davison heard and saw the commotion. He rushed to help Walker up from the floor and having done so, turned away. Walker then stabbed him in the abdomen. The knife penetrated Davison's left side, touching his lower rib and into his stomach, liver, and intestines. Davison then tried to strike Walker with his cane, but other patrons interfered, and Walker briefly escaped. Davison yelled, "Stop him! He stabbed or cut me!" Constable Delzell also yelled, "He cut me, too."

Two other officers, Constable Miller and Deputy Sheriff Charles G. Broadwell, stopped and arrested Walker and took him to jail. Walker requested that Broadwell contact Doctors Holcomb, Eckstein, Scott, Sullivan, and others. We believe Walker was also learning medical science while in Cincinnati and probably knew these doctors in that pursuit.

Constable Delzell tried to walk home but collapsed. He was carried to 13th and Race Streets and then transported to his home on Gano between Vine and Walnut Streets.

Constable Davison was carried to the home of Nathan Marchant (later a Cincinnati Police Court judge) on the east side of Race Street between 12th Street and the Canal.

By June 20th, reporters visited the two wounded officers. Dellzel was improving, but there was little hope for Constable Davison's recovery. On June 22nd, the reports were the same. Believing that he was near death, Constable Davison called on his brother-in-law, John Bonte, and issued a dying declaration. It included, "I was cut when I went in to save that young man,"

and "For my own part I forgive him and may his God forgive him." At dusk on the 24th, Constable Davison was reported to be almost lifeless.

Constable Delzell lingered near death for many weeks, but he recovered.

## **DEATH**

Constable Davison died at 5:15 p.m. on June 25, 1850. He was survived by his wife of 21 years, Elizabeth (Eliza) Davison; a son; and siblings, Rachel (John) Bonte, Mary Ann Davison, Juliann (Joshua) Estepp, Catherine Davison, William Davison, Danial Davison, and Thomas Davison.

His funeral was held from the Marchant home on June 26, 1850. A large number of family and friends followed his remains to his final resting place and the police of the city attended in a single unit. News accounts do not disclose a church or burial grounds.

## **JUSTICE**

On June 19, 1850, Walker was arraigned for Stabbing to Kill the two officers. His bond was set at \$1000 for Davison and \$2000 for Delzell (about \$120,000 in today's dollars).

Immediately, his uncle's Cincinnati Commercial Gazette came out and painted Walker as an angel, and referred the public to positive character references, Dr. Landon C. Rives, Alexander H. McGuffey, John L. Scott, and Alfred O. Eggleston, Jr.

After Constable Davison's death, a warrant for Murder was issued

for Walker at the request of his brother, Daniel Davison, a 5th Ward Watchman. On June 26, 1850, Walker was re-arrested and charged with Murder. Mayor Henry E. Spencer held an arraignment. On June 27th, at his preliminary hearing, the mayor bound him over to the grand jury on a charge of Manslaughter saying, "This is one of the most unfortunate cases I have ever been called to hear. A young man of most excellent and amiable character has taken the life of a fine officer, whilst the officer was seeking to save him. The mayor set his bond at \$4000 (more than \$160,000 in 2024 dollars). John L. Scott and Alex McGuffey, attorneys, paid his bond.

The Hamilton County grand jury indicted Walker on a charge of Murder. On August 9, 1850, the case against Walker for stabbing Constable Dellzel was dismissed by request of the Prosecutor.

On August 21, 1850, a jury acquitted Walker. The case came before Common Pleas Court Judge Robert B. Warden. The cards seemed to be stacked against justice for Constable Davison. Judge Warden was another Democrat with pro-slavery leanings and later wrote a biography of Popular Sovereignist Stephen Douglas (Abraham Lincoln's opponent). State's Attorney A. G. W. Carter prosecuted the case, and one of his assistant prosecutors, though not named as an attorney of record in this case, was Walker's uncle. Four attorneys defended Walker, but according to the Cincinnati Enquirer it might as well have been five. Judge Warden, in charging the jury, all but directed the jury to acquit Walker – which they did after a few moments of deliberation.

## **EPILOGUE**

Eliza Davison, in 1850, was working as a nurse and living on the north side of Franklin Street between Young Street and Broadway

near the Canal. Less than a year after Constable Davison's murder, his son drowned in the Miami Canal on May 21, 1851. We believe Eliza died in 1859 and is buried in the Fulton Presbyterian Cemetery near Lunken Airport.

John Walker, on the other hand, within a year of murdering Constable Davison, was elected to the Indiana House of Representatives. In August 1853, he raised and was appointed as Colonel of the 1st Regiment in LaPorte County. The purpose of the regiment, we assume, was related to the guerilla war over slavery in Kansas, but we find no evidence that the regiment fought anywhere.

On June 1, 1854, Walker gained principal control of the Democrat newspaper, Laporte Times. Two weeks later, he was named to the Board of Directors for the Cincinnati, Peru, and Chicago Railroad. By September 1854, he was nominated to run for representative from the 9th District. In January 1855, he and C. W. Cottom purchased the Indiana State Sentinel newspaper and renamed it the Indiana Times. In 1856, he was nominated to run for Lieutenant Governor but was ineligible due to his youthful age. In March 1857, he was appointed by the Democrat President James Buchanan as Indian Agent for New Mexico. In 1858 he announced that he was running for Representative from the 9th District to the Indiana House of Representatives. He failed in that regard, but the legislature elected him as State Printer in January 1859. On June 21, 1859, he was elected Chairman of the Convention of Editors in Indiana.

In April 1861, he was organizing a regiment of light dragoons headquartered in Indianapolis to serve in the Civil War ostensibly on the side of the North. However, on April 30th, the legislature funded infantry and artillery regiments, but no cavalry. He did receive an appointment of Colonel to the Irish Regiment based in Bardstown, Kentucky. He was discharged from

service suddenly in August 1862 when his traitorous leanings were discovered, but not yet made public.

In January 1863, he was elected by the legislature as Agent of State in Indiana.

In May 1863, it was found that an impostor had infiltrated the Irish Regiment with the knowledgeable assistance of Colonel Walker. Then, on July 30, 1864, Indiana Governor Morton broke the news that an official report had been submitted by him in June 1863 naming an organization that was antagonist to the government, the Sons of Liberty, similar to and later absorbed by the Knights of Golden Circle. Walker held the rank of Major General in the secret society having been promoted at a meeting in New York on February 22nd.

While in New York, Major General Walker, with between \$70,000 and \$90,000 having been embezzled from the State of Indiana as its Agent, arranged for 30,000 revolvers, 42 crates of ammunition, and 20,000 Garibaldi rifles to be delivered to the Sons of Liberty in Indianapolis. The cache was found and some of the Sons of Liberty were arrested.

Walker escaped. Over the next couple of years, he stayed in Cuba, Drummondville, Quebec, and England. On August 27, 1866, the Lafayette newspaper, Journal and Courier, reported that President Andrew Johnson, a slave-owning Southern Democrat and accused Copperhead, "pardoned John C. Walker, the most guilty and dangerous of all the conspirators who attempted to involve our State in the horrors of civil war in 1864."

Within a month, the murderous, traitorous Walker was already in Indianapolis consulting with the chief managers of the National Union Party in his enthusiastic support of Andrew Johnson for President.

Having lived a charmed life, he died of natural causes on April 14, 1883 at the age of 55.

If you know of any information, artifacts, archives, or images regarding this officer or incident, please contact the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum at [Memorial@Police-Museum.org](mailto:Memorial@Police-Museum.org).

*© This narrative was further researched and revised on November 21, 2024 by Cincinnati Police Lieutenant Stephen R. Kramer (Retired), Greater Cincinnati Police Historical Society, with extensive research also conducted by Cincinnati Homicide Detective Edward W. Zieverink III (Retired), Greater Cincinnati Police Museum Historian. All rights are reserved to them and the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum.*