Patrolman James Edgar | Newport Police Department

Age: 37
Served: 11 months
January 1884 to November 16, 1884.

OFFICER

James was born between 1843 and 1846 in Ireland to John and Margaret (Hastings) Edgar.

He enlisted in the United States Army on November 11, 1861 at the age of 15 to 18 as a Musician (Drummer) and served in Company K of the 71st Ohio Regiment of the Union Army during the Civil War. In 1862, at the Battle of Shiloh, the 71st was attached to the 2nd Brigade of the Army of Tennessee. A third of Company K was killed and Private Edgar and others were captured, but he escaped. On April 7, 1864, he was promoted to Corporal.

The 71st participated in the siege of Atlanta, Battle at Jonesboro, and operations against General Hood in Georgia and Alabama; including battles at Franklin and Nashville. In all, Corporal Edgar's regiment had lost about 20% of its complement when he was mustered out on November 30, 1865.

After the war, Corporal Edgar continued his military affiliations with the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), an association of Union veterans and the Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Association. On January 9, 1880, James was elected to the Board of Administration of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Association.

James was married on July 2, 1868 and began a family. He worked for years as a Teamster. One night during 1878, while in his night clothes, he chased a would-be burglar down the street. He cried for help, but none appeared and the burglar escaped. Perhaps the memory of this event led him to join the Newport Police Department in January of 1884.

INCIDENT

Shortly after 3 a.m. on November 13, 1884 Patrolmen Edgar and John McCloud were making their rounds. When they arrived at Monmouth and Ringgold (now 8th) Streets they heard a strange noise coming from John B. Lock's (the Chief's brother) grocery store on the northeast corner. As Patrolman McCloud looked in the window, he spied three burglars.

The burglars also saw McCloud and ran to the rear door of the store. The officers ran around the building to the rear and found their way blocked by a tall fence. The burglars scaled another portion of the fence and that abutted a vacant lot.

Patrolman McCloud ran toward Dayton Street. He was able to fire at one of them and was certain that the shot took effect, but at least two of the burglars somehow made it to Dayton Street where all five, the burglars and two officers, met and engaged in a firefight across the street. Apparently, none of those shots took effect.

One of the burglars ran up Ringgold Street and Patrolman Edgar pursued. McCloud ran after the other two down Dayton Street. Both were now involved in separate running gun battles. McCloud could no longer see his adversaries due to thick fog. From the rear of the store to the end of the pursuits, Patrolmen Edgar and McCloud fired five and six shots, respectively.

When it was over, Patrolman Edgar called for McCloud. Patrolman McCloud responded back to Dayton Street where he found Patrolman Edgar leaning against a tree box. He asked him if he had hit any of the thieves and Patrolman Edgar responded, “No, Jack. I am afraid they got me. I am shot.”

Mr. Lock heard the shooting and came down from his home above the store. He and Patrolman McCloud carried Patrolman Edgar to Dr. F. A. Locke’s dispensary. The doctor probed for the bullet in his bowels but could not retrieve it. Dr. Locke could do nothing for him and he was transported to his home at 154 Putman Street. It was thought that he might recover.

DEATH

It was not known at the time that the bullet had zig-zagged through Patrolman Edgar’s body and would end up taking his life. Three days after being shot, Patrolman Edgar died of peritonitis at 9:35 a.m. on November 16, 1884.

Patrolman Edgar was survived by his wife of 17 years, Katherine “Kate” (Cayne) Edgar (33), and five children; Lydia Edgar (15), John Edgar (13), Margaret Edgar (10), James Edgar (8), and Jesse Edgar (14 mos.).

‘s grave site

His funeral was held on November 18, 1884 at Grace Methodist Episcopal Church. Every Newport officer and officers from Cincinnati and Covington were in attendance. Pallbearers included Newport Patrolmen Adolph Hanselman and Steve Solar, Covington Patrolmen Mike Bolen and George Cutler, and GAR representatives Al Breith, L. Brandts, C. Rudemacher, and George Metzel. Patrolman Edgar was buried in the Section 15, Soldier’s Row 1 of Evergreen Cemetery.

The Newport City buildings were draped in black for 30 days. An effort was started already on the 17th to raise sufficient funds to purchase a home for Mrs. Edgar and her children. They were otherwise destitute. By the end of the month, Newport citizens had raised over $1,000 for them.

INVESTIGATION

With almost no clues as to the identities of the burglars, law enforcement on both sides of the Ohio River rounded up the usual suspects. William Gates, Charles Flannelly, John Davies, William Elliot, and Lon Emmerson were arrested in Cincinnati and taken to the Hammond Street Stationhouse. But all had alibis.

Several were picked up in Covington and Newport, but none seemed to be involved. That night, the Newport City Council passed a resolution offering $300 reward for the apprehension and conviction of the killer.

A couple of days after the murder, William “Billy” Nugent, a thief known throughout the country, handed a revolver to a barkeeper at an Indianapolis saloon and asked him to hold it for him saying, “I killed a cop in Newport, Kentucky with it, and saved my own life.” A few days later, he retrieved the weapon, went to Huntington in northern Indiana, and robbed the Post Office there. He was caught by a Marshal in Huntington and fled south with officers in pursuit. During an ensuing firefight in Kentucky, he killed a Kentucky officer, but the Marshal killed him. No evidence was garnered to otherwise implicate Nugent’s in Patrolman Edgar’s murder.

By January 1885, there was still no solution to the case and the Newport City Council raised the reward to $1000. On Decoration Day, May 31, 1885, an exceptionally large crowd came to the cemetery to decorate Patrolman Edgar’s grave.

There was no forthcoming information and the case went cold. On July 14, 1886, a William Brannan called the Chief of Police to his bedside at St. Elizabeth Hospital where he was being treated for a failed suicide attempt. A known Newport thief, Brannan admitted to a number of crimes. He also advised of his associations and crimes committed with master thieves “Whitey” Sellman, “Dutchy” Edenberg, Billy Dreer, and another whose name

he could not remember. He then advised that while in Cincinnati on November 15, 1884, he happened to meet three men in Cincinnati that discussed with him their involvement in the grocery store burglary and Patrolman Edgar's murder. They were "Red" Jenkins, "Dutchy" Edenberg, and "Whitey" Sellman. The knowledge of this secret had been so great a burden, he said, that he confessed it to Rev. Father McNerney and then went out to hang himself. By 1886, Sellman was already dead in New Orleans. Little was known about Jenkins. Edenberg was one of the best-known thieves and cutthroats in the country. Regardless, no evidence was ever obtained to support Brannan's story.

The case was never solved. Chief Lock went to his death certain that Nugent was the killer.

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.

This narrative was revised November 22, 2018 by Cincinnati Police Lieutenant Stephen R. Kramer (Retired), Greater Cincinnati Police Historical Society Vice President, with research assistance and information provided by Cincinnati Homicide Detective Edward Zieverink (Retired), Greater Cincinnati Police Museum Historian, and Susan Edgar Major, Patrolman Edgar's great granddaughter. *All rights are reserved to them and the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum.*