Patrolman William Sanders | Cincinnati Police Department

Age: 29
Served: 10 days
March 1, 1888, to March 11, 1888

On February 7, 1888, Republican Mayor Armor Smith, Jr. nominated William Sanders, a highly intelligent Black United States Army veteran, to the Police Board of Commissioners to be appointed as Patrolman. Three day later on the 10th, his appointment was approved. His bond was approved by the Commissioners on February 29, and by March 1, 1888, he was working as a Patrolman.

Five days after his appointment, at 1 a.m. on March 6, 1888, while patrolling his beat at Grandview Avenue and McMillan Street, Patrolman Sanders hopped off a curb or a step and his revolver came out of his breast pocket, fell to the ground, and discharged. The bullet entered his foot through the ball of the heel.

Patrolman Sanders was removed by Patrol 6 to No. 14 Walnut Street and attended there by Dr. Jones.

Within a day or two, Patrolman Sanders was transported to City Hospital. Medical personnel probed for the bullet, but they failed to find it. On March 9, 1888, doctors cut into the opposite side of his heel hoping to find it there; but it was not. Later in the day, he had violent bouts of hiccoughing which surgeons attributed to “great shock and irritation to the nervous system.” His temperature and pulse were very high as well. Amputation was the only solution, but his condition would not permit the operation.

DEATH

Shortly after midnight on March 11, 1888, Patrolman Sanders succumbed to septicemia and carditis, becoming the second officer in one year to die from an accidental discharge of a revolver fallen from a breast pocket.

Patrolman Sanders was survived by a wife. The Police Relief Directors arranged for his funeral and burial, with full military honors, at Wesleyan Cemetery on March 13, 1888, from his late residence at 114 Elmore Street. In attendance were the Sixth Company of the Police Battalion, the First Regimental Band, family, and friends. He was buried with full military honors.

NOTE

Firearms were not a standard part of a policeman's tools in most agencies until the late 1880s. If they carried a firearm, due to their relatively small salaries, they carried old, cheap, and often unreliable revolvers. Being in its infancy, the concept of armed law enforcement officers did not immediately push holster technology for concealed carry and officers merely placed their revolvers in their breast pockets. Naturally, a number of these were dropped and physics dictated that they fall toward the heavier end, landing on the hammer, and discharging the firearm. This circumstance caused four Cincinnati officers' deaths: Patrolmen Patrick Riley in 1887, William Sanders in 1888, Henry Roese in 1890, and Luther Brooks in 1901. There were at least five other cases reported (and probably many unreported) where revolvers dislodged and accidentally discharged; some causing injury to officers or bystanders. In

the first decade of the 20th Century, the hammer block safety was invented, and no more officers died from accidentally dropped revolvers.

EPILOGUE

For nearly one hundred years, the officer's name has been incorrectly listed as "Saunders". Research conducted by retired Cincinnati Homicide Detective Edward Zieverink during 2012 proved this to be inaccurate.

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 researched and revised on February 8, 2017 by Cincinnati Police Lieutenant Stephen R. Kramer (Retired), Greater Cincinnati Police Museum Executive Director, with research assistance from Cincinnati Homicide Detective Edward W. Zieverink III (Retired), Greater Cincinnati Police Museum Historian, and Joyce Meyers of the Price Hill Historical Society. All rights are reserved to them and the Greater Cincinnati Police Historical Society.