

Patrol wagon Driver John Joseph Sturm | Cincinnati Police Department



Age: 43

Served: 4 years

1871 to 1873 and 1883 to March 29, 1884

OFFICER

Joe was born in Frederick, Maryland on February 18, 1841 to George Joseph Sturm and Catherine Rehkemp. By the time he was 18, he was working as a servant in Democrat Cincinnati Mayor Richard M. Bishop's residence at 8th and Mound Streets; probably working out of the stable. There he met another servant, an Irish immigrant, Johanna Mockler. They were married two years later at St. Peter and Chains Cathedral.

We believe Joe left his new bride to fight in the Civil War and was wounded at Chickamauga.

After he was discharged, he worked at various jobs, usually around horses.

Joe joined the Cincinnati Police Department in 1871, hired by Republican Mayor S. S. Davis, and worked in the Hammond Street Station. On September 7, 1872, the citizens of Mt. Adams presented Patrolman Sturm with a fine gold-headed cane to show their appreciation for his untiring discharge of his duties. It appears he left the force by 1873, probably a partisan dismissal by Democrat Mayor George W. C. Johnston; which may have been the impetus for the cane presentation.

Patrolman Sturm went back to working as a coachman, teamster, driver, and/or blacksmith. Johanna worked as dressmaker and raised their three children.

During December 1881, Cincinnati's Superintendent of the Police Telegraph purchased for the City a Patrol Wagon; the first in Cincinnati and reportedly the third in the United States. By 1883, the Department purchased five wagons, and under another Democrat Mayor William F. Means, Patrolman Sturm was rehired as the Patrol Wagon Driver for Patrol 4.

BACKGROUND

During 1883, at least 93 people lost their lives in Cincinnati to murderers who rarely, by the standards of the time, received due justice for their crimes. The citizens of the city and of Hamilton County were growing tired of the circumstances and perceived corruption permitting them from avoiding punishment, e.g., execution.

Then, the year 1884 opened with a few notoriously vicious murders and a substantive rumor that juries were being bribed to

free murderers. The population of Cincinnati was uneasy when William Berner and Joseph Palmer came up for separate trials for a Christmas Eve 1883 murder of William Kirk, a West End horse trader. Even though Berner confessed, when he went to trial, the jury on March 26, 1884 returned a conviction for the reduced charge of Manslaughter. The populace was outraged.

On March 28, 1884 about a thousand citizens met inside Music Hall on Elm Street with thousands more outside the building. The meeting was tense, but peaceful. But, as they were leaving, a man on Elm Street yelled, "On to the jail! Follow me! Let's hang Berner!" The crowd became a mob and by the time they arrived at the Courthouse at 9:55 a.m. it numbered 10,000 by some accounts.

Warned of their approach, Hamilton County Sheriff Morton L. Hawkins sent in the riot alarm to the Cincinnati Police and Fire Departments and sent for the First Regiment of the Ohio National Guard.

INCIDENT

The responding guardsmen were inside the jail by 11:30 p.m. as a full-scale riot broiled around them.

The crowd swelled and, about 1:30 a.m. on the morning of March 29, 1884, the rioters poured petroleum down the steps into the tunnel where the militia were stationed and set it afire. The militia sprang to the door and delivered a shattering volley on the mob. They then pushed their way up the steps and fired again into the crowd.

Unknown to the militia, Patrol Wagon Driver Sturm had driven his wagon from the other side of the building and bravely into the

mob in order to pick up a wounded rioter and take him to the hospital. He had loaded his charge onto the wagon when he was struck with four rounds from the militia's volley.

DEATH

Patrol Wagon Driver Sturm was rushed to the hospital but was dead on arrival at 2 a.m. on March 29, 1884 – becoming the first of many deaths during the three nights of rioting. He was then transported to his home at 159 W. Court Street, four blocks west of the burning Courthouse.

Patrol Wagon Driver Sturm was survived by his parents; wife of 22 years, Johanna (Mockler) Sturm (43); children, George Albert Sturm (21), Mary Anne Sturm (20), and William Joseph Sturm (13); and siblings. A visitation was held in his home at 159 West Court Street. A Requiem High Mass was celebrated at 8:30 a.m. on March 31, 1884 at St. Xavier Church on Sycamore Street – the morning after the final night of rioting and four blocks south of the gutted Courthouse. He is buried in St. Joseph New Cemetery.

INVESTIGATION

On July 13, 1884 Coroner Muscroft released his verdict on the many deaths occurring between March 28th and 30th. In part, he found “that those of the victims who met their deaths from injuries received during the first night, or on the night of the attack on the jail, excepting Officer Joseph Sturm, who was in the discharge of his duty, were violators of the law, and were shot after being repeatedly warned by Sheriff Hawkins that further hostilities would be at risk of their lives.”

EPILOGUE

On the 29th of March, the Police Department presented to the widow \$882.50 (almost \$23,000 in 2020 dollars) that they raised; including \$332.50 that came from the officers (more than half a day's wages per officer).

After Patrolman Sturm's death, Johanna had to move in with her 22-year-old son, George Sturm, at 235 W. Court Street, and there continued to raise her other children. Other than the police officers' gift to Mrs. Sturm and the pittance she received from the Police Relief Fund, it would take fifteen years for any compensation from the State for the accidental killing of her husband.

However, within a week of the riots, the local Bar opened an account for the widowed mother of Ohio Militia Captain John Desmond who also died in the riot. Two years later, the Ohio General Assembly passed a bill that allowed for a pension of up to \$6000 to the widows of policemen who died (beginning in 1886) in the line of duty. Neither was applicable to Mrs. Sturm.

Almost seven years after the riot, State Representative Mallon introduced a bill to the Ohio House of Representatives calling for a \$3000 pension for Mrs. Sturm, but it was not passed.

By 1894, the House had passed a bill for the compensation of a Militia Corporal that was wounded in the riot. Another bill paid a pension to the parents of a militiaman who contracted a disease ostensibly during the riot; but still nothing for Mrs. Sturm.

During 1896, Representative Fosdick introduced a bill to appropriate \$3500 to Mrs. Sturm. During 1897, Mrs. Sturm's

youngest child, William Joseph Sturm, graduated from college in the first graduation from a Night School in the United States – with no financial assistance.

On April 26, 1898, a bill introduced by Senator Harper, Senate Bill No. 389, was passed by the General Assembly stating, “for the relief of Johanna Sturm and children, widow and children of Joseph Sturm, deceased, killed by a member of the Ohio National Guard while defending public property ... the commissioners of Hamilton County, Ohio, are hereby authorized and empowered to pay out of the treasury of said county to the widow and children of Joseph Sturm, deceased, a sum not exceeding thirty-five hundred dollars for their relief”. It took until July 1900 for the Commissioners to take the task seriously. They agreed to pay Mrs. Sturm \$50 per month until her death or until the full amount was paid out.

By then, her oldest “child” was 37 and would have only three more years to live. Her youngest was 25 and a college-educated Clerk. The pension ran out in October 1905. She passed away on January 7, 1906. The remaining members of the family moved to Seattle.

If you know of information, artifacts, archives or images regarding this officer or the Courthouse Riots, please contact the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum at Memorial@Police-Museum.org.