

Special Police Officer Armstrong Chumley | City of Cincinnati

Age: 58

Served: 23 years

1857 to August 10, 1880

OFFICER

Armstrong Chumley, at No. 75 Clinton Street, raised a family of four daughters and a son; Emma, Mollie, Lea, James, and Ella. He was a religious man, regularly attending the Finley Chapel on Clinton Street for decades. However, his children tended to the darker side of society and would eventually ignite the incident that led to his death while serving as a Special Police Officer assigned to Fifth and Vine Streets.

MURDER

Thomas Snelbaker, the son of a Cincinnati mayor, had also tended toward the darker side of society. He followed his father in politics and was even appointed as a Secretary of the Water Works and then Superintendent of the Police Department. However, after two years, he lost the latter position over allegations that he was steering prisoners toward favored attorneys.

He then involved himself in the entertainment and variety show business. For a time, Emma Chumley was his consort. When Ella Chumley turned 18 in 1880, he took her as his mistress. Later, he began a relationship with Virgie Jackson, an actress in New Orleans. He later returned to Cincinnati, took up again with Ella, and managed a burlesque house called the Vine Street Opera House. But Miss Jackson also came to Cincinnati and soon Ella was again cast aside.

INCIDENT

On August 8, 1880, Snelbaker and Jackson were in the Vine Street streetcar when, unaware to either party, Ella, Emma, and James Chumley boarded. A brawl ensued and a crowd formed. The driver whipped the horses and pulled to the curb above Sixth Street where a police officer was standing – Officer Chumley. Officer Chumley boarded the car to quell the disturbance, as did other officers. All participants were to be escorted to the Ninth Street stationhouse and Officer Chumley was ordered there as well.

Along the way, Snelbaker was permitted to enter Jake Aug's club to tend to the wounds sustained in the fight. They also gave him a revolver which he secreted in his sleeve. He accompanied police peacefully to the Ninth Street stationhouse.

Officer Chumley arrived at the stationhouse, took off his coat and vest and attempted to fix a broken suspender. While conversing with Sergeant Rittweger, Snelbaker walked in. Chumley saw him and said, "You God-damned son of a bitch!" Sergeant Rittweger put his hand on Chumley's shoulder and said, "Hold on Chumley; we do not want any words here." Chumley retorted, "He struck me over the head with a loaded cane!"

Snelbaker pointed his finger at Chumley and said, "Now, Chumley, I don't want to have anything to do with you here before these officers. But don't you come near me." Two officers put themselves between the two. Chumley shook his fist at Snelbaker and said, "I can whip you any day, you son of a bitch!" Snelbaker withdrew his firearm, took two or three steps around the policemen and toward Officer Chumley and fired several shots.

Sergeant Rittweger and other officers subdued Snelbaker. Officer Chumley, having been shot once in the groin and twice in the abdomen, went into a cell room and sat in an easy chair. Snelbaker was arrested and Officer Chumley was taken to his residence. When doctors advised him of the gravity of his wounds, he stated, "I have not lived the best life I might, but I am not afraid to die."

DEATH

He died in his home on August 10, 1880.



Special Police
Officer Armstrong
Chumley's grave
site.

Officer Chumley was survived by his wife, Mary Chumley, and his children. On August 12, 1880, funeral services were held at the

Finley Chapel on Clinton Street with an address from Elder W. P. Stratton. The church was packed in solid humanity, including the choir loft. The pall bearers included, from the Police Relief Association, Lieutenants Borck and Thomas and Sergeants Thornton and Robinson; from the Special Force, Officers King, Ritter, and Stewart; and from the Odd Fellows, C. Pasquier, William H. Hackwelder, and J.A. Remley. Citizen escorts included Nathan Marchant and James L. Ruffin. The police detachment was under the command of the Police Inspector, Captain Meyer.

Officer Chumley was the first interred on a family plot in Spring Grove Cemetery.

JUSTICE

On November 23, 1880, an indictment was announced against Snelbaker for manslaughter. He was acquitted on June 28, 1882, by a jury on grounds of self defense. He died six years later on March 15, 1888, in Chicago, from Focal Encephalitis (usually caused from an STD) and was also buried in Spring Grove Cemetery.

EPILOGUE

James was buried with him in 1889; his wife Mary in 1901; and Lea in 1905. Emma, Ella, and Mollie were last known to be in New York City.

If you have further information, artifacts, archives, or images of this officer, please contact the Museum Director at

memorial@police-museum.org.

This narrative was revised August 17, 2011 by Cincinnati Police Lieutenant Stephen R. Kramer (Retired), Greater Cincinnati Police Historical Society President. All rights are reserved to him and the Greater Cincinnati Police Historical Society.