Jail Matron Anna M. Hart | Hamilton County Sheriff's Office

Age: 45
Served: 5½ years
January 1, 1911 to July 24, 1916

OFFICER

Anna was born September 2, 1870 to Irish immigrants John and Mary (McGinnis) Hart. After her parents' deaths, she and her two sisters, Katherine and Theresa Hart, and a minor nephew, Thomas McCormick, were living at 349 Wood Street and she was working as a seamstress.

On January 1, 1911, newly elected Hamilton County Sheriff Charles C. Cooper (1911-1915) named Miss Hart as his Jail Matron, but the transition was rocky. Outgoing Matron, Sara P. W. Falconer, considered her appointment by Sheriff Salmon Jones (1903-1907) in 1906 and reappointment by Sheriff Henry W. Hamann (1907-1911) to be permanent and dissolvable only based on charges being brought against her and sustained in Probate Court. She put the issue to Probate Court and Judge Lueders ruled against her citing a law that prevents an elected officer from appointing anyone to a post for a period longer than the elected official hold his post. On February 11, 1911, Judge James B. Swing issued a mandamus ordering the Sheriff to appear before him on February 15, 1911 to answer as to Mrs. Falconer's

dismissal. On March 29, 1912, Common Pleas Court Judge Gorman finally decided that Miss Hart's appointment was legal. Matron Hart was reappointed by Sheriff George F. Schott (1915-1919).

All subsequent news articles depict Matron Hart as a dedicated, caring matron who was most admired by the criminals she tended.

MURDERER

We believe Reuben Ellis was born during 1884 in Kentucky to John H. and Mellissa Ellis.

Police reported in 1916 that Ellis had a long prison record. During 1900, he was sentenced to five years to the Ohio Penitentiary.

During 1909, he married Laura Lee Shannon of Kentucky. Soon after, his daughter, Lizzie May was born.

But he was more criminal than family man. On June 13, 1916 he was charged with robbing a home on West Sixth Street. He was also arrested during July 1916 for Grand Larceny and Receipt of Stolen Goods, but the Hamilton County Grand Jury did not indict him for those charges. He was awaiting trial on the Burglary in the Cincinnati Workhouse.

MURDER

On July 24, 1916, prisoners of the Hamilton County Jail were temporarily housed at the Cincinnati Workhouse (3206 Colerain Avenue) due to construction of the Hamilton County Court House and Jail. Matron Hart was off duty at 4 p.m. and was walking through the fifth tier shortly after 5 p.m. In order to take

Matron Hart's keys and escape, Reuben Ellis waited in a bathroom for her to pass. As she did, he leaped out and struck her three times with a 1½" x 20" iron rod wrapped in a bed sheet, fracturing her skull. She was found by Jailer Harry Peet and Deputy Jailer Wuest ten minutes later, lying in a pool of blood, and taken to Cincinnati General Hospital.

DEATH

Matron Hart died at 11:30 p.m., becoming the third female law enforcement officer in the United States to die in the line of duty.

Matron Hart was survived by siblings, Ellen Hart Callahan, Katherine Jane Hart, Margaret Hart McKiernan, Theresa Hart, and William Hart. Father Luke Callahan (a nephew of Matron Hart), Father James M. Kelly, and Father John F. Hickey concelebrated a Requiem High Mass at the Church of the Annunciation on July 26, 1916. Her burial followed in St. Joseph's New Cemetery. Matron Hart was so popular among the prisoners that even they took up a collection and sent a floral arrangement to her mother's home prior to the funeral. Hundreds of friends paid a final tribute to Matron Anna Hart inside the church. A throng outside the church included several women whom she had helped to better lives during the six years she was matron at the jail.

INVESTIGATION

The investigation to find the assassin took only a few hours. Jailer Peet immediately began an investigation and a prisoner told him that Ellis had told him that he was planning on attacking the matron in order to take her keys. Another prisoner, John Fletcher, advised Jailer Peet that he saw Ellis run into the men's quarters and throw a set of keys into a barrel of sawdust. Officials went to speak to Ellis, and he became unruly and had to be subdued. Told of the evidence they had already determined, Ellis admitted to Jailer Harry Peet that he had struck Matron Hart. Officials found that the murder weapon had been torn from Ellis' bed. They also recovered the keys from the barrel.

The next day, Ellis claimed that he and two other prisoners – Arthur Brown, under a sentence to Mansfield Reformatory for Cutting to Kill and Walter Level, under indictment for Burglary – had discussed the escape attempt and had cut cards to determine which of them would kill Matron Hart. No evidence was ever found to prosecute Brown and/or Level. Ellis was placed in solitary confinement, partially because other prisoners were fond of Matron Hart and Ellis's life was in danger.

JUSTICE

Chief Deputy Wenner charged Ellis with Murder of the 1st Degree. Ellis waived his preliminary hearing on July 26, 1916 and Assistant Prosecutor Simon Ross put the matter before the Grand Jury on July 27, 1916; which, within an hour, returned an indictment for 1st Degree Murder.

On July 28, 1916, Common Pleas Judge Albert K. Nippert appointed Attorney Raymond Ratliff to represent Ellis. He was arraigned on the 31st.

Ellis's trial began on Friday, August 25, 1916, in front of Judge Nippert. Assistant Prosecutors Simon Ross and A. M. Harris and defense attorney Ratliff empaneled a jury in record time. With selections suspended for the weekend, a jury was empaneled on Monday, August 28th. The jury was immediately escorted to the scene of the crime. The cases of the prosecution and defense were presented, and the jury charged by the end of the next day on the 29th and a verdict was expected the next afternoon. The jury came to an agreement on 1st Degree Murder almost immediately. However, there was one juror who would not agree to the death penalty. At 12:15 a.m. the jury returned to the court room hopelessly hung. Judge Nippert ordered them to the Burnet House overnight. They began redeliberating at 9 a.m. and at 11 a.m. Judge Nippert reluctantly accepted the hung nature of the jury and called it an "outrage upon justice."

A second trial starting October 4, 1916 took just two days to empanel a jury. It ended on October 10, 1916 with the jury taking less than forty minutes to find him guilty and recommend the death sentence. It was the first death penalty verdict in Hamilton County in eighteen years. By strange coincidence, twenty years prior, in Kentucky, a jury found the killers of Pearl Bryan guilty without a recommendation of mercy and Charles Fedderer was a member of both juries.

On Friday, October 13, 1916, Attorney Ratliff filed a motion for a new trial. Judge Nippert continued the motion for a hearing until the next Saturday, October 21. He ruled against a new trial on the 21st and set an execution date of February 6, 1917.

Meanwhile, on October 18, 1916, the Ohio Worker's Compensation Commission announced an award of $3,100 ($75,600 in 2019 dollars) to the heirs of Matron Hart; her sister, Teresa Hart,

and minor cousin, Tom McCormick (13).

On October 27, Ellis was transported to the Ohio State Penitentiary in Columbus. Attorney Ratliff filed a Bill of Exceptions on November 14, 1916 with the Court of Appeals. On November 19, 1916, Ellis filed a request, posed as his "final request," that none of the Workhouse guards be permitted at his execution.

The Ohio Court of Appeals upheld the conviction and sentence on November 27, 1916. On December 2, 1916, Attorney Ratliff appealed to the Ohio Supreme Court contending that the judge, while telling the jury that they had the right to consider mercy, should have told them that they had the duty to do so.

On December 13th, the Court refused to review the case. When visited by his mother, Melissa Taylor, and six-year-old daughter, Lizzy May Ellis, on January 17, 1917, Mrs. Taylor took down another confession, again implicating two other prisoners, Brown and Level, and took it to the new governor, James M. Cox. Governor Cox was not impressed.

On February 6, 1917, about midnight, Ellis walked calmly to the execution chamber singing *He Will Guide Till the Day is Done*. In a five-minute final statement, he admitted his guilt, repudiated his contention that Brown and Level had acted as accessories, and accepted his recent religious conversion. Two electrical currents of 1950 and 2600 volts coursed through Ellis. The Ohio Penitentiary physician, Dr. O. M. Kramer, pronounced him dead at 12:14 a.m. Ellis's mother claimed his body and took it back to Cincinnati for burial.

EPILOGUE

After 118 years of law enforcement in the region, Matron Hart was the 68th law enforcement officer to die in that service and the 48th to have been killed violently. Before Ellis, no person had been executed for killing a Hamilton County law enforcement officer.

On May 10, 1999, 83 years after her death, Matron Hart was added to the National Memorial in Washington, D.C. At the time, she was thought to be the first female law enforcement officer to die in the line of duty in the United States. Since then, the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum found two prior to Matron Hart; one a matron in New York and another, Cincinnati Police Matron Rosa A. (Dyer) Regan, at Cincinnati City Hall House of Detention. Matron Regan was placed on the National Memorial on May 15, 2019, twenty years after Matron Hart.

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

© 2019 – We believe Matron Hart's death was rediscovered by FBI Special Agent Stephen Barnett (Retired) during 1998; at which time he was the public information officer for the Hamilton County Sheriff's Office. Between he and the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum, this narrative was created and since revised on July 30, 2019 by Cincinnati Police Lieutenant Stephen R. Kramer (Retired), Greater Cincinnati Police Historical Society Vice President. All rights are reserved to them and the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum.