

Town of Marion Police Department a Brief History
By Chief John P. Clair

The Town of Marion was established by an act of the General Assembly on March 4th, 1835 and governed by a board of Trustees empowered to, "...make such by-laws, rules and regulations for the well ordering of the police¹ thereof..."² Unfortunately, the exact execution of these powers by appointment, ordinance, or code has been lost to the sands of time.

On March 15th, 1849 an Act of Incorporation by charter was passed by the General Assembly and this charter was subjected to various amendments in 1870, 1892, and 1920. In the Charter of 1849, powers to regulate peace and order were enumerated as:

"[6] ...the trustees of the said town shall have the power and authority to... prevent and punish by reasonable fines, the practice of firing guns and running horses in said town..." and the office Sergeant & Collector was established for the "[8]... service and return of all process arising under the authority of this act, or of any by-law made as aforesaid in pursuance hereof, and shall be entitled to the same or like fees and commissions as are allowed by law to sheriffs for similar duties and services."

Unfortunately the earliest surviving record the Town of Marion possesses, are the council meeting minutes from July 1st, 1888. In these minutes the Sergeant & Collector is listed as Charles A. Pruner, and George R. Rider³ was appointed as a policeman.

In the charter of 1920, an expansion of the Sergeant & Collector duties to specifically enumerate law enforcement was amended to include:

"[2] The town Sergeant and Collector⁴ shall have all the powers of a deputy sheriff in the Town of Marion and Smyth County, in criminal matters, and the powers of constable in civil matters in the Town of Marion... [3] The town Sergeant and Collector and all members of the police force of the said town shall use their best endeavors to prevent the commission of any crime, violation of State or town law, and detect and arrest offenders against the same, with or without warrants; to preserve the good order of the town, and secure the inhabitants thereof from violence and the property thereof from injury."

The office of Sergeant & Collector, as the only *consistently appointed* town sponsored law enforcement officer in Marion, continued until July 1st, 1896 when a "Night Sergeant" was added. In 1928 the Sergeant & Collector language fell out of use when the Collector duties were transferred to the treasurer, and the term Town Sergeant became more prevalent, with the office of Night Sergeant or Night Police continuing until 1936. Sgt. G.A. Snavley was the last appointee to the municipal office of Sergeant with the duties of Collector, and can be seen as the first officer *purely responsible for law enforcement* in Marion.

The "Sergeant and Night Sergeant" concept started to come to a close under the leadership of H. H. Groseclose who was appointed as Town Sergeant in 1936. Over the next 6 years, Sgt. Groseclose added staff until on September 4th, of 1942, with strength of 3 sworn members and a desk sergeant, we see the term Chief of Police consciously applied, and a police department concept begin to unfold. In a certain sense, September 4th, 1942 marks the founding of the Marion Police Department as an organized entity.

¹ This strikes me as an early and unusual use of the term considering the lack of it later charters.

² Wilson, Goodridge, *Smyth County History and Traditions*. 1939. "An Act to Establish the Town of Marion at the Seat of Justice for the County of Smyth", section 4. 318.

³ This appears to be a footnote later added to the minutes with a questionable import.

⁴ Given as a combined office with the title "Sergeant and Collector" in section 1

The growth of the Marion Police Department continued under the leadership of Chief Ralph S. Wolfe with the development of an internal rank structure and the promotion of Walter J. Boone to Lieutenant in 1950. Tragically Chief Wolfe was killed in a car accident while on duty, June 2nd, 1954 and his name appears on the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial in Washington D.C.

The language of the Charter of 1849 was repealed and replaced by an act of the General Assembly in 1960, and amended in 1972 and 1975. The charter amendment of 1960, officially eliminating the office of Sergeant, marks the final transition of the Marion Police Department into a modern law enforcement agency. Walter J. Boone was the last appointee to the municipal office of Sergeant.

Sergeant & Collector appointees:

Charles A. Pruner 1888 – 1890	John N. Hull 1894 – 1898	J. P. Stephenson 1914 – 1916
F.S. Snavelly 1890 – 1892	L.L. Scherer 1898 – 1904	W.E. Greer 1916 – 1918
W.J. Dickey 1892 – 1894	J. B. Richardson 1904 – 1914	G.A. Snavley 1918 - 1930

Town Sergeant appointees:

G.A. Snavley 1930 – 1934	Otho D. Snider 1934-1936	H. H. Groseclose 1936 – 1942
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Chief of Police appointees:

H.H. Groseclose 1942 – 1946	Elmer Blevins 1975 – 1983	Mike Roberts 2001 – 2013
Ralph S. Wolfe 1946 – 1954	John Grub 1983 - 1993	Rex Anders 2013 – 2018
Walter J. Boone 1954 – 1975	Charles Overbay 1993 – 2000	John P. Clair 2018 -
	Fred Catron 2000 – 2001	