

# The Cranston Police Traffic Division



**The Traditional winged-wheel patch worn by Cranston traffic officers since the 1920s.**

Most people tend to believe that speeding cars and traffic accidents are a modern-day problem, but even before the advent of the automobile in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Cranston officers were dealing with traffic complaints. One popular “racing strip” existed on reservoir Avenue between Park Avenue and the Providence city line. It was there during the 1890s that unofficial horse races would occasionally occur with spectators placing “friendly” wagers as to the outcome. However one didn’t have to race their horse to have an accident. At a time when traffic control devices didn’t exist, all it took was another rider or pedestrian who wasn’t paying attention.

According to a 1900 *Cranston Times* newspaper article, Chief John Bigbee designed diamond shaped speed limit signs to be placed on certain roads of the town to control traffic. Thus he established what *may* have been the first traffic control laws of the state.

Twenty-five years later the traffic problems had only increased. A Cranston police arrest report dated 1925 shows a man was arrested for “passing a trolley” with his automobile on Park Avenue.

On June 26, 1926, the front page headlines of the now defunct *Cranston News* declared, “Police Wage War On Auto Law Breakers!” The relentless battle continues to this day.

Before the days of electric traffic lights, traffic control at major intersections was left to the footman on the beat. If a particular intersection was busy at certain times of the day the beat man was expected to be there. His primary tools were a pair of white gloves and a whistle.

Up to the 1950s, it was possible for a foot patrolman to stop a traffic violator simply by blowing his whistle. Once the motorist stopped, and they usually did, the officer would ask for a license and registration. If the paperwork was not in order, the officer would instruct the motorist to take him to the nearest call box so

headquarters could be called. (Portable police radios didn't come into use until the late 1960s.)

If the officer had to call headquarters for a license or registration check, the desk officer had to call the Registry of Motor Vehicles, and someone at the Registry would have to look up the information by hand and then call back. (There were no computers.) This process could take up to an hour. In the meantime, the officer stood by the call box with the motorist.

There was a time in Rhode Island when all motor vehicle violations carried criminal penalties. If an officer decided to arrest a motorist, he could instruct the motorist to slide over to the passenger side of the car, and the officer would then drive the car to headquarters. (Try doing this today and see what happens!)

As the city grew, traffic increased. During World War II, it was said in Chief Miller's 1943 annual report that there was an increase in traffic accidents due to the mandatory wartime blackouts.

Early traffic officers in Cranston rode motorcycles and wore the traditional winged-wheel patch on the left arm of their uniforms. The origins of this patch are unknown, but this continues to be the standard insignia for traffic cops all across the country.



**Cranston traffic officers - 1929  
(Note cross-draw holsters and wheel insignia.)**

In 1927 it was reported that Chief Cuff added another officer to the "motorcycle squad". This was most likely due to the 1926 headline pertaining to the war on traffic. By 1929, the squad consisted of six men who wore the typical boots and breeches of the era.

By 1957, the traffic division had grown to 11 officers that included a lieutenant, two sergeants, and eight patrolmen.



**Cranston traffic officers - circa 1955**

In July of 1959, Cranston became the second department in Rhode Island to use radar in police cars to catch speeders. This was considered “cutting edge technology” for the day. Signs which read, “Speed Checked By Radar” became a common sight in the city as a deterrent.

The chief’s annual crime report for 1963 stated that the traffic division had investigated 1,089 accidents. It went on to state that the department had charged and prosecuted 1,643 persons for criminal offenses, of whom, 1,044 were for traffic offenses.

During the 1960s, a management study was done by a Chicago firm that concluded that Cranston didn’t need such a large traffic division and recommended reducing its size. The chief followed this recommendation and reduced the division to two or three officers. The job of writing tickets and investigating accidents then fell to the beat patrolmen.

Working in the traffic division was considered a preferred assignment since it generally meant that an officer got to ride instead of walk, and was permitted to travel throughout the city instead of being confined to a beat.



**Circa 1955 – Note windshields on motorcycles.**



**Cranston Traffic Division - 1957**



**A Cranston police traffic officer's motorcycle on Dyer Avenue - 1962**



**Dyer Avenue Crossing – December 29, 1969 – minor injuries.**

The present-day bike path was once a rail bed, and from time to time Cranston officers would investigate car vs. train accidents such as the one pictured above. The building in the background, a depot station, burned down in the late 1980s.



**Cranston at Uxbridge – April, 1970**

In 1993, courses in accident reconstruction began to be offered in Rhode Island. Accident reconstruction is a higher level of training in accident investigation where officers use mathematical formulas to determine exactly what happened in an accident. These formulas can determine things such as vehicle speed, time and distance, and energy forces involved in the crash. This training is six weeks long, and today's Cranston traffic officers are all trained as accident reconstructionists.

In the early 1990s, the traffic division consisted of two officers. Later in the decade a third officer was added to work nights. In 2001 a sergeant was added.



**Cranston Traffic Division car – 1997**