

# In Memoriam of Fallen Cranston Police Officers

By Det. Sgt. Jim Ignasher  
Cranston Police, retired

As of this writing, the Cranston Police Department has had five officers who lost their lives while in the performance of their duty.

Cranston, as a municipality, has had police constables since 1754, but unfortunately very little is known about those individuals who served in that capacity other than their names found listed in old records. If any of those early lawmen died in the line of duty, it was not recorded.

## **Chief of Police John Bigbee 1908**



**Chief John Bigbee**

In November of 1908, a small fire broke out in a barn at the farm of George Cahoon which was located near present-day Cranston Street and Gansett Avenue. Chief Bigbee lived nearby on Cranston Street, and near his home was a small shed which housed a hose reel for fighting fires. When the chief was notified of the fire, he and his son Richard pulled the hose reel from the shed and brought it to the scene of the fire. In pushing the reel down the street a chain on the apparatus snapped and struck Bigbee in his lower leg causing a small laceration. The wound became infected and the chief developed what was termed "blood poisoning". Antibiotics didn't exist in 1908, and the chief lingered

for several weeks as he fought the infection. Unfortunately he died at home several weeks later on December 11, 1908.

Chief Bigbee was Cranston's first Chief of Police, having been elected to the position in 1886. He is buried in St. Mary's Cemetery in Cranston.

### **Patrolman Henry Ralph Johnson 1930**



**Patrolman Johnson in 1929**

On the night of August 12, 1930, Motorcycle Officer Henry Ralph Johnson was talking with two friends, Harvey Dwight and Barry Leonard, who were sitting in a car on Arnold Avenue at Narragansett Boulevard. While speaking with them, he noticed a man come out from between two houses.

In the 1920s, Edgewood was a neighborhood where wealthy Providence executives lived thus making it a prime target for burglars. None of the men had seen the stranger before so Officer Johnson decided to walk over and question him. The man said he was from Providence, and was in the area "calling on his girl", but was unable to remember her name or where she lived. When Officer Johnson attempted to take the man into custody, he suddenly pulled a gun and shot Johnson point-blank in the abdomen.

Although seriously wounded, Johnson managed to draw his service revolver and return fire, but missed his assailant. The shooter, later identified as Daniel J. Dennis, ran down Narragansett Boulevard towards Pawtuxet and disappeared.

As the officer collapsed in the street, he called to Harvey Dwight to get help. As Mr. Dwight ran to find a house with a telephone, Barry Leonard dragged the

patrolman to his car and hauled him into the back seat, after which he raced to St. Joseph's Hospital in Providence.

Within minutes, officers from Cranston and Providence were converging on the area while the state police set up roadblocks on the main roads. Within three hours of the shooting, Cranston officers, Captain Henry (Clay) Debow, and Patrolman Michael Buzzard, spotted Dennis hiding near Pawtuxet Cove. As Dennis began to run from the officers, Patrolman McElroy fired a shot but missed. Dennis then jumped over a wall injuring his leg and was captured. (One account states that Dennis was found "hiding" up to his neck in the water of Pawtuxet Cove.)

The gun used to shoot Johnson was never recovered, and is presumed to be at the bottom of the cove to this day.

Surgeons operated on Patrolman Johnson, but hypostatic pneumonia set in and he died on August 14, 1930.

Officer Johnson was known as "Mike" to his friends and family. He was born October 17, 1898, and was 32-years-old at the time of his death. He left behind a wife Grace, and a son Owen. He is buried in Pocasset Cemetery on Dyer Avenue.

Daniel Dennis was convicted of Johnson's murder on December 6, 1930, and was given a life sentence at the Adult Correctional Institution where he died in August of 1952.

Ironically, Officer Johnson had been shot once before in 1928 when he interrupted a burglary on Strathmore Road.

While checking the home of a couple who were away on vacation he discovered three men ransacking the house. In 1928, policemen didn't have portable radios, so he hurried across the street and told neighbors to call the police station and send help. As he ran back towards the house, the three men rushed out and one began shooting. A bullet struck Johnson in the chin and was deflected down his neck and out through his shoulder. Johnson managed to fire off four shots at the fleeing burglars who escaped in a car parked on the next street.

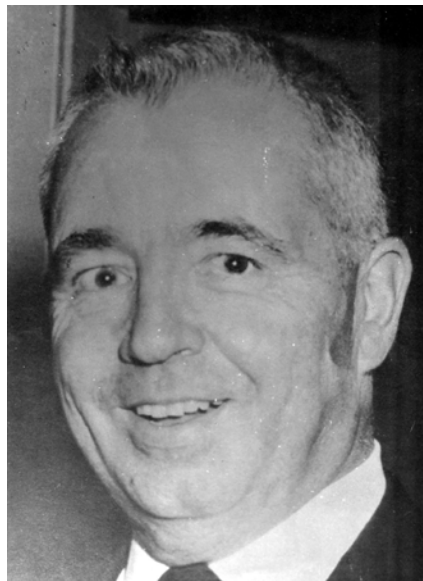
Officer Johnson's life hung in the balance for a few days before he recovered. The three men were never caught.



**Bronze grave marker**

At one time, the graves of departed Cranston officers were adorned with bronze markers such as the one pictured above. Unfortunately, virtually all of them have disappeared, and few examples survive today.

**Chief Anthony J. Moretti  
1968**



**Chief Anthony J. Moretti**

On January 30, 1968, Chief Anthony Moretti suffered a fatal heart attack while working in his office at police headquarters at 275 Atwood Avenue.

**Lieutenant Morris Kantrowitz  
1972**



Emergency Police Officer  
Lieutenant Morris Kantrowitz

On April 7, 1972, Lieutenant Morris Kantrowitz of the Cranston Emergency Police was on duty at an outdoor function being held at the Narragansett Brewery when he suffered a fatal heart attack.

**Sergeant Walter Busby  
1979**



Walter Busby as a patrolman

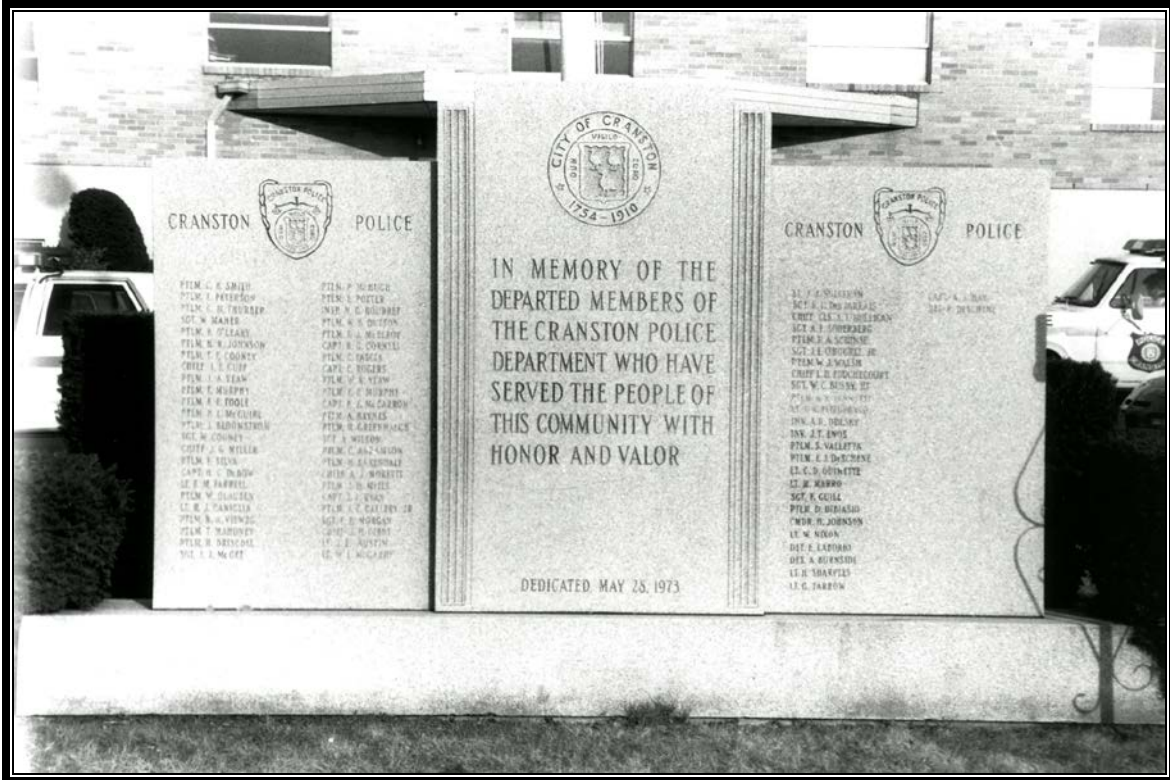
On February 12, 1979, Sergeant Busby and two patrolmen responded to 36 Vervina Street in Knightsville for a report of a possible drug overdose. When they arrived, they encountered a 31-year-old man on the second floor who was threatening to kill himself.

The man had been drinking and had taken a large dose of pills. When he saw the officers, he picked up a bottle and threatened to attack them with it if anyone came near him. After a few minutes, one of the officers was able to grab the bottle at which time a struggle ensued. The suicidal man continued to struggle even after he was handcuffed, and had to be physically carried by the officers down the stairs to the first floor. As they were attempting to carry the man through the door, Sergeant Busby suddenly collapsed and stopped breathing.

Those at the scene tried to revive him and transported him to St. Joseph Hospital where he was pronounced dead on arrival. The cause of death was determined to be a heart attack.



**A view of the Cranston Police Officers Memorial – circa 1991  
The memorial was dedicated at the Atwood Avenue  
police station on May 28, 1973.**



A Close-up view of the memorial that once stood in front of the police station at 275 Atwood Avenue. Today this monument stands at the current police station on Garfield Avenue.



Memorial at new police station - December 28, 2011



**The monument as it looked December 28, 2011.**

After the police department moved to its new headquarters in Arlington, the monument would have remained at the site of the old police station had it not been for the efforts of the Cranston Police Retirees Association.