

# An Historic Look Back At Cranston Police Uniforms

By Det. Sgt. Jim Ignasher, CPD, retired

One of the first police departments in the United States to begin wearing uniforms as a means of identification and symbol of office was the New York City Police Department, which began wearing blue frock coats with brass buttons as early as 1853. Prior to the American Civil War, (1861 – 1865), uniformed police officers were generally only seen in large cities. Those who patrolled towns such as Cranston simply wore a badge pinned to an outer garment.

It's unknown exactly when Cranston's police officers first donned their uniforms, but it's estimated that it was sometime during the late 1870s or early 1880s.

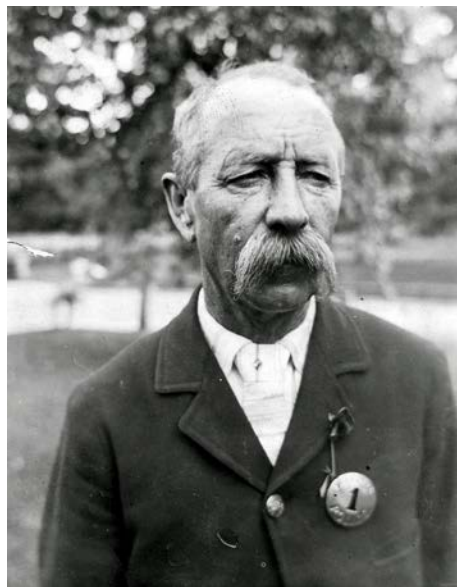


**Two oval shaped badges worn about the time of the Civil War.**

Contrary to popular legend, early police badges were not made of copper, but nickel and tin. Many tended to be generic in nature with only a title stamped into the metal. Early peddlers, (today's equivalent of traveling salesmen), would journey across the countryside in their covered wagons carrying a box of these badges hoping to sell a few to the local lawmen of the towns they visited. Besides "Constable", and "Police", other titles included "Justice of the Peace", "Sheriff", "Deputy Sheriff", and "Magistrate". For an extra fee, some peddlers would stamp the name of the city or town into the badge.



**A generic police badge with “Cranston, R.I.” added.  
Worn circa 1870s**



**John Kenyon, badge number 1  
1870s**

John Kenyon was first appointed as a constable in 1871, and was elected Town Sergeant in 1873. The Town Sergeant wore badge number one since he was in charge of all police constables in Cranston. Mr. Kenyon apparently didn't wear a formal uniform, but evidently dressed appropriately judging by his photo. He served as Town Sergeant until 1880, and continued to serve as a constable for another year afterwards.

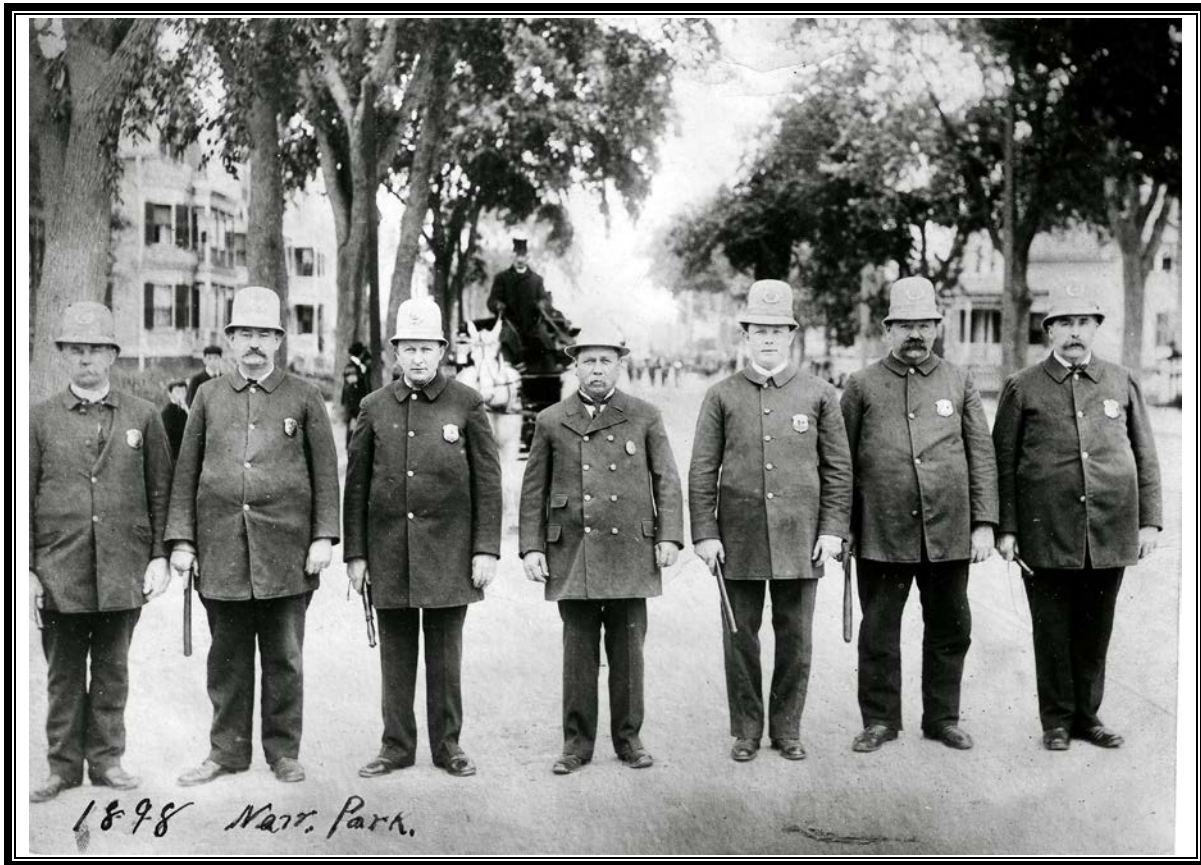


**Chief of Police John Bigbee - Circa 1890**  
(Photo courtesy of Patience Hamilton – John Bigbee's grand-daughter.)



**An artist rendering of a round style badge worn  
by Cranston police officers from the 1880s to about 1895.  
There were no ranks within the department at this time.**

Below is the oldest known photograph of the Cranston Police Department, and it was rescued from the trash!



### **Cranston Police Officers - 1898**

**Left to right are; John Yeaw, Charles hazard, Patrick Trainor, Chief John Bigbee, James G. Miller, ??? , and Benjamin Allen**  
**Note Chief Bigbee is wearing a round badge while the officers are wearing a shield shape.**

Most early police uniforms in America were modeled after the "Bobbie" uniforms of England. One difference was, and still is, that police officers in this country wear breast badges.

The first manufactured badges for the Cranston police appeared in the 1880s. They were round, with a number punched out in the middle. They read "CRANSTON" across the top and "POLICE" across the bottom. It is known that the punched out numbers in the center numbered at least into the 30s, but possibly much higher. No rank badges were produced as the department did not have a rank structure at that time. The Chief of Police/Town Sergeant wore badge number one.





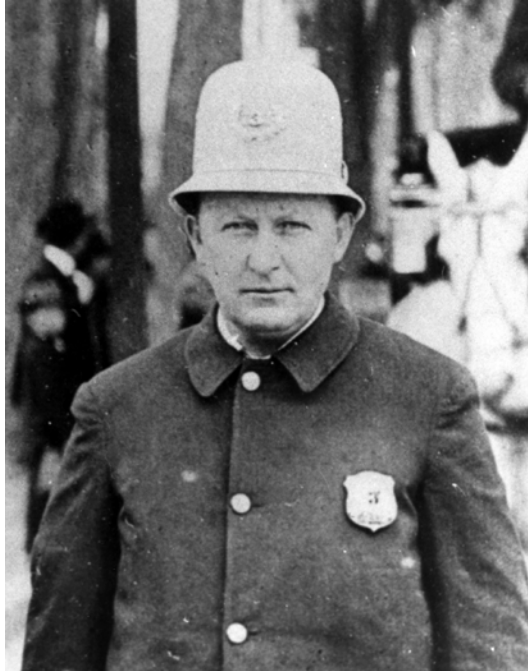
**A patrolman badge.  
Worn circa 1895 to about 1915.**



**A patrolman badge with no number cut out.  
Worn circa 1890s.**



**A badge with the number engraved.  
Worn circa early 1900s.**



**Constable Patrick Trainor  
1898**



**Chief of Police badge believed worn by Patrick Trainor in 1909.  
(Note town seal in center.)**



**Patrolman Charles Smith in summer uniform - circa 1910.  
Hats were pale green for summer and black for winter.  
(Photo courtesy of Mrs. Baxter, Cranston Historical Society)**

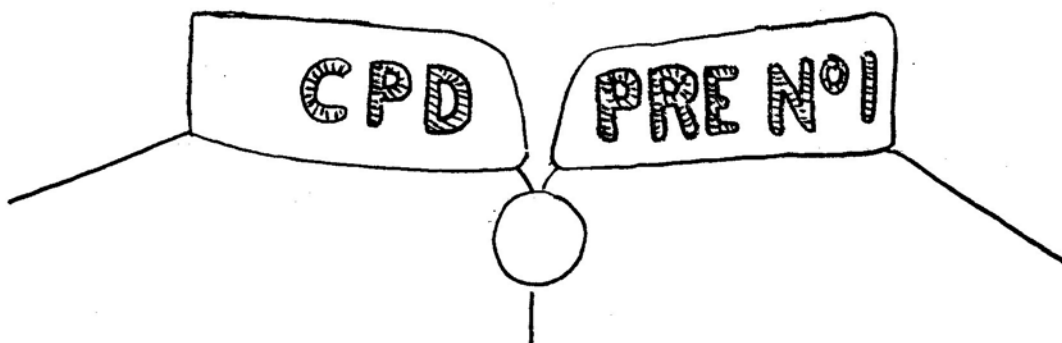


**Patrolman Charles Smith in winter uniform circa 1910.  
(Note "pillbox" style hat.)**



**Policemen's Ball at Rhodes on the Pawtuxet - 1915.**  
**(Note that collar style has changed.)**

Left to Right, standing –Ptl. Mahar, Ptl. Benjamin Allen, Insp. Jim Miller, Ptl. Charles Smith, Ptl. Claus Abrahamson, ??, ??, ?? Ptl. Clay DeBow.  
 Left to Right, sitting – Ptl. John McGee, Chief Daniel Kiernan, ??



Uniform collars had bullion thread embroidered in them from about 1912 to 1915/16 indicating which precinct the officer worked in. At the time, there were the Edgewood, Arlington, Auburn, and Knightsville precincts.

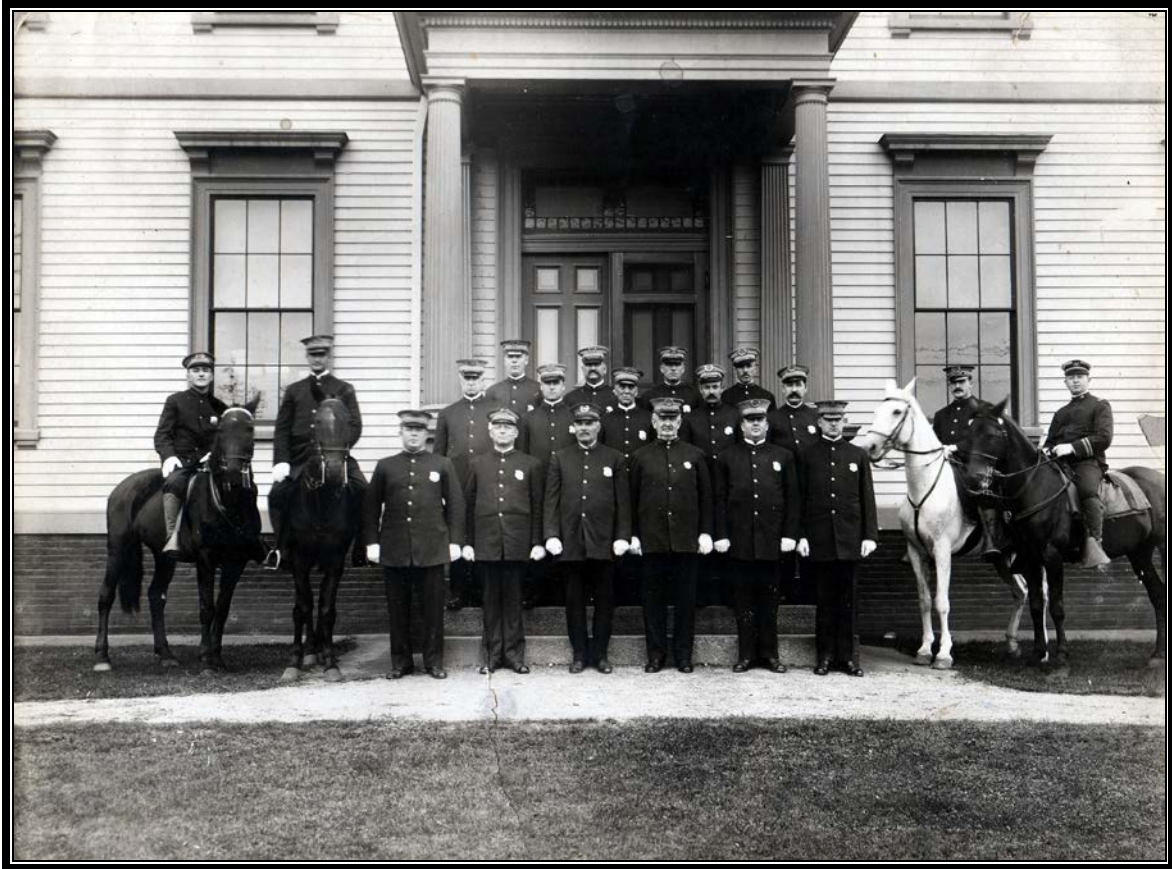




**This 1916 photo of an unknown officer shows pins instead of bullion thread on the collar.**



**Hat wreath worn circa 1890 to about 1920.**



**Cranston Police Department about 1915  
(Note change in hats.)**

This photo was taken outside the old City Hall which stood in Knightsville at the southwest corner of Park Avenue and Cranston Street where a gazebo stands today. For more information see the chapter on police stations.





### **Cranston Police Relief Association - 1916**

By 1916, Cranston officers were wearing a new badge style that featured the city seal. The uniform collars still indicated which precinct an officer worked, however the bullion thread had been replaced by metal pins.



**A Patrolman badge dating to 1916.**

Patrolmen badges issued from 1916 to the 1960s had a large city seal like the one pictured above. Later badges had smaller seals, and still later ones had enamel seals. The department wore this style badge into the 1990s.



**Special Patrolman badge  
Circa 1918 to World War II**

After the first permanent police department was established in 1910, the department continued to employ “special constables”, later called, “special patrolmen”, to fill in when manpower was needed. These officers wore the same uniform as a permanent patrolman with the exception of the badge. Special patrolman badges featured a number instead of the city seal.

Department rosters of the 1920s show hundreds of special patrolmen listed. One badge that belonged to Fred Joy Sr. had the number of 550. Why so many were thought to be needed is unknown.

In 1921, the rank structure of the department consisted of the chief, a lieutenant, an inspector, and 14 patrolmen. By 1929 the department consisted of a chief, a captain, four sergeants, and 31 officers.

The rank of lieutenant first appeared in 1921, and in 1925 the rank of captain was created to replace the rank of lieutenant. The department worked under a two platoon system during this time with only a day shift and a night shift of 12 hours each. The chief supervised the day shift with two sergeants, and the captain took over at night with the aid of two other sergeants.

The first supervisor badges of the 1920s were actually modified patrolmen badges with a rank panel added to the top.



**Artist rendition of a Sergeant badge worn circa 1925 to early 1940s.**



**Cranston Police Department - 1924**



**An early Captain badge.  
This style was issued from 1925 to early 1990s.**



**Capt. Henry Clay Debow - 1929**

It is said that Captain Debow loved working nights so much that he declined the chance to become chief after the death of Chief James Miller in 1941. Debow was appointed a police constable in 1903, and was one of the original members of the “regular force” created in 1910. He was the first to hold the rank of lieutenant, and later, captain, within the department. An avid outdoorsman, he raised horses and hunting dogs, which is the reason he preferred to work nights.

Captain Debow owned a black Irish Setter named Lady, which he taught to track and hunt. In 1920, Debow used Lady to track a fugitive in the woods that once surrounded the State Institutions, making him perhaps the first Cranston officer to use a dog to capture a criminal.

Captain Debow served 39 years as a Cranston police officer before retiring on January 2, 1942. He passed away at his daughter’s house on Scituate Avenue, February 10, 1943.



**Patrolman hat badge worn circa 1920 to 1975**

About 1920, the department adopted a more modern uniform hat badge. The new hat badges were numbered like the old hat wreaths. In the 1960s, when the department rank and file gained seniority rights, the number on the hat badge reflected an officer's seniority. The lower the number, the more time an officer had on the job, and therefore, the greater that officer's seniority.

The drawback to this system was that whenever an officer retired, everyone behind him in seniority had to swap hat badges. As the department continued to grow, this became cumbersome, and in 1975 the department adopted new hat badges that did not have numbers.



**Officer Pat McHugh, badge number 7 -Circa 1925  
(Note the numeral 2 on each collar.)**





**Cranston Police Officers - 1927**

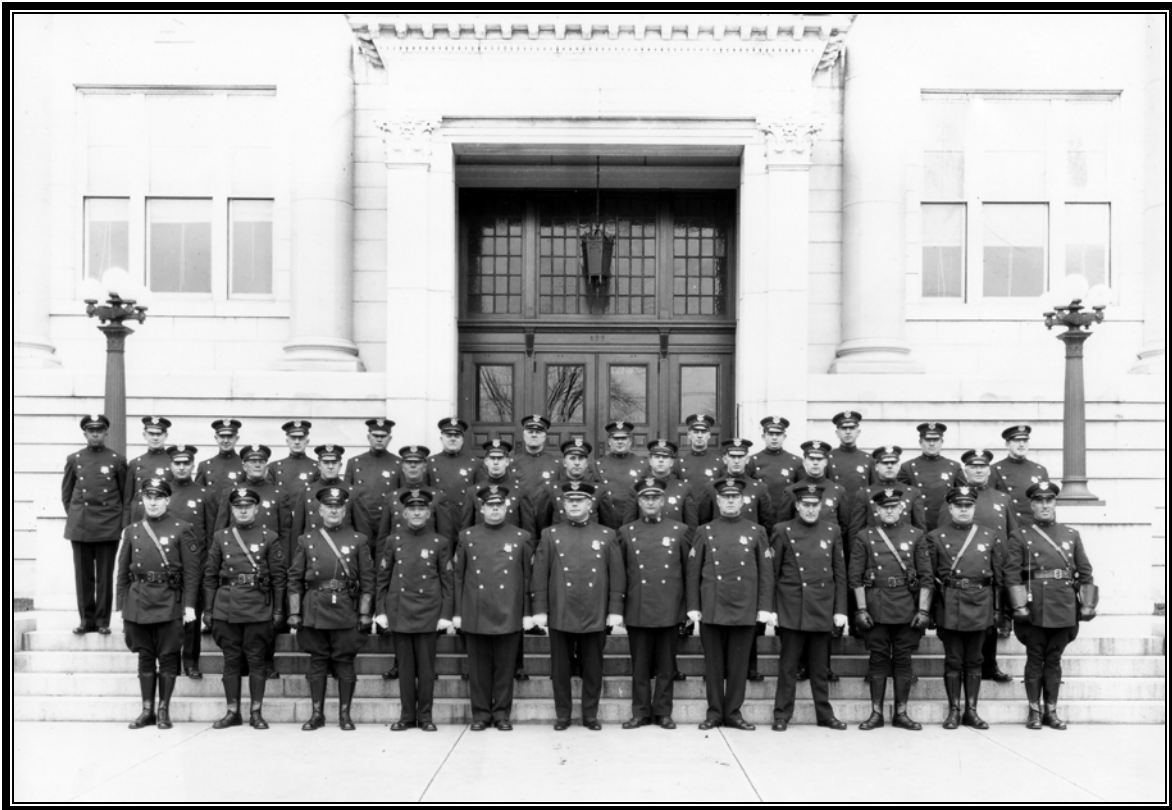
L to R standing: Capt. Clay DeBow, Sergeant Nelson Bourret.  
L to R sitting: Ptl. Ryan, unknown, Ptl Mahar.

Note that Capt. DeBow's uniform lacks buttons.  
Photo courtesy of Capt. Ed Ryan – Retired



**A chief's hat badge worn between 1920s and 1940s.**





**Police Department in front of Cranston (East) High School - 1929**

In the 1930s the department adopted a new uniform hat based on what the New York City Police Department was wearing at the time. The traditional “eight-point” hat is still worn by Cranston officers today.



**Brass uniform button  
worn from 1920s to 1970s.**



**An unidentified officer circa 1930s  
wearing an “eight point” hat.**



**Patrolman McHugh - 1933**



### **Rookie police officers – February, 1936**

Left to Right – William Hines, Joe Austin, Arthur Soderberg, William Nixon, Louis Morenzi, Terrance J. McKaig, George A. Seavor, Roland G. Cornell.

(Photo courtesy of Terrance McKaig.)

These eight officers were hired in the summer of 1935, however, for the first six months they didn't have any uniforms to wear. At the time, Cranston's uniforms were made in New York City and officers had to wait until a representative could be sent to take their measurements, and then go back to New York to make the uniforms. The representative generally made two trips to Cranston each year. The new uniforms finally arrived in February, 1936, and this photo was taken of the officers wearing them the day they arrived.

During the six months the officers waited for their uniforms, they were forced to work indoors at the police station. This picture was given to the author by Terrance McKaig in November, 1996. Mr. McKaig left the department in 1946 to join the FBI. He later retired from the FBI and spent 20 years as Chief of Police in Glastonbury, Connecticut.



**Officer Charles J. Rogers**  
Joined the department July 16, 1937  
(Photos courtesy of the Rogers Family.)

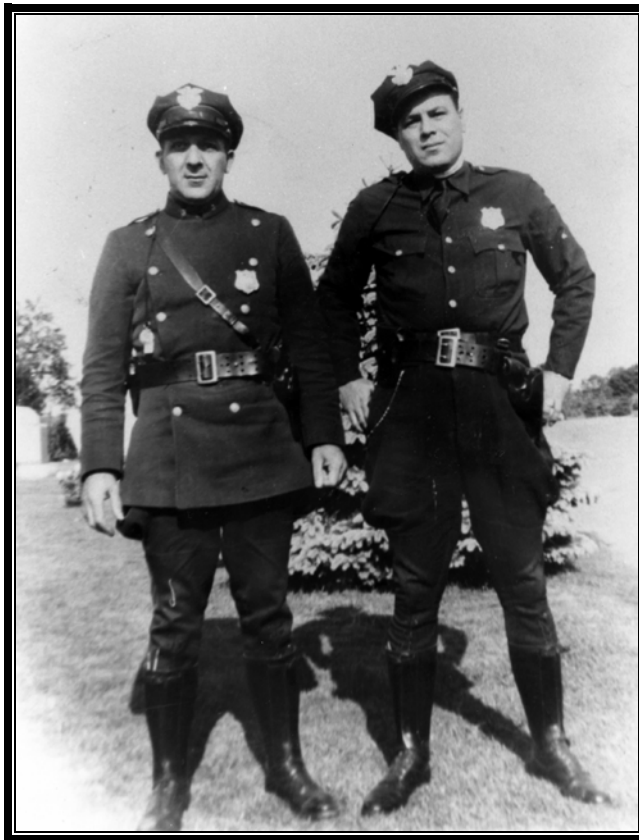


**Sergeant Charles J. Rogers - 1940s**  
(Note the hat badge.)



**Lieutenant Nelson G. Bourret - circa 1940.  
Lt. Bourret was promoted to Chief in 1941.**

(Note the uniform of the day was a long sleeve, dark blue shirt with no tie.)  
(Also note the lieutenant's breast badge.)  
(Photo courtesy of the Bourret Family.)



**Paul Soscia and Michael Morro - circa 1942**

Ptl. Soscia is wearing the spring and fall uniform and Ptl. Morro is wearing the summer uniform.  
(Note the cross draw holsters.) (Photo courtesy of Lieutenant Paul Soscia.)





**Sergeant hat badge issued about 1950 to 1975.**

Around 1950, the department began issuing a new style of hat badge for supervisors that featured applied raised lettering. This style was officially worn by all ranking officers until 1975. Unofficially by some afterward.



**Night Shift – January, 1955**

L to R:, 1st Row: Sgt. Joseph L. O'Rourke Jr., Capt. Patrick J. McCarron, Lt. Rowland G. Cornell.  
 2ed Row: Carl Fascia, Charles A. Carney, Edward J. Callery, Russell M. Trant, John Quinn,  
 Clifford Shultz, Francis Schinse. 3rd Row: William L. Costello, John T. Enos, Anthony Moretti,  
 Walter L. McGarry, Daniel Kenneally, Francis E. Carey, George W. Skuce, Donald Della Porta.





**Lieutenant's badge - 1950s.**

In 1954, officers worked 16 hours every other day, and earned \$58.00 per week. A new re-organization of the department brought the number of sworn officers up to 83. The department's phone number was UNION 1- 5700.

In 1957 the position of Commander was established, and the rank was designated by a single star worn on the shoulder. (The Chief of Police wore 3 stars.) The position was created to act as the departmental second in command.

In 1962, the rank of Deputy Chief was established, and this rank was designated by two stars, thus outranking the Commander.

The rank of Commander was abolished in 1965, and the Deputy Chief position was abolished in 1966.

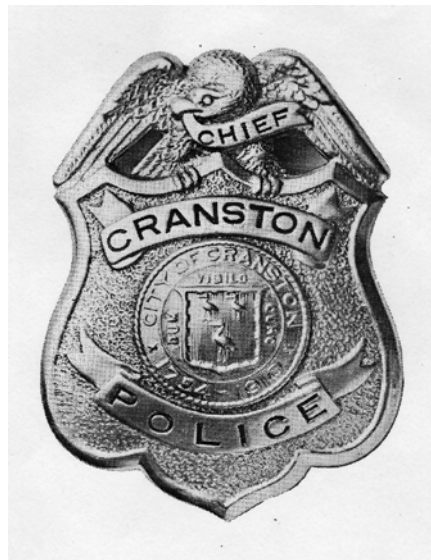
Each rank was only held by one man, and the positions were abolished upon their retirements.



**Officer Dan Cipalone – c. 1955**



**Officer Carl Fascia - 1956**



**Chief badge worn by Chief Fouchecourt - 1950s.**



Lieutenant hat badge - circa 1960  
Issued from about 1950 to 1975.



January, 1961

25 year anniversary for Sgt. Arthur Soderberg, who joined the department Jan. 16, 1936. (Note the leather coat.) L to R: Sgt. Edward Callery, Ptl. Bill Holihen, Sgt. Soderberg, Capt. Howard Jordan.

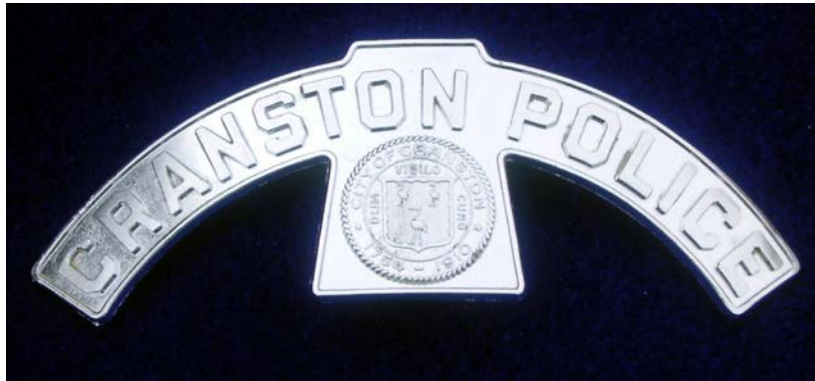


**Patrolman Ernest Potter - circa 1960**  
(Note long sleeve, light colored shirt.)



**Officer Ray Flynn - 1962**





**Custom metal shoulder insignia for leather jackets - 1960s.**

Officers in the 1960s who wore the heavy three-quarter-length leather coats had custom die-cast shoulder insignia that featured raised lettering and the city seal. Silver colored ones were worn by patrolmen, and gold colored ones were worn by ranking officers. Unfortunately, the insignia was made of lightweight pot-metal that tended to crack and break, thus, few examples survive today.



**Sergeant Edward Ryan being promoted to Lieutenant  
by Mayor James DiPrete - May 16, 1966  
(Photo courtesy of Captain Edward Ryan – Retired)**



**Officers in “bomber style” jackets - 1966.**

(L to R: Ptl. Christopher D’Ambrosio, Ptl. D. Salisbury, Sgt. George Carello.)

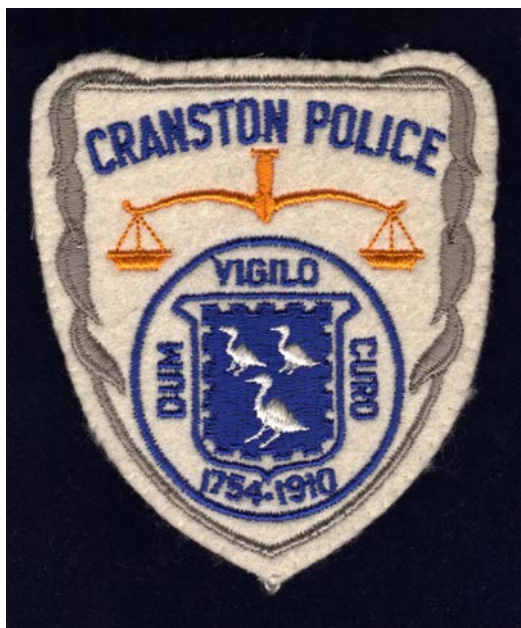
General order 66-1, dated January 10, 1966, authorized the wearing of service bars on the left sleeve of dress uniforms and duty jackets. Each bar was to represent 3 years of service.

General order 66-18, dated January 30, 1966, stated that sergeant stripes will be attached to every uniform of the day. Previously, sergeants had only worn their stripes on their dress coats and duty jackets.

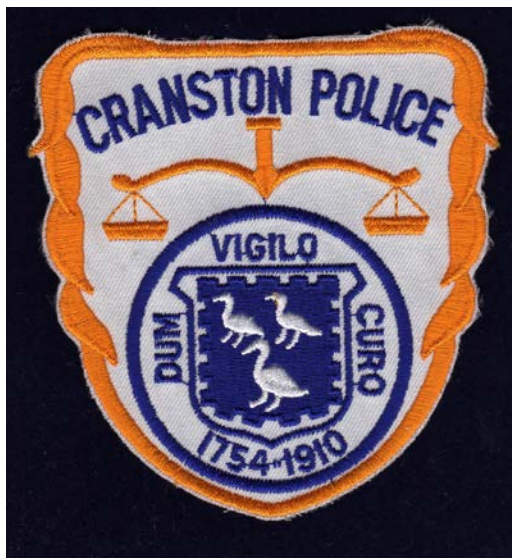
In 1967, the first departmental uniform shoulder patch was designed and worn on the left shoulder of all uniforms. The patch came in two variations, a silver border for patrolmen, and a gold border for supervisors. Both styles featured the scales of justice and the city seal. The earliest ones were produced on a heavy felt material with cheesecloth backing. Later patches had a twill background.

The new patches were popular with the officers as well as the public. They not only dressed up the uniform, but also boosted morale.





**An early first issue patrolman's uniform shoulder patch produced on heavy felt. Later ones had a twill background.**



**A later issue supervisor patch produced on twill cloth. The department wore this uniform patch from 1967 to 1994.**

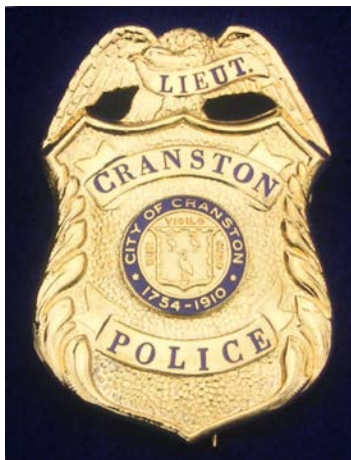
### **The City Seal Explained**

The city was named for Governor Cranston who served Rhode Island in the earliest days of the colony. The birds are cranes, from the Cranston Family coat of arms. "Dum, Vigilo, Curo," is Latin for "While I watch, I care." 1754 is the year Cranston incorporated as a town, and 1910 is the year Cranston incorporated as a city.

The city seal was adopted in 1910, and has been on insignia worn by the Cranston police since 1915.



**Lieutenant Tom Lanzi in the dispatch center – Circa 1972**



**Lieutenant badge - 1970s**



**Five Cranston officers - circa 1972**

Left to Right – Richard Gallo, Paul Trainor, Steve Agresti,  
Frank Migliorelli, Peter Sepe.



**Officer badge - 1970s**  
**Note smaller city seal.**



**Uniform Lieutenant badge - 1970s**



**Patrolman hat badge - 1975**

In 1975, the department did away with the numbered hat badges worn since the 1920s and adopted the style pictured above. It was also about this time that officers began wearing their badge numbers on pins above the right uniform pocket. Supervisor hat badges were also changed to this style.

The department also began to issue breast badges with a smaller city seal, but otherwise, they were the same style that had been worn since 1915.





**Sergeant hat badge - 1970s - Style I**

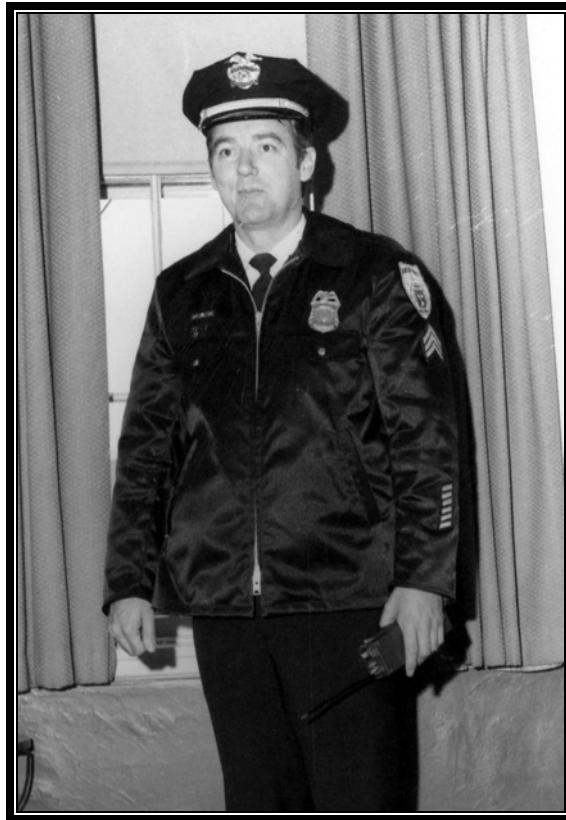
Supervisor hat badges came in two styles, either by accident or by design. Style I had the rank panel on top and the name "Cranston" on the bottom. Style II had the word "police" across the bottom.



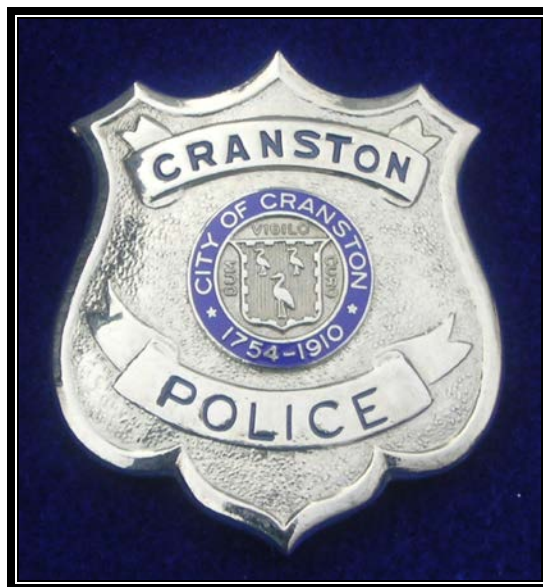
**Sergeant hat badge - Style II**

This particular example was issued circa 1990.  
(Note the change in the city seal.)





**Sergeant William Loux – 1978**  
wearing new style jacket.



**Patrol Officer badge -1983**  
Note enamel city seal

Officers badges of the early 1980s had blue enameling around the city seal which improved the look of the badge. Before then, the blue enamel had only been featured on rank badges.

By the late 1980s, patrol officer badges were issued with "R.I." at the bottom. These badges continued to be issued until 1995.

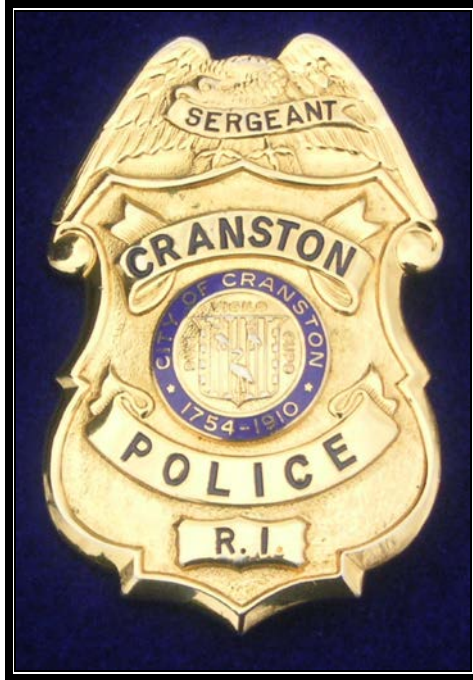


**Patrol Officer badge -1989**



**Captain badge - circa 1985**

This style was issued from the 1960s to 1995 for all supervisor ranks.



**Coat badge issued to supervisors from 1989 to 1995**



**Chief of Police badge -1990**

In 1990 a new badge style was designed for the department that is still worn today. The new style is considered a big improvement over the old one(s), featuring two-tone, silver and gold coloring, with blue enamel panels.

In the early 1990s, only those who held the rank of captain and above were issued the new badges, but those of lower ranks were allowed to purchase their own, if they desired, at a cost of \$50 apiece.

For many years, patrol officers had been wearing light blue short sleeve shirts in the summer, and long sleeve navy blue shirts in the winter. The thought was that the light blue shirts would be cooler to wear when working in the hot sun. Those who held the rank of sergeant and above wore white shirts year-round.

In 1993 the administration decided issue dark blue shirts to all patrol officers for both summer and winter. Although it was suggested at that time that perhaps sergeants should also wear dark blue shirts for safety and economical reasons, the suggestion was not acted upon, and all supervisors continued to wear white shirts.

A new uniform shoulder patch was also adopted which gave the uniforms a more modern look. Changing the uniform patch was more difficult than one would imagine. There were some who, out of tradition, wanted to continue wearing the patch worn since 1967, but others maintained that its white background made it difficult to keep clean, and the twill edges were prone to fraying.

Several sketches of what the new patch should look like were submitted, and after one was chosen, a prototype was produced. The prototype featured a unique shape for Rhode Island which some felt would set Cranston apart from other departments in the state. However, the prototype was not well received, so another design was chosen.

The first run of the new patches arrived in late 1993 with a modified city seal. They were quickly issued to the officers, but it was decided to order the next run with the city seal featured on the old style patch.



**Officer Mike Falls - August 1991  
wearing the light blue summer uniform shirt.  
The light blue shirts were discontinued in 1993.**





Prototype uniform patch produced by Centurion Insignias in 1993.  
Only six were made as this style was never adopted.



One of the “first run” patches produced for the department in 1993.  
All following orders had the traditional city seal.

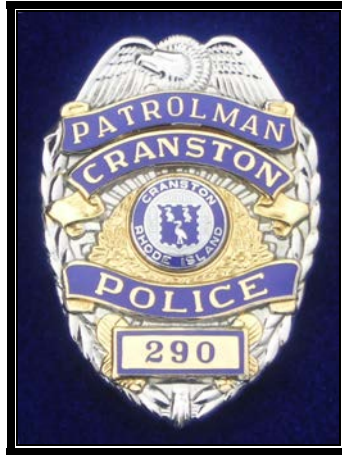


Current issue uniform patch  
worn 1993 to present



Another uniform change instituted in 1993 was the addition of service bars to the long sleeve uniforms shirts worn by all ranks. Service bars had previously only been worn on coats and jackets.

By January of 1994, all department members were wearing the new uniforms. Shortly afterward, the new two-tone enamel badge was issued to every sworn member of the department.



**Patrolman badge - circa 1994**

The early issue badges of 1994 had the title of “Patrolman” and “Patrolwoman”, but those issued in 1995 and later carry the generic title of “Officer”. Badges issued before 1995 with the old titles were still authorized to be worn and were phased out through attrition.

Other titles found on the new badges include “Inspector”, for those working in the Prosecution Unit, “B.C.I.” for those working in the Forensics Unit, and “Detective”. (The title of “Investigator” was discontinued at this time.)

The new badges were issued with an officer’s number on them so they could be traced if lost or stolen.

An interesting fact about the new badges is that one can tell when a badge was made simply by looking on the back. The manufacturer puts a three or four digit number on the back of each badge indicating the month and year it was produced. For example, 995 means that the badge was made in September of 1995. In some cases, repair dates, and the first name of those who worked on the badge are also included.

Some badges do not have a number, but the letters “R.I.” at the bottom. Sometimes badges need repair, and these badges were purchased by the department to be given on loan to an officer while his or her badge is being fixed.



**Sergeant badge - 1995**



**A Patrolwoman hat badge  
Issued early 1990s**



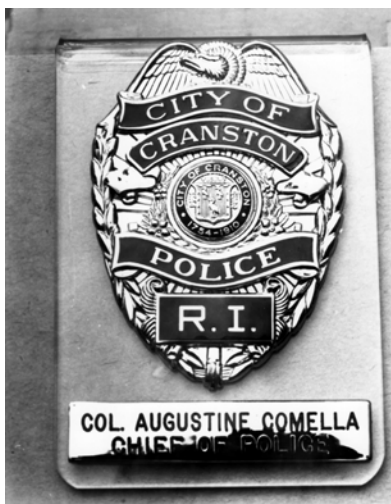
**A generic "Officer" hat badge  
Issued from about 1995 to about 2000**



**Colonel's hat badge circa 1990**  
**Colonel Mancuso changed the official title of Chief of Police to Colonel.**



**Current issue sergeant hat badge.**  
**By the late 1990s, all ranks were issued these**  
**two-tone style hat badges to match the breast badges.**



**A badge worn by Colonel Comella circa 1993.**



**Captain Ronald Hitchen, Uniform Patrol Commander – circa 1994**



### **New Snowsuits - February 1994**

Left to Right – John Ryan, Joe McMahon, Peter Podedworny, Craig Perinunzi

In 1994, officers were authorized to purchase snowsuits at their own expense to be worn on regular patrol duty or special details. Eighty officers bought the suits which cost \$95.00 apiece.





**A metal “shoulder plate” worn on leather jackets.  
Worn from 1979 to present.**

By the mid 1960s, Cranston officers were no longer wearing leather uniform coats. Instead, a blue “bomber” style jacket was issued for winter wear. However, the popularity of the leather coats among the rank and file remained strong, and there were those who lobbied for their return.

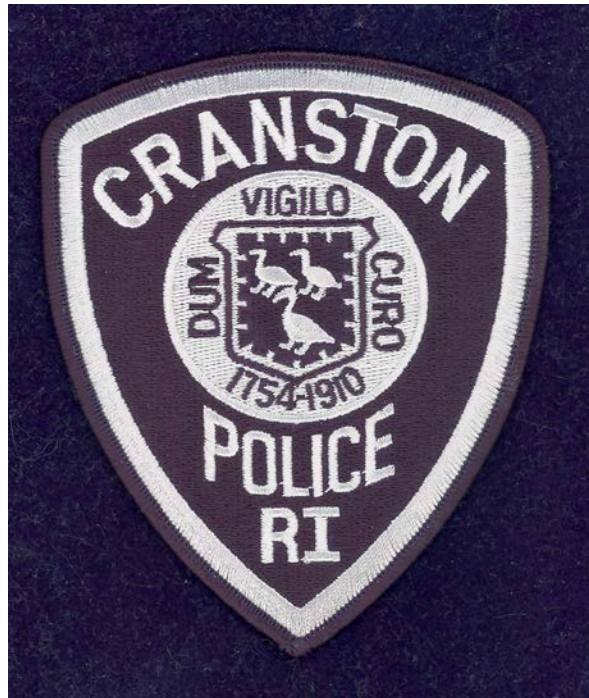
On September 26, 1979, Chief Anthony Moretti issued Memorandum 79-9, authorizing officers to purchase leather duty coats at their own expense. The new coats would require some sort of identification insignia, but the ornate, raised letter, metal shoulder insignia worn on earlier leather coats was no longer being manufactured, so the department opted for an oval shaped metal plate like the one pictured above.

The plates were worn on both shoulders, although they are presently only worn on one. Nickel plated insignia are worn by patrol officers, and brass plated ones by supervisors. These plates have proven to be much more durable than the old ones.

Purchasing the leather jackets was strictly optional, but most officers did so after completing their first year on the job.

In 1995, the department once again discontinued the authorization of wearing leather uniform coats, and consequently, every department member was issued a Gortex winter coat, and a separate spring/fall jacket to promote uniformity. However, the popularity of the leather coats didn't go away, and persistent lobbying convinced the chief to authorize their return.

One can imagine that police officer uniforms will continue to evolve and change with the times. Undoubtedly there will be a time when the uniforms of the present-day will appear as obsolete and quaint as the “Bobbie” style uniforms of 1898.



Prototype patch from 2011, suggested for use by officers who were assigned to the bicycle patrol. The silver thread was supposed to be reflective for better night visibility. A small number were produced but never issued.



“Badge Patches”

These cloth insignia badges were introduced in 2015.



Motorcycle officer insignia designed for the Cranston police.  
Introduced in 2015.