



The District of Columbia Metropolitan Police Force, 1861–1968

With the outbreak of the Civil War in April 1861, the District of Columbia's population increased dramatically. In addition to an influx of military personnel and government employees, Washington became home to many Southern sympathizers as well as criminal elements and profiteers. As a result of the ensuing disorder and growing concerns over the safety of the national capital, Congress established the Metropolitan Police Department, the first regular Federal police force for the District of Columbia, on August 6, 1861. The congressional statute (12 Stat. 320) abolished previous local ordinances that provided for a day force and night watch, and consolidated the then-area of the District, including Washington City, Georgetown, and the County of Washington, Maryland, into a centralized police district governed by a Metropolitan Police Board. The new police force included 10 sergeants and a number of patrolmen as needed, but not to exceed 150. All officers had to procure their own equipment and side arms.

In 1878 Congress abolished the Metropolitan Police Board after granting a permanent local government to the District of Columbia; supervision of the Metropolitan Police transferred to the District of Columbia Board of Commissioners.

Records relating to the Metropolitan Police form part of the Records of the Government of the District of Columbia (Record Group 351), and contain information about police and criminals. They exist in textual form only, not on microfilm, and are at the National Archives Building in Washington, DC. The records are described in Preliminary Inventory (PI) 186, *Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Government of the District of Columbia*.

Personnel Records

___ **Register of Appointments to the Force, 1861–1930** (PI 186, Entry 117). Arranged in rough alphabetical order by the appointee's surname. Records include a bound volume of entries showing name of appointee, date and place of birth, where and when naturalized, age, former occupation, number in family, home address, date of appointment, and date of resignation or dismissal. Some notations show promotions, reason for dismissal, date pensioned, deaths, and other comments. The majority of records cover 1861 through 1906.

Note: Related appointments to the Metropolitan Police Force are also located in the series **Appointments, ca. 1871–80** (PI 186, Entry 23), and are part of the Records of the Temporary and Permanent Boards of Commissioners in the General Records of the City of Washington, the Territory of the District of Columbia, and the District of Columbia.

___ **Service Records of Members of the Force, 1861–1930** (PI 186, Entry 118). Arranged in rough alphabetical order by surname. Two bound volumes contain entries for members of the force appointed from 1861 to 1917, giving the name of the appointee; date and position to which appointed; and a summary of service including information on promotions, resignations, discharges, suspensions, fines, misconduct charges, and other personnel actions.

___ **Personnel Case Files, ca. 1861–1950** (PI 186, Entry 119). Arranged alphabetically by the name of the policeman. The records primarily relate to police appointed from 1861 to 1900, with a few files for persons appointed as late as 1926. Case files generally include applications for appointment, letters of recommendation, physical and mental examination records, chronological summary of assignments, complaints, disciplinary actions, proceedings before the trial board, commendations, resignations, pensions, and other matters affecting duties and service.

___ **Register of Oaths of Office, 1862–65 and 1868–78** (PI 186, Entry 120). Arranged in rough chronological order by year. The entry includes a record of printed oaths of office filled in with position title, name of appointee, date, signature of attesting officer, and signature of appointee.

Selected Case Records

The following series of records concern law enforcement and contain specific information about criminal individuals. The majority of the entries relate exclusively to the 3rd Police Precinct, which included part of the County of Washington lying west of Rock Creek, including Analostan Island in the Potomac River, and all of Georgetown.

___ **Daily Returns of Precincts, 1861–78, 1887** (PI 186, Entry 125). Arranged chronologically and then by precinct. Records include sergeants' daily reports of arrests, which usually give the name of persons arrested, time of arrest, age, race, nationality, occupation, marital status, literacy, the nature and disposition of the complaint, and name of complainant.

___ **Arrest Books, 1869–1906** (PI 186, Entry 127). Arranged chronologically, the records include lists of arrests mainly for the 3rd Precinct (1869–70 and 1894–96) as well as an unidentified precinct (1869–93 and 1897–1906). Entries usually give the date and time of arrest, name, age, race, nationality, occupation, marital status, and literacy of arrested person; complaint; name of complainant and arresting officer; and case dispositions.

___ **Record of Juvenile Arrests, 1908–18** (PI 186, Entry 128). Arranged alphabetically by the surname of person arrested, then chronologically. A bound volume from the 3rd Precinct shows the date, name of juvenile arrested, their address, age, and race; charge; name of complainant and arresting officer; and disposition of the case.

___ **Record of Arrests for Traffic Violations, 1913–21** (PI 186, Entry 130). Arranged chronologically. Records include a list of arrests for traffic violations within the 3rd Precinct, giving date, name of person arrested and arresting officer, and the charge.

___ **Lists of Arrests for Traffic Violations, 1914–18** (PI 186, 131). Arranged alphabetically by violator's surname, then chronologically. This series includes lists kept by the 3rd Precinct, giving name and description of motor vehicle operator, charges against him or her, and related data.

___ **Identification Books, ca. 1883–90** (PI 186, Entry 138). Two volumes of "mug books" arranged numerically and containing cards with photographs and descriptions of criminals. Many cards have been lost or misplaced.

Administrative Records

___General Files, ca. 1924–68 (PI 186, Entry 21). This series, a central file in the Records of the Temporary and Permanent Boards of Commissioners, includes correspondence, narrative and statistical reports, printed documents, clippings, processed material, and other records that document the basic policy and procedural decisions of the local government in the District of Columbia. The records are arranged according to a 4-digit decimal classification system (see the appendix in *Preliminary Inventory 186* for a select list of the decimal classifications.) Records relating to the Metropolitan Police Department appear under the classification heading **4-000 Public Safety Program**, and are further divided into the following sub-categories:

- 4-220 Police Personnel
- 4-240 Police Facilities
- 4-250 Crime and Crime Prevention
- 4-270 Police Training Program
- 4-280 Police Auxiliary Units
- 4-290 Police Methods, Conduct, and Discipline
- 4-300 Police Regulations

Annual Reports

Congress required Federal agencies to write an annual report providing an overview of their accomplishments. The president of the Metropolitan Police Board wrote the report until Congress abolished the board in 1878. Thereafter, the Superintendent of Police authored the report for the department. The annual report was published at various times under three different reporting authorities. The Secretary of the Interior, who served as the intermediary between Congress and agencies in the District, initially received and published the police report with his annual report to Congress from 1861 to 72. From 1873 to 77 the report appeared in the annual report of the U.S. Attorney General. After the District of Columbia received a permanent local government in 1878, the annual report of the Metropolitan Police was included within the annual report of the Commissioners.

The annual reports generally do not contain information about individual policemen. They do, however, provide an overview of the yearly activities of the police force as well as the nature of crime in the District. In addition to narrative descriptions about the condition and organization of the force, station houses in the District, discipline on the force, liquor licenses issued, the police telegraph, and activities of the detective corps and sanitary office (who responded to complaints about public health nuisances, and transported the indigent poor and insane to hospitals and asylums), the reports contain:

- Lists of Police Board members and officers, including property clerk and Superintendent of Police
- Dispositions of the police force among the precincts, and statistics about sick leave
- Statistical overviews of the disposition of cases for crimes and misdemeanors
- Number of arrests in each precinct, categorized by sex and age of the perpetrator
- Statistics about offenses against people and property, categorized by type of crime
- Reports about the nativity of arrested persons
- Reports about the trades and callings of arrested persons

- Lists of nuisance complaints and incidental work performed including destitute persons furnished with temporary lodgings, lost children found, sick or disabled persons assisted, horses and cattle found astray, doors left open and secured by the force, fires reported, and horses and vehicles found astray and returned to their owners
- Statements of public property and money received and held by the property clerk
- Information about traffic regulations and accidents
- Reports that occasionally expound on crimes of local color, such as the punishment of boys “catching rides” (engaging in the practice of running after and jumping onto street cars and other moving vehicles)

The annual reports of the Metropolitan Police Force are published in the *U.S. Congressional Serial Set*, and are usually available at large university or public libraries as well as U.S. Government Depository Libraries. The National Archives and Records Administration has copies of the *Serial Set* at its facilities in Washington, DC, and in College Park, Maryland. To identify a local depository library, go to the Government Printing Office web site at <http://catalog.gpo.gov/fdlpdir/FDLPdir.jsp> and select the link to “FDLP Public Page.” The web site will provide you with information to contact a depository library to ascertain if it has copies of the annual reports.

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