



ELKTON'S FIRST POLICE CHIEF,

GEORGE M. POTTS:

A STUDY OF THE HISTORICAL RECORD

PREPARED FOR THE
MAYOR AND COMMISSIONERS
OF THE TOWN OF ELKTON

PREPARED BY THE
HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CECIL COUNTY
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Purpose of Study

This report examines the public service record of Elkton's first police chief, George M. Potts. Prepared by the Historical Society of Cecil County for the Mayor and Commissioners of the Town of Elkton, it consists of a brief historical overview of Elkton law enforcement, a synopsis of the Chief's public record, a timeline of important events, and conclusions. It focuses on Law Enforcement in Elkton from 1908 to 1935.

Scope of Study

The study involved an examination of extant public records. Four Cecil County newspapers existed (the *Cecil Whig*, the *Cecil Democrat*, the *Cecil County News*, and the *Cecil Star*), and those were read. All town minutes for the period were available and selected dates were examined. Governance documents, such as the charter and ordinances, were also studied.

Background of Law Enforcement in Elkton

Elkton was incorporated in 1787 and by the first half of the 19th century it was appointing an official who was responsible for maintaining law and order. In those formative years, the officer was the Bailiff. Elected by the Board of Commissioners, Maryland law gave him the authority of a constable within the municipality. In addition to preserving the peace, he took care of streets, impounded wild animals, and collected taxes. In the 1890s, a charter change turned responsibility for tax collection over to a town treasurer, but a new duty, that of lighting street lamps, was given to the bailiff.¹ Many men held the position throughout the 1800s.

¹ This information is found in the original Charter of the Town of Elkton, (1787) and its subsequent revisions, as well as periodic references to the bailiff in newspapers in the 1850s. For some time, the town appointed a lamplighter, but a late 19th century change in ordinances turned that responsibility over to the bailiff. The lamplighter's responsibility ceased when an electrical generating plant was built.

Elkton's First Police Chief

George M. Potts was appointed to a two-year term as bailiff in June 1908.² The salary for the man who constituted the entire force was \$50 per month and Council had an assignment ready for him when he took office. The Town had erected large signs warning of the eight M.P.H. speed limit for automobiles and it wanted the bailiff to enforce the law in the town of 2,487 residents. Within days, Bailiff Potts arrested his first speeder when he detained a Baltimorean who was fined one-dollar and court cost.³

In 1923, the charter and the ordinances updated responsibilities for the bailiff. He was required to “devote his entire time to the duties of his office,” and to wear a “blue uniform and suitable badge of office” when on duty. Specific responsibilities were:

- ❖ Preserve order within the town;
- ❖ Keep a constant oversight of the streets, pavements, gutters, sewers, ditches, lights and property of the town;
- ❖ Patrol the town at least once each twenty-four hours and see that the ordinances were observed;
- ❖ Superintend all work upon the streets;
- ❖ Report nuisances to the Board;
- ❖ Act as a messenger at all town meetings; and
- ❖ Impound any horses, cattle swine, or geese found at large.⁴

The 1920s, a time of prosperity in the United States, were a period of improvement for Elkton law enforcement. The size of the force doubled when a full-time night officer (O. P. Humes) was added in 1928, at a salary of \$50 per month.⁵ The Chief, still called the bailiff for one more year, received \$60 a month. About the same time, the Town purchased guns, belts, and uniforms for the men. As another mark of progress, the Town installed its first traffic light to regulate the flow of vehicles at two main arteries, Bridge and Main streets.⁶

² President and Commissioners of the Town of Elkton, Minutes, June 1908

³ The *Cecil County News*, June 24, 1908, p. 3; *The Cecil County News*, June 24, 1908 p. 3; the *Cecil County News*, July 1, 1908, p.3.

⁴ The Charter and ordinances of the Town of Elkton, in force June 12th, 1923, published by Authority of the President and Commissioners.

⁵ The town had periodically had a special officer to work special events or to provide patrols at night, but in the 20th century this marked the beginning of having an officer regularly scheduled to patrol at night.

⁶ The *Cecil Whig*, May 19, 1928, p. 1

Some four months after the Great Stock Market Crash, the Town purchased its first patrol car, a Ford Phaeton from Warren W. Boulden (1930). The vehicle, complete with a bumper and spare tire, cost \$493.40. A local newspaper, the *Cecil Democrat*, criticized the purchase: “. . . although the Elkton Police may be short in number, they are now long on equipment. A year or more ago they were furnished with impressive looking revolvers and Sam Browne belts, and now an automobile in which to dash around. Certainly Chicago racketeers and gangsters should steer clear of Elkton.”⁷

As the essentials of a modern police department slowly emerged, the bailiff was regularly called Chief Potts by Elkton’s press corps. Nonetheless, not until 1929 did Elkton town minutes routinely confer the title of chief to Potts, though he had functioned as the lead law enforcement official since obtaining his first appointment in 1908, when James F. Powers was president of the Council.

Law enforcement activities were typical for a rural Eastern Shore community, in the decades leading up to World War II. For example, in 1929, while national, state, and county lawmen occupied themselves with chasing “rumrunners” and “bootleggers,” Chief Potts arrested two young men in connection with the theft of money from the Express Office. One of them had a revolver hidden under his shirt.⁸ A few years later in 1932, four burglars, one of them armed with an automatic pistol, had a shootout with Chief Potts’ night officer. During that incident, Patrolman Randolph discovered a grocery store burglary in progress. When he commanded the culprits to come out, he was greeted by a volley of shots. Randolph emptied his service revolver at them, but the men vanished in the darkness. Within days, Chief Potts had the four culprits in custody, without incident.⁹

Eight years before Chief Potts’ appointment, the first automobile punctuated the quiet of an Elkton day, and thereafter traffic enforcement matters would increasingly occupy the tiny police department. For example, one summer Sunday in 1918, a vehicle sped through town. When the bailiff held up his hand to stop it, the lady passenger waved and kept going. Potts reached a telephone in time to have Deputy Sheriff Seth detain the car when it reached the jail. At the hearing, the owner, a Miss Winwood, was

⁷ President & Commissioners of the Town of Elkton, Minutes, February 19, 1930; *The Cecil Democrat*, Plenty of Equipment, February 15, 1930

Department, September 1993, p. 1

⁸ *The Cecil Whig*, Young Gun Totter Caught, April 13, 1929

⁹ *The Cecil Star*, 4 Robbers Dodge Officer’s Bullets in Making Getaway, March 24 1932, p. 1

asked why she did not stop when signaled and she answered she thought the “handsome officer was flirting.” The “bailiff blushed modestly,” an Elkton paper reported.¹⁰

Vehicle accidents started jarring the county seat during the second decade of the 20th century. The first time it happened in 1917, the dreadful squeal of ripping metal coming from the Bridge Street railroad-crossing cut through an early summer evening. Four people (the Simmons family and their hired hand, George Foster) had been wiped out when a fast express train collided with their vehicle. This was the town’s first automobile fatality. Some fourteen months later, Elkton had its first pedestrian fatality involving an automobile. This occurred when a six-year-old, Gladys R. Vendergrift, was struck by a car.¹¹

During lulls in police work, the daily routine was occupied with public works tasks. Three days after taking office, he had a force of workmen out “dressing up the streets,” according to one newspaper. When the Commissioners were anxious to complete filling the marsh south of Main Street in 1925, the Board announced that anyone having coal, ashes, or other suitable materials should notify Bailiff Potts and he would have it removed. At a board meeting in February 1930, he was instructed to place a pipe for a driveway on the building lot of David Frazer on E. Main Street. Such were the typical day-to-day maintenance tasks of the bailiff.¹²

The dark days of the Great Depression were a time of fiscal restraint for municipal government in Maryland. Council announced in June 1933 salary reductions of 10 per cent across the board for all employees. Chief Potts’ salary, however, was reduced from \$1,560 to \$1,456, almost 7 per cent.¹³

Chief Potts retired in 1935, after having served the town for 27-years. The announcement first appeared in county newspapers in April when he notified the Town Council that he would not be a candidate for another term.”¹⁴ At the first meeting of the Board of Commissioners in June, Chief Potts was praised “for having served the town faithfully for 26 years [sic]” and he was presented with his equipment. His salary that

¹⁰ The *Cecil County News*, August 14, 1918, p. 3

¹¹ The *Cecil Democrat*, June 23, 1917, p. 1; the *Cecil Democrat*, August 10, 1918.

¹² The *Cecil County News*, June 3, 1908, p. 3; the *Cecil Whig*, March 21, 1925; The Mayor and Commissioners of the Town of Elkton, Minutes February 19, 1930

¹³ The *Cecil Whig*, George Gets Water Dept. Appointment, June 9, 1933 p. 1

¹⁴ The *Cecil Star*, Genial Elkton Police Chief Says He Will Live Life of Retirement After Next Month, *April 23, 1935 p.1*

year remained at \$1,456. That last fiscal year, the town devoted \$2,867 to law enforcement (almost 10 per cent of its expenditures).¹⁵

The departure of this tireless public servant was a time for change. Jacob T. Biddle was hired to replace the chief. Biddle and the other officer, David J. Randolph, were to alternate between day and night work and they had identical authority.¹⁶ With Chief Potts' retirement, the town also hired its first Superintendent of Public Works. That official, Russell M. George, took charge of all "town work," in addition to his previously held duty of Water Plant Superintendent. He had 10 to 25 men engaged in town activities, working for him according to newspapers.¹⁷

The period after his retirement was an unsettled time for the small force. Just when it seemed a smooth transition might have taken place, the Department was involved in an international incident. On November 27, 1935, the highest-ranking diplomat from Persia (Iran) and his wife, who were traveling through Elkton in an automobile, were stopped for speeding. When the ambassador protested that his diplomatic immunity was being violated, he was forcefully handcuffed and taken to the Elkton jail by Officer Jacob Biddle. The Roosevelt Administration and Governor Harry Nice made public apologies on behalf of the United States government, but somehow the incident kept snowballing. In 1936, the minister was recalled to Persia.¹⁸ Furthermore, neither town officer was made Chief. At various times in the next decade, the Superintendent of Public supervised the police, President Henry H. Mitchell assumed responsibility, and an officer, W. Coudon Reynolds, carried the title.

Chief Potts, 74, died in September 1940. Newspapers noted that he had filled his position with the town "most efficiently for about 28 years." At the time of his passing, the Town Council attended the funeral in body and Mayor Henry H. Mitchell issued the following statement:

The Town of Elkton and the whole community, has just lost one of its most conscientious and respected citizens. I feel a deep sense of personal

¹⁵ The Mayor and Commissioners of the Town of Elkton, Annual Statement, June 1, 1934 – May 31, 1935.


¹⁶ *The Cecil Star*, New Town Board Holds Meeting Here Tuesday, p. 1 June 6, 13, 1935; *The Cecil Whig*, June 7, 1935, *Mayor H. H. Mitchell Takes Office With New Council . . . June 6, 1935*

¹⁷ *The Cecil Whig*, Mayor H. H. Mitchell Takes Office . . . June 7, 1935

¹⁸ Associated Press, Envoys Now Spared Elkton Incident, *The Philadelphia Record*, February 9, 1936; *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 30, 1936.

loss in Chief Potts' death, and I am grateful for his friendship. He embodied every quality of honesty and integrity, and in the years he served the town, night and day, heedless of long hours of hardship and fatigue, he discharged with unfailing loyalty.¹⁹

Timeline



1840s	By this time, the town is appointing a town officer, a bailiff, to serve as a town officer
1908	George M. Potts appointed bailiff
1918	Elkton's first pedestrian fatality caused by automobile
1928	First full-time night officer hired in 20 th century First traffic light installed in Elkton
1929	Town minutes routinely use title of Chief when discussing Potts
1930	First patrol car purchased
1933	As the depths of the Great Depression blanketed the country, the Town ordered a reduction in salaries. Chief Potts' salary reduced nearly 7 per cent.
1935	Chief Potts Retires
1940	Chief Potts Dies

Conclusion

George M. Potts, Elkton's first police chief, faithfully served the town as a public servant for 27-years, under the leadership of five presidents (mayors). His service began with the decade that saw the dawn of the 20th century and it ended in the dark days of the Great Depression. All those intervening years that spanned World War I, the arrival of the automobile age, the Roaring Twenties, and the

¹⁹ *The Cecil Whig*, Death Claims George M. Potts, Ex-Police Chief, Many Mourn Elkton's Oldest Public Servant . . . p. 1. September 5, 1940

Great Stock Market Crash were spent serving as Elkton's thin blue line. The post he assumed was that of bailiff, popularly known as chief, and during his time the position officially became that of Chief of Police.

In a time when serious crimes were few and far in between, he routinely spent his regular workdays supervising public works and his evenings and weekends taking care of minor thefts, disturbances of the peace, and speeding automobiles. During his time, the framework for a modern police department evolved, a force with two members, equipment, and a patrol car. Upon his retirement, a Superintendent of Public Works was hired to handle the oversight of streets and town property, a responsibility he had painstakingly managed. He was well respected by the elected officials he served and the community.

Appendix

Published in the *Cecil Star*, August 1, 1935

George M. Potts

Who was the man, who wore the dark,
Blue uniform of Cops?
You said it, friend, for thirty years
Of course you know, Chief Potts

Who was the man, who always showed,
Respect for little Tots?
Your Answer? Right! The guiding hand,
Our mutual friend, Chief Potts

Who was the man, they'd always call
To unravel family knots?
The smiling, kindly, genial cop
Sympathetic friend Chief Potts

Who was the man, who's record white,
Reveals no single blot?
Our staunch and sturdy true blue friend
The Chief of Chiefs -- Chief Potts

Who was the man, who'd get his man
Without the use of shots?
Two-fisted, witty, nonchalant
A man of men – Chief Potts

Who'd give the rich and poor alike,
A Square deal, to the dots?
The man who practiced Golden Rule,
His name, my friend – Chief Potts

Who was the man, who'd mercy show,
Poor suckers, drunks and rots?
A man who did his duty,
With compassion, our – Chief Potts

Who was the man, who thought it small,
His Authority, much to show?
None less than unassuming friend,

Chief Potts – whom all well know.

Thanks, thanks, to you, our worthy
Friend,
For the lesson you have taught
May your successors emulate,
The deeds you have thus wrought

Good luck to your, our noble Chief,
We wish you joy and health
We'll long remember our Chief Potts
In memory's store of Wealth

-- A FRIEND

Source: *Cecil Star*, August 1, 1935

Obituary